

BOOK 6

VAMP & CHRONICLES

CHRISTIN LOVELL

Vigilante
Mel's Story

VIGILANTE: *Mel's Story*
Vamp Chronicles, book 6

Christin Lovell

Vigilante
Vamp Chronicles, book 6

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*So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I
am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will
uphold you with my righteous right hand.
Isaiah 41:10 niv*

—~—

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Vamp Chronicles

Diary of a Vampeen

Vamp Yourself for War

Hit the Road Jack

The Innocence of White (short)

Vamp Versus Vamp

Darkness Falls

Reflections (short)

Vigilante

The Break of Dawn (coming soon!)

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VIGILANTE: Mel's Story

When tragedy strikes, Mel, best friend to Vamp Chronicles lead, Lexi, leaves her entire life behind, including her heart.

Fate delivers her in New Orleans, a city with a big vamp problem. Teaming up with the local authorities was the last thing she expected to do. She ran so she could be free of all ties, not to form new ones.

Everything happens for a reason though, and the more time she spends helping others, the more she realizes she needs to help herself. After all, a new city doesn't mean a new life, and absence doesn't erase the memories, good and bad.

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Vigilante Playlist

1. *Adam Lambert - Underneath*
 2. *We the Kings - Just Keep Breathing*
 3. *Remedy Drive - Hold On*
 4. *Lupe Fiasco & Guy Sebastian - Battle Scars*
 5. *Christina Aguilera - Army of Me*
 6. *Katharine McPhee - How*
 7. *Fifth Harmony - Miss Movin' On*
 8. *Fall Out Boy - My Songs Know What You Did in the Dark*
 9. *Drowning Pool - Digging These Holes*
 10. *Remedy Drive - Resuscitate Me*
 11. *The Afters - Lift Me Up*
 12. *Sixteen Cities - I Need You*
 13. *Carrie Underwood - See You Again*
- Bonus. *Jimmy Wayne - I Will*

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Vigilante: Mel's Story

– **Prologue** –

Kyle

You don't wake up at ten years old thinking today is going to be your last day on Earth. You're thinking about the newest video game, that new movie you want to see, maybe a test at school or how your gym teacher actually smells like a dirty gym sock. My point is, I didn't think it'd be my last day. No one ever does I don't think.

The biggest tragedy wasn't that I never transformed into an awesome creature of the night; it's that I had to lose my life over someone else's cruelty. Had the kid never been picked on for being a little overweight, had he not been tortured for being an unpopular outcast or teased for not having the money to buy the coolest new gadgets, he never would have taken the one thing his dad did have money for: a gun.

Mel

My heart thundered in my chest. Terror squeezed my lungs. I couldn't breathe. I couldn't see. Everything was a blur before my tear stained eyes.

My pulse rushed, it thumped loudly, echoing in my head, drowning out the report from the local news anchor. It couldn't be true. They had to be mistaken. It just- I couldn't fathom another loss.

—~—

"Hey pip-squeak." I ruffled Kyle's hair.

"Leave me alone!" He swatted at my stomach.

I held him away at arm's length. I had just enough height over him to avoid his retaliation. I leapt away from him at a delicate human sprawl. "You totally missed me, bro." I tossed over my shoulder as I walked away.

"Melly?" His voice was small, weak. He was no longer my annoying little brother in that moment. His vulnerability had me spinning around, ready to protect him from the world.

"What's up, little man?"

He fidgeted, unsure of himself. "Do you ever think about Mom?"

I studied him, watching as his brown eyes looked anxiously at me. He was nearly as tall as me already. His mopy brown hair hung down over his forehead.

"Sometimes. Why?"

"I miss her sometimes." He shrugged his shoulders, trying to be coy. He considered me for a minute. "Would you miss me if I died?"

My heart stopped beating for a moment, the unfathomable idea wrenching me. I wanted to dismiss his question, but his voice was too earnest; he was truly concerned that I could somehow forget he ever existed. "I'd miss you more than Mom."

Needing a reprieve from the weight of the subject, particularly with my mother's death still fresh, I pushed forward. "You're so going to outlive me, bro. So you need to remember, I want a pink glitter casket lined with purple roses and I want like a gazillion Hello Kitty stuffed animals thrown in for good measure."

He rolled his eyes. "Yeah, like I'm gonna pay for all that."

"Oh ye of little faith. I was planning to leave you a cool mil." I smirked.

He rolled his eyes again. "By doing what? Dressing up Barbie dolls?" He scoffed.

"Something like that." I winked. I ruffled his hair again. This time he didn't fuss. Rather, he surprised me by pulling me into a hug. A hug that had us both entwined, hearts beating in unison as if we were connected by more than blood for that single moment.

How could I let all that go? How could I ever forget that? How could I ever forget my brother, my little man, the boy I spent half my childhood raising.

I couldn't. I wouldn't. Ever.

—~—

I stared blankly at the TV. Panic surged within me. It couldn't be true. It just...

The female anchor was so professional, so factual...so removed. She clearly didn't have any children at the school.

She was stoic, cold, as if this was just another news bulletin to read without inflection, without emotion, because God forbid if the press proved to be more than robots spewing facts.

“So far, authorities have confirmed one teacher and ten students injured with one teacher and two students reported dead on the scene at Ft. Sumter Elementary. The shooter was allegedly an eleven-year-old male student in one of the fifth grade classrooms of the local school. Authorities have yet to release a name although the student is apparently in custody. Low Country police officers have...”

“Mel? Love?” I heard Craig’s voice in the distance, but nothing registered.

I opened and closed my mouth several times, fighting the tremble in my chin. I knew I needed to sprint into action. I knew I couldn’t stand there helplessly. I had to do something. I had to see him. I had to... “I...We...Fuck! Go, go, go!” I screamed, pulling myself to the present, to the possibility that my brother, my innocent little brother, may be injured...or worse-

I frantically searched for keys.

Craig seized my arms, steadying me in front of him. His sun kissed locks were in spiked disarray; his reflective eyes revealed my harrowing expression. His brows furrowed, concern etching his forehead as he studied me.

Tears stung my eyes as I gazed at him; my chest constricted as the unknown snaked through me, draining me of warmth. For the first time, I truly felt out of control. My body was disconnected from my mind; I was running as a true vampire: on instinct.

My heart was barely working; my pulse rocketed, raging with a thunderous pulsation, banging against my sensitive flesh from its liquid filled lines.

Out of the corner of my eye, I spotted the keys on the side table. Without a second thought, I lunged for them before speeding out the door. I didn't care what my neighbors thought of me. I didn't care if they discovered my secret identity in that moment. I had one goal.

"Melanie!" Craig whisked after me, leaping into the passenger seat as I put his car in reverse and peeled out of the driveway. "You don't even have a license! What the fiddle is going on, love?"

I heard the fear in his voice, but I had my own to deal with.

Oh, God. Please, please, please. I'm begging you; I'm praying to you for the first time in forever because I'm desperate and I don't know what else to do. Please, let him be okay. Please, don't let me lose anyone else. I don't know if I can handle it. I don't know if-

Craig gripped my hand and squeezed. "Mel, love, you're scaring the boggles out of me. Please, tell me what's going on so I can help you."

I swallowed hard, but my serum continued to rise. "Pull out your phone and Google Fort Sumter Elementary School."

"Kyle's school?" I didn't have to look to know his features were scrunched in confusion, yet, perhaps, a tiny bit of knowledge was seeping in. He had to know I wouldn't ask him to search unless something was wrong, unless something had happened.

I merely nodded my head, unable to speak, unable to voice the possible truth, that my brother, the only sibling I would ever have could be-

“Fudgeballs.” The word fell breathlessly from him.

The drive to the school was a blur. I couldn't recall any portion of the course if my life depended on it.

Crowds gathered around the perimeter of the property. Throngs of parents, of neighbors, pooled together in groups; nothing united communities like tragedy. It disgusted me. It shouldn't take misfortune to bring people together like this.

I gazed around helplessly. My short stature made it difficult to see through the masses. Before I knew what I was doing, I was using my brute strength to push my way through. A man went flying sideways; women fell to the ground. I didn't care though. In the back of my mind, I knew they had to be suffering on some level. I knew we were all going through this together; hence the unity. But I only cared about one person on that campus: Kyle.

When I reached the front line, I found barricades set up by the local police force. Officers, firemen and EMTs occupied the schoolyard; the lights from their vehicles flashed in the background. Students hugged their parents as county workers escorted them from the school. As the scene unfolded before me, as I got my first glimpse of the situation, tears sprung; it felt like an anaconda was squeezing my entire body, crushing me. Worse, it felt like my soul was being flattened, diminished to a black speck.

It was a scene out of a movie. It wasn't happening. This was somehow a dream. This wasn't reality. This didn't happen in my community. This didn't happen here. It happened in other states, other places, but not here.

It couldn't happen to my baby and me.

I gaped forward, lost in their actions, consumed by my own emotional reaction...until he appeared.

I lurched forward, flying over the barricade. I was by his side in a split second.

A swift once-over proved something was wrong though. Why was he struggling to breath? What was all this blood spilling from him?

“Ma’am! Ma’am! I need you to step back.” Someone was spewing these words at me in the distance because he could, because it wasn't his child, his sibling, on this stretcher.

“Melanie!” I felt Craig's arms circling my waist, trying to detain me, but I'd be damned if anyone pulled me from his side.

My entire body began to shake as I studied his lifeless form. *How? Why?* With shaking hands and tears streaming down my face, I swept my fingertips against his pale cheek. He felt cooler than normal. Not quite cold, but cooler than normal. He used to feel warm to me. He used to be my blanket when I got cold. He used to be my baby; I didn't give birth to him, but he was mine.

His lips were changing, loosing their rosy red color. His complexion seemed to be fading as more blood seeped from his chest, soaking his shirt and the blanket the paramedics had draped over him.

“Ma’am!” It wasn't until the paramedic yelled at me that I realized that my other hand was clinging to the stretcher, preventing them from moving forward, preventing them from taking him from me.

I felt detached in a way. This was happening, but I couldn't seem to wrap my mind around it. My eyes saw and my heart reacted, but my psyche, my soul refused to accept it. Idly, I realized, if I let him go, he would be gone.

No. I wouldn't let them take him. They couldn't take him. It- They- "No!"

"Mel, love, baby." Craig held me tight. His tone was soft, his thick accent soothing, yet his goal grated me. He was trying to appease me, but no one could make this right.

Children didn't deserve to die this way. My brother didn't deserve this! Where the hell was God? Why wasn't He protecting these kids? Where were the school superintendents? Why weren't precautions in place to *prevent* this? I didn't care what they did after. It should have been prevented. Why did this world progress only in reaction rather than forward thinking actions?

Why?

I gathered Kyle's hand in mine. I studied the shape of his fingers, of his nails. I smiled wistfully, fresh tears falling, at the dirt smeared on them. He always was an outdoor kid. He enjoyed getting dirty.

—~—

"Give me a hug, sis," Kyle teased as he walked in the front door. Grass stains and dirt covered his soccer uniform. Mud was slicked to his sweaty flesh. He was a ruffled mess, but he wore the biggest smile. It lit up his eyes.

"I don't think so." I shook my head, crossing my arms over my chest.

"Come on. You afraid I'll give you cooties?" he taunted.

“Heck yeah. I don’t know what you and those other rugrats did in that dirt.”

He snickered. “Wimp.”

I pursed my lips, narrowing my eyes on him. “Catch me if you can,” I challenged.

He beamed, his boyish need to torture girls with things we despise being met.

I took off for the backyard, slowing my pace to a decent human speed. After a good ten minutes of running him ragged, I let him catch me. I knew it would be the end of my white shirt, but his happiness was worth the sacrifice.

He threw his arms around my waist, immediately rubbing his grimy face into my shirt.

“Ew! Cooties! Germs! Yucko!” I feigned disdain.

He squeezed me tighter. “Shut up! You love me so you have to love my germs too.”

I laughed, returning his embrace. “I guess.”

Pulling back, I roughed up his hair.

“Hey!” He jumped away from me. He turned for the house. “Think Dad’ll let us have pizza again for dinner?”

I smiled, my heart warming. “I think we can talk him into it.”

—~—

“Kyle.” I shook his hand, jiggling his arm in turn.

“Ma’am! You have to let go or I will have to take you in.”

“Mel, love, listen to the officer, doll.”

I shook my head negatively, trapped in the impossible. Darkness clouded my judgment; desperation licked my conscience. "He's mine. You...you...you can't take him." I ground my teeth as hysteria crushed my chest. Tears welled quicker; fell faster. My lungs refused to expand. "Nnnnn...ooo. No!" My lips curled.

I squished Kyle's hand, but he just lay there. He didn't move. He didn't hug me back. He would never hug me back again...

"Love, sweetie, darling, doll, please, baby. We can dolly with them to the hospital, but you have to let him go for now."

"But..." My knees gave out. For the first time as a vampire, I felt weak and helpless. My soul shrouded in blackness as they all fought me, as they attempted to force me into surrender, into acceptance. "I can't lose him. They can't take him, Craigy. Don't let them take him from me. Please." My voice grew in volume, in octave, in panic. "Please," I cried.

He pried my fingers from the stretcher; from around Kyle's limp hand.

I shook violently, my entire body reacting to being ripped from him, from being required to let go of yet another person.

The paramedics surged forward, immediately taking him.

I collapsed into Craig. He held me fiercely to him, his muscles ensconcing me with the strength I didn't have.

I sobbed, unable to contain my pain. I was losing him. I was losing everything. I was losing my whole world. Lexi went off and married Kellan. She was having a baby. She was a different person. She wasn't the same best friend

who was always there like before. Craig was always there, but he couldn't be there the way I wanted him to be, the way I needed him to be. My dad was in and out with the Vamp Army, lost beneath a mountain of responsibilities that had never before included his kids. That left Kyle. He was the one I could count on to be all I needed and more. He was mine. He was my everything. He was the one who'd gotten me through. And now, he was...gone.

Mel

The white walls of the hospital were smudged and scuffed near the baseboards. It was an homage, proof that nothing was pure anymore, that perfection didn't exist.

The hard plastic of the chair combined with my anxiety made me feel like I was sitting on jagged rocks. Pain, awareness, chilled my spine, sending shards of ice between each vertebra. I knew I was cold. My heart was slowly icing over; the longer I sat, the more detached I became.

I stared blankly ahead. The waiting rooms were full, prompting the hospital to place chairs in the hallways. Mothers, fathers, brothers, sisters, friends, school officials, all waited. Legs bounced, fingers fiddled, thumbs twirled. Phones were going off non-stop as they reached out to their loved ones, and their loved ones reached out to them.

I'd left three voice messages for my father and sent two text messages. He'd returned none of them.

Craig cuddled me close, quietly comforting me physically. There was no way to ease the agony I felt though. I could be engulfed in flames and feel less pain.

You don't know how much someone means to you until they're gone. No one had said it yet, no one was brave enough to face any of us waiting yet, but I felt it. It was a haunting hollow in the pit of my stomach; it was a sixth sense that had my soul in knots.

Flashes of Kyle on the stretcher, lying lifeless with blood spilling from his chest, with his color fading quick, preoccupied me. That image stole my hope. The longer I sat there in that sterile, yet dirty hallway, the colder I became and the more my hope dwindled.

"Miss Hartford."

I was on my feet immediately. My heart kicked up as I looked at the young doctor. He couldn't have been older than twenty-seven. He seemed nervous. His heartbeat was slightly irregular. His skin was pallid and sweat dotted his brow.

He extended a hand forward. "Hello, I'm Dr. Channigan, one of the doctors who worked on Kyle."

Worked on? He wasn't a fucking science experiment.

I glared at his hand, stretching towards me in a gesture of greeting. Greetings were a buffer, procrastination. "Where is he?" I bit out, balling my hands into fists at my side.

Craig slid his arm around me, reminding me of his support.

The doctor dropped his hand to his side. He clutched a clipboard a bit closer to his chest with the other. He swallowed hard, his forehead crinkling as he peered at us, trepidation obvious. "I'm...sorry. We did all we could, but the bullet..."

I blinked rapidly, trying to ward off the fresh bout of tears. My breathing became shallow snuffles. I wrapped my arms around myself, hugging my midsection tightly. The doctor was still talking, still explaining his way out of responsibility, but I didn't hear, I didn't care to hear. I'd heard what I was waiting for, what the sinking feeling had suggested long before verbal confirmation was received.

I bit my bottom lip, barely suppressing a sob that shot from my chest. I bowed at my waist, gasping for air as my heart split in half, as my world splintered apart. Craig cupped my face, but I jerked away from him.

You know it's possible; anything is possible. But you never expect it. To a degree, we all believe we're invincible, that certain things will never touch us, will never destroy us.

Bitterness rose up, slowly demolishing my upset. Anger wound and coiled, bound and soiled my sadness. It wasn't fair. None of it was fair.

I looked up to find the doctor and Craig studying me; their expressions one of anxious uncertainty. They didn't know what to do, the same way I didn't know what to do next. What I wanted to do and what I could do were two separate things.

My phone went off, the custom ringtone telling me it was my dad. Jerking my phone from my pocket, I studied the caller ID, glowering at his picture on the screen. He may have had better intentions than my mother, but he reminded me of her in one important way: he was conveniently absent when I needed him the most.

I turned face, located the first trashcan and chucked my phone in it before dashing out of the hospital, out of the place washed in sorrow, lit with the title of 'The Place my Brother Died.' I couldn't take it. It was too much.

It'd happened so fast. Never did I expect this morning to be the last time I spoke with him, the last memory I would ever have of him.

—~—

"Let's go, goober. You're gonna be late if you keep farting around."

He bound from his room, his book bag hanging haphazardly off his right shoulder. His clothes were rumped; his shoelaces tied off-center, proof of his haste.

I laughed. "You're really gonna schmooze the girls looking like that."

He looked back over his shoulder, rolling his eyes at me. A second later, his lips lifted in a cocky smirk. "I don't need to schmooze the girls; they know what's good on the field. They come looking for me."

"Alright, my main squeeze." Craig high-fived Kyle, winking at my little brother as he headed for the front door.

"Oh, brother." I shook my head in dismay.

They chuckled in unison; from the beginning, they were nearly always in sync with each other.

"That's right, sis. You've got a fresh stud for a brother."

It was my turn to roll my eyes and smirk. "I don't know about fresh, but you look alright."

I locked the door behind me as we stepped outside. Craig unlocked the car and slid behind the wheel.

Kyle stood by the back passenger door, waiting for me to approach. "Don't be hatin' cause I'm prettier than you."

I slung a hand on one narrow hip, my brows hitching upwards. "Who are you and what have you done with my innocent brother?"

He smiled, puffing out his chest a bit, apparently proud of himself as he opened the car door. "What can I say, sis? I'm practically a man already."

I damn near choked on the laugh that spurted from me. "Talk to me when you have hair on your chest. No, actually, when you have hair anywhere on your baby bottom bod."

His smile fell momentarily, but he quickly recovered. "Smooth is in. Bieber doesn't have hair, but he's got plenty

of ladies.”

I smirked, amusement warming my heart. I slid into the car, listening as Kyle did the same behind me. “You may have the body of Bieber, but you don’t have the voice, style or sex appeal he does.”

“I don’t need all that. I’ve got something better.”

Craig and I caught each other’s gaze; each of us cocked a brow as our eyes gleamed with interest.

“What would that be?” I asked as Craig peeled out of the driveway.

“You,” Kyle stated.

“Smoothie in a cup, bud.” Craig nodded his approval. He pressed a hand to his chest dramatically. “I’m chocklin’ full of pride.”

“Me?” Surprise had me turning in my seat towards him.

“Yup. You taught me what women want.”

My heart cracked open, my love somehow multiplying for him in that moment. “I’m sure the Biebs has someone like me too.”

“Egh.” He scrunched his nose. “She’ll never be as bossy-“

My mouth fell open, my vocal chords preparing to ream him when he continued.

“I mean cool, whoever he has isn’t as cool as you. Or loving. Or smart. Or” -his expression turned amusingly painful- “fashionable.”

I smiled wide, determined to pull as much from him as possible. “And?”

“Loving?”

I pursed my lips, deciding whether that would suffice. Getting compliments from the kid was like pulling teeth. I giggled, tossing his favorite line back at him. "Aw. You love me."

He turned his head, glancing sideways at me. He shrugged his shoulders. "A little."

"Twerp. You had to ruin it." I shook my head, facing forward.

Seconds passed. "Okay, so maybe more than a little."

I tried to conceal my smile, but failed. "I love you, too, little man."

—~—

There was little consolation in exchanging sentiments that morning; there was no reprieve in knowing he was aware of my love for him. Rather, there was pain, boiling, burning beneath the fury sweeping through me.

He was aware of my love that morning...and now, I was aware of his absence. The weight of an elephant was on my chest, its trunk constricting my throat as I raced towards the car.

Gone. He was gone.

Mel

Two days later...

“I’m so sorry, Melly bee.” Un-spilt tears sat in the basins of Lexi’s eyes. Bloody tears. How symbolic.

I couldn’t talk about it. I didn’t want to talk about it. Somehow talking about it made it real. There was hope if I didn’t acknowledge it. But I knew still...

I felt empty. I felt lost. I wasn’t supposed to be here without Kyle. We were supposed to have wrestling matches in the backyard after he turned. We were supposed to be able to race each other. We were supposed to be able to indulge in every ridiculous competitive sport out there until we became bored with it, or until I continued to win and he gave up.

He was supposed to be here.

He was supposed to be the one to walk me down the aisle. He was the one who had always been there for me.

God, I missed him so much it hurt. A hollow, harrowing pain consumed me; it never left me. Life wasn’t the same without him. I wasn’t the same without him.

“Mel.” Lexi carefully collected my hand between hers. Her gaze flickered to Kellan’s before refocusing on me.

“You don’t have to stay,” I croaked. I’d rather she not stay. I could fall apart whenever I wanted when I was alone. I could be bitter and angry alone. I didn’t have to pretend when I was alone.

“I’m not going anywhere.” She settled deeper into the sofa beside me. She laced her fingers through mine. “You’ve always been there for me, and I’ll be damned if you go through this alone.”

What if I wanted to go through this alone? What if I wanted to curl up in a corner, hidden in the dark recesses of the world? What if I wanted to be by myself for a while, independent of all those who required me to pretend to be someone I'm not, absent from the eyes of those who needed me to pretend that I wasn't a shattered soul?

I found myself staring at Lexi's baby bump. They say for every life taken, another is born in its place. Was that what her baby boy was: Kyle's replacement?

I clenched my jaw, anger furling inside me. I didn't want her baby. I wanted my baby brother.

"Mel, love?" Instinctively, my head shot towards Craig's tender voice. He'd been so gentle and patient with me, acting as if my snapping one minute and crying the next wasn't disarming to him.

My breathing grew harsh.

Concern etched his brows and forehead.

Damn it! Why couldn't they just leave me alone?

A bit of color drained from his face. His gaze was intensely focused just beyond me. "Why don't you let go of Lexi's hand?" he suggested.

I looked down at my friend's hand to find I'd crushed it. She hadn't said a word. She'd bore my pain. *Dang it.* I immediately released her. Kellan was at her side in a split second tending to her.

"It's fine. I'll, um..." she stumbled, hissing as the agony assaulted her I was sure.

What was wrong with me? This wasn't their fault. None of it was their fault. Why was I blaming them? Why was it so easy for me to take my resentment out on them?

“Sorry,” I mumbled, leaping up from the couch. I couldn’t look at her though. I couldn’t look at the kindness, the compassion, I knew I would find in her eyes. Their empathy ignited my frustration, and yet, it simultaneously drove my guilt.

I swallowed hard, feeling my serum rise in the back of my throat. It hadn’t risen in days. It was the oddest thing to be paralyzed by powerful emotions that were so violent that my body couldn’t even properly respond. My body had been numbed by the loss of Kyle; shocked, stunned. I only wished my heart would turn ice cold and hard alike. I wished I could bury my head in the sand. I wished I could die with him.

My phone rang in the distance. *Damn Craig for saving it from the trash.*

I held my breath, listening to the familiar ringtone. *Gabi.* I couldn’t bring myself to answer. I didn’t want to face the world. I wasn’t willing to greet anyone. I wasn’t prepared to move on without him.

I slowly backed out of the living room. I caught a glimpse of my dad’s bedroom door as I turned around. He barricaded himself in his room every chance he could. He checked on me intermittently. He’d tried to talk to me several times, but when we both fell silent, it was too painful to know we were both thinking about him. It was too excruciating, damn it.

I just didn’t understand why. Why me? Why him?

A tiny giggle erupted from Lexi.

I spun around and watched Kellan fawn over her. I couldn’t quell my bitterness. I didn’t understand why she got everything. She got the perfect figure. She got the perfect man who stayed with her even after she cheated on

him a million times. Now she had the perfect wedding, perfect honeymoon and would have a perfect baby in her perfect condo with her perfect support system because Lexi was perfect to everyone but me.

Though I hadn't voiced my opinion, guilt still rammed my chest. I knew she'd been through a lot to get to where she was. I knew she was still facing a mountain of responsibility and opposition. I also knew her relationship with Kellan was a lot more than met the eye.

Shit. When did I turn into a jealous bitch, especially when it came to my best friend? Wasn't I supposed to be happy for her? Wasn't I supposed to be celebrating all the milestones in her life?

Perhaps. But, I couldn't get past that fact that I wouldn't have half of what she had, and Kyle would have none of it. And for her to be selfishly flaunting it at a time like this was-

A growl erupted from me as I spun on my heels and raced to my room. I slammed the door; the walls vibrated in reaction.

Tears sprang, stinging my eyes with the ache I felt inside. I couldn't witness her fairytale every day knowing Kyle would never have it. I couldn't- *Errr! It just wasn't fair!*

Who decided who deserved to live a full life or not? *Who* decided that Kyle didn't deserve to live past the age of ten?

Who decided I didn't deserve everything Lexi had? *Who* decided Craig and me didn't deserve what Lexi and Kellan had? *Who* decided? Fate? Well, who the hell does Fate think she is? She clearly isn't an American citizen because where the hell is her sense of equality? Does she even know the definition of it?

What was the reason for her decision? What made her decide to shit on me? What did I do that was so bad to earn this degree of punishment? Nothing! I did nothing wrong! Kyle did nothing wrong!

My serum shot into my mouth. My tears were dried by the flaming fury firing through me. I leapt to my feet, my hands in fists at my side.

I laughed wickedly, dangerously, with a lack of humor. It sounded evil to my own ears. I didn't care though. I knew they could hear me in the distance, but I didn't care. If no one was willing to fight Fate, then I would. If she thought she was the sole dictator of punishment, then she was sorely mistaken.

I'm done! Hell hath no fury like a scorned mother! Kyle was mine! He was innocent! He didn't deserve the fate she so vindictively delivered him to. Criminals deserved that fate. Delinquents, rapists, child molesters, murderers, they deserved to die in cold blood. They deserved to die slowly, painfully, with their life source trickling from them ounce by ounce as agony tore through their limbs, shutting down their vital organs and forcing them to beg for death to come quicker. They deserved that fate, not Kyle! And if Fate was too busy delivering foul destinies to innocents, then I suppose it was up to me to take up arms and do her job right.

I'd be damned if the dark souls of this world got off free while the innocent, like Kyle, suffered at their hands; I'd be damned if the blameless continued to endure the fate earned by the spawns of hell.

Adrenaline gushed through me in excess. My pulse beat a swift, erratic rhythm; thriving on the determination suffocating every weak emotion I'd embraced these last few

days. I was done crying. I was done being a victim. Kyle was the victim, not me.

I was alive. I could still fight. I had the opportunity to vindicate Kyle's death. I had chances, as in many, to change things.

I was going to change things. I was going to damn their souls.

My name wasn't Mel. It was Fate. She stole my baby brother from me and I was stealing her job.

Everyone is born with a purpose, and Fate just unveiled mine.

I jerked open my closet and tore an outfit off the hangers. I would dress the way I felt. I felt dark. My cup of soul was brimming over with rage. They could kill my body and I'd continue my mission. No one could stop the pure hatred pumping through me for those undeservingly spared. No one could halt the sinful plots I developed as I dressed. No one could end my new reign. I was embracing the job Fate delivered me to.

Vigilante.

I gazed at my reflection in the mirror. I didn't recognize myself. It was a far cry from the happy, bubbly, bumbling girl I used to be. That girl died. She died with Kyle. She was killed by Fate.

Black skinny jeans were tucked into knee-high flat black boots. A thin, black long-sleeve shirt covered more of the ivory innocence of my flesh. I nearly ripped out chunks of my hair as I fastened it into a painfully tight knot atop my head.

I stared into my blue eyes. They'd lost their luster. They were flat orbs that would spit fire if you looked into them too long, reflective of my soul burning in hell. That's what this felt like: hell. When Fate took Kyle, I was immediately thrust past the gates of hell for all my dark emotions to burn and blaze, to simmer and grow in power until they consumed me.

Vigilante. I could think of no greater position, Fate. Too bad you couldn't be the recipient of my first judgment.

Withdrawing my state ID and debit card from my wallet, I tossed all else aside. I tucked them into my bra. One last glimpse around my room had my mind swimming in memories. I swiftly suppressed them. I needed to get away fast. I couldn't stay where *he* had been.

Moving fast, I opened my window and leapt out, bypassing those oblivious to my suffering. They acknowledged that this was difficult on me effortlessly. They were quick to offer useless apologies and feigned understanding; they were fast to take my hand and physically comfort me. They were swift to offer what they thought I needed, rather than asking what I wanted.

I knew it wouldn't be long before they came looking for me. Eventually they would realize I wasn't just taking a walk around the block. Eventually they would realize I was actually gone. Eventually, they would panic the way I had when I saw Kyle on the stretcher. Eventually, they would understand the agony I felt if they cared about me.

Regardless of where a person goes, if you love them, you worry. You can only remain ignorant for so long. Things happen; death swoops in faster than we anticipate possible. What took years to build can be destroyed with a single wrecker ball, turning one's heart and soul into ashes and rubble.

Craig

One day later...

“Did you get a bloody hit?” I knew cursing at Jack wasn’t going to get me answers sooner, but I was a fucking wreck.

I loved Kyle. He had been like the little brother I didn’t know I wanted. I bonded with the pipsqueak. He was a cool sammy. Mel and I designed our days around him. He was the child we would never have.

And now he was gone.

But worse, my pitter-patter key guard was gone too now.

I yanked my fingers through my hair, tugging on the sprawly bits by the root. I couldn’t stand still. My feet paced paw prints into the floor.

Gabi grabbed my arm, jerking me to face her. A firm frown turned her features down. Her eyes held sympathy, understanding, but the rest of her expressed her frustration with me. “Hey! I’d like this floor to last at least a century. Think you could stop pounding it with your *pies gordos*?”

I expelled a breath, pursing my lips. A worried heart, a fear filled soul wreaked havoc on the mind, sent the body sputtering with fidgets.

Swallowing the bit of serum sitting at the base of my throat, I attempted to relax. “Sorry, love.”

Her expression fell. Her breathing softened. “I know you’re worried, C. We all are. I promise Jack is trying as hard as he can to find her.”

There was nothing I could say, so I merely nodded my knocker.

She gave me a small smile, patting my shoulder in congrats, as if choosing peace over rage was such an auccalling moment.

“I’ve got some stuff,” Jack stated.

Kellan, Lexi, Gabi and I rushed the computer where Jack sat typing away. He enlarged an image on the screen. My heart cracked at the sight of Mel. She looked so dark, so angry and a bit lost. The determined set of her jaw drew more attention than the unshed tears in her eyes.

“She visited the ATM on Rivers Avenue at 10:16pm last night. She approached from the Northwest and withdrew five-hundred dollars, the maximum allowed per day on her account.” Jack toggled to a new screen. This one was an overhead view of a ticket counter, at a ticket counter I recognized in the Charleston Airport. “She purchased a one-way ticket to Atlanta. The flight took off at 6:12am this morning and safely landed in Atlanta.” Jack grew quiet. His brows furrowed.

“What’s wrong, Jack?” Lexi pressed. One of her small hands landed on his shoulder, gently coercing him to tell us.

My stomach bubbled and cursed. My lungs felt like snakes were biting them; pain stabbed my chest, making each breath harder to take than the last.

Jack sighed, pulling up yet another tab. “I think she knew that I would track her. Look.”

My pitter sped up as he played the short clip of Mel stopping in front of a camera in the Atlanta airport. She held up a piece of paper. I recognized her handwriting as I read her message. ‘Don’t follow me.’

“Blasted fluff is what that hunk of is!” I couldn’t stop my outburst. Didn’t she know that I would miss her, that they would miss her? Did she think that we would just go on without her? Did she think I’d just pop it all up and move on?

Kellan squeezed my shoulder. I jerked from his grasp. “No, mate.” I shook my head, emphasizing my stand. “If it was your doll, don’t philander me. Your arse would be on the next flight out.”

“I don’t think she’s still in Atlanta.” Jack’s words reined me in.

I swallowed the serum slowly rising upwards in the back of my throat. “Why?”

“This time she went inside the bank.” Jack assessed me, his gaze briefly passing over the others before returning to me.

Gabi wrapped her arms around herself, watching the scene unfold. Her features were twisted, much like Lexi’s. They were clearly concerned, but no one was springing into action.

“She withdrew over five thousand dollars, Craig.” Jack’s voice was distant, like a voice-over in a movie. I could no longer see his dark figure before me. I was gone, lost inside my mind. What the hell was I supposed to do?

Oh, Melanie.

Mel

One day later...

I was conscious of my surroundings. I checked every stoplight, every business, every possible corner for cameras. I knew I wouldn't be able to avoid them all. There were too many in this post-modern world. My goal was to avoid them in my final destination.

I'd paid cash for a taxi from Atlanta to Mobile, Alabama. I hitchhiked across the state line and spent the night in a motel outside Pensacola, Florida. I was out the door before 6am in another taxi. This time, I traveled just over three hours to New Orleans, Louisiana.

Those hours spent in a car with a stranger were anything but peaceful. I tried to lose myself in the scenery, but failed. Kyle had too strong of a hold over me. My heart ached too much. I felt heavy, as if I was drowning in sinking sand. Every time I surfaced for air though, anger swaddled me again, stiffening my limbs, burning my tender insides.

I had the driver drop me off at the city limit, far from cameras, inside one of the suburban residential neighborhoods.

Spending far too many days around the Vamp Army, I scented the air around me, checking for vamps nearby. I knew from my mom that a lack of their natural, woodsy odor didn't mean they weren't there, it just meant they were trying to be as invisible as I wished I could be.

I crossed my arms over my chest and tilted my head down a bit while keeping my eyes up and alert. To humans, I would appear to be taking a stroll to clear my head. To others, I was an immortal who knew how to fend for herself.

Thankfully, no one bothered me. Monsters didn't jump from the alleys between the houses, and eventually, between the businesses. Quiet suburban roads gave way to busy highways and then to a bustling city center with narrow streets that were anything but flat. The human volume grew the closer I got to the middle of it all. Sirens whirled in the distance constantly, horns honked in mid-day traffic, dogs barked at every tiny skitter and scuffle. If I closed my eyes, I would swear I was in New York City. If it weren't for the country charm of the historic buildings, the aged columns crawling with ivy, the porches framed with planters that drew you in, that made you want to sit and absorb the busy scenery, and the occasional cobblestone street that somehow survived Hurricane Katrina, I would believe I was in New York City. The melting pot of accents surrounding me further perpetuated the idea.

My time spent walking cooled my ardor a bit, but didn't put it out. Bitterness still blackened my soul. Fury still engulfed my tattered heart.

"Imara was right."

I froze at the sound of her weathered voice, heavy with a French Caribbean accent, an accent I recognized as similar to Jack's. There was wisdom in her curling words, confidence in her raspy tone.

I turned back towards her.

An African American woman in colorful swept fabrics watched me from the doorway of a small shop tucked between bustling corporate conglomerates. Long black dreads with touches of grey kissed the center of her back; the thick twists of hair were tied back in a red scrap of material.

“Melanie Marie Hartford I presume.” She didn’t offer a hand. She merely studied me with a knowing gaze.

I swallowed hard, meeting her heavy gaze. Her stance was a relaxed one, her features weren’t taut with anxiety, but her grey eyes were intense powerful orbs that I somehow knew were staring into my soul. “And you are?”

A small smile lit her face; crinkles framed her eyes, revealing her age. “That is of no concern for you now, girl.” Spinning on her heels, she walked inside the shop. She left the door wide open, as if she knew I would follow.

I glanced around, watching the humans shuffling in and out of office buildings. It was an odd place for a business such as hers, whatever it happened to be. My first instinct was a psychic medium, like Imara.

No signs adorned the one-story building. It was a miniscule shack in comparison to the tall, brick and glass structures around it. From the outside, it had the traditional French country charm famous in New Orleans. Aside from its size, it didn’t stick out like a sore thumb, yet I couldn’t help feeling like it didn’t belong nonetheless.

Cautiously, I peered inside. The scene before me took me aback. It was a coffee shop, a cozy, eclectic coffee shop with color and charm. Cushioned chairs were nestled in groups throughout the quaint shop. A few worn wooden tables were tucked between, but no matching chairs could be found. The strange woman spoke to a young Caucasian male with shoulder length brown hair; his hair was tied back similarly to hers. He continued cleaning out a few white, porcelain coffee cups as she whispered in his ear. When she was done, he nodded his head, acknowledging he’d heard.

I was so absorbed in their exchange that I didn't notice the couple sitting in the corner, nor that a man was trying to cut around me.

"Come on, little one." The woman looked directly at me before disappearing through a sea of beads dangling from a doorway to the left of the work area.

Curiosity drove me into the potential arms of danger. Gone was my cognizance of my surroundings, lost was my conscience; ignorant was I to my knotted gut.

Beyond the beads was another room, similar to the front but on a smaller scale. Two navy, velour cushioned armchairs were nestled to a worn wooden table with what appeared to be a century worth of use from the knicks and scratches on its surface.

"Sit," she commanded, though she didn't.

Hesitantly, I sat in the closest chair, my eyes never leaving her cat-like movements.

"There is no need to fear me, child. Imara is a friend. She has spoken well of you, therefore, I mean you no harm." Her carefully worded statement hinted at her power, made me aware that had I not been spoken of well, she could have incited harm against me.

"What do you want with me?"

She stopped circling the room, finally dropping gracefully into the seat across from me. "It is not what I want with you, but rather, what you will receive from me."

I knew my face was scrunched, unveiling the confusion that swarmed me. "I don't understand." I took a moment to scan the room before coming back to focus on her.

"You are here for a reason, Melanie."

I hated people who spoke in riddles. “You were the one who told me to come in here.” I couldn’t hide my frustration.

The spark of amusement in her eyes irritated me. She was silently mocking my ignorance, the very blindness she was keeping me in. “You know not why you are here just yet, my child. You are running, but you know not who you are running to just yet.”

“That makes no sense.”

“Be wise, girl. You are here as Fate for now. You believe yourself something you are not.” Her expression grew grave, haunting. “You are not a god. You ought to keep away from the shadows. Abide the laws governed in this city, for many of us guard it. Any vigilante who rises up shall surely fall into the pits of hell.”

I swallowed hard. I knew my eyes were wide; I was unable to mask my fear, the unease choking me.

“You believe yourself something you are not,” she reiterated.

The words I declared in my bedroom busied my mind, shrouding my ire in unwavering caution.

“You are here for a reason, my child. Work with the laws within this city, and those that guard it will certainly guard you. Help this city, and it will help you. Again, you know not why you are here just yet. Your foolish ideas are what brought you, but they are not your purpose.”

“What’s my purpose then?” I didn’t know how Lexi felt around Imara before, what she experienced emotionally on her journey to unencrypt her messages. Now I did. I finally understood the annoying aspects, but beyond that, the self-reflection one must do in order to get through it.

“My name is Jai’kay. This is a name you will remember for all of your eternity, Miss Melanie Marie Hartford.” She abruptly stood and left the room, leaving me to swim through the tide of thoughts washing ashore.

Several minutes later, I stood, no less confused. I felt different though. The Mel that had walked through this door wasn’t the Mel that was exiting.

Back in the coffee house area, Jai’kay worked beside the young male, offering up fresh, steaming cups of coffees and teas to customers.

I passed by the steady stream of customers coming in. I was just about to walk out of the shop when she called out to me.

“Melanie.”

I halted, angling to look back at her over my shoulder. My brows were heavy, crushing inwards as an outward expression of the defeating weight of my thoughts.

“You ought to eat. I would suggest *Orla’s Bistro*.” Her eyes ignited with mischief. “It is two blocks from here. I’m certain you will find something to satisfy you there.” She focused on a customer approaching the counter; it was my cue to leave and go in search of this *Orla’s Bistro*.

Mel

A black and white striped awning greeted me long before the establishment did. A faded pink and white wood-carved sign announcing I was in the right place hung above the awning, from what would appear to be a second floor or possibly an upstairs apartment. Wrought iron chairs and tables lined the outside of the corner restaurant without blocking the sidewalk.

Humans, tons of them, shuffled in and out of the busy bistro. The smell was a tad overwhelming. Each breath I took filled my senses with perfumes, sweat, deodorants, food, and something akin to spoil as my ears were overwhelmed by the tapping of phones, the clicking of heels, conversations, metal hitting metal, and food being smacked between teeth. If I had an appetite at all before, it was certainly gone.

“Hey, babe.” The tall, slender girl walked straight into the arms of a beefy male who was an inch or two shorter than her. She wore cut-off jean shorts, an oversized long-sleeve shirt. My eyes trailed down to her studded, rusty brown, ankle boots. She was clearly a college student. Her hair was swept up into a quick ponytail that wasn’t quite centered.

The male, dressed to the nine in a well-tailored business suit, didn’t mind their difference in age or attire. He swiftly wrapped his arms around her, kissing her openly and affectionately. My supersonic hearing allowed me to hear their intimate sigh as they broke apart.

He gazed into her eyes, tucking a stray hair behind her ear. “I missed you.”

Her smile reached her eyes. “I missed you more.”

A pang hit my heart. I couldn't suppress the flash in time.

—~—

"Hello, love." Craig smiled wide, coming around his car to swoop me up into his arms.

I grinned wide, easily falling into his security. I pressed my face into his neck, inhaling his spicy, yet smooth, cologne.

He squeezed me extra tight before pulling back enough to peer at me. "I only get doggy snuffles?"

I chuckled, feeling myself blush. I adored his unique language. It was all Craig. His accent, his charm, it allowed him to get away with creating a language all his own, leaving most in the dust with his crazy phrases. Perhaps I was already gone, but I adored him all the more for standing out rather than blending in.

I bashfully met his gaze. "You get way more than a few sniffs."

He captured my lips, playfully teasing my mouth into surrender. His hand slowly, subconsciously, moved upwards to cup my head. He was always protecting me, shielding me from all he could. I always felt safe in his arms.

He swiped his tongue along the inside of my mouth before pulling back to nip at my lips.

I knew my cheeks were red, but my heart was giddy. I was giddy. I never felt this way with anyone else.

"Uh hum!"

I jerked away from Craig. Our faces were more than a foot apart, but his arms remained like anchors around me, locking me into place against him.

Lexi laughed. "And you talk about us." She rolled her eyes, a broad smile plastered on her face, as she and Kellan brisked past us.

Craig wagged his brows at me, not the least bit embarrassed. "Hey, mate!" he called to Kellan.

"Hey, man." Kellan kept moving.

I slapped Craig's chest. "Let go of me before we draw a bigger crowd."

He pursed his lips. "You a bitty kitty 'bout bein' round me, love?"

I leveled his gaze. "No. I just prefer not to have to answer a million questions from people who ignored me until this point."

Craig gave me a small smile; he was indulging me. "Alright, love. You get the gold. Let's split the rubble."

—~—

"Yo!"

I jumped as the aggressive voice pulled me back to the present. My vision cleared, revealing a disgruntled male in a disheveled suit standing before me.

"You in line?" he growled. The sun shone down on his balding head.

I nodded my head negatively.

As I glanced around, my heart grew heavier, my chest felt tighter and my serum was present in the back of my throat, proof of my emotions.

I shook myself. I needed to focus. I needed to find something to do. The more quiet time I had, the more time

my mind had to dwell on my heart's ache.

I missed them. There was no denying it. I missed my brother...and Craig.

Craig

“Fuck this!” Anxiety ate away at my flesh, breaking my surface.

Kellan’s eyes widened. Lexi’s brows dipped inward, concern etched in her features. I knew they were speaking in their heads...about me. I didn’t give a bull’s gowl though.

“I can’t frame my arse with cushion anymore, mate. I gotta go after her. My pitter can’t take it.” The tough exterior I’d commandeered the day Kyle passed was about to break and blunder.

Lexi stood, her belly unmistakable. I envied my mate there. I wasn’t thinking bout bottles and diapers, but I was thinking ‘bout forever with one woman.

All the guys before me said I would know when the right one came along, that I wouldn’t screw around, I wouldn’t want to screw around. I would think about all I never thought I would.

That was Mel; that my love. She was the one for me, the only doll to get me. She loved the rough bits of me and all.

Lexi threw her arms around me.

With a sigh, I gave in, hugging her for her best friend.

Unshed tears sat in her eyes. “Please bring her back, Craig. It’s hell worrying all the time.”

I pat her cheek affectionately. “I’ll do my best, love.”

Kellan rounded Lexi, pulling her to his side. He held out an arm. “You know I’m here if you need anything.”

We did the one arm bop, to keep our macho in tact. “I know.”

“Call when you get there. If you need us, we’re on the next flight out,” Lexi said. I hated the fear in her eyes. So much more ran through her knocker than she said. My mate had a lot before him. I hated that I was piling the shit on.

Her fear was a reflection of my own though. The worst crushes your genius on the good and bad days. Your brilliance is squandered on crimpets, the little possibilities that can kill your soul with little brute.

With one final wave, I walked out of their apartment, backpack in tow. I didn’t care about clothes, shoes or crap. I just wanted her. I knew the essentials were necessary though. I also knew she didn’t take anything with her, and she would need the essentials.

With one carry-on and a ton of emotional luggage, I boarded the next flight out to Atlanta, to follow my pitter.

Mel

One hour. I'd been sitting inside the packed bistro for nearly an hour. I was ready to crawl out of my skin. It never slowed. The sounds, the smells, they never let up. Wave after wave of nausea sloshed in my tummy. I'd never been so close to losing my stomach.

I looked around the room. The order counter had a line that wrapped out the door. Every seat was taken. I was surprised to find that strangers even shared tables in this place. Apparently the food was that good.

I wouldn't know though. My plate sat untouched before me. I was too anxious, too overwhelmed. I wound Jai'kay's cryptic message around my mind over and over again. I wanted so badly to run, to get out. Something kept me glued to my seat...and it wasn't the chair.

The woman across from me smiled and nodded a farewell. "Have a good day."

I did my best to return the gesture. "You too."

No sooner had she vacated than a police officer scooped up the chair. "Afternoon, little lady." He offered a courteous nod in my direction.

Conveniently, the mother and child at the table across from mine left. "Joe!" The guy flagged down a fellow officer.

Joe damn near ran over and plopped down in the seat and propped his feet on the chair opposite him. "Guess Doug is paying." A smug smile lifted his lips, suggesting he wasn't at all disappointed by the turn of events.

"I paid last time," the officer at my table said, his features turning down slightly. "You're the cheapskate."

“I’ve got a baby on the way! I’m gonna need all that money for diapers. You have any idea how much those suckers cost?” Joe crossed his arms over his chest and leaned back in his chair.

“That’s been your excuse for the past six months.”

“You’re just jealous you ain’t got a steady.” Joe laughed.

“What’s Marcus jealous of?” Doug, I assumed, carried an overflowing tray of food.

Joe dropped his feet to the floor and sat up. “That he doesn’t have-”

Marcus cleared his throat, jutting his chin towards me.

I struggled to bite back a smile. Didn’t these guys know what teenagers knew these days?

Marcus frowned. “I wouldn’t want that kinda worry. Too many slums like Slizzecki on the streets.”

Joe’s expression fell. “Don’t remind me. I’ve got Jaz in gun classes next weekend. I’ll be damned if an asshole like him touches my little girl.”

“I’d feel a hell of a lot better if we could nail the asshole. He’s so damn smug. The sad thing is he’ll probably get away with it.” Marcus’ jaw tightened, his anger visible.

Doug unloaded the tray, setting it aside as he sat.

“We’ve been over his house and car with a fine tooth comb. Can’t find shit. He’s too clean; just like a pro.” Joe took a hearty bite out of his sandwich; his teeth aggressively tore at the food, unveiling his frustration.

I found myself sitting a little taller, angling my ears a little closer. After what happened to Kyle, nothing would satisfy me more than to lock up a sleaze-ball for life.

Marcus scrubbed his bald head. He was a young male, only a few years older than me. His chocolate skin bulged with muscle, like he'd spent a bit of time in the military before becoming a police officer.

Joe was older, late twenties, early thirties, if I had to guess, and the only one wearing a wedding ring. His brown hair was spiked; a five o'clock shadow framed his jaw. He was lean. It didn't look like he had much muscle beneath his uniform, but you could just tell that he could catch any guy who dared to run.

Doug was the eldest in the group. Grey touched the roots of his hair. He was slightly stalkerish, as if he'd spent more years driving the car than getting out of it. He had the keenest eye though. He patrolled the room every few seconds, always alert, always on the lookout.

"The man's a pro I'm tellin' ya," Joe reiterated. "He knows what chemicals to use to hide DNA. Not even a cadaver dog could sniff it out."

I couldn't help but wonder if my nose was stronger than a dog's. In *Twilight*, werewolves and vamps seemed pretty equal when it came to senses. Of course, that was a fictional book and this was reality.

Wait! They had better eyesight! If I focused hard enough, I could see every speck of crushed rock in poured concrete.

I leaned in a bit more, tuning my hearing entirely to their conversation. It was difficult to block out the excess noise around me, the clear conversations at nearby tables that echoed around the sputter.

"Can't hold him if we don't have any evidence against him," Doug muttered, disdain undeniable.

“Stained concrete. Who the hell has stained concrete in their attic?” Joe shook his head in dismay.

“Yeah, well, that’s not enough to keep him behind bars.” Doug took a hearty sip of his drink.

“And that’s a damn shame.” Marcus scanned the busy restaurant before his gaze landed on me. He cocked his head to the side. “You don’t like Hattie’s food?” A quizzical brow lifted.

I shrugged my shoulders. “Not really hungry.”

He smiled easily. “Doesn’t matter. You’re always hungry for Hattie’s food.”

I looked at the other two officers who were suddenly just as interested in me. “You skippin’ school?” Doug pinned me with a hard glare.

“Nope. Got my GED.”

“Hmph.” He took a bit out of his thick sandwich.

“Don’t mind the grump.” Marcus winked.

I studied the three of them. My heart beat a little quicker as the case they detailed mulled around in my head.

A clean crime scene... I knew television and movies fabricated a lot; there wasn’t always a break in every case. It was convenient for writers, but rarely so easy for the real guys.

My leg began to bounce, anxiety working through me. I nibbled my lip, watching them for a bit as they ate.

“Can I take a look?” I blurted the question before I could think things through.

All three of them stopped chewing long enough to stare at me. Brows lifted and lips mashed together. I knew they were about to turn me down.

“Before you say no, just listen. I’m not some emo kid with a hard on for dark, gritty stuff. I have really good senses. I know you guys don’t want to let him go free. What could it hurt if I took a quick look at his house?”

“No.” Doug bluntly rejected me.

Joe and Marcus exchanged glances.

“My senses are better than any cadaver dog. You can put me to the test before you take me there if you want.” Suddenly, I was desperate to help. I didn’t know specifically what came over me. I was abruptly driven. The only answer I could come up with was that I wanted to save any child I could from the early death my brother met. Kyle didn’t die at the hands of a sick, twisted man with a fetish, but he did die at the hands of a sick, disturbed child, and I suppose at some point, the line is blurred because the end result of each was multiple deaths by the same hands.

“No.” Doug didn’t hesitate.

Marcus gave me a once-over before leaning across the aisle towards the older man. “What could it hurt?”

“Say she gets something. She’s not an officer or government official. There’s no way it’ll hold up in court. Not to mention the act alone violates a hundred rules against it. The yellow tape is there for a reason.” Doug didn’t look my way. He fixed his stare on his food, dismissing us all.

“We do hire outside consultants from time to time,” Joe offered.

Doug lifted his eyes and fixed him with a scowl.

“I could pass as a consultant,” I asserted. “I’ve watched enough crime shows to pass any test.”

Doug grimaced. “It’s a hell no now. Hollywood ain’t nothing like the real thing.”

“So you want to pass up on the only chance you have to possibly lock him up for good?” I was ready for battle. I would fight to change that next child’s fate, as if I had a chance to change Kyle’s by doing so. “Know that if he gets someone else, it’ll be on your hands because you were too uppity to take help from a girl in black.”

“I ain’t uppity. This isn’t about politics, little girl.”

“You hire consultants. What’s wrong with hiring me on a trial basis?”

“What qualifications do you have? Better yet, what real experience do you have? Solving the crime on CSI before those twerps could doesn’t count.”

“What qualifications did you have before you got your badge? We all start somewhere. You don’t even have to pay me. I don’t think having me look around would hurt anything though.”

Doug was vividly agitated. If looks could kill, Joe, Marcus and I would be piles of dust by now. “One of you can talk to the Chief about this shit. I want no part of it.” He stood, carrying his empty plate and cup with him.

“Let’s go, Emo.” Marcus followed suit. Joe wasn’t far behind him leaving me to do the same.

Once we were outside, Doug quickly distanced himself from us. “She rides in the back of your car, not mine.”

I was slightly amused by the man's adamant rejection.

"Fair enough." Joe said. "Let's go, Emo."

Apparently Emo was going to be my nickname so long as I was trapped in a sea of black. *Damn me and my impulsive wardrobe decisions.*

Mel

Marcus opened the back door, letting me out in front of the police station a few blocks away from *Orla's Bistro*.

Doug brisked past us. He fixed them with a hard glare. He'd done that a lot in the short time I'd observed him. I could all too easily picture him giving every potential suspect he encountered the same scowl. He seemed more than angry, and, yet, dismissive, a bitterly, direct passive.

"Is he always like that?" I watched as Doug blew through the precinct doors.

"More so lately. Don't take it personally." Marcus closed the car door behind me.

"Let's get in there before he blows a fuse," Joe said.

I walked with the men into the busy epicenter.

Metal detectors greeted us at the entrance with no side escape. The space was overwhelmed by off-white walls, that were probably white at some point, bulletin boards, with little room to spare, hung throughout the entry area. Missing children fliers occupied most of the cork surface.

The chairs in the foyer had seen better days. So had those sitting in them it appeared.

A large, wood desk curved outward from the right side wall, acting as a blockade and main service station. A pale, older woman with generous wrinkles, a strong brow and thin lips that feathered at the edges scrutinized us, like a hawk surveying the strangers in her presence. She had a stern, no-nonsense disposition, something I imagined one needed when manning the front of any government office.

"Hey, Gretta," Joe called as he breezed past the desk in the moderate sliver of a passage to the left. It wasn't until I

followed that I saw the desk was actually a large 'L' since the front of the piece had a high and low counter surface, giving the elusion of privacy.

Gretta nodded a greeting before answering the ringing phone. Her gruff personality came through in her greeting. I assumed she didn't start that way. Lexi didn't start that way. Life, bullshit, toughened the gentlest of beings. It didn't mean they no longer had a kind heart; it just meant you had to work to access it.

Beyond Gretta was two large rooms of desks that connected via a wider than normal doorway. Several private offices and rooms lined the perimeter.

"Keep up, Emo." Joe pulled me back to him.

No one really paid me any mind, but my keen senses made me hyper-aware of all of them; them being government employees, civilians, victims, criminals, and their families and legal council.

In the second open space of desks, Marcus led me to one I presumed was his and instructed me to sit at a chair flanking it. A quick glance showed several more desks had the same additional chair; more interestingly, though, was the massive board spanning half the back wall. It had photos, maps, and strings; all items I instantly knew were for a current case.

"Don't touch anything," Marcus warned.

I quirked a brow, unable to contain my smirk. He suddenly developed anxiety. I listened as his vitals reacted.

"Look, the Chief can see you. Don't mess this up if you really wanna help." He worriedly glanced back at one of the side offices.

“I can handle myself.”

Joe lightly clapped Marcus on the shoulder. “Stop hovering and let’s get this over with.”

Marcus cast one last pleading look my way before going with his co-worker.

“Good luck,” I called at the last minute.

The guys were slightly amused by the gentle lift of their lips. Marcus’ shoulders dipped proving his muscles had been bulging stiff prior.

Sensitive ears made eavesdropping too simple. I listened as the door clicked shut behind them.

“What do you two want?” a brusque voice bellowed.

I forced myself to focus on the back wall. Several photos of young girls, no older than ten, were tacked up. They all had gone missing over the past seven months. The map to the right had several red pins poking out with strings connecting them.

“Where the girls went missing,” Doug stated

I looked up at him. He took a sip from a steaming mug of black coffee, based on the scent. “Are they confirmed victims or guesses?”

“They all were abducted from community parks within an eight mile radius of each other the exact same way. Mother focuses on the younger child believing the older can fend for herself-”

“But she can’t.” I finished his sentence.

His expression dimmed; he tilted his head down enough to show he struggled with the case.

Silence fell between us.

In that moment, I developed a new appreciation for my mother's over-bearing nature. She had enemies with stronger motives than a perverted stranger to go after me. We fought regularly over my lack of freedom. Lexi was the only friend I could go out with. Knowing that, I lied to her every time I'd gone out with Ben. I never considered the risk of going to the movies with my boyfriend. I never considered any view but my own.

She knew though. She knew the dangers so many kids were still oblivious to after all these horror stories. Furthermore, knowing what I did now about the paranormal world mixing with the human, I was more aware than ever. A human mother never stood a chance against a vamp.

I frowned as I studied the board. That hadn't even crossed my mind before. "Are these parks open? Are there any hiding places nearby?"

Doug cocked his head; I could tell he was mentally scanning through the parks. "Most of them are in the middle of residential neighborhoods, community centers of sorts."

"Did the girls scream?" I couldn't imagine not making a fuss or trying to get my mother's attention if someone snatched me.

Analyzing the photo of a pale girl with a blond braid falling over each shoulder, I had to quell an unexpected emotional reaction. She was missing two teeth, waiting for the permanents. Her smile lit up her brown eyes. She appeared genuinely happy and carefree...and some asshole probably destroyed it all.

“Every mother said the same: it happened so fast. They were so distraught; it was hard to get them to calm down long enough to recall details.”

I couldn't fathom if someone had snatched Kyle from the playground one day. As a teenager, we rarely concern ourselves with the evil in the world until it hits too close to home...

My serum erupted into my mouth, coating my tongue before slipping back down my throat.

A male with buff arms yet a pouching belly abruptly blocked my view. He sized me up for a solid minute, his piercing eyes trying to break me down. “Name?” He barked the question.

“Melanie Marie Hartford.”

“Age?”

“Seventeen.”

He raised a brow, his eyes cutting me.

I sighed. “Okay, sixteen.”

“Where you from Melanie Marie Hartford?”

“Charleston, South Carolina.”

He harrumphed, watching me longer, scrutinizing me with an air of distrust.

He bent down, getting in my face. “Listen up, Miss Hartford. Joe is gonna fingerprint you and run a background check. If your story checks out, then you'll get thirty minutes on the scene, no compensation and three chaperones. You waste our time and I'll slap you with a misdemeanor in a heartbeat and these two will be suspended for a week.” He jerked his chin towards Joe and

Marcus. "This isn't a game or the set of CSI Miami. You're peddling valuable police resources on this escapade of yours. You got me?" Grey hair brushed his temples; the aging color stood out against the dark brown locks it blended into. His weathered, ivory flesh revealed the toll years of police work had taken on him.

The Chief straightened and, like Doug had done so many times, he narrowed his eyes at me, trying to dissuade me from typical teenage immaturity.

I stood, meeting his heavy gape. "Deal."

"Print her, Joe; then, you three take Kristof in case she actually finds something." He pursed his lips as a huff escaped him. "I'd hate to let the perp go." The Chief walked away. His pessimism tickled me. If only these guys knew I was a vampeen...

"Let's go, Emo. He's already got the timer running." Joe took me back to the front room and proceeded to fingerprint me before running my name in the system. He sent me back to Marcus' desk to wait for the results.

A few minutes later, Joe returned. "She's clear."

Doug sighed, setting his near-empty cup of coffee on Marcus' desk. "Let's get this over with."

They escorted me back through the precinct and out to their squad cars. This time, Doug let me ride in the passenger seat of his.

We sat in silence until the final stretch of the drive.

"Why don't you have a partner?" I asked, staring out the window at the scenery.

"Don't want one," was his clipped reply.

“Why?” I looked his way.

He eyed me sideways, irritation clenching his jaw. “Just don’t.”

“I thought all of you had to have back up.”

“Don’t need back up.”

“Everyone needs help sometimes.” Even as I said it, I heard the lesson I neglected. I’d left all my back up behind, selfishly cutting them out of my life, treating them as if they didn’t care, didn’t deserve to be a part of my healing process.

Doug harrumphed, throwing the car into park in front of a typical suburban home in a middle-income subdivision. The homes were a cluster of old and new, some maintained, others deteriorating slowly. No one yard, home or design stood out. “Let’s go.”

I expected a reaction, some instinct when I saw the suspect’s home, but I didn’t have one...until Doug opened his car door.

Immediately I scented the vamp, a vampire I deduced by the musky pine aroma. The off thought I had at the station had fear surging within me. I only smelled the one, but experience said it didn’t mean there weren’t more. I couldn’t explain my surprising need to protect these men. “Keep your eyes and ears open,” I stated.

I got out of the car and, with a heavy heart, knowing what a vamp was capable of, made my way to the front door of the mid-century, craftsman style home.

Craig

I fiddled with Mel's phone, scrolling through her photos. Memories were a bitter bug to swallow at times. Every second that passed without hearing her voice, seeing her, ratcheted up my nerves, busting my rumblers.

I'd been with plenty of dolls, ravenous sexy vampers. But after I got to know Mel, after she hooked my pitter, none of the others mattered. She made a sunny Australian think about forever for the first time. She was so different. Her enthusiasm was adorable whereas the same made the old dolls desperate and easy.

Damn, I missed the fire out of her...

My pitter took off as my phone rang. The sound echoed around me. I always hoped.

Her dad's caller ID was a disappointment. My optimism deflated. "Hello?"

"She called Auggy. She's in New Orleans." His voice was strung with tension.

"On my way." I hung up.

My pitter picked up its pace again. "Turn this cabby round and belt it to New Orleans, mate."

The driver calmly maneuvered to a turn around point. "It'll cost ya, boy."

"I don't care." She was worth every penny. My inner bits craggled, knowing. If she called Auggy, it meant she had run into vamp trouble...

I wanted to run, but knew the car was safer. If she called Auggy, surely she needed me. I prayed she needed me. I couldn't handle her siftin' out again.

— ~ —

Mel

The house was decorated in mid-century modern – meaning mid-century could have been when the vamp was born or turned, or it could just be a style preference. That was the downside of vamps. They didn't smell their age; you had to guess.

Walking through the house, I was careful about what I touched. As it was, if they released him, he would know by scent alone all those who entered his residence. My stomach churned as a chill chased down my spine. Even if they didn't release him, he could easily escape them. If this vamp was guilty, I would have to call in the Vamp Army; they, or the Bladangs, were the only ones equipped to deal with the troublesome vamp.

Considering the two, I recognized that Kai's death was probably too fresh for the Bladangs to step in on this one. I wouldn't want to overwhelm them.

The first order of business, though, was to figure out if the vamp was guilty of anything.

"CSI just pulled up," Joe announced. He peered through the curtains out the front.

"Where's the attic?" I focused on the stairs leading to the second floor.

"I'll take her." Marcus led the way.

There was a short landing at the top that ended at another door. It was an odd placement, in the center of second floor.

I noted what was visible. From my position, I saw three bedrooms. All of them were untouched, confirming that this was a vampire, not a vampeen.

Marcus opened the door, revealing a set of weathered wood stairs that curved. I'd never seen stairs like this leading to an attic or basement. It made me wonder if it was designed to be a fourth bedroom at some point. The wood wasn't sealed, an odd observation considering someone had gone up and down them often to warrant it.

The wood creaked beneath our weight as we ascended them.

I didn't know what I had expected, but the space above was empty. Not a single box, or cobweb even, occupied the room.

The ceiling was spacious in the center running parallel with the home. It had a swift, steep slope that would make it nearly impossible to avoid hitting your head outside that central line. The entire room would be a surprise to outsiders, as an attic didn't appear possible from the outer design of the home.

Like many older homes, half of the attic was unusable, full of ancient insulation. Pink fluff made one half of the attic seem like a Barbie cloud. An air-conditioning ventilation unit stood just outside the fire hazard area.

Bleach, ammonia and peroxide burned my nostrils the second I had opened the door to the room. Looking around confirmed he had gone over the polished concrete, and the walls too if I had to guess. The plywood walls were well sealed, preventing evidence from collecting. At the least, based on the chemical smell alone, this was his primary feeding room. No lights were in the space, meaning, at night, the human would be blind to his moves. Two small porthole windows were at either end of the space, but since they faced the side of the home, offered little light.

The attic door opened and a young, nerdy-looking male with thick glasses stomped up the steps carrying a black tool chest.

“Don’t touch anything without gloves.” He set down the box, immediately opening it and passing me a pair of blue gloves. They smelled of some sort of chemical plastic with a tinge of rubber. I scrunched my nose as I stuffed my hands into them.

Marcus stood in the center of the room, his hands shoved into his uniform pant pockets. Kristof joined him and immediately their attention fell on me. *No pressure.*

I put on my thinking cap. Lexi called it business mode, saying she had two minds that governed one heart.

If blood happened to spatter in the room, he would have gotten all of the visible bits. I smelled no trace of blood beneath the chemical fog. If any evidence existed, it would be in the places he wouldn’t check.

“Did ya’ll go through the pink stuff?”

“With a fine tooth comb,” Marcus replied.

Scanning the wood framing the cotton zone, I noticed a bit of residue similar to tape. “He hung up a plastic shield?”

“Doesn’t take a genius to figure that one out,” Kristof scoffed. Apparently he was as skeptical as the Chief.

Think, Mel.

I studied the joints in the wood, the edge of every nail. Moving closer, I analyzed every groove in the air-conditioning pipes.

Nothing. There really was nothing here.

My stomach roiled as my serum crept higher in the back of my throat. No vamp was this clean. They were impassive. They didn't care if humans knew they killed...but if they were killing little girls, even some of the cruelest vamps would protest that level of immorality.

Moving to the stairs, I inspected the seams, but saw nothing.

Frustration mauled my muscles, crushing my ligaments; it was the same frustration I felt, the same helplessness I experienced when they put Kyle in the ambulance.

"You good, Emo?" Marcus' voice killed my mind's new trail.

I cleared my throat, swallowing my serum. "Uh, yeah."

"Didn't find anything, did ya?" Doug stood at the top of the stairs expectantly.

I frowned, anger uncontrollably exploding within me. I shoved past him and dashed down to the second floor to smell the bedrooms.

Nothing.

Coming to the stairs to the ground floor, I scrutinized the pathway down. "Did you dust for the girls' prints along the walls and railings?"

"We know how to do our job." Kristof pushed past me.

Marcus appeared at the bottom of the attic stairs beside Doug. His disappointment was hard not to register.

Joe stared up at me from the bottom of the stairs. "Let's go, Emo. Chief is gonna blast us as it is." He sounded deflated. The fact that he wasn't the slightest bit mad left me sulking, drowning, in regret.

I coerced them into this; I'd sold my vamp skills to them. They'd believed in me, stuck their necks out for me, and I'd let them down...the same way I'd let Kyle down. I should have protected him. I should have profiled every kid in his class at the least...

Doug's face was a mask. "You're riding in the back." He shot down the stairs, disappearing around the corner on the ground floor. A few moments later, the front door opened.

I couldn't imagine what my expression was at the moment. I was in shock. Disbelief shackled me. I was disillusioned, unable to process that it didn't carry into reality. They did make it seem so easy on TV. There was always a smoking gun, some new piece of evidence that closed a case...or brought the criminal to justice...or, at the least, garnered a confession. I'd been stupid to think I could be a hero.

Slowly, I trotted down the stairs and towards the front door. Joe and Marcus brooded behind me.

The scene outside was depressing. Doug leaned against his car. Kristof was unloading his equipment onto the passenger seat of the government van emblazoned with the NOPD logo on the side. Joe and Marcus pursed their lips, their eyes full of sadness. It was a hard scene to face since I produced it.

Subdued with despair, I released a small sigh. A lazy breeze kissed my skin as I followed the path to the car, dragging a fresh, earthy, new-soil smell towards me.

Fresh soil! I jerked my head up and spun around.

I ran around the front of the house, scrutinizing every blade of grass, but found nothing disturbed or new in the garden.

The back!

My heart raced, adrenaline kicking in. I thrust myself over the wood fence into the backyard.

“Dammit,” Doug cursed.

“Yo! Emo!” Marcus yelled.

Feet shuffled behind me. I knew they would find their way in so I turned my attention to the back yard.

The grass was spotty in places, far from the lush carpet in the front, but the dirt was unmoved. A grey aluminum-framed shed occupied the back right corner of the yard. I made a run for it, praying it would unearth something useful.

“We already swabbed every tool. Trust me, we wanted to prove the perp was guilty,” Joe stated.

Sugarplum! Too easy I guess...

Rehashing what I did have, I followed the fresh soil scent to a koi pond occupying the left side of the garden. It was a focal point from every vantage point, yet was set back a bit, close to kissing the fence.

“That’s been there, Emo. It was listed on the purchase documents for the home. He requested that the previous owners leave it behind.” Marcus expelled a breath, furrowing his brows as he watched me.

The news didn’t make sense though...

I squatted near the decorative feature. I tilted my nose down and inhaled. Sure enough, the spicy, earthy smell wafted into my nostrils. I didn’t know how just yet, but the vamp had done something beneath the pond.

Marching towards the shed, I yanked open the door. Tools, most of them well-used, lined the side walls near the back. Two things caught my eye on the floor against the back wall: a pump of some sort, and an empty fish tank that could hold at least thirty gallons of water.

Sucking my bottom lip between my teeth, I mulled over the possibilities. The pond clearly had more water, but the pump could cipher the water into anything. "Did you find any containers in the garage, plastic bins or large paint buckets maybe?" I felt their heavy gazes upon me, watching me with a mix of humor and irritation probably.

"A few plastic bins with holiday supplies inside," Joe offered.

I spun on my heels. "How many?"

He shrugged his shoulders, his brows pinching lightly as he regarded me. "I dunno. Maybe six or so."

I did the calculations in my head. If my vamp talents were working well, there would be just enough to hold the water from the moderate sized water feature.

My pulse pounded; my heart beat slowly but strongly against my rib cage.

Before I could make a silly vamp mistake, I diverted the responsibility. "Grab that tank and pump," I yelled. I slid past them, focused, on a mission.

I hovered over the pond, individually spotting the fish I would have to pluck out.

"What the hell are you doing?" Doug growled.

"Putting these gloves to use." I smirked, wiggling my fingers. When he continued glaring down at me, I added with a huff, "I'm helping you prove he's guilty."

His stare lightened in intensity as curiosity moved in.

I met his questioning gaze head on. Confidence finally radiated from me. I didn't know what we'd find beneath the pond, but I knew we would find something. I felt it, soul deep. Call it instinct if you'd like.

Mel

“This is destruction of property, not justice,” Kristof stated. He’d been snooty the entire time. He’d been quite the agitating supervisor.

“Not if she finds something,” Marcus quipped. I didn’t know why they believed in me, but I appreciated their faith. It’s what gave me the audacity to pursue this, especially after failing so miserably inside the house.

“Anyone know how to work a pump?” I studied the pieces in Joe’s arms.

Doug moved forward. “Give me that.” He snatched the equipment from Joe. He cut his eyes at me. “We don’t find anything and I’m locking you up.”

I was a tad nervous, but it was more so nerves to perform than being afraid of jail time. Not that I wanted to go to jail, but, as a vamp, I knew I could handle myself, if I didn’t glamour my way out of any charges that was.

It took us twenty minutes to drain the pond and save the fish. One by one we lifted the framing rocks away from the pond’s edge. At the halfway point, I yanked the lining back to reveal fresh soil.

“Well shit.” Doug scratched his head.

“Alright.” Joe high-fived Marcus.

“That doesn’t prove anything,” Kristof grumbled.

Excitement coursed my veins. My first big break...sort of.

“How far down you think it goes?” Joe marveled.

“Not sure. Any of you boys afraid of a little dirt?” I teased. Their hands were filthy already. “Everyone grab a shovel.”

“Why don’t we call in back-up?” Kristof appealed to Doug, appointing him as the voice of reason.

“Because this is Melanie’s find.” For the first time with him, I heard a smidgen of respect in his tone.

My heart warmed. “I don’t need credit.”

“Nobody needs credit. Doesn’t mean it’s not deserved at times.” He cleared his throat, surveying the area. “Now let’s cut the mush and get ta’ diggin’.”

I smiled, but happiness warred with anxiety over what lied ahead. While we had a tiny success, there was still the possibility that there was nothing below ground. It could just be a game on his part in case the department had paranormal assistants.

That thought quelled my enthusiasm immediately. I walked a little slower towards the shed, my mind racing with what-ifs.

I’d recognized it before. This wasn’t Hollywood. It wasn’t so easy in reality. As a vamp, he could have hidden bodies anywhere. Anyone who caught him could be killed or glamoured.

Glamoured. I rolled my eyes. It isn’t like that is some sort of mesmerizing power of ours. The truth is, we look directly into a human’s eyes and allow them to see in our eyes how powerful we are, that we are otherworldly. Our voices confirm what our eyes convey. The human could immediately defy what we said, but their fear cripples them. Every human has a weakness. Fear is the fastest way to disable them. Unleash a strong enough threat and even the hardest of soldiers will back away.

The inflection of our voices combined with the dangerous gleam in our eyes activates their fear chamber. They

consider of the cost of challenging us, and often, it's not their own death they contemplate, but rather, the destruction of their loved ones. They've already sensed they, as a trained destroyer, couldn't easily compete with us, meaning their family would be helpless.

The saying is right. Vampires will always be stronger because they rarely have the same emotional ties as vampeens and humans. Kellan, Kai, Alejandro...they're the exception, not the rule.

"Let's go, Emo!" Marcus tossed me a shovel.

My reflexes kicked in. I caught the tool with one hand.

He chuckled, shaking his head in dismay. "You're full of surprises, Emo."

I took my time blowing out a breath. *Slow human pace*, I reminded myself.

I spent the next half-hour forcing myself to dig at the same sluggish pace as the officers while Kristof shuffled about, pouting.

"I hit something!" Joe slapped his shovel against something hard; a hollow echo resounded.

The four of us converged on the item, digging around it. We were a good three to four feet below ground level.

"Kristof, I want photos of every step. Start shooting," Doug ordered.

Kristof startled, but, for once, the guy didn't putter. He immediately began snapping pictures as we revealed a plastic bin with a side-snapping lid.

"Melanie, you and me are going to ground. Boys, hoist her up." Doug tossed himself upwards; his agility surprised

me. He held out a hand. I forced myself to take it.

On solid ground above, Doug and I reached as Joe and Marcus hefted the bin towards us.

“It’s light,” I stated.

Kristof continued documenting the event digitally.

Doug and I frowned, gazing down at the bin. My stomach knotted, fear draining my warmth. Worry gobbled away at me. I hoped the bin wasn’t empty. I prayed this wasn’t a wild goose chase.

The lock clicked open on Doug’s end. He nodded for me to undo my end.

Joe and Marcus moved in beside us, having lifted themselves out. Kristof moved in, the camera clicking repeatedly in succession.

I took a deep breath. A hint of a metallic, fishy scent scored my nostrils. Quickly, I unclasped my side and revealed the bin’s contents.

“Shit!” Marcus exclaimed, his hands fisting at his side.

Joe’s expression hardened; his brows slammed together at the bridge.

Doug’s face was a tight mask, concealing his reaction, but his eyes were fiery pits blazing with fury.

Kristof’s mouth was agape; his eyes widened even as he continued snapping photos.

My heart sank at the mess of blood-covered plastic stuffed to the brim within the plastic container. The lid would have popped open, even with the airtight side locks, if not for the weight of the dirt and water compressing the contents.

Doug pulled out his cell phone. With a single press of a side button, dispatch was on speaker. "This is Officer Doug Harolson requesting CSI back up at 1345 Claris Court. We've uncovered a crime scene. Ensure Anthony Slizzecki is not released. I repeat, ensure the suspect is not released."

"Roger that. Back up is en route."

Doug sighed as he stuffed his phone back into the holder attached to his belt. I heard his heart's heavy beat; his pulse quickened just enough to recognize its change. The others' bodies revealed and responded in like.

I met Doug's dense gaze. Foreboding disturbed my soul. These men were dedicated to this case; I hated doing what was necessary sometimes. "I need to make a phone call."

His head drooped in acknowledgement.

I was anxious to escape the oxidized, corroded metal scent of the blood. I wasn't sure if it was the fish themselves or the blood, but there was a minute seafood edge that wasn't encouraging my stomach. Layered with the odor of decay, the scents alone revealed the truth to me: this vamp had killed many over a period of time.

Nausea drained me of energy as I tossed the gloves on the ground near the bin and strode away from the box of evidence.

All those girls... For once, I appreciated the way Kyle died.

I swallowed, forcing down my rising serum.

Suddenly, I remembered I didn't have a phone; I'd left mine, not wanting to be tracked. *Smart, Mel.*

My heart pumped a little harder, felt a little heavier. Calling this in to any vamp authority would give me up. Part of being responsible meant sacrificing my wants. I couldn't let this asshole get another girl. I couldn't sign the death certificate of another set of girls just to selfishly buy myself more time. Before I'd left, I'd vowed to prevent innocent lives from being cut short like Kyle's; I'd vowed to deliver fate to those who deserved it.

Anthony Slizzecki deserved more than fate could offer.

I sauntered back to the silent circle of men. Heat radiated off of them, anger driving up their blood pressure, overheating their bodies. "Um, can I borrow someone's phone, please?"

Wordlessly Joe passed me his. I took it and moved to the other end of the yard to make the call.

"Yeah?" The brute grumble was his greeting.

"Uh, hey. It's Mel. I've got a child murdering serial killer with the chance of molestation in New Orleans, Auggy." I lowered my voice. "And he's a vampire about to be released from human custody."

"Got proof?" He seemed reluctant.

"I just dug up a bin of bloodied tarps in his backyard."

"Any bodies?"

"Not that we've found yet, but there's a long list of girls abducted the same way in similar locations."

"Fuck. Just what I need: a slew of human cops to deter and families to deflect." I heard some ruffling in the background. "Monitor the situation closely. I'll have a mobile unit at the precinct in an hour to confiscate all evidence and have custody transferred to us. Send me his

name, address and anything else you have on him. I'll pull his file from our master records." He was silent for a minute, but it sounded like he was doing something based on the soft rustles. "You coming back or slumming it with the human do-gooders?" Clearly his regard of the human police force wasn't high.

My grip on the phone roughened. Why were people so quick to degrade these days? "They've done a good job on instinct alone. If it wasn't for those do-gooders, you would have a body count for national news and a smart vamp killer wasting your resources. He hid the bin of bloodied tarps four feet under a koi pond, and F.Y.I., the pond was listed in the property's sales records. The least you can do is act slightly respectful since they knocked out some of your job duties."

A low growl rang through the line. "A team will be there in an hour. I'll inform your father and my *niece* that you prefer the company of humans states away for now." The phone clicked off.

My blood curdled. I'd only ever dealt with Auggy through Lexi. He'd never treated her like that. *I guess I'm not special enough for him.* Exasperation had me grinding my teeth, barely catching myself before I crushed Joe's phone.

Breathing deep, slowing my inhalation, didn't suppress the rage rolling through me, gathering, building as it claimed all of me. It wasn't fair. Nothing about life proved fair it seemed.

It was several minutes before I could rein myself back from the edge. I was far from serene, but knew I had to find a solid balance before I faced my escorts again.

Needing a distraction, I focused on texting as much as I knew to Auggy. His attitude fostered resentment inside me.

We were helping him, and yet, he felt the need to cut us down still, dismissing our contribution. Before I could embrace dander again, I deleted Auggy's phone number from the phone and focused on the extra quiet group of guys across the way.

Twenty minutes later, a throng of city workers arrived on the scene. To be safe, I remained off to the side, merely observing, as they worked the site. I was horrified as they uncovered a second bin of bloodied opaque plastic tarps. My pulse quickened as forensics began swabbing the red splatters.

I swallowed hard, awareness slapping me. Adults had a right to fear for their children in this age. Sadly, Anthony wasn't the only child-focused criminal. Wickedly, twistedly, maybe it was a blessing in disguise that I couldn't have kids with Craig.

An hour passed before Doug meandered over to me. "Forensics estimates there are nearly twenty sets of DNA spanning one week to over a year old. This will help us at least close the door for some parents."

"Will you search for the bodies?"

"We'll try, but they could be anywhere. He could have dumped them in the Gulf, dug graves in the center of any forest. Slizzecki wasn't forthcoming on any front." Doug stuffed his hands into his pockets. His heavy brows furrowed; he was watching the scene intently beside me, but I knew his mind was reeling as he did so, igniting my own mental spark.

Vamps had good memories, but over the years, things could fog up. I was certain this wasn't Anthony's first murder spree. He was too clean, too professional. No one would be smart enough to bury all the evidence in an odor

sealed bin four feet under a koi pond, which would never reveal disturbance.

“Sprinklers are set for twice a week at two in the morning. Any excess dirt would be washed away by sunrise.” Doug glanced sideways at me. “Over time, he would lose enough dirt to need a bag of soil so the pond liner reached the boulders at ground level.”

I surveyed crime scene investigators as they maneuvered around forensics and other officers documenting their findings. “Smart.”

Workers thrust shovels into the ground again, digging deeper to ensure there wasn't more. I prayed there wasn't more to be found.

“Very,” Doug agreed.

He was a smart vamp, but from what they said he was cocky too. How arrogant was he though?

“Did you have dogs sniff around the parks?”

“The trail died at the perimeter of each. No cars were spotted from traffic cams nearby at the time stamps though.”

“Do any of those parks have mulch or sand, some sort of filler that could cover disturbances?”

Doug regarded me. “You think he went back?”

“Maybe.” I chewed my bottom lip. I hoped he wasn't that cruel, but instinct said he was. A vamp would never forget a place if he took the time to dig up part of in order to bury a body he'd snatched from the same location days prior. At least I didn't think he would. It was his arrogant, dirty little secret, a trophy of sorts.

Darkness was beginning to fall when Auggy's team burst into the backyard flashing badges and passing papers to confiscate the uncovered evidence. It was the one thing that Hollywood portrayed right. The Vamp Army was the notch above, the FBI over the local police force, claiming their case was more important.

Groans and grumbles ensued from the humans. Protests called after the Army as they carried off a day's worth of hard work and resources. On their way, one of the tough vamps met my gaze knowingly. He'd smelled me. They all had. With a simple nod of his head, he silently acknowledged my report had been processed.

Unrest shook me at the core. I hated that these guys lost the credit they deserved, I hated that so many innocent lives had been cut short, I hated that Fate wasn't doing shit to stop this.

"Damn Feds," Doug hissed.

I was more determined than ever to find the bodies now.

"Let's go, Melanie. I'll drop you off at home."

"What about the parks?"

He studied me. "What about 'em?"

"You gonna give me a crack at 'em?"

He studied the gaping hole in the ground before turning back to me. "They'll be there tomorrow."

I smiled, pleased to have earned, at least in part, his trust.

In the front yard, police issued vehicles were being loaded up. It wasn't until I slid into Doug's police car that I

realized I didn't have an address to give him. "Um, just drop me off at whatever hotel you recommend."

His heavy gaze quietly assessed me. "They don't rent rooms to minors," he muttered.

"I'm paying cash."

His features turned down, crinkles revealing his late-forties age. The cop in him was surfacing fast. "Don't tell me where you got it."

I chuckled, amused by his negative assumption. "My dad."

"And I suppose he let you wander free in a big city at sixteen with no chaperone, too?"

"Yup."

"I don't suppose he's in Charleston?"

"He knows where I am." *Now*, I mentally added. I knew Auggy would tell him; he'd told me such. "He also knows I can fend for myself."

"A slight thing like you?" A single brow rose towards his receding hairline, disbelief vivid.

I gave Doug my most charming smile, shrugging off his concern.

He threw the car into 'Drive.' "You'll stay with me and my wife, Edna, until the case is closed."

Confusion swallowed me. A sneak peek showed he wasn't wearing a ring. Trouncing my mind, I realized he hadn't worn a wedding ring all day, and his desk at work was devoid of personal photos. I decided not to press the subject for now. "I don't mind staying at a hotel," I politely brushed off his offer. I didn't know if I could hide the truth

of what I was while living with humans. Kyle was one thing; he was a kid more interested in pranks than his sister's abnormal behavior. Adults, specifically cops, analyzed everything though, especially irregular habits and preferences.

"I do." I knew from his tone that the matter wasn't up for discussion.

My muscles tightened. I clamped my hands together in my lap, praying I didn't screw up.

Mel

Edna was the opposite of Doug, once she got over her initial shock.

I damn near doubled over when she leaned into Doug, a well-mannered smile still firmly in place, and asked in a whisper if I was paroled into his custody. He responded by introducing me as the station's youngest consultant. She'd been nothing but welcoming since, if not a bit motherly.

"Doug, honey, why don't you show Melanie to the guest room?" She looked to me. "I'm afraid I don't have anything in your size, but I'm sure I can find you a pair of sweats and a t-shirt to wear while I wash your clothes. There's a fully stocked bathroom upstairs. Use what you need, dear." She gave Doug an adoring smile, patting his chest. "You ought to clean up too. Drop your clothes in the hamper."

Doug kissed his wife's cheek and headed for the stairs. "Let's go, Emo."

I smothered a smile. Joe and Marcus used the nickname playfully all day, but Doug never did until now. His tone was light, teasing in a way. It was the softest side I'd experienced of the man.

He showed me to the frilly, country style room.

White furniture popped against pale blue walls; the centerpiece was an extravagant, intricate floral comforter. The quality fabric was decorated in varying hues of blue against a soft grey; the piece anchored the room while acting as the primary artwork. Doug and Edna's home was a plantation design, but this room somehow complimented it while standing out in style.

"Bathroom's across the hall. If I know Edna, clean clothes will be outside the door before you turn on the water and a

hot plate will be waiting downstairs when you're done. Master is downstairs so you have privacy."

I caught sight of his left hand as he strolled towards the stairs. "Why don't you wear a ring?"

He halted. Hesitation met me as he glanced back over his shoulder at me. His shoulders tautened, his jaw clenched and his brows furrowed as he considered me, considered my question. "To protect her," he finally replied.

It made perfect sense. So often we attach deceit to the lack of a ring, but for a man like Doug, a cop who dealt with low society criminals without a moral conscience, it was the ultimate show of love.

A small smile curled the corners of my mouth. "Smart." I knew my eyes were sparkling.

His lips quirked up slightly. "Very."

I watched as he disappeared down the stairs. He really loved Edna. I saw it when he observed her. His expression revealed nothing, but his eyes were full of affection.

Edna reminded me of Beth in ways; the red in her hair, the shape of her lips and the hazel in her irises. She wasn't slender like Beth, but she wore her curves beautifully.

I couldn't stop myself from wondering how Craig and I would have aged. Would he still look at me the way Doug gazed at his wife when I was worn and wrinkled?

A resounding 'yes' echoed in my head.

I hadn't been entirely fair to Craig. He'd proven his love time over. He'd tried to comfort me in the days after Kyle's death; I'd pushed him away though. I'd been the catalyst, the one who rejected people. I built an impenetrable wall,

and convinced myself it was for my own security. In reality, if I was truthful, it was to my detriment.

I was alone.

There's a reason we have a soul mate. There's a reason why God, the Universe, Fate, pairs us up. We can try to convince ourselves that we don't need anyone, and it's true to a degree. We can survive alone, but we won't thrive alone.

Balance is found in pairs like the yin-yang. Harmony is found when you partner with nature. Love is a two-part equation, and I was missing the other half of mine.

—~—

"How was edu camp today, love?" Craig trailed his fingertips up and down my upper arm. I cuddled deeper into him, prompting him to slouch back into the sofa more.

I snickered. "School. It's called school." I shook my head in amused dismay. He insisted on calling everything something but its actual name.

"Sloggy of a day?"

I gave in. "No. School was fine. What did you do while I was gone?"

"Missed you."

I rolled over to gaze up at him. "Hm. Someone's trying to be a charmer. Well, buttering me up won't work, buddy. What'd you do?"

He smirked; his crystal blue eyes glittered as he studied me. "I'm helpin' my mate with a bitta."

"A bitta what?" I sat up fully, worry working my brows.

“Nothing to peddle your pitter over, love.”

“Promise it’s nothing dangerous?”

“Yes.” He tugged me into his lap and kissed me.

Not knowing for certain killed me for many days after. Kellan was at school with me during the day, meaning Craig was alone doing God only knew what...

—~—

...just like I was now.

I had seen Craig every afternoon. I heard his sexy voice, and checked his flesh for healing wounds. He didn’t have that luxury now. He didn’t even have a phone number to call me.

Guilt thundered through me. I’d been impulsive, rash and selfish. Craig was willing to sign up for a life of celibacy to be with me. No man, woman or vamp did that without unending love.

And in turn, I didn’t walk, but ran away. It was the ultimate slap in the face. I definitely wouldn’t have forgiven him for this, at least not right away.

When I first took off, I didn’t think I would need his forgiveness. My chest tightened, emotions welling at my core; my troubled soul was wrought with misery as I reflected on my actions. It was hard to accept that I’d messed up so bad. Honestly, I didn’t think I would miss him so much. I really thought, assumed, I could suppress all my feelings for him eternally. That wasn’t happening though. Rather, the opposite was happening. Every day that passed was a day I loved him more, appreciated him more, and regretted my choice to leave him behind. Initially I was just looking to leave Kyle’s memory behind. I thought I could

escape my past, but I couldn't. I never would. No one could.

The clothes Edna left for me were large and hung off of me everywhere they could. With the drawstring at its tightest, the sweats still slid down some, caressing my hips.

Downstairs, just as Doug had suggested, a hot plate of food sat on the table. Edna sat sipping fresh coffee in the chair next to where Doug sat eating. It was strange to see him out of his uniform. He wore khaki shorts, a well-loved police force baseball tournament t-shirt, and socks kept his feet warm. His gun was set on the table beside his plate. Edna didn't flinch, so this was routine.

At the sight of me, she stood. "Come sit, dear, and tell me, what would you like to drink?"

"Water is perfect, thanks."

"Of course." She smiled as she stepped away.

I slid into the seat across from Doug. The aroma of beef stew in the bowl before me saturated the room. A single chunk of French bread sidled up to the bowl on the plate below.

"Here you are." She placed a cup of ice water beside my bowl and moved back to her chair.

"Thank you."

Doug was unusually quiet as he watched me. I knew company was worth more than conversation to him since Edna didn't make a peep. Conversation was worth more than company to me though. Silence gave my mind freedom; freedom to think about those I didn't care to.

"Why do you wear a police uniform?" I asked.

Doug stopped mid spoon to mouth and extended a brow.

“I’ve deduced that you’re a detective.”

He returned his spoon to the bowl. “Deduced? Isn’t that too big a word for you?”

“Doug.” Edna lightly scolded him.

“The detectives on TV don’t wear a uniform.”

He considered me as he consumed another bite of food. “I got tired of flashin’ my badge. Few put up a fight when you’re in uniform.”

“But wouldn’t some guys not talk at all?”

“Some.” He shrugged his shoulders. “Most want you out of their business quick to save face, so they’ll tell ya what they feel you need.”

“Marcus and Joe?”

“What about ‘em?”

“Are they detectives too?”

“They’re whatever the department needs at the time.”

“Ever get called in overnight?”

“All the time. Now stop interrogating me and eat.”

I looked to Edna, but she just smiled warmly, her eyes still sparkling with love as she sipped more coffee.

After dinner, Doug sent me to bed with a stern warning. “You snoop around my house and I’ll treat you like a trespasser and won’t hesitate to shoot. If anything is missing tomorrow, I’ll lock you up and book you for theft.

“I wake at six and leave at seven. I’m not your alarm clock. I expect you to just be there. I only drink coffee in

the morning. If you want more, you'll have to make it yourself and clean up after."

"Anything else?" I smirked, amused by his anomalies. He was treating me like a criminal in the wait, yet he was the one who had welcomed me in.

"Good job today."

I gasped dramatically, covering my mouth with my hand. "O.M.G., he's a softy disguised as a grizzly."

Edna snickered. "She has you, honey."

Doug rolled his eyes. "Goodnight, Emo."

My smile grew. "'night."

Upstairs, I tossed and turned for a while. Around midnight, I heard Edna set my clothes on the floor outside my door. I fell asleep about an hour later. I dreamt of a better time when Kyle was alive, Lexi was my reliable best friend, and Craig and I could show our love any way we wished... I dreamt of a better time that never existed.

Mel

My nerves flared to life as Doug pulled up to the park. Located on the corner of two busy residential streets, what immediately stood out was the fence. A chain-link fence loped around the perimeter of the park, allowing total visibility, yet limited access through three latch gates. No wonder the mothers weren't as concerned; the fence offered a false sense of security.

Marcus and Joe parked along the street behind us. Kristof and a forensics expert lingered behind them in a black van.

"There's no pressure, but after the Feds took our criminal and evidence, a body or two would be good." Doug spoke to me, but looked at the empty park through the windshield.

I imagined few were coming here these days since two, of the unknown number of girls, were abducted from this spot. The cars passing by had distracted drivers lost in the frivolous day-to-day usual of putting on make-up, talking on the phone, yelling at the kids who were bouncing in the back seat, or some other attention hogging activity.

I stepped out of the vehicle. A cool breeze blew over my exposed flesh. I wore my own pants and boots, but the department had given me a t-shirt with the NOPD logo printed on the left chest area.

I took a deep breath, trying to catch a whiff of anything suspicious. After yesterday, I was driven with a new purpose. I didn't need to be Fate. The world didn't need another wanna-be vigilante either, but, according to the Power above, the world still needed Melanie Hartford in her best vampeen form. Perhaps I couldn't save humans from every act of violence against them, but right now, I had the opportunity to give a handful of families closure.

My resolve strengthened as I thought of Kyle. I knew, without question, that Kyle was dead, that he had been killed and wasn't coming back. My soul didn't shudder over the unknown; it wept for what was certain...when I allowed it.

As heartbreaking as it is to know someone you loved died in violence, in vein, it is better to know than to wonder, to cry in anger before pouring yourself into plunder for answers.

The longer I ignored the truth, the more visible Fate made herself. Even when I thought I was outwitting her, she proved herself the victor. Apparently I was meant to run. I was meant to find the proof to convict the vamp. I was meant to meet these men in the café. I was meant to meet Jai'kay.

Fate knew. Fate directed it all. *Let's just hope fate directed my thoughts to the parks too...*

—~—

Craig

The cabby dropped me off in the city center. I paid the killer fare and sent him packin'.

I yanked out my cell and speed dialed Mel's dad. I didn't bother telling him that he should be here with me. That was between him and Mel. I was a bitter bear though. She deserved better.

"Hey." He sounded apprehensive.

"I'm here. Did she give Auggy an addy?"

"She called the Army in to the local police station for a criminal vampire."

"There must be a palla of 'em around here." I sighed in frustration. I hadn't slept since she left. How could I? Worry blasted my mind.

He sat quietly on the line for a while. "I'm not sure," he finally stated.

"Right." I scanned the area. Nothing was familiar but an air of desperation in my pitter had me trolloping forward. "I'll call you later," I clipped.

"Wait! Craig?"

I halted mid-step to listen to him. "Yeah?"

"Tell her...I'm sorry."

Well if that wasn't a pisser. He didn't have the bull-winkles to tell his only child himself...

I bit my flicker. "Yeah." I hung up.

He wasn't brave enough to face his daughter, but I was. I wanted to see her, angry, hurt, whatever space she was in.

I hefted my backpack over my shoulder and headed for the closest station according to Siri.

—~—

Mel

It wasn't as easy at the park. Too many smells infested one small square footage despite the lack of foot traffic lately. It took intense concentration to get the minute odor of rot beneath the swings. It was so faint that I wasn't even confident it existed.

My heart hammered in my chest as serum coated my tongue. I watched intently, nerves wracking my conscience, as they dug up the foot-deep layer of cedar wood chips in the sectioned area.

The park was full of clean lines with little shrubbery occupying precious running paths for the kids. Each play set had its own log border, which was the barrier that kept the fillers mostly in place. I knew from Kyle that kids were rough and liked to kick things around, particularly wood chips. As expected, chips spilled over the edges onto the well-preserved green grass.

The construction equipment beeped loudly as the driver backed up an inch before driving the arm back into the ground. It was another two feet before they hit the familiar plastic.

I laced my fingers and rested my chin on my clenched hands, sickly waiting for the reveal.

My pulse skipped about, thumping wildly. My stomach knotted around itself, nearly to the point of cramping. A chill ran down my spine as my serum surged. Instinct had me cringing. Somehow I just knew it was bad.

"It's heavy," one of the excavators announced.

It was then that the worker's pulses competed in a rapid rhythm ensemble.

I couldn't stand still. My muscles were wrought with tension. I shoved my hands into my hair, jerking on it at the roots, needing a distraction. I wanted to turn away, but found myself fixated on the decent size tan storage container - at least thirty-two gallons I estimated.

The guys stood around the bin as one of the forensics experts wearing gloves grabbed hold of the lid's side clasps. Admittedly, though I was standing a few yards away, I didn't scent much. Whatever brand containers he used were airtight.

The fume knocked me back and sent blood rushing up my esophagus as he released the lid. I took several steps back and yanked my shirt over my nose; it didn't do much though. My sense was too strong.

Morbid curiosity scouted courage. I focused on the contents in the container.

Selfish. I'd been so selfish.

Tears welled fast, taking me by surprise.

Kyle had been spared. Though violent, his tragic death seemed like a favor compared to the bruised and broken girl in the bin. Her death had been brutal and slow based on the streak of tears that broke up the dried-on blood casing her face.

Her face...her features were young, plump, and cherub-like. He'd murdered an angel. He'd destroyed the purest of innocents.

My coffer constricted. I had to fight for every breath. Clenching my fists, I repeatedly swallowed the serum inundating my mouth.

It got to be too much though. I spun around and ran for the small shrubbery around the oak tree near the fence. My serum spewed from me. Rage fueled my reaction.

Fury claimed me. I leveled myself, standing tall.

“You okay, Emo?” Marcus moved into my line of sight.

I swallowed the last of my serum. Back straight, jaw tight, determination in place, I met his concerned gaze. “Yeah, I’m good.” I didn’t hide the fire in my eyes. I felt the blue flames flickering. Glaring at the scene unfolding, I committed myself until the very end. “Let’s go find some bodies, Marcus.”

“Alright. That’s what I’m talkin’ about, Emo.” We headed for the swings.

I leapt down into the dirt hole. I hunched and shoved my nose towards the cave walls and inhaled. It was minute, but registered just long enough for me to acknowledge it. Ignoring what I was certain I scented for a millisecond, instinct drove me to dig further. “There’s another,” I called. I looked up to find them all staring at me.

Doug extended a hand. I wanted to ignore it, my temper demanding independence, but accepted his help.

“While y’all are digging up the next, have you considered working this backwards?”

“How so?” Joe crossed his arms over his chest.

“Those aren’t your everyday bins. They’re airtight. Cadaver dogs have been over the area I’m sure and didn’t catch it. I barely caught it.”

Brows creased. Suddenly I was the one being investigated.

“Stop.” I frowned at them discouragingly.

They seemed to back off.

“I can try to search stores in the area that sell these, but with the upswing of online shopping, I doubt I’ll find anything worthwhile.” Joe ran his hands through his hair.

“Check the number of them delivered to his address over the last year if you get a hit online. The goal is a number. How many he’s purchased could indicate how many he’s killed.”

“That’s a good point. We already got eight at his house,” Marcus said.

“I’ll get on it now,” Joe offered.

Doug nodded. “Head back with him, Marcus. Fill in the Chief. We’ll be moving to the next park after they uncover the second body. You might want to give forensics a heads up. The medical examiner’s office is gonna have a full morgue by the end of tomorrow I’m sure.” Doug’s expression was harrowing in its formal state. So much was shown and hidden simultaneously.

We watched, side by side, as Joe and Marcus got in their government issued vehicle. I felt the tension radiating off of Doug.

“You ready to do this, Emo?” He surveyed the curious neighbors beginning to form a small crowd across the street. We didn’t arrive with sirens blaring, but human interest never kept people at bay for long.

“Let’s do this,” I stated.

Craig

I was growing hopeless. It'd been three hours since I arrived in New Orleans. I'd been to five districts and had been turned away from all of them with no information.

Staring ahead at the sixth listing from Siri, the building was nondescript aside from the sign announcing it. Grey-washed walls greeted me outside and dirty white walls engulfed me inside. It was louder than the others, the busiest by far. The building was four stories from the outside, but everything seemed crammed together on the ground floor. Like the others, metal detectors hugged the entrance.

The first thing that registered amongst the rancid pewters of musk, body odor and too much perfume from one scantily clad doll in cuffs was Mel. It was weak, but I smelled her. She'd been here.

My pitter pattered about, a smile broadening my lips for the first time that afternoon.

"Whatcha need?" a gravelly female voice asked.

I approached the desk but the woman didn't look up at me. "I'm looking for a young woman named Melanie Hartford. She was here."

Two officers rounding past the L-shaped reception desk abruptly turned to face me. Their eyes scanned me; narrowing the longer they studied me. It was obvious they knew her by the way they reacted to her name.

"What do you want with her?" the younger of the two with a glistening bulb of a head asked.

I pursed my lips, meeting their intense scrutiny with my own. "She's my girlfriend."

“How old are you?” he pressed, aggression in his tone.

I slit my eyes at him, upset burbling my veins. He was trying to pin me with something.

“Looks guilty to me,” the other said. “I think he just became the second suspect in our murder spree case.”

Glutinous fancies, the arses pissed me off. I had no patience to trollop through questions. I just wanted to see her.

Knowing I wouldn't get what I wanted without sugar, I took a deep breath. “Is she alright?” I ensured they heard the concern in my voice.

“She's your girlfriend, shouldn't you know?” A dark brow rose.

I ground my teeth.

Mr. Clean rounded the desk again and grabbed my upper arm. “Let's go.” He jerked me along.

My senses lit up as Mel's odor coated him like cologne. He was drenched in her special aroma. I jerked out of his grasp once we were past the grouchy lady. “You reek of her! You were with her.”

He sighed. “Looks like we've got another cadaver kid, Joe.”

“So it seems.” Joe frowned. He appeared uneasy suddenly, like he was trying to compute something he couldn't.

I studied them, but found no badges or nametags telling me who I was dealing with and on what level. I didn't gauge 'em to be supervisors, but people could still surprise you.

“I suppose we should call Doug,” Joe said.

The rough handler watched me, his eyes dancing in their pockets. “I’ll make the call, but first, I want to know who I’m dealing with.” He inspected me a minute longer, hardening his expression as a means of intimidation. “What’s your name, boy?”

“Craig.”

“Last name?” His features pinched. I was ticking him.

“Ask Melanie.” I smiled wide. I had the lot. I would hear everything on the call.

“Cuff him to my desk, Marcus. I think I’ll make the call.” Joe crossed his arms, staring deadpan at me. He was trying to trick me into a wee bitty mouse, but it wouldn’t work.

I wasn’t leaving without her.

—~—

Mel

“You ready to move on to the next one?” Doug quirked a brow.

“Yeah.” My voice was strong, but my soul was disheartened.

The second girl was in worse shape than the first. Her body had been ripped apart, the pieces dumped into the bin. Several paled at the sight. I knew we all wondered the same thing: how could anyone do this to an innocent child? People with personal vendettas didn't even go to this extreme.

“Tim, is your second team en route yet?” Doug called.

Tim was the owner of Hardy Construction. He had a big city contract with New Orleans. His business handled all of the city's school and local government construction needs, including remodels, expansions and maintenance. He was a bit hitter who hadn't assisted the police force on this level until today.

“Uh, yeah,” he stumbled, his mind pre-occupied.

His expression proved he was a novice, unfamiliar with the true evils of the world. White-collar crimes and petty thefts were probably his limit. He struck me as the kind of man who felt he was invincible. After all, he wore a three-piece Armani suit to a crime scene.

“Come on, Emo.” Doug stalked to his car, giving little attention to the circus across the street.

Low rank officers - according to Doug - were discouraging citizens from photographing the scene. A news crew had joined the crowd mid-way through our excavation, drawing more curious bystanders to the area. I

didn't have to strain to hear the gossip flying or the rumored speculations passing through cell phones.

The drive to the next location was a quiet one. For once, I didn't feel the need to force conversation. It wouldn't erase what I saw, what was burned into my brain.

Witnessing the aftermath of brutality was intense. My mind whirled, caught in the trap of imagining what the little girls experienced. Knowing what I knew about vampires allowed the scene to be brought to life within my mind. It was easy to feel their fear compressing my lungs, making it harder to breath, more difficult to move on from. Knowing with the extent of detail I had did little to heal my broken soul.

—~—

The next park was beside a cemetery. This must have been a budget-forged decision because few would choose to construct a playground for lively children beside a dark and dreary burial ground. It was quiet, peaceful without the convergence of nosy neighbors, but unsettling nonetheless.

“CSI should be right behind us, and the equipment not far behind them. We just need to know where to look.”

I breathed deep, blowing it out slowly. I studied the park, but it wasn't set up like the last. Trees sprouted up throughout, offering shaded areas with picnic tables. The playground equipment was a mix of rusting metal and worn wood play sets. Unlike the previous one, this one wasn't visible from the street. It was set back, surrounded by lush, mature landscaping.

My heart took off, startled by the shrilling ring of Doug's cell phone.

He retrieved it from the clip on his belt. "It's the station. Why don't you go ahead and I'll catch up."

That sounded great. As much as I hated to admit it, my nerves were a tad shaken by what I saw. "Sure." I climbed out of the car, shutting the door as Doug answered the call. I ignored the conversation, more absorbed in the creepy, disconcerting feeling coming over me. This park was a better reflection of the killer than a place I'd want to take my kids.

Shadows bounced around every angle. There was little to no grass on the dirt-stomped land. You could tell grass grew there once, but between the children stomping it and the weeds strangling it... Serum rose in the back of my throat as I made my way towards the merry-go-round. This was a vampire's heaven. Their scent penetrated every square inch of the place.

Goose bumps covered my forearms. I wanted to run. This place proved I was a coward, that I was anything but a fearless vigilante.

I scanned the ground, but there were no pockets of mulch, no segregation like the last. Slightly uneven dirt with spare bits of grass and weeds were it. Tree roots appeared to be the primary cause of the uneven ground. Cypress trees, pines and oaks owned the footage.

I inhaled deep, but smelled nothing but musky, earthy vamps. My guess was they were vamp squatters. The forest created the perfect backdrop for the community playground, but was a drawing point for the vamps. The picnic tables offered a decent "resting" place, or vantage point depending.

I swallowed my serum. My emotions were being rocked beneath my hard layers.

Nothing was crisp or clean about the park's landscape. Not even the neighboring cemetery had a fresh scent, despite a few burial sites kissed with blooming flowers.

Discomfort shook me at my core. Instinct told me bad things happened here, but there was no visible proof of it. I smelled no rot, not even from the burial grounds. I smelled nothing new, nothing disturbed and my vision confirmed it.

I frowned as my gaze fell upon the tree-filled horizon. If he couldn't bury it on the property, my guess was he would bury it as close as possible.

Oddly, I wanted Craig right now. There was something about him and Lexi. They were fearless. Kellan and I just pretended to be. I should have known that when I got trapped in a car with Kai and Lex. I freaked. I panicked and she remained utterly calm.

Kellan tried his damndest to be rough and tough for Lex; I think in a way he also did it to compete with Kai, to prove he was just as worthy of my best friend. The truth? Kai was better at protecting Lexi. He had a century on Kellan though. If Kellan stopped trying to impress his wife so much, he wouldn't screw up half as much.

I preferred Lexi with Kellan, but that was because he did try so hard. He dedicated his life to being what, who, she needed. No one could fault him for that.

Kai charmed a taken woman openly; his arrogance was a major turn-off. He came off high-handed, cocky; the opposite of Lex. If it wasn't for his sacrifice, I would forever question whether he considered Lexi a test of his man-whore skills or if he actually cared.

Of those two, I was happy to have Craig. He was self-confident, but not self-indulgent. He was a perfect balance of alpha and beta, leader and follower. He listened but

always formed his own opinion and did what he thought was best. He had a way of supporting you and being brutally honest at the same time. He was serious when he needed to be, but carefree and easy the rest. He kept me smiling. The words he invented alone were comical.

Damn I missed him. Each day I went without him, my heart ached a little more. The black hole got a little bigger, and I felt like I was missing a little more of myself. I tried to suppress it, but this case was drawing out things, memories and feelings, I longed to keep buried.

—~—

Craig

“She’s busy,” Joe stated.

I’d heard the conversation. I listened to that Doug guy say he didn’t want to shake up Emo’s – bully of a pet name from a cop – concentration by asking.

“She coming back here?” I lifted a single brow at the arse.

He smirked, blinking a few times before he answered. “Not sure.”

I had to molly down a tidal; I couldn’t blow Mel’s cover. I couldn’t let them know we were anything but human. I yearned to break the cuffs that bound my right wrist to a desk I could split in two with one micro jerk.

I ground my teeth, my muscles tightening as I glared at the pair. “Ask me your questions or let me go. You’ve got nothing to whammy me for.”

“You sure about that, tough guy?” Marcus sat in the chair at the desk.

Joe crossed his arms over his chest. “You didn’t think we forgot about your age. There’s no way you’re under eighteen, and there’s no way you’re not trying her.”

Serum rushed my mouth, coating my flicker. My muscles flexed as anger bowled through me. “You don’t know *shit*.” I couldn’t keep the growl out of my voice. I’d never been so burnin’, not even when I’d been taken captive by the Vampeen Army under its old leadership. They weren’t just attacking me; they were implying my girl had breezy legs.

My reaction must have gotten to them. They shifted where they were; their vitals didn’t change much though.

“What’s your story?” Marcus leaned back in his chair.

I bit my bottom lip, mulling over what to tell them. The truth was certain, but to what point? There were things they didn’t need to know, and things I would never betray Mel over.

Mel. Damn, I missed her like water in the desert. My pitter ached, growing darker by the day. She was like a little ray of sunshine in my life. My world was gloomy without her.

“I love her. I would do anything to protect her, but she’s not-” I pinched the bridge of my nose. Anxiety dowsed me. “Her baby bro was killed a week ago. Headliner. She took off a few days later.”

The guys blanched, falling over each other practically.

Joe grimaced, focusing on me. “Got proof?”

“Kyle Hartford.”

Marcus jostled his computer’s mouse, waiting for the ancient machine to awaken. He immediately typed the name in Google. Charleston newspapers, big and small, covered the school tragedy, listing names as soon as they had them.

“Shit.” Marcus scrubbed his face.

“Should we call Doug back?” Concern crinkled Joe’s brow.

I was glad they were finally listening.

Marcus looked from me to the computer. “Think she’ll run if she sees you?”

I’d been mulling that same question the last two days. “Not sure, mate.” A wistful smile lifted my lips. My pitter

puttered, praying she wouldn't break it again.

Marcus removed the cuffs. "We've got to investigate something related to the case. If you're willing to wait though, we'll take you over to the site when we're done."

"Appreciate it." Maybe these guys weren't so bad. After all, anyone willing to go to such lengths to protect the one I loved couldn't be a complete arse.

Mel

“You got anything?” For the most part, Doug had remained in the background, trying to blend in with the scenery.

I’d taken my time, studying every crack in the ground, every whispered scent in the occasional breeze, and even between the overgrown landscape in places.

Nothing. It was like I was back at his house again. I knew something was there, I sensed the negative energy, but I couldn’t pinpoint the final resting place.

I shook my head, too disappointed to speak.

My features drew taut; I concentrated hard on every detail I could, hoping it would break open the case somehow. My nerves were going haywire. I feared a vamp would erupt from the forest at any moment. I didn’t hear anything, but I was paranoid. My pulse was uneven as I scouted the land, suspicion escalating my response to every little thing that attacked my senses.

It also didn’t help that the construction crew, CSI and forensics weren’t patient. They huffed and puffed about the lack of enough breezes and my lack of progress, particularly the jab about me being in on the crimes because I knew where to find everything.

Pressure squeezed my muscles, forcing me to stand up and stop for a moment. I took a few deep breaths. This police stuff was no joke. I understood now how it took over your life. I knew I wouldn’t be able to leave without having found his burial ground.

“Do you think maybe the last park was a new pattern? From what I overheard, those were the last two girls to go missing.”

“Doubtful, but only because of the buried tarps. They date back to our first possible known victim. Killers like Slizzecki are ritualistic in their clean up routine. Changes leave too many chances for errors.” Doug’s hands rested on his hips as he gazed out at the playground with me.

The problem was, this wasn’t a human killer; this was a vampire with no regard. It didn’t matter if humans caught him or not. He knew that. The fact that he did go to such lengths told me either this was a game to put the cops to shame on their tracking skills or it was pure egotistical indulgence on his part.

“We can go to the next and come back if you’d like,” Doug offered. He was being more than gracious and I wasn’t quite sure why.

“Give me a minute, please.”

He pursed his lips, exhaling a little heavier before he took a few steps back.

I closed my eyes. The energy of the place surrounded me, enveloping me. It was a hauntingly beautiful moment.

Abruptly, a flash lit up my mind.

“No!” I screamed.

I shook my head negatively, trapped in the impossible. Obscurity clouded my judgment; desperation licked my conscience. *“He’s mine. You...you...you can’t take him.” I ground my teeth as hysteria crushed my chest. Tears welled quicker; fell faster. My lungs refused to expand. “Nnnnn...ooo. No!”*

“I can’t lose him. They can’t take him, Craigy. Don’t let them take him from me. Please.” My voice grew in volume, in octave, in panic. “Please,” I cried.

I threw my eyes open, unable to handle that day. My heart thundered in my chest; my pulse sprinted faster, pumping blood and oxygen through my body at a quicker pace.

And there it was. It'd been staring at me the entire time. It was the largest, most harrowing piece on the entire playground.

I raced towards the merry-go-round and threw myself on the ground. *Jackpot!* "I got it!"

I heard bodies push away from cars and feet scuffing up the dirt covered floor.

Excitement, a rush of adrenaline burst through me. I was on my feet fast and grabbed one of the handles for the merry-go-round. I froze as Doug came into view, catching myself.

He eyed me suspiciously, but didn't say anything.

"Um, we don't have the right equipment here to remove that thing," one of the construction workers stated.

"How long until you can get it here?" Doug pressed.

The blue-collar worker scrubbed the back of his neck, his features scrunching. "Uh, a couple days. It's being worked on."

"It can't be that heavy. If we all took a handle and lifted at the same time, I'm sure we could get it off ourselves." I didn't want to leave. There was no way I was leaving.

I gave Doug a pleading look.

Empathy shone in his eyes. He'd been here at some point, desperate to uncover the truth.

“Move your asses and grab a pole. We’ll lift on the count of three.”

I gazed down, smothering my eagerness.

We waited as everyone gripped a bar. There were eight large openings for children to stand on the merry-go-round, approximately sixteen rails segregating the wheel and twelve people, including the three construction workers, were present to assist in this move.

Don’t over do it, I reminded myself.

“One, two, three,” Doug said.

We all pulled up, myself a little too much. I dropped my side a bit the moment I caught it. To me, the play piece was like lifting a five-pound bag of sugar. I saw the veins straining in the necks of the humans and the whites of their knuckles, telling me it was much heavier than it appeared.

Shuffling a few yards to the left elicited grunts and groans from everyone heaving the load.

“Drop!” Doug let go of his handle. The rest of us followed his lead.

A few bent at the waist, resting their hands on their knees, others rubbed their lower back and few massaged their wrists and hands. I knew I should too, but I didn’t feel like putting on the human charade.

I squatted down a couple yards from the metal pole sticking out of the ground. It was the center of what appeared to be a crop circle. Someone had taken a commercial size broom and swept complete circles, mimicking what they probably believed to be the imprint of wind moving the sand when the merry-go-round spun.

“Huh.” Kristof snapped a few photos of the scene. “Merry-go-rounds don’t touch the ground and they don’t spin fast enough to leave this imprint.”

I stood. “I know.” I fought the urge to take over. How was I ever satisfied with a slow human pace? I get so much more done as a vamp.

“Get the machines and start digging,” Doug ordered.

I backed up to where we dropped the merry-go-round. It had collapsed on its side, reminding me of an early century wooden spin top toy.

Doug approached, avoiding eye contact. “Care to explain your theory on how our perp removed that thing without help? There are no tire treads from construction equipment anywhere.”

I glanced up at him, delivering a coy smile.

He met my gaze. “Or how about you explain how you are the smallest woman here, but didn’t show any signs of strain when moving that.”

A tried to stifle my smile. “Some things are better left as questions.”

Doug took it as a challenge. I saw the way his eyes sparked to life. “I’ll figure you out, Emo.”

Amusement tickled me. I chuckled. “Have fun, sir.”

From that moment on, Doug and I focused on what the construction crew unearthed. I knew I was absorbed, a goner, when I didn’t even bother brushing off my dirt covered clothes. The old Mel would have grumbled over dirty clothes, worried about money lost on the overpriced label items. The new Mel knew there was much more to life than replaceable material possessions.

Synchronized, Doug and I descended upon the first bin at the same time. I stopped a foot from the container, the smell of smelt, rotten eggs assaulting my nasal passages. It must have been faint because no one else reacted to it.

I stopped breathing and backed up.

“Get the camera. There’s definitely a body in here.” Doug stared at me the entire time he spoke.

The lid was unlocked and tossed aside. Much like last time, faces paled, varied expressions intensified. The difference was one of the construction workers ran off and vomited.

Curiosity drove me forward. The smell was far more potent on this body. The gasses emitted into the air were enough to make my eyes water. The smell would have caused me to lose anything in my stomach, if I actually had anything in it. Sour dairy products had nothing on this body.

I frowned as I peered into the plastic bucket. I swallowed my serum as a small body with little left for recognition came into view. I knew without further insight that the smell was from the green gel oozing from it. The body had little color left aside from the foul green goo.

I didn’t have the same reaction as the first two bodies. Perhaps it was because this looked more like a prop doll than an actual human child. It was hard to compute, to close the gap between what I saw and what I knew.

Doug met my gaze. “Are there more?”

This time when he spoke, he gave complete authority to me. He treated me as if I was the professional and he was the amateur. I didn’t know whether I liked it or not. It proved that knowing my secret would change our dynamic

forever. I knew now why it was better to keep some things as questions rather than answers. Answers changed things; they defined things.

I didn't know for sure if there were more bins. My response was purely based on instinct because of the location, because of the prevailing eeriness this place reeked of. Beyond that, the odor from the first uncovered bin was so strong, I couldn't smell anything past it. I had a feeling I would smell green gassy goop for days to come.

"Definitely," I stated.

Each bin retrieved contained a further decomposed body than the last. My heart sank further at the sight of each one. Emotions swam to my surface. I couldn't stop myself from equating their body's breakdown to what Kyle's would endure over time. There are some things that can't be unseen, unlearned.

The fourth bin had tears stinging my eyes. All that remained were tiny little bones swallowed in clothes at least five times larger.

I felt as fragile as the remains looked. My heart ached, my soul wept for those girls, for Kyle, for my mother, for Kai...for all those whose lives ended too soon.

How? How did Fate decide? How did God decide? In what world was it fair for a criminal to keep all that he stole from so many: life itself?

I knew that made me a horrible person, to wish death on a little boy, the little boy who killed my brother. In truth, I actually didn't wish it upon the child himself, but rather those who teased him, those that drove him to react the way he did. It wasn't fair. None of it was fair.

I despised the saying 'life isn't fair.' It applied though. It rang with truth. If Fate was fair, peace would exist because all the criminals would be dead. If life was fair, peace would exist because we all would be equals, never knowing lack or experiencing segregation. They say He is a fair and just God, but how is murder of an innocent fair and just? How is childhood cancer fair and just? How was slavery fair and just? How was the Holocaust fair and just?

Suffering to appreciate, is what many refer to it as; suffering brings about appreciation. Others focus on good deeds, citing good deeds store up treasures in heaven. What few consider though is a vampire is immortal. The same after-life rules don't apply to us unless we pass.

Of course this experience, losing so many I loved, has taught me to appreciate the life I have, the days I'm given, the people I still have. But it will never erase the anger and resentment in my heart. It won't make me forgive Him for stealing something so precious, for allowing something so innocent and precious to suffer.

None of them deserved this. Karma was wrong for allowing this, and Fate must have been her best friend.

My heart beat faster as I silently watched the teams work. Samples were collected, photographs taken, notes jotted in files...I felt like I was on a movie set. How else could such injustice be explained? It wasn't reality. I was trapped in a world of fiction. Maybe in this world, Kyle could come back, Craig could forgive me and my best friend could remember me from time to time...

"Mel?"

My pulse roared at the familiar accent. I shook my head, dismissing the voice to my imagination; it was a reflection

of what I wanted, of my vulnerability in the moment. There was no way he was here.

I swallowed hard, suppressing the hope that swiftly bloomed. Not allowing myself to move, I remained fixated on the crime scene still unfolding.

I barely contained an unexpected sob as his cologne broke through the rotten smells I'd been inhaling for hours now. My body seized, my heart running rampant, knowing he was here even if I tried to deny it. My tears began to spill over the rims of my eyes. I bit my lower lip hard, fighting harder to quash it all.

And then I saw him. He was there. He was standing before me, dressed in cargo shorts and a t-shirt, his sparkling blue eyes looking at me with nothing but love. He wasn't yelling at me for running, for abandoning him. His brows crinkled in concern but his eyes shone nothing but love, love I didn't even know if I deserved right now.

He breathed a sigh of relief, a smile brightening his face. He broke me. The walls came crashing down, the emotional waves surged, taking advantage of the break in the barrier. I threw my arms around him, crying into his shirt. He hugged me tight; he cocooned me, silently reassuring me that this wasn't a dream.

He kissed my head several times. "I'm here, love. I'm not leaving you."

His words made me sob harder. Regardless of how unfair life was at times, Craig was far more than I deserved. He was my reward for the bad shit.

What was Kyle's reward though? What rewards laid in wait for these little girls?

Craig's muscles pressed into me as he deepened his embrace. "Shh. It's okay, love. You're going to be okay."

"I miss him. I missed you." I gasped for air. "It's just not fair. Why didn't He take me instead?"

"Because you're a spiffy bullet, love. This world still needs your spunky tail. And it's your pitter's fondness for your bro that will drive you to do more than you planned, to be more than you thought you would be." He gripped my face harshly, angling back my head to gaze directly into my eyes. "I'm glad He didn't take you, Melanie. I love you. You can ball your orbs black, but I'll never hate Him for sparing you."

My tears slowed, but they didn't stop. The past week whirled around inside me, lashing out at my heart, brutally assaulting my emotions, my soul, my mind. "How can I be grateful when I know what Kyle lost out on?"

"You're not supposed to be grateful for death, love. You're supposed to be grateful for life, for getting all that Kyle didn't."

"I'm not grateful. I feel guilty as shit."

"What would he want? Would he want you sullying about, dowsing what you have left in gasoline?" His eyes blazed with determination; his jaw gritted as his biceps bulged.

I knew Kyle would want me to move on, to live a long and happy life, but I couldn't get over the fact that he wouldn't have the same.

"He's not moppin' it up, love. He has forever in a wonderful place on the other side. Who would complain about leavin' a world full of tragedy, broken pitters and endless pain and suffering for a world overflowing with peace, parties, treasure and endless dolls for boys like Kyle

to mack on?" Conviction rang strong from every syllable he spoke. "I'm not wetting my face for him, love. I'm jealous as a sugar plum faery."

I chuckled at his analogy. My eyes began to dry as I processed his words.

"I'll never be a delicate downer, love. I've always seen death as being birthed into a new and better life. You never have to look over your shoulder again, you never have worry about having enough, you get to bathe in it all, frolic like a purple pansy all day every day without your mates tiddlin' on you. And for a kid like him, he's in the metro factory of candy coated fun." He swept his thumbs across my cheeks, wiping away my tears. "He's not sad, love. He's not ruinin' his make-up either." He gave me a small, wistful smile. "I guarantee he's what he wants you to be: happy."

There was something in that last statement that pierced my soul, that turned all I'd mentally rambled about, struggled with, on its head. Craig's words took a bit of the weight off my chest. My lips curled upwards. "When you put it like that, I'm a little jealous of him too." A silent laugh escaped me.

Swallowing hard, I still couldn't conquer my brokenness in his absence. "I still miss him like crazy."

Craig's gaze darkened slightly. "There are of people missing you like crazy, love. I missed you like a crazy mad man."

I nibbled my lower lip, anxiety rising up within me. "For what it's worth, I missed you like a crazy mad woman. I didn't expect it to be so hard to leave you behind."

Pain crossed his features. "My pitter tattered when you left. You made me wonder what I'd done."

Guilt slammed into me, killing all other emotions.
“Nothing. You did nothing wrong. I just couldn’t deal with...
life.”

“Partners, love. We’re supposed to be partners. It’s a zed brooder to know for one moment that you thought you couldn’t come to me.”

What could I say to that? Nothing would erase what I’d done. Nothing I said would make up for it.

I hugged him to me, burying my face in his chest. I never wanted to let him go. I didn’t care if I couldn’t consummate my relationship, I didn’t care if I couldn’t show Craig in every way how much I loved him. I would show him to the extent I could. I would make up for my mistake every single day of forever that he allowed me to.

“I’m sorry. I never meant to hurt you.”

He sighed, curling around me. He rested his cheek on my head. “I know, love.”

Mel

“Uh-hum.” Doug cleared his throat.

I felt my cheeks heat as I stepped out of Craig’s embrace and faced my partner in justice.

Craig kept an arm around me. He leaned in and kissed my head, unashamedly showing his affection in front of everyone there.

I smiled. Truth was, while I had one less person who loved me around, I wasn’t feeling any less loved.

“You planning to run off into the sunset with lover boy now?” Doug was trying to remain neutral.

I stared up at Craig, wordlessly asking if he was okay with sticking around for a bit.

“Whatever makes you happy, love.”

Thrusting a hand on my hip, I addressed Doug. “Are you shitting me?”

Craig bit back a grin. I knew he was celebrating the return of the feisty, fun-loving Mel he’d come to know and love.

A single brow rose, damn near kissing Doug’s hairline. His lips began to twist up, displaying his amusement.

A few yards away Marcus and Joe snickered.

“You need me, buddy. Without me, you wouldn’t have this right here.” I gestured my hand towards the excavation area.

“There’s no need to act like a brat about it.” Doug’s grey eyes glinted.

“Be careful or I’ll tattle to Edna.” I smirked.

“Spoken like a true brat.”

Our attention fell to the work happening in the distance. CSI workers were helping forensics load the bins into the back of their van as others continued processing the final two on the scene.

“How many parks are there?”

“The last body has been there longer than our original timeline leading us to believe there are more than we know. I’ll have to go back to the station and pull all the missing persons cases and reexamine them. I’m thinking the day Slizzecki purchased his home is going to be my start date.”

“Need any help?”

He looked between Craig and me. “Joe and Marcus don’t mind working late with me, do you fellas?”

“Nope, not at all.” Their faces said otherwise.

“Meet you at the station at eight?” I asked.

“Sharp.”

I pursed my lips contemptuously.. “I’m not getting paid, so if I’m a few minutes late, you’re just gonna to have to deal.”

“You are getting paid, so you better not be a second late.”

Shock registered. When had I missed that change? “Since when?”

“Since you broke open this case.” He turned on his heels and started hiking towards the action. “Have a good night, Emo,” he called.

“You need a ride somewhere?” Marcus jutted his chin towards his squad car.

I looked up at Craig, raising an eyebrow. “Do we need a ride somewhere?”

“My tummy’s gonna thunder soon.”

“You guys in the mood for *Orla’s*?” I knew what their answer would be before they spoke.

“Always.” Joe’s eyes lit up like a kid in a candy store.

“You give us a ride and we’ll pay?”

“Let’s roll out.” Marcus yanked the keys from his pocket and made a beeline for the car.

—~—

Craig

I snuggled Mel into my arms in the back of the car. Feeling her back against my chest made me feel that all was right in the world again. It made me want to squeeze her to me, glue her to my poor cells to ensure I never lost her again.

She laced her fingers through mine over her chest, right where her pitter pattered. Gingerly, she kissed the top of my hand, sending fuzzies up my arm.

I wanted to take her lips, but I knew I couldn't do anything less than ravish her when I let loose.

She was gone only a few days, but she looked different to me already. She seemed darker, wiser somehow; though a springer still, she'd aged. Her days away changed her.

She was still my Mel though.

Gorgeous feather blonde locks, deep ocean blue eyes I wanted to surf in, a petite wallow of a frame that fit against me perfectly; she was a beaut, inside out. She was the whole kanga with the roo.

We were all quiet on the drive. Street parking was atrocious and the line was long at the eatery. As long as I had Mel though, nothing could bother me. She didn't realize she was my peace.

"What do you vultures want to eat?" She stared at the two officers.

"If you're buying, the most expensive thing on the menu," Joe said.

"Prime rib sandwich, baby!" Marcus winked at Mel.

"Is it good?"

The guys exchanged a look. “If you have to ask, then you haven’t had it. Best sandwich on the whole menu. A bit of a wallet-buster though.” Marcus placed a hand on Mel’s shoulder, the one not pressed into me. “But since you’re paying...”

“I smell a bet coming on.” Joe rubbed his hands together. “Come on, Emo. You know you want to.”

She narrowed her eyes at them, assessing them carefully before she spoke. “First one to finish, I’ll buy lunch again tomorrow.” The guys were grinning wide, but they didn’t know my doll. She would eat them under the table, especially with her vamp speed. “But! If I beat you, you each owe me a lunch later in the week, and I have a feeling it’s going to be the prime rib sandwich again.”

The smug smirks on the guys’ faces told me they thought they had this in the bottle. I kept my smacker together. I would laugh my arse off when they realized they misjudged her.

Mel glanced up at me and winked. A devious smile lit her face. Pride erupted within me.

—~—

Mel

At the front of the line, we ordered five prime rib sandwiches. "Will you guys take one to Doug? He didn't eat this morning."

"Sure thing, Emo." Marcus nodded his head.

Joe practically nose dived for a four-chair table when it opened. He took his badge out and set it upwards in the center of the table, warning off anyone who dared to get close. I couldn't stop laughing.

"See if I don't give one of these seats away for that one." There was no bark in his threat.

"See if I don't give away your sandwich."

He lost his smile. "Not cool, Emo."

Craig stood quietly beside me the entire time. It didn't escape me that the moment he got here was the moment I felt like myself again, that I felt like I could be myself. And as much as I wanted to be alone with him, knowing he was here was enough for now. He calmed my restless spirit.

We all settled down.

"Craig is the ref," I said. I glared at my opponents, wiggling my spirited fingers.

Joe and Marcus hunched over their plate ready for the mark.

"Your ballocks are about to be volleyed, mates."

"We'll see about that," Joe said.

I giggled.

"Three, two, go!" Craig shouted.

I waited several seconds, giving the boys a head start before I pulled my vampy trick on them. They each took massive bites out of half of their mile-high sandwiches. Moans followed.

“You better start chewin’, Emo.” Joe’s cockiness was hilarious.

I shrugged my shoulders nonchalantly. “Alright.”

Like a wood-pecker pecking at wood, I took small bites down the edge of the sandwich, rapidly chewed and swallowed. Row after row, more like a chipmunk with overstuff cheeks I was sure, I devoured the first half of the sandwich.

I wagged my brows at the guys as I picked up my second half. They quickly tried to stuff the rest of their first half in their mouths; perplexed expressions met my gloating gaze.

I approached the second half the same way, knocking out the entire sandwich in just under four minutes. The guys were less than halfway through their second sandwich when I rubbed my full belly. “Yummo! You guys were right. Definitely good. Glad I’m getting it again soon.” I beamed at them.

Their mouths were so full of food they couldn’t begin to reply to my statement. Their eyes said what their mouths couldn’t: they were astonished.

“That’s my girl.” Craig grinned like a wise fool.

I checked Craig’s plate. He still had half of his sandwich. Admittedly, they were huge, at least six inches in content stack height.

“Full, love?”

“Not quite, but I’m good.” The prime rib had been cooked to medium-rare perfection, feeding my vamp and human side equally.

“Not quite?” Joe’s brows rose. “You’re a beast, Emo.”

If they only knew.

Craig winked at me. My secret was safe with him.

“We should set Doug up. You in, Emo?” Marcus inclined his head eagerly.

“He doesn’t strike me as the competitive type.”

“Then you don’t know him well enough yet. He competes against every other district on cases. He has a big ego that needs regular petting. He just tries to hide it.” Marcus wiped his mouth with a napkin, going in for another big bite.

“He plays coy, but the man’s a grizzly.” Joe stuffed the last of his sandwich in his mouth. He sighed, sitting back in his chair. “Now I have to call and break the news to my six-months pregnant wife that she won’t be able to indulge in ice cream this week to pay for a beast’s second prime rib sandwich.”

“If you’re trying to guilt me, it won’t work. My best friend is preggo too and I have no sympathy.”

“Damn! You are a beast.” Marcus’ tone was caught between shocked and amused.

Joe laughed. “It’s okay. Jaz will just tell me that I’m not having a second sandwich. One way or another, she’ll get her ice cream.”

“There’s no stopping a pregnant woman.” Marcus finished off his sandwich.

My heart clenched. I tried to keep a brave face, but it bothered me. I didn't want children anytime soon, but just knowing as long as I was with Craig it would never be an option dimmed my soul. I felt bad that I couldn't give him a family legacy.

He reached out and threaded his fingers through mine, giving my hand a gentle squeeze of reassurance. Craig said he was okay with the reality of our situation, but in truth, I didn't know for certain that I was.

The difficult part was knowing we'd put ourselves in this situation. Had we just waited to have sex, we would have avoided this.

Knowing how I feel about Craig, knowing what love really is now, Ben never came close. I was stupid. I wanted the whole high school sweetheart experience so badly that I mentally turned Ben into someone he wasn't: *the* one.

The reverse could be said of Craig. If he'd taken the time to get to know the girls rather than just screw them, he would have been turned off by the true character of the vampires he bedded.

As much as I hated sounding like a parent at sixteen, it's worth the wait. I regret my choice to indulge. That one decision destroyed my entire future. Ben's human cells attached to my inner walls, coding them with human DNA to add to my vampeen DNA. Now, any vampiric DNA but my own would incite an immune response. Skin contact was fine, even saliva was alright, but a drop of my body's personal secretions touching him or a drop of Craig's touching me would call the troops and turn the experience into a painful one. The ferocity of a vamp is stronger than a condom could handle; even humans tear condoms, and my vampeen cells move much faster than human ones do. We don't get sick because bad bacteria, viruses etcetera are

immediately converged on by my body's little soldiers and more antibodies are created from invaders to fight it off quicker and harder next time. I'm literally a walking, talking vaccination lab, only no artificial, man-made materials are necessary.

I should have waited...

My heart jumped as Joe's phone went off. It was loud inside *Orla's*, but I'd focused on the closest range, allowing all else to become one hum of background noise.

"That's Doug; he's probably wondering where we are." Joe stood and made a beeline for the door, answering his phone at the threshold.

"The sandwich should soften him," I offered.

"Let's hope." Marcus pushed out his chair. Craig and I copied. "Your bag's in the trunk." Marcus addressed Craig.

"Thanks, mate."

Marcus nodded his head, gathering the empty plates. "Thanks for lunch, Emo."

"And thank you ahead of time."

He shook his head in dismay as he dumped the handful in the trash. "I still can't believe that shit."

Craig and I chuckled. I grabbed Doug's box and headed to the car.

"He's already moanin' and groanin'," Joe announced as the three of us approached.

"Well, this is gonna be a fun night." Marcus opened the trunk and handed Craig his oversized backpack. "See you in the AM, Emo."

“See ya.”

“It was nice to meet you, Craig.” Marcus jutted his chin towards him.

“Back at ya, mate.” Craig slung his book bag over his shoulder.

Joe stuck his head out the passenger window. “What he said.”

“Talk about a lazy cop.” I tapped his shoulder and passed him Doug’s food.

“As often as I can be,” he replied.

I waved them off. Craig stood behind me on the sidewalk watching.

“Where do you fancy a drop, love?” He pulled me into his side and wrapped his arm around my waist.

“Wherever you want to go.” I slid my arms around his midsection, allowing him to lead the way.

“I saw a dilly of a palace earlier.”

I smiled against him. “I’m guessing that’s a luxury hotel?”

“Nothing but the best for you, love.” I didn’t know how much Craig earned doing odd jobs for Kellan, the Bladangs, Jack and the Vamp Army, but it was enough to support his lifestyle: a decent BMW, a condo in Charleston, and me.

Mel

We walked, taking the scenic route to the French Quarter. Before long we were standing before a stunning, historic hotel. The name was centered, proclaiming it as we approached.

Hotel Monteleone had the appearance of a royal dwelling well preserved. It was easy to picture something similar in France centuries ago.

The inside was just as exquisite at the outside. It was opulent, very palace-like in its French-European majesty.

I stood off to the side, lost in the high-end stone floors that reflected the light, yet offered a mirror image on its surface, as Craig checked us in. Staring at my reflection, I felt out of place. My clothes were still coated in dirt. No one had made a comment on it all afternoon.

I shifted, not wanting to touch anything. Silently, I prayed they had onsite-laundry. I hated feeling out of place, less than.

Craig approached, two key cards in hand. "Let's mosey, love." He escorted me into the elevator. "I booked the penthouse all week," he stated as the doors closed.

I perked. "Do they have a laundry room?"

He kissed my head. "I've got a bag of outies for you with flippers and bobbles."

I smiled. "I love you."

He laughed. "That's how I get those three bits from ya?" he teased.

I feigned upset. "Uh! See if I tell you again." I stuck my nose up and turned my head away.

He jerked me against him. Cupping my cheeks, he turned me to face him. "Tell me again." His voice was a gentle plea I couldn't deny.

I dropped the act, expelling a soft breath as I gazed into his eyes. In that moment, I swore I was getting a glimpse of his soul. "I love you."

The elevator doors opened, breaking the spell as it deposited us on our floor. Craig led the way into the suite.

Green walls popped against the neutral and green palate of the furniture in the social space. The pieces were sturdy with a traditional flare. What gave it an upscale feel was the details: the finish of the chair legs, the feel of the fabrics, the weight of the drapes, the intricate weave of the oversized area rug. The chandelier dangling overhead was a well-preserved antique I could picture in any royal estate.

Moving into the bedroom, the formal décor of greens and natural hues continued. The twill drapery fabric was the same, the wall color carried throughout and the fine details of the furniture remained offering continuity.

There were two sets of white-framed, glass, French doors leading to two separate balconies. Peering out, one offered a decent view of the city while the other was a prime observation deck of the French Quarter.

The bathroom was no less grand. Marble and granite christened the master bath. Immediately my attention was on the garden tub. I couldn't wait to soak in that puppy later.

Craig snuck in and slipped his arms around me from behind. I laid my hands atop his at my waist, sinking into him. He dipped his head and kissed the side of my neck, sending flutters through me.

A chill ran down my spine. My flesh heated where his lips grazed me.

“I really missed you, love.” His voice was thick.

I swallowed my emotions the best I could. “I missed you, too.” Guilt continued to wrack me. Running had hurt him far more than he was letting on, which cut me deeper than any knife ever could.

When you love someone, you want to do all you can to protect them, but more often, it’s those you love that you hurt the most. You know their weaknesses, and anger kills the best of consciences.

I turned in his embrace. I trailed my fingers along his five-o-clock shadow. I ran my thumb across his generous bottom lip. “I’m sorry.” Hesitantly I lifted my gaze. I didn’t know if I could handle the hurt in his blue eyes.

“Promise you’ll never skitter off again?” He was struggling to keep his expression neutral, to keep his pain hidden behind a wall.

“I promise.”

He searched me, his features tightening. Abruptly he captured my lips. His kiss was hard, fueled by days of worry and stress.

I met him touch for touch, graze for graze, pouring out all I’d suppressed.

He gripped my face, pressing his hard body against mine. I felt the tension strumming in his muscles, running up into his fingers as they molded to me, holding me to him.

I grabbed his shirt, clinging to him with the desperation I’d experienced in his absence, in the wake of Kyle’s death.

How could I run? How did I leave him behind? My heart felt on the verge of shattering, overwhelmed by his presence, by his caress. My lungs filled with his scent every time I gasped for air around his commanding mouth. I was foolish to think I could ever sever what we had. He owned me, all of me, including the parts he couldn't experience. I wasn't myself without him because he had become such a huge part of me. I was who I'd become because of Craig.

His breathing was harsh as he broke away, matching my laborious intakes. He pressed his forehead to mine. "Never." His voice was mangled with emotion. "I don't think I can bear it, love...but..."

My heart skittered, my soul collapsing under the emotional weight as he began to sing to me. The lyrics were relevant, his voice casting them out in a hauntingly beautiful proclamation. His soothing tone encased me, cocooning me in a world of beautiful heartache, surrounding me in the truth he sang.

I knew Craig would give up anything for me. I knew he would sacrifice everything for me. His love was unending for me.

A drop of moisture kissed my cheek. I was surprised to find tears streaming down his cheeks. He couldn't hide the truth anymore, and I couldn't bear the agony it caused me, knowing I'd caused him to break down. I'd broken the man I loved.

He continued to belt out words that shredded me from the inside out. Tears painted my face as I crumbled, the weight of my actions pelting me.

*"...I don't wanna weigh you down like an anchor
If that's how you see me now I would rather,
Let you go free, just sail away*

*If that's what you need, if that's what it takes
I will, I will...*

*I will give up my life for you, if you want it
I'll give you my heart, you already own it
I'll do anything,
I'll go anywhere
It's true,
I will, I will, I will..."*

Running was my subconscious way of causing others to know the pain I felt after Kyle died. I was broken, aching, distraught, wrought with grief I didn't know how to handle. Then I buried it beneath anger, rage, a blaze of fury I longed to aim at someone. I thought I was targeting Fate; little did I realize it was a double-edged sword. I hurt those who didn't deserve it, and, in the end, I didn't feel better. I felt worse.

"I will, I will, I will, Mel." His features twisted as fresh tears gathered.

I'd never felt worse in my life. Not when Kyle died, not when my mom died... I couldn't stop the tears falling fast, the massive ache in my chest, the tightness in my throat as I gulped for air. "No. No. I don't want that." I shook my head negatively. "I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry, Craig. I didn't mean to hurt you."

His brows pinched; he mashed his lips together. He didn't say anything. His tears dried, yet he remained silent. My guilt multiplied every minute he didn't speak. Quietly he held me. The one who loved me the most I destroyed the worst. That was a harrowing recognition, especially since he was the only one who cared enough, who loved me enough, to risk finding me.

Tenderly he feathered his lips across mine. "I'll Philly a bath for you. Leave your clothes and I'll wash the lot." He forced a smile.

I sobered a bit. I pressed a hand to his chest. "I really am sorry, sweetie. I'll make it up to you any way I can."

He kissed my forehead. "Never leave me again."

I nodded my head emphatically in agreement. "Never." I glided my hands up under his t-shirt, raising it up. He drew it over his head and tossed it on the counter.

He was gorgeous. His sun-tanned skin, a pale gold, was soft silk over sturdy muscle. I wrapped my arms around his waist and kissed his chest, directly over his slow beating heart. "I love you." My skin drew taut where my tears began to dry.

He shuddered. "I love you, too."

I kissed my way up to his neck, stretching on my tiptoes to press my lips to his jawline.

He stiffened, chuckling as he disentangled himself. "Go before I tiddle myself blue." He tossed a towel at me from a nearby rack.

I giggled, catching it before it hit me.

At the door, I stopped, looking back. He'd already begun drawing a bath for me. "I'm sorry I put you through this."

He straightened, meeting my gaze. With a wistful smile, he said, "I'm sorry you lost your baby bro, love."

I nodded, slipping through the door.

Craig washed my clothes while I soaked in a hot bubble bath. I stole one of his t-shirts to wear after, losing myself in the lingering scent of him on it. He showered and joined

me in bed, where we listened to the commotion on the streets below, cuddling ourselves into slumber. It felt like no time at all before he was gently shaking me awake for work.

I was just coming out of the bathroom, dressed for the day when his phone went off.

He winked at me, smiling as he took me in. Most of the emotional tension had dissipated overnight.

I'd chosen a pair of stonewashed, skinny, blue jeans with a bit of give. I wore camel colored ballet flats with an oversized bow over my toes. I'd thrown on the now-clean police shirt from yesterday. An extra long, simple, yellow gold chain with a heart pendant dangled to my upper stomach; gold stud earrings were on display with my hair swept up into a tight bun atop my head. It was the most practical hairstyle for what I would be doing.

Blindly, Craig reached for his phone and answered. "Hello?"

"Did you find her?"

His expression fell, his lips turning down and brows slamming together at the bridge. "Protter her yourself." He jabbed the phone towards me.

Taking the phone, I watched Craig climb out of bed. Clad in just boxers, he grabbed the book bag and pulled out khaki cargo shorts and a black tee.

"Hello?" I kept my tone even.

"Hi." He was silent for a solid minute. "How are you?"

I didn't reply right away. I observed Craig's snappy movements as he dressed. He was angry, upset. I couldn't

say I blamed him. It was yet another layer of unfairness in life.

“You know what, Dad, I’m not okay. Mom was gone a lot, and we didn’t see or hear from you for years, until she died actually. I thought you would have changed. I was hopeful. You were there for us those first couple weeks, but then you abandoned us again. Your absence the day Kyle died, after all those times I called and text you, proved it. Work will always come first. You not being here proves you care about work more than you do me.

“Kyle and I got stuck with two work-a-holics, leaving me to practically raise him alone, and leaving him with no parents.” My voice rose. The more I said, the madder I became. “Because you and Mom put us in that situation, I feel like I’ve lost a child. I’m not okay with that. My heart feels like it’s been through a shredder. It hurts like hell, Dad. But it hurts just as much to know you could have been there, you could be here, and just chose not to be.

“I hope it’s worth it, Dad. I hope all those years of service give you more than Kyle and I tried to. I hope it’s worth losing both of your kids over.”

Craig placed a hand on my shoulder; his other soothingly trailed my upper arm.

My dad was quiet far longer this time. “I can’t change the past, but I want to be in your life, Melanie. Maybe I didn’t show it well, but I do love you, both of you. I tried to be there for you; I guess I just didn’t know how.”

“Locking yourself in the room when you weren’t working, asking me randomly if I was okay only to dismiss it immediately after wasn’t it, Dad. Not being here now isn’t it.”

“I can fly out later today,” he offered.

It was like he was acting, not reacting. He was doing what he was told, not what he wanted. "I want a Dad who wants to be here, volunteers to be, not one who feels like he has to be, treating me like an obligation rather than a desire."

He took a deep breath, expelling it swiftly. "I want to be there for you, Melanie. I...You're all I have left. I don't want to lose you."

Craig rubbed my back, assuring me of his support regardless of what I chose.

Honestly, I didn't want to lose my dad either. I wasn't close to the rest of my family. I saw my mom's sister and cousins maybe twice a year, and it was usually because Kyle asked to visit them. My dad was the last of my immediate family it felt. Now I understood how a vampire became detached from humanity over time.

"I'll be in New Orleans another week. Why don't we give ourselves that time and pick this up when I get back?"

I listened as he considered it. "Alright. Call me when you get here."

"I will."

"Stay safe until then, okay?"

"I will, Dad."

"I love you, Mel."

I swallowed hard. "I love you too, Dad." With my heart somehow lighter and heavier, I gave Craig his phone back.

"You alright, love?"

"Yeah." I pushed down the rising response crushing my chest. "Thanks." I gave him a small smile.

Glancing at the clock, I sprung into action. “Oh! I’ve gotta go.”

Craig whisked me in for a kiss. There was no better send off. “Take your phone. I charged it for you.” He pointed at the nightstand.

“Thanks, love.” I aimed for his accent, but failed miserably.

He got a hearty chuckle out of it though. “Be good. Be careful. Love you, doll.”

I poked his chest. “You be good. You be careful, and I love you, too, doll.” I stood on my tiptoes and kissed his cheek. As I turned away, he playfully slapped my ass. I cut my eyes at him over my shoulder, but a smile brightened my face too soon, convincing him I enjoyed his love tap.

—~—

I arrived at the precinct by cab with two minutes to spare. “I’m on-time so not a word,” I said as I approached Doug’s desk.

He looked me over, taking in my outfit. “Fancy.”

“I’m more girly than emo.”

He harrumphed.

I studied the boxes on his desk. Files and folders filled the gaps between them. “What’d you find?”

“Twenty cases spanning the past twenty-two months involving eleven community parks, not including the two we’ve covered and six bodies already recovered. I hope you’re ready.”

With my personal life back on track, no longer consuming my thoughts, I would be able to focus.

I met his gaze head on. "I'm ready."

Mel

It took us six long days to uncover all of the remains, but we did it. On day seven, I was graced with the task of contacting the families alongside Doug. Surprisingly, he was patient and kind in answering all of their questions before offering condolences. Hearing their unending thanks even as they wept undid me.

My emotions had been raw, my soul sensitized, affected by each new body found. I dealt with death all day and returned to Craig each night to embrace life with him. We explored the city together and developed an appreciation for the melting pot of cultures it allowed us to experience. It was very different from Charleston in many ways, but both cities had a unique historic charm that drew you in.

“Chief wants to talk to you,” Doug said. He all but kicked me out of his chair.

I strolled into the boss’ office.

“Close the door and have a seat.” His attention was on the paperwork on his desk.

I knew I didn’t do anything wrong, but nerves still crept to the surface. He unnerved the toughest of men on the force.

He set the folder aside and met my gaze. “You’re not normal.”

I rolled my eyes. “Thanks, Chief Obvious.”

He frowned only for a moment. “You’re not normal, but you get results. That’s what matters in my book.” He clasped his hands together atop the desk. “You did a good job this week, Emo.”

Yup. The nickname not only stuck, but spread.

“Um, thanks.”

“Your results got the district recognized by some big names in big places in this city. Because of that, the commissioner authorized me to hire you on fulltime in a salary position. I spoke with Doug and he agreed to partner with you.”

I was taken aback. I enjoyed the work, loved the people I’d come to know and adored the city, but leaving Charleston for New Orleans full time was a big commitment, one I wasn’t sure I was ready to make just yet.

“I appreciate the offer, but I need to think about it.”

He pursed his lips. His brows furrowed, revealing his disappointment. He issued a curt nod.

“Just an F.Y.I. for you though, if I agree to it, it wouldn’t be until after I go back to Charleston and settle things there. You all have twenty-six bodies to process and I have a baby brother to bury.”

“I heard about that.” His expression softened. “We’re here if you need anything.”

“Thanks.” I took a breath, reflecting on the past week. I never pictured myself doing police work. “Regardless of what happens, I’m grateful for the opportunity you gave me. I know it was unconventional, but, well...”

“You’re a little unconventional?” His lips quirked at the corners. It was the closest he’d come to a grin all week.

I smiled. “Yeah.”

Together we stood. He extended a hand. I allowed him to crush mine beneath his grip. “The guys are waiting for you.”

I stepped away. At the door, I peered back at him over my shoulder. He looked up from his desk. "If you think I'm wearing a uniform, you're sadly mistaken. Fabulous is a must for my wardrobe. Shirt and badge is my limit."

He narrowed his eyes. "Deal. Now get out of here."

That was a victory for me. I loved fashion, but part of the greatness of being a vampeen was the ability to live a thousand lives in one, to have fifty careers in my eternity if I desired. Saying yes or no now doesn't eliminate opportunities later.

Doug was waiting at his desk. His muscles were taut as he hunched over the file in front of him. He seemed more tense than normal. "You staying?" He didn't turn towards me. His tone was casual, but his body language was anything but.

"I'm going back to Charleston for a bit."

He closed the folder he pretended to be pre-occupied with. "Then what?" he pressed.

"Then I may or may not come harass you every day."

He didn't push. He spun around in his chair, a sparkle in his eyes. "Take care of yourself, Emo."

"Right back at ya."

"Yo, Emo!" Marcus called across the floor. He and Joe ambled over. "You stayin' or what?"

"Going back home for now."

The guys sombered.

Marcus nodded his head in understanding. "Come back soon, ya hear?"

I bonded with these guys during my short stay in the city. “Sure thing.”

Joe held out his arms. “Cumba,” he sang.

I went to him, hugging him then Marcus. “Take care, guys. Stay out of trouble.”

I dropped a quick kiss on Doug’s cheek. We laughed as his cheeks reddened. “Take care of the grizzly.”

“Tough job.” Joe sighed.

Marcus scrunched his nose in disgust. “Guess someone’s gotta do it.”

“Yup.” I grinned heartily. It would be hard to forget these guys, even in a thousand lifetimes.

Leaving the station, watching those three wave me off, was *almost* heart breaking. I didn’t realize how attached I’d become until it was time to say good-bye. I didn’t realize I was leaving a small piece of me behind until this moment. My life was in Charleston for now, but I knew my future held New Orleans at some point.

I lit up as I spotted Craig waiting for me a block away from the police station.

“Ready, love?” He slid an arm around me.

I looked around one last time, my soul soaring as I relived every amazing new memory in the bustling city. My gaze fell upon a flyer taped to the inside a ground floor window of a business; it was an advertisement for a local coffee shop. Instinctively, I knew the sign was meant for me. “There’s one more stop I need to make.”

Mel

“Welcome back, Melanie Hartford,” Jai’kay greeted as we entered the easy-to-miss establishment.

It was quieter this time. A few customers filled the chairs. Most were lost in their electronic gadgets.

The aroma of coffee, teas and spices intensified as I approached the counter. “I came to say good-bye.”

Her gaze flicked to Craig. Her eyes glittered. “I gathered.” Amusement brightened her voice.

I took a breath. “As much as it pains me to say this, you were right.”

Her gaze held knowledge, understanding. Her warmth seemed to radiate around me. “I see you found your purpose, my girl.”

“And then some.”

She cocked her head, reading me. Somehow I knew she was viewing my soul, the bare innards of me few had accessed before. “I told you that if you guarded this city, the city would guard you; if you helped this city, the city would help you. I do believe these are what you came for.” She set two steaming mugs of something that smelled like passion tea steeped in blood on the counter. The delicate cups sat on small white saucers. A closer look revealed a pin on each plate.

Like before, I was awash with confusion.

“A drop from each of you eludes your wicked fate.” Her dark eyes met each of our gazes, penetrating us.

Craig stiffened beside me.

I knew my eyes were wide. My heart took off, racing with my pulse at the possibility alone. "Are you- Do you..."

She nodded her head, confirming it. "Tis a thank-you, my girl, one that you have earned." She pushed the plates closer to us. "Be quick and drink fast, little loves. You are wasting precious moments of your eternity."

The look on Craig's face was one I would never forget. It was permanently emblazoned in my mind. He was so happy, unlike he'd ever been.

To have the walls ripped from between us forever...words couldn't express the emotions overpowering me.

"Karma does exist, and I expect you to build plenty of good when you return. We will be waiting."

Like before, she left me there, overwhelmed and speechless with my mind reeling. My brain struggled to process the amazing, the impossible.

Swiftly, discreetly, Craig pierced his finger and squeezed a drop of his blood into each cup. He never took his eyes off me as he worked.

Taking my hand in his, he delicately kissed my fingertip before he pricked it. He squeezed a drop of my lineage into each cup.

"She said I wouldn't forget her name," I marveled, joy bubbling up inside me, close to exploding at my surface.

We each picked up our mug.

"I love you, love." He beamed down at me.

"I love you."

Eyes locked on each other, we downed the brew. I was so consumed I didn't even taste it.

My gaze traveled over Craig, lost in the wonderment of his physical perfection. A slow smile curled my lips lustfully, sinfully. I bit my bottom lip, trying to stifle it. "How long until our flight leaves?" I asked.

"Not long enough," he replied. Our vitals increased, anticipation coursing our veins. "I'll stone the bird and bus 'em out for tomorrow."

"That gives us a full day." I knew passion darkened my eyes.

"Are you two still here?" Jai'kay ambled through the dangling door of beads, drawing us out of our haze.

"Not for long." I closed the distance between us, carefully hugging her tightly. "Thank you. Thank you so much."

"Many thanks, doll. My pitter won't forget you, love." Craig leaned in conspiratorially. "Neither will my willy." He winked.

Jai'kay's eyes widened and cheeks heated. She tried to remain composed, but struggled. "As you helped many, there were many who helped you. I will pass along your gratitude, excluding the willy part."

Craig laughed.

I smiled, feeling giddy as I moved into his arms. It was real. This was real. Our love was no longer forbidden.

We waved good-bye, and, hand-in-hand, we left to start our forever, a forever that allowed us to express our love in every way possible.

Everything happens for a reason. Kyle's death sent me running to New Orleans. It was his tragic end that led me to Jai'kay, a new career option and a blissful eternity with

the vampire I love. How could I hate Fate for that, especially after coming to view heaven the way Craig does?

The pain, heartache, didn't go away overnight, but focusing on all I had left rather than what I had lost helped. Appreciating those I had left helped.

—~—

“Merry Christmas, goober.” I ruffled Kyle’s hair.

“Merry Christmas, Melly.” Unexpectedly, he threw his arms around me, crushing my neck. I wasn’t a vamp, but I’ll never forget the smell of his shampoo: apples and musk, a very manly combo according to him.

He carefully extricated himself, suddenly remembering hugging his sister wasn’t cool. “So, next year, I’m thinking I deserve a MacBook.” He smiled cheekily, tightly gripping his new iPad.

“Oh really?” I quirked a brow, tickled by his forwardness.

“I’m worth it.” He winked, his grin widening to reveal teeth that weren’t perfectly straight, but close enough.

My heart expanded, motherly love sweeping me up. “You’re worth more than that, little man.”

—~—

He was worth so much more. They all were. Their early fate left gaping holes in many. You could allow bitterness to fill that hole, or you could allow love to.

I chose love.

Darkness would always shroud that moment in time, but by choosing love, that darkness wouldn't shadow my forever.

Life is a series of choices. I've found the best way to control Fate isn't by rebelling, but accepting. You can't change what has already happened, you can't control what is to come, but you can control how you handle the present. Life isn't a series of actions, but, rather, a series of reactions. And this is Melanie Marie Hartford telling you to react wisely.

—~—

Dear Reader,

Thank you for faithfully supporting the Vamp Chronicles series. I hope you enjoyed this departure from the general tone of the series to explore the sub-character of Mel. Her character was eye opening to explore. Her wounds run deep, but her determination runs deeper, especially when it comes to the ones she loves.

Speaking of loves... Squee! I was so excited that she and Craig received the happily ever after they deserved!

*For more information on the Vamp Chronicles, and my other titles, please visit my website at:
www.christinlovell.com*

*In case you're wondering, the final book in the Vamp Chronicles series, *The Break of Dawn*, is estimated to release October 20th, 2013.*

*Thanks for reading this title!
~ Christin*

—~—

In case you were curious as to what song Craig was singing to Mel, it is the bonus track on the soundtrack: Jimmy Wayne - I Will

"I Will" is a song written by [Dave Pahanish](#) and [Rory Lee Feek](#), and recorded by American country music artist [Jimmy Wayne](#). It was released in October 2008 as the second single from Wayne's album [Do You Believe Me Now](#), his sixth Top 40 country hit, and his eighth overall single release."

—~—

I Will

So you're the one I've waited on
The one I've been dreamin' of
Now that I know, it's hard to let go
I don't want to lose your love

But what can I do? I can't make you stay here
But if you should choose to go your own way
Where ever you're going, whenever you turn
Remember this moment, remember these words
I will, I will

Give up my life for you if you want it
Give you my heart, you already own it
I'll do any thing, I'll go anywhere, it's true
I will, I will, I will

I look in your eyes and I see our life
So full of happiness
Do you see the same? Or just someone you'll blame
For things that you might have missed

I don't want to weigh you down like an anchor
If that's how you see me now I would rather
Let you go free, just sail away
If that's what you need, if that's what it takes
I will, I will

Give up my life for you if you want it
Give you my heart, you already own it
I'll do any thing, I'll go anywhere, it's true
I will, I will, I will

If ever your day is done
And still you feel you need someone to hold you
I will
If you ever need

To talk to somebody who really knows you
Yes I will

Give up my life for you if you want it
Give you my heart, you already own it
I'll do any thing, I'll go anywhere, it's true
I will, I will, I will

I will love you

—~—