



Summary: "I'll see you again," Eric told Sookie when she left with Bill following the Long Shadow attack. What if that "again" had been the very next night? This is a "SHORT," suggested by Gwynwyvar. (SVM Eric/Sookie)

One Night

by California Kat

Story Prompt:

After the Long Shadow incident, what if Eric arrived the next night to apologize to Sookie? What if he was able to tell her about the blood effects then? Would she open up about her accidental slip into his mind? Would he see a picture of Hadley in the house? How many things could have been avoided and sorted out that night? (Idea from Gwynwyvar-March 14, 2015)

A/N:

I asked my blog-ites to vote on the POV they wanted. They asked for a mix of Sookie and Eric (in first person). So that is what you are getting. Also, after the Long Shadow incident, I changed quite a few of the happenings in the books, so up until then, it is “canon”; after that, I played with the “rules” a bit. I hope that you enjoy!

Disclaimer:

I own nothing related to *True Blood* or the *Southern Vampire Mysteries* novels. Those items provide the inspiration for the story; however, I do not own or profit from the fanfiction I produce using that inspiration (except in the form of your kind comments and reviews).

Many thanks to:

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for the inspiration & for participating in my SHORT project.

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for always being ready, willing, and able to beta for me!

Sephrenia

for graciously “taking up Gwynwyvar’s challenge too – by making a banner from only the same prompt I had! It’s always so fun to see what she comes up with for these shorts!!!! She’s a wonderful partner in crime!!! Her amazing banner is on page 4!

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banner by Saphrenia

**“Love knows not distance; it hath no continent; its eyes are for
the stars.”**

— Gilbert Parker

Chapter 01: The End

ERIC POV

I'd woken up the night before in a very different frame of mind than I'd woken tonight. Last night, I'd been looking forward to seeing the telepath again – to seeing her skills in actions, though she'd been impressive enough the first night I'd met her.

After all, she'd warned me about the undercover policeman in my bar, saving me a lot of fucking hassle.

I'd been intrigued by Miss Stackhouse. And attracted. Now I was downright captivated!

More significantly, I liked her.

In truth, I'd not suspected Long Shadow of duplicity. I thought he'd been smarter than that. If he had been, he would have known better than to fucking double cross me! He *should* have simply asked for a fucking loan!

Some people's children!

Speaking of which, I'd just gotten off the phone with Hot Rain. Now there was a "hot mess!" I shook my head, knowing that I'd have to deal out his death too since the crazed vampire was obviously not capable of understanding that his child got *exactly* as he deserved. Instead of recognizing that Long Shadow had signed his own death warrant by stealing from an ancient vampire, the idiot had fixated on the fact that a human had been involved in the discovery of that theft.

And that meant that the bastard might eventually send someone after Sookie — since Bill’s report of the situation to the Magister had included her fucking name! I knew that because he sent me a copy of it; at least, it hadn’t included the fact that she was a telepath.

Still! What. A. Fucking. Idiot!

The fact that I envied Compton — even a little, but only because of Sookie — riled me to no end.

And it brought home the changes that had been wrought within me from the night before.

Changes brought about by the amazing demonstration put on by Sookie the night before.

Pam interrupted my pleasant recollections as she sauntered into my office as if it was hers.

She was a bitch — though a loveable one. Most of the time.

Defying the laws of physics, she sat down without revealing her pussy, despite the miniscule length of her dress. Pity. She had a lovely one, though I’d not partaken in it since her preference for women had become clear.

“You are pensive tonight,” she stated.

“Hot Rain will be a problem,” I relayed.

“Surely not for you,” she observed, studying me through narrowed eyes. “There was a time when you would have welcomed any threat from someone like him. After

all, there's so little opportunity for torture these days – even among our own kind," she said wistfully.

"But it is not only me at risk," I said.

"You think I cannot take care of myself?" my child asked incredulously. "Hot Rain might be a little older than I am, but I could smell him coming from a mile away! Seriously, hasn't he ever heard of a bath? Every time Long Shadow visited him, he carried the scent for weeks!"

I rolled my eyes. "I'm not worried about you, Pamela."

"You are thinking about Sookie Stackhouse – aren't you?" she intoned. "I will admit that she's lovely, but – seriously – Eric, you cannot take her into consideration in such matters."

"I already have," I reminded. "I killed Long Shadow instead of letting him continue harming Sookie."

Why Compton hadn't jumped to her defense, I didn't know. But I did intend to find out – even if I had to get a little rough with him to do it.

She sighed. "You killed Long Shadow because he'd stolen from you – from us," she said firmly.

"No. That is not why. You and I both know that I would have normally just pulled him off of her and then enjoyed torturing him for a few months before cutting him loose, disgracing him, and then exiling him from Area 5."

Pam looked away. "But you didn't do that. Why?"

“Had I pulled him off of her, the damage to Sookie would have been grave,” I said honestly.

“I was afraid you’d say something like that,” Pam sighed. “But why her?”

My eyebrow lifted. “You need to ask?”

Pam had witnessed Sookie’s performance the night before as well as I had. Not only had Sookie negotiated with a thousand-year-old vampire to turn in human miscreants that she discovered to human authorities, but also she had kept her cool in the face of three vampires ravenous for her blood.

It had been she who had made sure that Ginger was called in to satisfy my own bloodlust before I licked Sookie’s body like a Popsicle. It had been she who had dragged Bill from the room, controlling him like he was a dog on a leash. By all rights, Bill should have drained Sookie the night before. But she had obviously gotten him to snap out of his blood-haze.

Indeed, I knew that she’d gotten home safely because I’d hovered outside of her window for a while after I’d had my fill of Ginger.

I frowned. Ginger always left a bad taste in my mouth, and I always feared “catching something” from her, even though human sexually transmitted diseases didn’t affect vampires.

Still, she was someone I’d used sparingly – only in “emergencies.”

Pam broke me from my thoughts. “The telepath was quite clever in handling you *and* in figuring out the mystery – despite Ginger’s being glamourised by Long Shadow.”

“And she did figure things out remarkably quickly too,” I smirked.

“And there was that light in her eyes as she worked,” Pam remarked. “The confidence was quite attractive on her.”

“Indeed,” I agreed.

“*And* quite unappreciated by Compton,” Pam added.

“Indeed,” I growled.

“You *really* like her,” Pam said, her tone betraying her surprise.

“I really *could*,” I returned.

“What are you waiting for then?” Pam asked me, picking up her cell phone.

My eyebrow rose, curious about whom she was calling.

“Compton,” Pam grinned, “there has been an issue over border rights in Northern Louisiana; since Area 5’s investigator position has not yet been filled by the queen, you have been charged with investigating the situation and putting forth a solution for your sheriff.”

Pam checked her nails as Billy Boy offered his protests. It was her eyebrow’s turn to rise as he gave his final one: Sookie’s safety.

I sat forward to better hear.

“What do you mean Sookie is in danger?” Pam asked casually, putting forward my own fucking question. Only I would have asked it much less calmly!

She and I both listened as Bill explained the work of the serial killer in the Bon Temps area. Not only had he killed the two that Sookie had brought to my attention, but also he’d killed Sookie’s grandmother!

And that had happened AFTER Bill had brought Sookie to Fangtasia for the first time – AFTER he’d claimed her! And that meant that he *should* have provided for her protection. And – if he was unable – I should have been asked to help protect his human. Hell – even a simple, worthless pet would have merited a Were guard.

At the very fucking least!

Pam recognized this fact as well as I did.

She snarled, and I reached for her phone.

“Bill, you are hereby appointed provisional Area 5 investigator.” After all – friends close, enemies closer. “You will do as Pamela has instructed, and you will begin your task tonight! You’d better fucking be in Northern Louisiana within 90 minutes, or I *will* punish you for insubordination!” I yelled before hanging up on him.

“I liked that phone,” Pam whined as she looked at the crushed plastic in my hand.

“Sorry,” I said, handing her back the remaining pieces. “Your little phone guard was useless, however.”

She rolled her eyes as only she could. Seriously, there really should be a contest for such things, for Pam had made eye rolling an art form *and* a sport.

“It was obviously not vampire-proof,” she said testily, looking at the pink scraps in her hand.

“There is glitter on my hands,” I remarked with a frown.

Pam’s phone’s case had been laden with the substance.

“Then you will bedazzle Sookie when you see her tonight,” she smirked.

I didn't move for a moment.

"Go," she said simply.

"I'm not sure what to do once I get there."

Her smirk was immediate.

"You must *really* like her," she said.

I did, but I didn't have to admit it again.

She shrugged. "Do what you always do. Do what will help you accomplish what you want – what you need," she said, making things sound so simple.

I was sure that they would not be.

SOOKIE POV

Bill had offered me his blood to heal the wound Long Shadow had made, but I'd not needed it. Between what Bill had convinced me to take the night before we'd gone to Fangtasia and what I'd accidentally swallowed of Long Shadow's blood, I'd already mostly healed by the time Bill got me home.

I cannot say that his behavior was ingratiating, however. He'd acted almost as if I was to blame for Long Shadow attacking me. And he'd told me more than once that having the other vampire's blood was bad.

As if I could have helped it.

Moreover, if having Long Shadow's blood was so "bad," why was having Bill's apparently no big deal? I was full of questions, but without answers as I worked my shift at Merlotte's – a shift which Bill had suggested I skip, given my "ordeal."

A worse “ordeal” would come when the monthly bills arrived!

Gran’s Social Security check wouldn’t be among the mail either.

As I tallied my bills in my head, I busied my current table faster, hoping a new customer would arrive to take it.

That would mean a tip.

“Do I really need a house phone?” I muttered to myself as I took the dishes back to the kitchen. After all, most calls that came in had been for Gran. In fact, I could count the calls that had come in for me during the last month on one hand. And not having one would save forty-three dollars a month. Or maybe there was a pay by call sort of thing I could work out with the phone company – just so I’d have a phone for emergencies.

And I was already hoping to save on electricity by not running the air conditioning. Gran had needed her window air conditioners to stay comfortable, but I could get by with cool baths and a box fan.

Of course, my grocery shopping habits had already changed. I knew that I could use the free meal I got every shift at Merlotte’s to fill me up most days. And Mac-n-Cheese was filling on the days I didn’t work. And it was cheap too! Ramen noodles, which Gran had felt to be an abomination, had also made their way into my cupboards. With salt and a little chicken broth, the noodles actually tasted decent.

I smiled when Hoyt came into the bar with Catfish. They always left 15% on the dot, and they sat at my newly-cleaned table.

I had them a pitcher of beer before they could even ask, and I mentally added milk to my grocery list, but then took it off again when I realized that Mike Spenser would want the first installment for Gran's funeral costs by the first of the month.

Yes – the phone would *have* to go. I frowned. Maybe I could sell some baked goods at the farmer's market? Or maybe I could ask Bill to buy his own TrueBloods to keep at my house?

I cringed, thinking about how Gran would be displeased if I was so rude as to ask that. But at twenty dollars a four-pack, they'd been half of my grocery budget the week before. And they'd only lasted three visits by Bill. Not to mention that he'd asked me to get vitamins for when he drank from me. I scoffed. As if I could afford those!

I frowned. I wondered if I could ask Jason to cover half of Gran's funeral costs?

I shook my head as I bussed another table. No. Jason's mind already blamed me for Gran's death. How could I ask anything of him?

Especially since I blamed myself, too.

No – Gran was *my* responsibility.

I'd just asked Sam for more shifts. And I would look for a second job. Yes! That is what I'd do. I'd start hunting for one the very next day.

Resolved, I continued moving between tables as quickly and efficiently as I could.

I hate to admit it, but I was a little disappointed when Bill took my empty booth. Since he and I had been together, he'd stopped tipping – barely leaving enough to cover his TrueBlood tab.

Still—I mustered my smile and scurried to get him his usual before delivering it to his table.

“I am sorry, Sookie,” he said rather stiffly. “But I’m afraid I won’t have time to have a drink tonight.”

I’ll admit that I deflated a bit. Would that mean that he wouldn’t pay for the \$8.50 TrueBlood? I sighed, refactoring the tips in my apron.

Could I get by without electricity?

“Can you sit for a few minutes?” he asked.

I looked around at my tables. They were all fine for the moment, but even a minute of a customer’s not getting something he or she needed would result in less of a tip for me.

Still, I closed my eyes to accept the probability of even more math in my future and then nodded toward Sam, who gave me a disapproving look. There went those double shifts.

I sighed, but I sat, nonetheless.

“I have to go away for business,” Bill began.

“Business?” I asked.

“It is Eric’s fault,” he said sullenly. “He made me the acting Area 5 investigator, and—though this could be a good thing because it will make you less vulnerable—I *have* to do his bidding.”

“What is his bidding?” I asked.

“There is a border dispute with Arkansas,” he explained, “and I am to investigate it.”

“But there’s a serial killer on the loose here,” I said. Maybe I sounded selfish, but I was also afraid.

“Blame Eric,” Bill said, a certain amount of triumph in his tone. “And be wary of him. He might use this opportunity to try to seduce you,” he practically growled.

“I’ll be careful,” I promised.

“Remember that he is brutal and duplicitous,” Bill warned. “And you are naïve. Do *not* trust him.”

I nodded as if in agreement. But I wasn’t sure I fully agreed with my vampire boyfriend. Was Eric a little scary during our two meetings? Um – yep. But he also was personable, and he certainly worked with me the night before.

And he saved my life.

“I have to go. He expects me to be up north soon.” Bill paused. “I shouldn’t have even spent the time to come here,” he reached out to take my hand, “but I wanted to say goodbye.”

I sighed. Why did his words sound so ominous?

Bill got out of the booth and then pulled me out before kissing me soundly. I had a fleeting thought that the display would be noticed by any serial killers that might be in the room before I let myself enjoy the kiss for a moment since it was happening anyway.

Silent touch was – after all – still a luxury that I was appreciative for.

“When will I see you again?” I asked, once he’d pulled away.

“When I am done with my task,” he answered enigmatically.

Bill gave me another quick kiss and then zipped away.

With a sigh, I dug \$8.50 out of my apron and cashed out Bill’s check – all the while trying to ignore the glare that Sam was giving to me.

Struggling to keep my head up amidst the onslaught of negative thoughts being targeted at me because of Bill’s visit, I attempted to “make things up” to my tables. I smiled and anticipated their needs. And I skipped my dinner break, too. I skipped a needed bathroom trip. I walked so fast that my feet hurt.

“Would it really be so bad to live without electricity?” I wondered to myself. After all, the range was gas. And there were quite a few candles in the house. They would last for a month or more.

Given my meagre tips, I might be finding out just how long they would last very soon.

But I was determined to pay Mr. Spenser; he’d be the kind to rip up Gran’s simple headstone otherwise! And I *would* pay the mortgage of Gran’s home. That was the least I could do for her.

“You’ll figure it out, Sookie,” I promised myself – trying to convince myself that I really could.

Chapter 02: Dinner & a Movie

SOOKIE POV

When I got home, I was ravenous, and I quickly started a pot of water to boil before changing into more comfortable clothing. Celebrating my current electricity, I decided that I'd watch a movie, and I put on *The Sound of Music*, one of Gran's favorites. Mac-n-Cheese was a mindless meal to make, so I checked on the noodles only occasionally as the head nun sang to Maria about climbing every mountain.

I paused the movie to mix up my dinner once the noodles were done. And then I put half of the meal into a Tupperware container and placed it into the refrigerator, cursing myself for not thinking about my need for that appliance in my musings about the need for electricity.

But surely one could live without a refrigerator – right? I didn't have to use milk to make Mac-n-cheese, after all. Water would do just fine. "But I'll try to keep the electricity," I promised myself.

Plus, in about two months, Gran's life insurance check would come, and – after I split that with Jason – I'd have enough for this year's property taxes and about half of Gran's remaining funeral charges. "I'll just be careful," I promised myself, flipping off the kitchen light.

In fact, I made sure that all the lights in the house were turned off.

The light from the television was enough.

I will admit that I may have cried just a little when I finished my dinner and was still hungry. But I knew I'd get through. Plus, my tears might have been for the movie!

ERIC POV

Sookie's house was mostly dark, though her car was parked in the back. I smelled tears as I approached the darkened home, which was alit only by the flickering of a television.

A flower – Edelweiss – was being sung about.

I flew around the home, taking extra time to try to pick up any scents, given the fact that a serial killer had, apparently, murdered someone in the home. But there were many, many trace scents, and I recalled that human funeral rituals often included a wake at the victim's home. That meant that the whole fucking community had been in Sookie's house since her grandmother had been slain.

I sighed in temporary defeat and knocked on the door.

Smartly, Sookie didn't just open the door to me; she flipped on a porch light and looked out the front window to determine who was visiting her home.

"Eric?" she asked.

"Do you know any others who look like me?" I smirked, hoping to make her laugh and stifle the tears in her eyes even before I entered.

If she allowed me to enter.

"What are you doing here?" she asked suspiciously.

“I saved your life last night,” I said, hoping to appeal to her hospitality or her sense of obligation. I didn’t care which one at the moment. “In my human culture, that meant that I was bound to you for the rest of our lives,” I added.

Her skeptical look didn’t fade. “I’ve been warned about you.”

“I’ll be on my best behavior,” I swore. “And I brought you something!”

I produced the meal I’d purchased from a restaurant between Fangtasia and Sookie’s home.

“I believe it will still be warm enough to eat,” I said when she looked at the Styrofoam container with wide eyes. Suddenly, I’d feared that I’d made a mistake. I’d learned that she’d been working that night and had thought that she might need sustenance. Perhaps, I was incorrect about humans’ eating schedules, however.

“Or – if you take it out of this conveyance container and place it on a plate, I believe that you could warm it in your microwave tomorrow.”

I’d even asked the restaurateur to be sure.

I sighed with relief as she threw open the door.

“You brought me dinner,” she said incredulously.

“It is a little thing,” I returned.

“Do you – uh – expect dinner in return?” she asked.

I frowned. “No. I am currently in no need of blood.”

She smiled as if she were uncertain about whether she was allowed to do so.

“Eric, won’t you please come it,” she invited.

I stepped in somewhat cautiously. “Thank you, Sookie,” I said trying to remember Southern manners.

She frowned and flipped off the porch light. “I don’t have any TrueBlood left.”

I shook my head. “I am fine,” I assured, handing her the food container. “I had a bag of bagged blood earlier.”

“Bagged?” she asked, even as she eyed the food hungrily.

I nodded. “It has been my preference for a while.”

“Not fresh?” she asked. “Not fangbangers?”

I shrugged. “Occasionally? Sure. But they tend to taste horrible because of cigarette usage or alcohol consumption. Bagged blood is dependable,” I added.

“Oh,” she said as she took her dinner into the living room where the flickering light was steady since she’d paused the movie that was creating it.

“Do you mind?” she asked as she opened the container and gasped at the steak inside of it. “I just came off a shift,” she said in a whisper as she eyed the meat.

“The food is for you,” I smiled as I looked at the scraped bowl on the coffee table.

From it, I smelled some kind of pasta and fake cheese – surely not enough to nourish a human.

She practically skipped to the kitchen to get a steak knife and fresh fork before stabbing into the meat in the container. I will admit that I’d asked for the most expensive meal on the menu – but just because I was mostly ignorant about human meals these days. Happily, I’d recognized the scent of cooked meat and vegetables, so I knew that the meal would suffice for Sookie’s nutritional needs.

I didn't speak – for words failed me – as she moaned her appreciation with each forkful.

I couldn't help but to wonder why she was not used to such tiny gestures. Surely Bill saw to her needs.

After she'd virtually inhaled her food, I asked a question I'd learned would go over well during the research I'd done as I made my way to Sookie's home.

"How was your day at work?"

She looked at me in shock and then collapsed into tears.

I was on my knees in front of her in the next moment.

"I am sorry," I stammered. "The website – it assured that – do not women like being asked such things? Um – the – uh – steak – was it to your liking? I thought that medium would be safe since it is – um – in the middle of the cooking spectrum. Did it suit you?"

She cried a little louder.

I wanted to kick myself for being so goddamned unsure of myself, but her continued tears remained my main focus.

I found that I – inexplicably – hated those fucking tears!

Even as I wanted to drink each one! Gods, they smelled delicious.

"Sookie," I said, moving to sit next to her on the couch. I know I did it awkwardly, but I attempted to comfort her by patting her back. "I didn't come here to make you cry."

She moved to place herself in my arms. I found that hugging her felt less awkward. In fact, I liked the feeling.

But I didn't like the fact that her tears continued.

"I will un-pause the movie," I said with a confidence I didn't possess.

Thankfully, she turned her attention toward the screen.

"Why did you come?" she asked finally – though she was still sniffing.

"That question has many answers," I sighed. Hell – even I didn't know all of them.

She leaned back a little. "Start with one?"

I couldn't help but to smile at her simple request.

"I wanted to make sure that you were okay – after last night," I began.

She showed me her arm. "All healed. I guess it was Long Shadow's blood that did it?" She shrugged. "Ironic that he tried to kill me, yet his death is what healed me."

"You didn't seem surprised that our blood could heal," I commented.

She looked concerned. "Um – no. But please don't be mad at Bill; he – uh – told me. He had to – uh – because he saved my life with his blood. And it's not like he tells me a lot of vampire secrets or anything," she added quickly.

"You were mortally injured? When?" I asked. I was also feeling concern in that moment, but *certainly* not because of anything Bill may or may not have told Sookie.

She nodded. "More than a month ago. Um – June 12." She smiled. "I have a good memory for dates. I was attacked by the Rats."

"Rats?"

“Rattrays,” she clarified. “They were a couple of redneck drainers who decided they wanted to get revenge because I’d stopped them from draining Bill the first night I met him.

There were several things about Sookie’s statement that immediately troubled me.

I started with her use of the past tense. “Were?”

She bit her lip. “Yeah – um – Bill killed them after they attacked me.”

I suppose I couldn’t blame him for that. But he *should* have reported the deaths to Area 5’s sheriff – me! It would have been *my* ass if the deaths had been linked to vampires, after all. And, as sheriff, I would have sent someone to make sure that the cover-up of vampire involvement was effective.

“How were their deaths explained?” I asked, trying to sound curious rather than pissed off.

“Bill – uh – took them to their trailer and made it look like they died in a freak tornado.”

It was getting harder to hide my anger! What was Bill – a fucking infant?

“And authorities here bought the explanation?” I asked.

She nodded. “Plus, they were glad that the Rats wouldn’t be around anymore. They’d always been trouble makers.”

I sighed. Thank the gods that the local authorities seemed either incompetent or lazy. Of course, that was also likely why there was still a serial killer targeting women

in the area – another thing Bill *should* have informed me about. It should never have been Sookie who'd had to do it.

"You said these Rats were drainers?"

"Yeah," she nodded, reaching out to get her tea. I found that I was greatly disappointed that the action caused her to move further away from me.

"I picked it up from their minds that they intended to drain Bill on the first night he came to Merlotte's. He was the first vampire we'd ever had in Bon Temps, but Mack and Denise buddied up with him right away." She shook her head and took another drink. "I was going to warn Bill to keep away from them, but before I could, they had all left together. If I hadn't gone after them, they would have drained him for sure!"

"You went after them alone?" I asked, my frustration clear.

"I'm not helpless!" she said with the sass that I'd first noticed – and liked – about her.

I couldn't help my smirk. "I know."

She nodded as if my acknowledgment was enough to placate her. "They had him trapped under some silver."

"Chains?" I asked.

"More like one long band."

"Thick?"

She shook her head. "No – pretty thin. Why is that important?"

"Just trying to understand the standard drainer kit better," I offered. "How did they use the band?"

“They sort of crisscrossed it around his wrists and then put it over his ankles too.”

I nodded in acknowledgement. Bill *should* have been able to avoid being taken down, and – unless they’d had a silver net – they should never have been fast enough to secure his wrists in the way she described.

Especially not with a *thin* cord!

Curiouser and curiouser.

And another fucking strike against Bill!

To not report drainers to the area sheriff – again *me* – was a punishable offense!

“I think he was embarrassed that he’d let himself get captured,” she said with a frown. “And – to tell the truth – he was a little creepy that first night. But – then again – I touched his face when I couldn’t hear his thoughts, just to make sure I wasn’t having trouble with reception.”

“So he learned of your gift that first night?”

She shrugged. “My disability? Um – I’m not sure. He might have guessed there was something up, but I didn’t tell him outright until a few nights later – after he’d healed me.”

I ignored her critical remark about herself for the moment. Another infraction on Bill’s part. He *should* have contacted his sheriff – me again – about a potential asset. Of course, that would have required him checking in first!

Which he'd also failed to do! From the timeline I was getting from Sookie, Bill had been in Area 5 for more than a week before he'd darkened Fangtasia's door – contrasted by the light that was Sookie Stackhouse.

My mind whirled.

"You said that Bill acted a little creepy?" I asked.

"Well – I think he was trying to flirt, but y'all tend to leer."

I chuckled. "That we do."

"When I showed him that I was using the Rats' silver chain to protect my neck and wrists in case he tried to bite me, he said something about being able to feed from my groin." She shuddered.

I kept my fangs at bay only by biting my tongue with my blunt teeth.

"Oh – and he offered me his blood. Either to drink or to sell."

By my count, Bill had already had enough strikes to be "out," but this revelation added exponentially to the shit-storm he would soon face! Clearly, Bill had been wanting to get his blood into Sookie from that very first night. And, clearly, he'd found another way to do it only a few nights later!

I was too goddamned old to believe that *that* was coincidence.

"So you saved Bill's life? And that is why the Rats attacked you?" I asked.

"Yeah. I'd been waiting for Bill outside of Merlotte's after a shift. Gran – my grandmother – was hopin' to talk to him about the Civil War."

"And he was late," I commented, still working very hard to keep my voice calm.

The situation seemed clear to me. Bill glamoured the drainers to attack him. And he let himself get captured. That was the only way he could have been secured as Sookie had described – unless

“Sookie, I am going to ask a couple of – delicate questions,” I said tentatively.

“Okay,” she responded nervously.

“Did either of the Rattrays have bite marks on them – when you went to save Bill?”

She frowned. “Not that I saw, but – like Bill said – there are other places to get bitten other than the visible ones.”

“Were either of the Rattrays in a state of undress?” I asked.

She blushed, but shook her head in the negative.

Drainers working in tandem had been known to distract a vampire in order to secure him or her – though such a thing should *never* happen to one older than a decade or so. However, it seemed clear to me that Bill didn’t have his fangs in a neck – or other intimate place – when he’d been “caught,” so I was back to the theory that he’d arranged the whole initial “draining.” And that meant that he had known that Sookie would come! And that meant that he had known that she was a telepath. And that meant that he had known what the Rattrays were thinking about because he’d implanted the fucking idea!

“You were badly hurt?” I asked.

She looked down as if remembering her pain and nodded. “Yeah. If Bill hadn’t come, I’d have died.”

“Did he have your blood that night?” I asked tensely.

She nodded. “When I regained consciousness, he was – uh – licking my wounds.”

“Did he tell you that he formed a tie with you?” I asked.

“A tie?”

“A blood tie,” I clarified.

“Well – I know his blood healed me. And Bill said that he’d be able to feel it if I was in danger and find me. When he gave me a little of his blood the night before we went to Fangtasia, he told me that I’d feel stronger and he also figured I’d be able to control my telepathy more.”

“Have you had his blood a third time?” I asked nervously.

I shook my head. “No.”

“Why?”

I sighed with relief.

“Three exchanges forms a permanent bond.”

“Permanent?”

“Yes,” I confirmed.

“Exchanges?” she asked.

“Blood in the mouth at the same time,” I clarified.

She thought for a moment. “Then Bill and I have had *only* one exchange. He – uh – didn’t take my blood the second time.”

I sighed, knowing that Sookie would find that both good news and bad news.

Chapter 03: A Little Knowledge

SOOKIE POV

Eric seemed to sigh with relief for a second time in as many minutes. The action was odd for a vampire. My thoughts on the matter were interrupted, however, when the video ended, thus causing the room to darken.

“I’ll turn on the light,” Eric volunteered.

I bit my lip in order to avoid asking him to light the candle on the coffee table instead. That’s what I’d been intending to do. But I suppose my pride got in the way of that; plus, Eric was a guest. And I figured that guests deserved light.

“So – um – will you tell me more about all this blood stuff? I should probably know since I’m dating a vampire. Or,” I paused, “is it forbidden or something?”

In fact, I wondered if Bill would get in trouble for *already* telling me some things about it all.

“It is not forbidden for a *claimed* human to know,” he said thoughtfully.

“Though it would be better coming from Bill.”

“Oh well,” I said, “I’ll ask him when he comes back. Um – is he right about why you sent him away?”

“Why did he say?”

“So that you could take advantage of me – steal me from him.” I shrugged.

“And you are here, after all. You know – I love Bill. I’m not gonna cheat on him.”

He tilted his head a little as if studying me for a moment. "I would like to steal you from him," he said bluntly. "And I do want him out of the way for a while."

"Why? So you could try to seduce me?" I asked, feeling my cheeks heat up with a blush. "You know – even if I wasn't with Bill, I'm not the kind of girl to do a one-night stand."

He chuckled. "I'm pretty sure that one night would not quench my thirst for you, Sookie Stackhouse."

I rolled my eyes. "Whatever. Don't forget that I can hear people's thoughts, and your fans at Fangtasia have *very* loud ones. And none of them get more than one night with the great Eric Northman." I felt my face get even hotter.

He laughed even louder. "I am a single man," he said. "And I do enjoy taking what pleasures I can in this *life*," he added, emphasizing the word "life."

I shook my head. "That's what Bill said."

"You judge me," he commented with amusement.

"No. I just don't understand casual sex. I mean," I paused, "I get the concept of it. But – well – I just don't think it would work for me."

"Yet some humans have loose ways," he commented, his eyes dancing.

"Like my brother – yeah," I said under my breath.

He laughed heartily. "Yet I imagine that he might one day settle down – *if* the right woman came along."

"Yeah," I allowed.

“The right woman is difficult to find for a vampire,” Eric relayed thoughtfully. “Most vampires do not want to make themselves vulnerable to another vampire. And – our ages are certainly a factor too.”

“Ages?”

“Yes,” he responded. “We get more powerful as we age, so there is – inevitably – a dominant and a passive member when two vampires couple. Most of us do not enjoy passivity. But – paradoxically – I have always liked strong women.”

“You’ll have to find a vampire of equal age then,” I commented.

“There are few my age,” he smiled ruefully. “And those whom I’ve met that are do not suit me.”

“What about a human?” I asked.

He shrugged. “Before the Great Revelation, vampires who let humans know of our secrets were killed or – at least – punished. Unless the humans were *totally* controlled by vampire blood.”

I shivered. “Like Renfield?”

He nodded. “Exactly like that, though the humans are much less raving. However, too much blood influence and glamour take away a human’s,” he paused, “ability to function on his or her own. And – like I said – I like strong women.”

“What about after the Reveal?” I asked curiously. “I mean, Bill is mainstreaming, and he found me.”

“Yes, but there is only one you,” he said sincerely, making me blush. “Plus, we have been public only for a couple of years. Finding a true partner can take a long time—even for a human. Correct?”

I nodded but then frowned. “So—uh—if I keep taking Bill’s blood, I’ll be like Renfield?” I shivered at the thought. “Is that was a bond is?”

Again, he tilted his head as if to study me.

“I think Bill has offered you only incomplete knowledge,” he finally said. “But, if you want me to tell you about the full implications of having vampire blood, you must agree to the consequences.”

“Consequences?” I gulped out.

He nodded. “Yes. Knowledge is power. But gaining it can hurt like hell.”

“Hurt?” I cringed and moved further away from him.

“I do not mean in a physical way,” Eric said, looking a little confused for a moment.

“Oh. Well—with vampires, you—uh—never know,” I stuttered.

“You do not know enough about us,” he said, with a little anger in his voice.

I took a deep breath. “Will you tell me? Even if it hurts?”

ERIC POV

“I will,” I said after a few moments of looking into her questing blue eyes. Yes—I would be honest with her, even if it ended up hurting us both. “You are right that some things are kept secret among us, but there is plenty you can and should know.”

“Okay. I’m ready,” she said bravely.

“Once you know, you cannot un-know,” I said, giving her a final warning.

“I know,” she whispered.

I nodded, acknowledging both her courage and her choice. “Okay then. Firstly, vampires can take blood from all the humans we want without ever forming any kind of connection with them. On the other hand, when we *give* blood – which is quite uncommon as Pam suggested last night – ties or bonds get made. To make a Renfield, I would force a blood exchange and then periodically give the human more of my blood, but – though I *might* feed from that human – I would make no more exchanges. Each dose of my blood would heighten my power over the human. After the first, I could sense most strong emotions and the location of the recipient. I would also be able to affect the human’s moods in a way. The human would become attracted to me and would have dreams about me – erotic ones. Thus a dependence would begin to grow within him or her.”

She paled, but I went on.

“With each drink of me, my allure – in the human’s eyes – would grow. I would be able to influence his or her thoughts and actions more and more, for the thought of pleasing me would be paramount to the human. The good news is that Renfields cannot be made quickly, and ties can be broken by magic or time or,” I paused, “a stronger vampire’s blood.”

“Bill has tied me to him,” Sookie said with realization.

“Yes, but you *must* judge his intentions for yourself,” I said truthfully. “You must gauge *why* you love him. It is possible that what you feel is from *you* and not from him.”

She bit her bottom lip and looked thoughtful for a moment. “How’s a bond different from a tie?” she asked.

I couldn’t help but to smile in reverence. “A bond is sacred. It is about equality rather than conquest. With three exchanges, the two forming the bond become dependent upon each other – in the most revered of ways. Emotions are felt on *both* sides. Location is known on *both* sides. Influence can be given on *both* sides, but it can also be denied by both. And the bonded ones know the difference between themselves and their partners. Lying is impossible. Long separations are impossible. Most bonded couples also pledge.”

“Pledge?” she asked.

“More sacrosanct than human marriage, a pledge is a public demonstration of shared interests and devotion. Its term is a minimum of one-hundred years, but most bonded couples make an eternal pledge.”

“So – uh – only vampires can do it?”

“No. A vampire can bond with another vampire or any other kind of being, though bonds are rare. The bonded pair’s lives are tied together – you see – so if one dies, so does the other.”

“You thought that Bill had bonded with me? Earlier?” she asked.

“I worried that he might have,” I admitted.

“Why?”

“Because I was jealous of the possibility,” I confessed. “But a bond would – indeed – mean that his intentions were undeniably honorable.”

“And that thought made you jealous?” she asked.

“Uncomfortably so,” I owned.

She shook her head.

“Emotions are often unexpected,” I said somewhat cautiously.

“So Bill *obviously* wasn’t working on a permanent bond with me,” she said, her cheeks flaming. “I wouldn’t have minded if he’d taken my blood when I took his the other night.”

I was silent for a moment. “To intentionally form a permanent bond without giving a bonded a choice in the matter would go against vampire law and tradition. It would lead to resentment on both sides,” I observed.

“Why are you being so forthcoming?” she asked suddenly.

I closed my eyes. “The thought of Bill making you a Renfield has created a knot inside of my very soul,” I confessed. I opened my eyes to find the surprise in hers. “I cannot say why I’ve reacted so strongly to you, but I can tell you that I’ve never felt this level of attraction before. I appreciate your beauty and your bravery and your spunk and your cleverness. I appreciate your gift, too, but I do not like that you think of it as a disability. And I do not appreciate it only because I covet it. I appreciate it because the look in your eyes as you worked last night *stirred* me. You were magnificent!”

She gasped. “You really are trying to seduce me!”

I sat back and laughed long and hard. I couldn't remember laughing like that in a long time. Soon enough, she was joining in, though her laughter was clearly fueled by stress – at least in part.

"I appreciate *that* too," I said after composing myself.

"What?"

"Not many can make me laugh."

"Pam?"

"Why do you think I've kept her around for so long?" I said with a smirk.

"Makers and their progeny often get tired of each other after a while. Of course, Pamela and I maintain separate residences, and that helps, but she is quite amusing."

Sookie smiled. "She's the worst leerer of you all – you know."

I chuckled. "She will be pleased to hear that you think that and will redouble her efforts."

Sookie suddenly looked uncomfortable.

"What?" I asked.

"Laughing like that," Sookie said, her cheeks flushing. "It makes me – uh – need to take a human moment," she added apologetically.

"I used to pee too, Sookie," I smiled. "I promise that I will behave myself while you are gone. I will snoop *only* in this room."

She shook her head almost fondly and chuckled her way out of the living room.

I *did* intend to snoop, however, not through her personal items. I wanted to investigate the crack I'd seen in the ceiling. I hovered upward and took a closer look.

Luckily, it seemed to be a simple imperfection in the plasterwork. I landed in front of the fireplace and focused on a recent picture of Sookie, a young man, and an older woman. I assumed the young man was her promiscuous brother and the woman was “Gran.” My eyes scanned the rest of the pictures, paying special attention to the ones that included Sookie. I smiled to myself as I saw her at various ages – some of them quite “awkward.”

She came back into the room and stood beside me, though she didn’t seem to be upset by my “snooping.”

“Why is one turned down?” I asked of one of the pictures, though I didn’t move to right it.

“Oh – that frame never stays up,” she commented with a sigh as she moved to fix the picture. “It’s a cheap frame, but it was the only gift Hadley ever gave to Gran, so she never changed it out.”

Hadley. The name was familiar. I looked at the picture more closely.

The face. Also, familiar.

“Sookie, do you remember what I said about knowledge?”

“Yes,” she answered, suddenly nervous again.

She was right to be anxious.

Chapter 04: A Little More

SOOKIE POV

“Knowledge can hurt,” I said. In truth, I’d already felt gutted by it that night. I wasn’t sure whether Bill had been manipulating me with his blood or not, but I did know for sure that he’d not told me about blood ties. All I knew was that I was questioning our entire relationship—our love. And I knew that we’d be having a very serious discussion when he returned.

But the look in Eric’s eyes in that moment was more somber than even when he’d told me about blood ties and bonds.

He reached out and picked up the picture I’d just set upright.

“I know her,” he said quietly.

“Hadley? How? She’s alive?” I asked.

He nodded. “She belongs to Queen Sophie-Anne, Sookie. She is Sophie’s pet.”

“Pet?” I asked with a squeak, not even recognizing my own voice in that moment.

“A permanent blood donor. These donors were always *tied* to their ‘owners’ before the Great Revelation, but not always afterwards. I do not know Hadley’s permanent status.”

“P-pet?” I stammered.

He nodded. “Yes. Some vampires—if they find a human with particularly good blood—they keep them.”

My eyes widened. "Hadley is being used for blood?"

"And sex," Eric said softly. "But she seemed content when I met her." He looked down as if meeting my eyes pained him. "She offered herself to me."

"Offered?"

"Blood *and* sex," he revealed, bringing his eyes back to mine, searching for my reaction.

"And – you – uh – took her up on it?" I asked, wondering where my own tiny bolt of jealousy had come from.

"She sucked my dick," he answered frankly. "And I took blood from her femoral artery after I," he paused, "returned the favor."

I took a deep breath and then took my time letting it out. "Bill says I taste different," I said in a whisper. "Does she?"

"She was sweet," he said. "That is why she's Sophie's favorite, but she also likes being with men too, so Sophie lets her enjoy others as long as she is available whenever she wants her."

"But Hadley's – uh – happy?" I asked.

He nodded. "She seems fine with the arrangement. She certainly likes the luxury of the palace and is given gourmet meals and much entertainment. She liked being bitten," he responded.

I cringed. I couldn't judge. So did I – during sex.

"Well," I resolved, "I'm happy for her. I just wish that Gran were here to know that she was okay."

He took my hand. "Sookie, there's more."

"Is this where the knowledge starts to hurt?" I asked.

He nodded. "Yes. But – if you want – you can stay in the dark."

I closed my eyes, even as I thought about the inevitability of my own lights being shut off when I couldn't pay my electric bill. I'd never been afraid of the dark. My disability had always allowed me to "hear" when people were there – hear when they were threats.

"I didn't hear the Rats before they attacked me!" I said loudly, startling Eric.

"You were listening that night?" Eric asked.

"I'd had my shields up while working. Too many negative thoughts and rumors about Bill and me, but I'd relaxed them once I went outside." I shook my head. "If they had been thinking about attacking me – thinking about me directly – their thoughts *should* have gotten through. Heck, even my full shields don't block those, and I'd not had the *luxury* of vampire blood yet," I added, somewhat sarcastically.

"We should sit," Eric said as he led me to the couch to sit down.

"Uh-oh," I sounded.

"Dark or light, Sookie?" Eric asked somberly.

I found that question ironic, coming from a vampire. But I could not laugh at it, even though I tended to laugh when nervous.

"Tell me," I said after a full minute of looking for my words.

“I will tell you no more and no less than the facts that I know,” he conveyed. “I have made inferences, but I will leave you free to make your own. Do you believe me?” he asked.

There was something in his eyes that was begging for me to trust him – to believe *in* him. It was something I seldom saw in humans and had never seen in Bill. It was openness. It was a gift, even though I recognized that it was one he’d prefer never giving.

One it would *hurt* for me to receive.

“I trust you,” I said quietly. Surprisingly, I found that I did trust him – after only a couple of nights knowing him. This vampire might have motives where I was concerned, but *he* was the one who had brought me food when he didn’t know that I was hungry. He’d held me when I’d cried for no apparent reason, and he’d not made me feel guilty or bad for not offering him a complete explanation of my tears.

He’d simply been there.

Though he’d clearly been uncomfortable because of my tears.

But how could I explain that it was his kindness, which had made me cry. It was hearing someone ask how my day was – when I hadn’t heard that question once since Gran had been killed. It was his question about how I preferred my steak to be cooked as if he wanted to know for *next* time – as if he planned to record my preferences for future occasions when he dropped by with the best meal I’d ever tasted in my entire life.

Maybe every word he'd told me was an elaborate lie meant to seduce me.

Maybe I was a fool to trust him. Or maybe I'd been a fool to trust Bill.

I figured I'd know soon enough.

Eric seemed to understand that my thoughts were spinning quickly in my head, and he waited until they'd calmed a little.

"Ready?" he asked.

"No, but tell me anyway."

He smiled at me. It was a soft smile – a kind one. It didn't hold pity. I appreciated that.

"I have a spy in Sophie-Anne's court," he began. "I first heard about Hadley from him, for the queen was unusually fond of her, and anything unusual is something I want to hear about."

I nodded for him to continue.

"Rasul, too, has sampled her," he said, his words loaded with meaning. "But it is what he heard about her that caught my interest. In fact, it was his report that made me take Hadley up on her offer to taste her blood."

"What caught your interest?" I asked, my hands shaking from my nervousness.

"Andre, the queen's child, has a special gift. He can taste blood and discern its components. He discovered that Hadley was part Fae."

"Fae?"

"Fairy," he clarified.

"Are fairies telepaths?" I whimpered.

“I don’t know,” he replied. “They guard their gifts carefully, especially from vampires, for the full-blooded of their kind are not safe around us. We cannot,” he paused, “control our bloodlust around them. But, given your gift, I would posit that telepathy is a gift among at least some of them.”

“I’m part fairy,” I gasped. “That’s why I taste different. That’s why I smell different.”

Eric nodded. “That is my conclusion, too. But, Sookie, Rasul heard more.” He took a breath that he didn’t need. He was stalling.

Uh-oh.

“Tell me,” I begged.

“Rasul overheard Hadley telling the queen about her family – others who might be part Fae. She mentioned a cousin with a special talent, but Rasul heard no more, for Andre was coming.”

Uh-oh.

“I have known Bill for about a decade,” he went on. “I first met him in Sophie-Anne’s court. He was her chief procurer. The last time I saw him – about a year ago – he was bragging about having been the one to find Hadley for the queen.”

“Procurer?” I asked.

“Someone who finds humans with unique or delicious blood,” he whispered.

I closed my eyes, part of me wishing I was still in the dark.

“All of this might be coincidence,” he said. “Still—I am sorry I didn’t see all the,” he paused, “possibilities before. I began asking serious questions of Bill’s motives *only* last night.”

“Why then?” I asked.

“He didn’t try to negotiate your payment up, and that is standard practice. Also, he didn’t move to save you from Long Shadow. Yes. I am faster than he, but he hadn’t even moved by the time Long Shadow was dead!”

My mind had stopped at a single word. “Payment?”

“Of course,” Eric said. “I had to pay Bill as soon as I made the request. Why? Was the amount an insult? Trust me, I am quite pleased by your performance and have a bonus check already written out. I’d intended to have it delivered to Bill tonight, but the situation changed.”

“Payment?”

Yeah—I was still stuck on that one word.

“The thousand dollars for your work last night,” he said. “I know now that it was too little. But—in my defense—I had tried to convince Bill that it would be best to put you on the payroll so that you could have medical insurance in case you were injured.” He looked away. “Given what happened, my concerns were justified. I am sorry I wasn’t prepared to stop Long Shadow before he could harm you, but the revelation of him as the thief truly surprised me. And you had to suffer for it,” he said with a sigh.

“Payment?” I asked again. *Utterly stuck!*

He looked at me with shock. “You didn’t know,” he growled. “He didn’t give you any of the money? He didn’t even tell you about it!”

I shook my head.

He stood and paced.

“Why did your heart beat increase when I offered to turn on the light? Why was your stomach growling when I arrived?” he asked, storming into the kitchen. As I buried my face into my hands, I heard him opening and closing my refrigerator, my freezer, and then my cupboards.

ERIC POV

Sookie’s refrigerator contained no meat. No vegetables. No fruit. There was a pitcher of tea, a carton of eggs – half gone – and a loaf of bread. There were condiments: mustard and ketchup. There was a Tupperware container of the same meal that she’d been eating when I arrived.

I opened the cabinets and found an almost empty can of coffee. There were several boxes of pasta-based dishes. All looked cheap and smelled cheaper. None of them looked to be providers of sustenance.

It was then that I noticed that the air conditioning wasn’t on, though it must have been uncomfortably hot in the house for a human. I’d noticed – with some concern – that all of the upstairs windows had been opened when I arrived.

Before tonight, I’d seen Sookie only twice – three times if one counted the vigil I’d made outside of her window the night before.

Each time, she'd been with Bill and had been dressed in a pretty, but certainly not expensive, sundress. From looking at her home the night before and seeing the condition of her automobile, I'd ascertained that she was from humble roots.

But I didn't have any idea just how poor she was. I growled. Why the fuck wasn't Compton helping her? Even if his motives regarding her were as underhanded as I thought, he *should* have been taking care of her!

Unless he preferred his victims to be vulnerable so that they would be more malleable – more grateful for every fucking scrap they got!

Fuck him!

When I returned to the living room, Sookie didn't look up at me. She was taking deep breaths. "It's nothing. I'd planned to eat at Merlotte's, but Bill came in to tell me goodbye. I'd already opened a TrueBlood for him, but he didn't want it, so I had to pay for it, so I worked through my official dinner break. We have to pay for the food if we ask for it to go, and I didn't want to risk my tips by stopping work again. I'd already lost ten minutes speaking with Bill," she explained. "And no one tips as well when they've seen me with him."

"Have you told *him* this?" I snarled.

"He knows that there's someone in the area targeting women who are with vampires," she sighed.

"Yet he still visited you there – tonight," I said. "This is *my* fault. I ordered him to be at the Arkansas border studying a dispute there within ninety minutes of my call."

There was the sound of a bark outside, and Sookie turned her attention toward the door. A tear slipped from her eye. "It's a stray. I call him Dean, but I can't feed him tonight." She looked at the floor. "I don't have any food to spare."

I looked at her curiously and then growled. "That is *no* dog, Sookie," I said, standing up, even more angry that the people in Sookie's life – the ones she trusted most – were so fucking set upon keeping her in the dark. Surely they understood that telepathy was a Supernatural trait! Even if they didn't know what she was, specifically, they *should* have treated her with some fucking respect!

Hell! I'd only seen her a few times, and I already understood that she could take the truth – even when brutal. Moreover, I'd seen that she *deserved* the fucking truth!

I walked to the door and opened it. "Merlotte, get your furry ass in here – *now!*" I yelled.

"Sam?" Sookie asked uncertainly.

"Sam is a shifter," I said bluntly. "That means he can turn into any animal. He must turn during a full moon, or he will be driven mad. However, he can turn at will. There are also Werewolves, which are called Weres. There are other Were-animals too, including a pack of Were-panthers in Hot Shot."

Sookie's mouth gaped.

"Show her, shifter," I said looking out into the dark, "or I'll kick the puppy until you cannot help but to shift."

The mongrel entered Sookie's home as if his bone had been stolen.

As if the mutt had a "bone" to speak of.

He looked neutered to me.

I felt the air beginning to stir. “She’s modest, you idiot!” I yelled, grabbing a throw pillow from the couch, just in time for the shifting Merlotte to grab it and cover his scanty genitalia.

“Sam?” Sookie asked.

“Sorry, Sookie. I didn’t want you to find out this way,” he said to her – though he was glaring at me.

Prick.

“What way?” she asked. “What way did you want for me to find out?”

“I was going to tell you, Sookie – honest I was,” he tried.

“When?”

He looked down. “It’s not just me I was protecting; the others of my kind – we can’t let people know about us until we are ready to come out like the vampires,” he explained.

“Yet I told you about myself – about my own difference from ‘normal’ people,” Sookie whispered. “I told you how lonely I felt. Surely you knew that I could keep a secret – that I could be trusted.”

“I wanted you to,” he paused, “*be* with me. But I wasn’t sure how you’d deal with all of this.”

I rolled my eyes. Prick.

Chapter 05: Painful Truths

ERIC POV, continued

Sookie's eyes closed. "Sam, your brain is tinged in red, and your thoughts are different – more feelings than specific words." She opened her eyes. "I've heard other similar brains – just not nearly as many as other people – so I never wondered. I just always accepted that some people were different."

"Sookie," Sam whimpered.

She sighed loudly. "You should go, Sam. I'll see you tomorrow for my shift."

"You're still gonna work for me?" he asked.

She let out a little laugh. "I don't have much choice." She took a deep breath. "I understand why you decided not to tell me. I do. I wish you would have trusted me, but I'll get over it."

"We're okay?" the shifter asked.

I rolled my eyes.

"No," Sookie responded. "We aren't. You didn't trust me, and now I don't trust you. Maybe that'll change one day. Maybe it won't. Meanwhile, I need my job to pay my bills, so – as long as you don't fire me – I'll work," she resolved.

I couldn't help but to be impressed even more by Sookie Stackhouse. It had taken her only minutes to process that she was a Supernatural. It had taken her even less time to accept that her "friend" was one and that there were many others out there.

Moreover, she'd used her cleverness to ascertain how two-natured beings were different when it came to their thoughts, too.

A gem, more precious than a diamond in the rough — *that* is what Sookie Stackhouse was!

"I don't want to leave you alone with *him*," Merlotte said, sending his derision in my direction.

"Why not?" Sookie asked.

"He's a vampire," Merlotte growled.

"You're a dog during full moons," she responded acerbically. Even Pam would have been proud of her tone. "And I can read minds," she reminded.

"He has a reputation," the dog said.

"As what?" she asked.

"He is likely trying to seduce you."

"No *likely* about it," I intoned under my breath.

"And he's brutal!" the mutt cried out.

Idiot.

"Of course I am! To my enemies. Are you one of those, Fido?" I smirked.

Sookie gave me a warning look.

"Just asking to clarify," I said innocently.

She shook her head, but I saw her tiny smile directed at me. So did the stray.

"Sam," she asked, "do you know about vampire blood ties?"

If I could have gotten away with kissing her for her savviness, I would have. With a bit of training, she could rival any tactician.

“Yeah,” the shifter said, even as he shifted uncomfortably from foot to foot.

“Did you know that Bill had made one with me?” she asked.

He nodded. “Yeah, but he seems like a decent one, Sook. And he saved your life.”

Sookie sighed and closed her eyes. “You were there the night the Rats tried to kill me. I mean—*Dean* was there.”

“Yeah. I tried to help you, Sook.”

I rolled my eyes. Transforming into a fucking lion would have helped! Dean the fucking dog was a fucking waste of ability.

Of course, Sam in “human” form was a waste too. So that made sense.

“I appreciate that, Sam,” Sookie sighed. “But I still want you to leave.”

“But I know that Bill’s not around, and there’s a killer on the loose,” he insisted.

“I am a thousand years old,” I deadpanned. “Come fetch the newspaper tomorrow morning, Lassie, but for now — it’s covered.”

Sam glared at me, but then dropped the pillow even as he shifted into a hawk and flew away.

I heard Sookie exhale. “That *is* pretty cool,” she remarked.

I chuckled. Yes — she was one of a kind.

Finding out about Sam had left me a little raw.

Actually, I'd *already* been raw after learning about Hadley and her likely role in Bill approaching me.

And then there was the fact that Bill had likely been sent to procure me for the vampire queen of Louisiana.

"I was an easy target for Bill," I said quietly. "A *very* easy target."

"We are all easy targets until we learn to fight," Eric returned.

"What should I do?" I asked him.

"I won't tell you what to do," he said firmly.

I think I might have fallen in love with him in that moment – if I weren't so numb.

"What would *you* do?" I returned with a sigh.

"Know thyself," he said simply.

"Magic, time, or a stronger vampire's blood," I said. "That's what would take away the tie?"

He nodded.

"Would you give me your blood?" I asked.

"I would *love* to exchange with you," he said, panting.

"Good," I replied with a nod.

"But I won't," he added.

"What the fuck? Why not?" I asked.

“Wouldn’t you doubt me then?” he returned. “Wouldn’t you want to know what *you* wanted *before* you tied yourself to me – or to anyone?”

“You’re right,” I relented.

He smirked. “Of course I am. But I *do* know a witch or two,” he smirk, retrieving his phone from his jeans.

His really flattering jeans!

I listened as Eric quickly explained the situation to a woman whom he warmly greeted as Octavia. Five minutes later, he’d gathered several items, including some from Bill’s house – all the while mixing some sort of paste in a plastic mixing bowl.

He seemed to pause for a moment. “You’ll never be able to use this bowl again,” he told me apologetically. “Octavia just alerted me of this fact.”

“It’s okay,” I said. “It’s old anyway.”

“I will replace it,” he assured.

And – suddenly – just like that, I was in his mind again. Those slithering snakes were back. Again, I felt his desire to have me. It was overwhelming! He wanted me with everything that he was.

Bite. Take. Help. Give.

These were the impulses I heard from him.

“Sookie?” he asked with concern, even as the force of his thoughts and emotions made me have to sit down.

I guess there was no hiding my “slip-up” now.

“I heard you,” I whispered, looking up at him. Thankfully, his thoughts were now blanks again.

“My thoughts?” he asked, still stirring the mixture and still on the phone with Octavia.

I nodded.

He nodded too. “We’ll discuss that later,” he said.

“Are you gonna kill me?” I asked. Bill had suggested more than once that I was safe from vampires only because I couldn’t hear them.

“No,” he answered simply. “I like you too much to do something like that.”

He was smirking. I took that as a good sign.

ERIC POV

So—Sookie had “heard” me. And—from her reaction—I posited that it had occurred at least one other time, too. For she’d not been surprised enough for it to have occurred just the once.

Horrified and scared? Yes.

Surprised? No.

I should have been more bothered by the fact that she’d heard me, but I found that I trusted her in the same intrinsic way that she seemed to trust me.

It was funny how that worked.

But it *did* seem to work.

“If I’m not Bill’s – if I don’t feel love for him after his blood is gone – then couldn’t anyone claim me?” she asked sagely.

I nodded.

“Does claiming require blood?” she asked.

I smirked. “The *good* kind does. But not when you have Were guards during the day and vampire ones sent by *me* at night.”

She blushed, and I reveled in it.

“Are you claiming me?” she asked, even as I listened to Octavia’s final directions and hung up the phone.

“If you ask *after* this spell has worked, then yes,” I responded.

“And what would that mean?” she asked.

“How about a salary and benefits for two nights of your service per week – at a thousand a night. As a start.”

She gasped. “Surely, I’m not”

“You are worth that and *more*. And I’ll have my lawyer draw up a contract between us so that other vampires have to go through me to approach you.”

She took a deep breath. “Okay – and *us*?”

“We’ll talk *after*,” I whispered, “once you know your *own* mind.”

She nodded her agreement. “So – uh – what do I need to do?” she asked, gesturing toward the paste in the bowl.

“We go outside, make a circle with salt, put this and you inside the circle, add some of your blood to the mix, and then light the bowl on fire.”

“Okay. Sounds easy enough.”

“I hear that it’ll hurt you a little,” I cautioned. Okay, I was low-balling it.

Octavia said that it would hurt badly. But I wasn’t about to make her even more afraid than she already was.

“Knowledge tends to do that too,” she laughed ruefully.

“You’re sure you want to do this?” I asked. “No matter what?”

“I’ll get the salt,” she responded.

Oh the things I hoped to eventually do with and to her!

She had a warrior’s spirit – and a survivor’s heart.

SOOKIE POV

I won’t lie and say that I wasn’t scared shitless. I was. I was really, *really* scared. But I was also anxious to know what my feelings were versus those that may have been influenced by Bill.

I also won’t lie by denying that I was in shock. To find out the man I thought I loved might had been sent to procure me for his queen was sobering to say the least.

Was I doing my very best to avoid thinking about the hurt I might very well be experiencing in just a few minutes? The betrayal?

Yes, I was.

And I was woman enough to admit it. Frankly, I was proud that I was still on my feet – still breathing.

Being sucker punched in the gut was *not fun!*

Being repeatedly sucker punched, though? Well—I just felt numb. And I was okay with that for now.

Eric instructed me how to draw the salt circle. Then he produced a knife from his pocket and handed me the bowl and the knife before stepping away from the circle.

“Sit in the center,” he instructed in a gentler tone than I would have thought him capable.

I followed his directions.

“Make a slash on your palm and hold the wounds over the bowl.”

“Do I need to say something?” I asked. “Chant or something?”

He chuckled. “Most spells don’t need that.”

“Um—okay,” I nodded and put the bowl onto the ground next to me. Then I took a deep breath and cut into my palm before letting the blood drip into the bowl.

I couldn’t ignore the fact that Eric’s fangs popped down.

“I’m not allowing myself to inhale,” he assured. “It’s just the sight that is exciting.”

By the looks of the sight in his pants, he was *very* excited indeed!

“Now what?” I asked, my voice quivering and tears falling because of the pain of the cut.

“Put the knife into the bowl.”

I did as instructed.

“Here,” he tossed a box of matches so that it landed right next to me. “Light one, and place it inside the bowl, and then brace yourself. In five minutes, I’ll be able to come in there and get you – okay? And I’ll be here the whole time.”

I nodded, picked up the matchbox, and lit a match. I’m not sure what I was praying for as I dropped it into the bowl.

For Bill to really love me?

For the pain to be bearable?

Or was I thanking God that painful truths were better than “pleasant” lies.

Soon, I had no thought for prayers, however. I had only pain. And a lot of it.

Chapter 06: Claimed

ERIC POV

Sookie writhed in the center of the salt circle as if she were dying.

Ironically, I circled the salt like a lion wanting *into* a cage. My fangs were down. My hands were curled as if in claws. My phone was ringing with Nancy Sinatra's "These Boots Are Made for Walkin'": Pam's ringtone. I'm sure that she felt my distress. Hell—I felt like I was about to go into battle!

"I'm fine!" I yelled into the phone before hanging up on Pam.

My instinct? To pull Sookie out of her cage of pain and give her my blood.

To make her *mine*!

To protect what was *MINE*!

I denied my instinct, however.

Yes—I wanted her to be mine and I wanted her to take my blood and welcome my body. However, I wanted to be *chosen* by her.

And she would need time to heal from Compton's machinations.

Time to trust herself and others again.

Time to mourn her grandmother once Compton's blood is no longer inside of her to anesthetize and manipulate her.

Time to get used to the fact that she was a Supernatural being.

Time to understand that—by embracing her lineage—she could protect herself in some ways.

Time.

I was a fucking expert with time, and I counted down the five minutes required for the severing spell to take effect with the efficiency of a Swiss clock.

And as soon as the last second ticked down, I had Sookie's collapsed body in my arms. I quickly carried her inside of her home and lay her on her couch before zipping into the kitchen to get her some cool water. Drinking many glasses of this liquid – Octavia had said – would help Sookie fend off the worst of the “hangover” from the severing spell. Oh – she would still be a little tired for the next several days (apparently nothing could stop that except for vampire blood – the taking of which wasn't currently on the table). However, she would be okay to work – an important consideration for Sookie.

I looked down at the sleeping woman. Her face was peaceful, and I contemplated letting her rest, but then I recalled Octavia's directions and gently woke her up.

Her face screwed up with pain as I offered her the water.

“Slowly,” I instructed when she started gulping it down. “Drink slowly.”

She nodded and did as I instructed. I had a second glass ready as soon as the first was gone.

As Sookie was in the middle of that one, her house phone rang. We both looked at the old answering machine located in the living room as it clicked on.

As soon as Sookie's recorded instructions to leave a message had ended, Bill's desperate voice was heard.

“Sookeh! Are you there? Are you alright? I—uh—felt that you might be in danger, and now I cannot feel you at all! Sookeh! Please, if you are there, pick up the phone!”

As Bill spoke, Sookie motioned for me to pick up the “antique”-looking cordless phone.

She took a deep breath.

“Be cautious about what you tell him,” I warned.

She nodded and answered the phone.

“Hi, Bill. Sorry. I was in the bathroom. I think I have food-poisoning,” she explained wearily.

Of course, the weariness was authentic, but the excuse was brilliant.

I listened to Bill’s desperate voice.

“Why can’t I sense you?” he asked.

“I vomited a lot,” she offered.

I smirked.

“And I am running a fever. Maybe it’s the flu?” she brilliantly lied. “Could that affect how you feel me? And you’re far away—right? Is there a range?”

“Sookeh, I’m coming home right now. You are not well. My blood will help you!”

She sighed and looked up at me. I could see an idea forming in her mind, and it was beautiful to witness.

“Bill, I don’t want you to get into trouble with Eric. We both know how *he* can be. Just do your work, and don’t worry about me. Humans get sick all the time; I’m sure I’ll feel right as rain in a couple of days. And then you’ll be back anyway.”

“But – with you ill and the killer loose – I will make Eric understand that you need protection.”

Her eyes twinkled. “But the protection you got for me is already enough! Thank you for that – by the way. I’d usually argue, but I know you did it only because you love me.”

“Protection,” Bill half-asked and half-stated.

“Yes. Pam called earlier and told me that it had been arranged for me to have Were guards during the day and a vampire guard at night. Of course, her explanation of Weres was surprising. Hey – did you know that Sam was shifter?”

“Yes,” Bill said, his jaw obviously clenched.

“I get why you didn’t tell me before, though, honey,” Sookie assured.

“I could not,” Bill lied.

I wondered if his fucking pants were on fire.

“Pam mentioned something about a bonus coming your way too. Is it because of your work up there?”

She was fucking brilliant in her questioning of him!

“Yes,” he answered.

“That’s great for you,” Sookie said with feigned sincerity that even I would believe.

“It is required for a sheriff to pay other vampires for services rendered,” he explained.

Her eyes filled with rage, but she’d held her composure – in a manner of speaking.

“Oh! Sorry, Bill – feeling sick again. Gotta go!”

She hung up.

I grinned at her as she took another drink of water and calmed herself.

SOOKIE POV

After my third glass of water, I wasn’t feeling nearly as much discomfort.

“How do you feel?” Eric asked.

I sighed. “Pissed off.”

He chuckled. “Care to elaborate.”

“When I met Bill, I will admit that he intrigued me. I’ve always felt like an outcast, and I thought that maybe – just maybe – he and I could be friends. I won’t lie and say that I wasn’t a little attracted to him too, but the main reason why I *liked* him was that his mind was silent. I can remember all of that clearly now. I can also remember just how quickly I fell in love with him after I had his blood! Even when fucked-up things happened – like when Malcolm, Diane, and Liam pawed at me or Bill started claiming me left and right – my misgivings seemed to disappear the very next time I saw him.”

I frowned. “Thinking about it, he hasn’t treated me well. And, if he cared, he would have never taken my virginity on the night of Gran’s funeral! *He* would have been the one to make us wait. Plus, he would have helped me clean up Gran’s blood. Or he would have noticed things – like the fact that I told him that I couldn’t really afford having a lot of TrueBlood in the house. Or the fact that I’d been taking as many shifts as possible since Gran died. If he would have cared, he would have asked me why I was doing that, and he *wouldn’t* have acted annoyed because of it. And – he would have given me some of the money for the services *I* rendered!”

“Speaking of which, I have a very important question to ask you,” Eric smirked.

I could tell that he wasn’t upset at all that I’d pretty much figured out that my “love” for Bill had been based upon the manipulation of his blood and my desperation for affection from the one being I’d met whom I couldn’t hear.

Yes. I had been a perfect victim for Bill. And I knew that – eventually – pain would come. But, right now, I felt anger both at Bill and at myself for not questioning how fast I’d fallen for him. Of course, with his blood influencing me, I wondered how much I’d really been able to question.

“What’s the question?” I asked Eric.

“Do you renounce Bill’s claim upon you? Do you belong to Bill Compton?” he asked.

I didn’t need to think. “I renounce Bill Compton’s claim. Oh – and I rescind his invitation to my house too! I do *not* belong to him.”

Eric smiled like the Cheshire Cat himself before dialing his phone.

“Desmond,” he said into the receiver, even as he turned on the speaker phone.

“Eric Northman,” a man with a gravelly voice said. “How may I help you this evening? Is this in regards to Hot Rain?”

“Not really,” Eric responded with a smirk. “I need you to craft a contract between myself and a newly-found and tested asset. A Miss Sookie Stackhouse.”

“Sookie,” the man said in a surprised whisper. “Granddaughter to Adele?”

Both of my eyebrows sky-rocketed, even as one of Eric’s did the same.

“Yes,” Eric confirmed. “She is with me now, and we are both highly curious of how you know about her.”

He sighed. “It is an association that has been kept secret for her safety. Tell me—how is she known to *you*?”

“Are you still serving the queen, too?” Eric asked.

“Yes, but my employment with you predates hers and my alliance with Miss Stackhouse’s,” he paused, “family is long-standing, so in areas of conflict of interest, I will recuse myself from involvement on the queen’s side. And—of course—attorney-client privilege is a sacred idea to a demon.”

“Demon?” I asked with a gasp, probably because I was still trying to catch up with the whole “long-standing” thing.

Eric nodded.

“Ah—Miss Stackhouse. Hello,” the demon said. I am Desmond Cataliades, and—yes—I am Dae, or *demon* in the layman’s term. Will you tell me how you came to be known by the vampire in your company?”

Eric offered me an encouraging nod, and I spilled the whole story, pausing between elements to give the vampire the chance to stop me or the demon the opportunity to ask questions. Neither spoke. In fact, Eric looked pleased that I was speaking about the matter to his lawyer – his lawyer who somehow knew my family!

Once I was done with my story, Mr. Cataliades spoke.

“In light of your introduction to the supernatural world – thanks to Hadley, the Queen of Louisiana, and Bill Compton – I feel that it is time to tell you how I knew your name.”

“Okay,” I said, my voice quivering.

“Some of it might be difficult to hear,” the demon warned.

“It’s a night for that,” I intoned, reaching out to take Eric’s hand. I was glad when he didn’t pull away. I found his presence comforting, which was why I denied Mr. Cataliades when he asked if I would prefer hearing the news without Eric present.

“Very well,” he began. “My involvement in your family’s life began many decades ago – when my closest friend, Fintan Brigant, met your grandmother, Adele Stackhouse. He was simply using the fairy portal in the area when he heard her crying. He investigated and fell in love with her at first sight.”

“Brigant,” Eric whispered.

“Fintan is Niall’s son,” the demon said. Of course, none of those names meant anything to me, but they clearly meant something to Eric. His eyes were wide open, and his grip on my hand loosened. I found I didn’t want to break contact, so I laced our fingers together.

Eric looked down at our entwined hands and explained, “Niall Brigant is the Prince of the Sky Fae, which is the most powerful group in Faerie.”

“Ooooo-kay,” I said. “So his son met Gran. What does that have to do with me?”

The demon cleared his throat. “Sookie, Adele was crying over the fact that she’d just learned that her husband couldn’t father children because of a childhood disease. Fintan offered Adele and Mitchell Stackhouse his services as sperm-donor in exchange for three nights with Adele.”

I felt my mouth gaping. I’d never been more shocked. “But Gran wouldn’t!” I stopped, my mouth suddenly dry. “Gran wouldn’t agree to that – let alone would Grandpa!” I added defensively.

“They both wanted children badly,” Mr. Cataliades explained. “Fintan offered them a memory charm so that Mitchell would never recall the true nature of any children made. On the other hand, Adele would remember *only* on the nights that Fintan came to her.”

I was speechless. Thank God Eric wasn’t.

“They agreed to that?” he asked.

“Yes. Fintan really did love Adele. Their first two encounters, timed two years apart, both bore fruit. During the third, Adele told Fintan that she didn’t want another child – that even if she couldn’t remember the next day – she didn’t want to be unfaithful again. Fintan, though he craved his lover, settled for simply spending the night with her and the young children. And then, knowing that his father had many

enemies, he used magic to conceal his involvement with the Stackhouse family – though he *did* ask a request of me.”

“Request?” I managed.

“I was to keep watch over your family, especially over any child born with the essential spark, and – if Supernatural beings were to interfere in that child’s life – then Fintan asked me to contact him if he were alive or act on his behalf if he were dead.”

The demon’s voice caught. “Fin died many years ago, and the magic that had concealed your family from other Supernaturals died with him. By then, Fintan already knew that you had the essential spark and the gift of telepathy, but – given his agreement with Adele – he couldn’t contact you directly. However, he did keep tabs on you from time to time. Once he was gone, I did the same.”

I gripped Eric’s hand harder.

The demon continued. “I have kept an informant in the area – a shifter. I believe that you work for him. He was to tell me if any other Supernaturals showed any interest in you, and he was to inform me *immediately* if they did – so that I could extract you.”

Again, I was too dumfounded to speak. Sam was the demon lawyer’s spy? Why hadn’t he told Mr. Cataliades about Bill being in the area?

Eric seemed to be asking himself the same questions I was pondering, but he was the first to voice a question: “Extraction?”

“I am what might be called a godfather to Sookie,” Mr. Cataliades said. “Trust me when I tell you that the Queen is an entitled brat who will not take no for an answer.

Thus, the only way to keep Sookie safe is for me to claim her in Fintan's stead. And I will have to contact Niall, too. We must both claim her and file her status as Fae with the Council – if she is to remain safe."

Chapter 07: Them's the Rules

ERIC POV

"Wait just a minute here!" Sookie said, her ire clearly rising. "I just got out of one controlling situation! And it sounds an awful lot like *you* want to take my choices away from me again!"

"I want to protect you," Desmond returned calmly. "I cannot do that unless you are with me."

"But I have a home!" she said stubbornly. "Anyway," she looked at me hopefully, "Eric already said that he'd hire guards to watch over me – Weres during the day and vampires at night. I don't want to leave my home!"

I was silent for a moment. "Sookie, Desmond is offering you safety that even the guards I would provide could not match."

"You're taking back your offer then?" she asked, tears forming in her eyes.

"I am not; just consider some things for a moment. I am the queen's sheriff, so even if we had a contract, she could still try to use your ability – through me. And Desmond is right. She is a spoiled cunt."

"Language!" Sookie admonished.

I squeezed her hand and smirked. "Vampires may claim humans, Sookie, but they have *no* right to claim other Supernatural beings."

"So Bill never had a legitimate right to claim me, and he knew it?" Sookie asked.

I shook my head. "This area is a gray one. Before now, you've not been claimed by your kin, so your status is *officially* human. As it stands right now, even without Bill's blood in you, you could still be claimed by another Supernatural – another vampire – looking to create a tie with you."

"But magic can break ties," Sookie said.

"That type of magic can work on a human only once – maybe twice. However, eventually, the process would become fatal to the human," Desmond said.

Sookie looked at me, and I nodded in confirmation. "Of course, I have no intention of letting you get into a situation where a tie could be forced upon you, but things happen, Sookie. Variables occur."

"So I couldn't be tied to a vampire if I was claimed by Mr. Cataliades and this Niall person?" she asked.

"*Bonded* – yes, but tied, no," Desmond answered. "Your kin would have the right to kill anyone who formed an illegal blood tie with you; thus, any tie would be broken by the death of the vampire."

"I don't want to leave my home," Sookie whimpered, looking around the room with love. "I don't have much family or many friends, but I don't want to go anywhere." She sighed. "Unless there's no other way."

She was looking at me with such a mix of hope and hopelessness in her eyes that it was difficult for me to look back at her, but I held her gaze.

“Consider this. Do you really wish to continue working for the shifter? Knowing that he was keeping tabs on you? Knowing that he did not tell Desmond the moment that Bill began his pursuit of you?”

“But how will I keep my home?” she asked. “If I don’t work – if I’m not here – I’ll lose *everything* I have left?”

“How about a compromise?” I asked.

“What compromise?” Desmond inquired.

“We could offer the following story,” I started, the idea forming even as I spoke it. “Desmond, hearing rumors that your ward had been tied to a vampire, you sent someone here to collect Sookie tonight. Or – better yet – you came yourself. And, after telling her who you were, you slipped a potion into her drink – one that made her ill and also cut the tie. Conveniently, Sophie-Anne consults Octavia Fant when she has questions about magic. And, with a little request from me, Octavia would confirm that she’s heard of such magic, but doesn’t know how to do that particular spell herself. This will fit with the story Sookie told Bill earlier.

“After that, the story will be that Desmond convinced Sookie that Bill’s blood could have been affecting her feelings. Upset about that possibility, Sookie left with her godfather.” I looked at Sookie. “You should stay with him as the paperwork of your new status is filed. But that need not be permanent.”

“What do you have in mind?” Desmond asked.

“After Sookie is established as a Brigant and you are established as her guardian, only a fool would touch her! Of course, Sophie-Anne isn’t known for being particularly

wise, so steps would need to be taken before she returned to Bon Temps. I would suggest that Sookie and I still form an employment contract, but as a contract between two Supernaturals, it would be based upon *mutual* benefit. Moreover, she couldn't be farmed out – even to the queen. And she wouldn't need to belong to anyone – but herself.

“What do I do about my house in the meantime? My bills?” Sookie asked.

“The Brigants are wealthy and so am I . . .,” I started.

“No! I'm not going to take charity!”

“Sookie, Fintan left a large sum of money to me for your care. It is yours by right,” Desmond said reasonably.

“But I didn't even know him,” she sighed.

“A fact *much* regretted by Fintan,” Desmond returned.

“Why not use the money just to keep your home secure?” I suggested. “Or I will take care of things while you are gone, and you can repay me as you can when you start working for me.”

“Why are you doing all of this?” Sookie asked me.

I smiled a little, for I could tell that she'd agreed with the compromise I'd suggested.

I cupped her cheek. “Desmond, how long will it take you to get here?”

“Two hours,” he responded.

“Dawn is in three. I will stay until you have her.”

With that, he hung up.

“What is he like?” Sookie asked with some trepidation.

“Honorable. Trustworthy. A powerful demon. This situation really is ideal, considering what Hadley put into motion. By the end of the night, you will have several badass demons looking out for you. Within the next few weeks, you will meet other fairies. And – if you do eventually come back – you’ll have your vampire employer looking after you too.”

She leaned into my hand. “Why are you doing all of this?” she asked again.

However, before I could answer, she grabbed my hand, and her face became the picture of fright.

“He’s here!” she said, shaking like a leaf.

“Bill? I won’t let him near you,” I swore.

“Not him,” she whimpered. “He saw Bill kissing me at Merlotte’s earlier. He’d thought that killing my Gran would teach me a lesson. But he knows now that I’ll only learn the hard way – his way.”

My fangs snapped down.

“Do you know who he is?”

Her eyebrows furrowed together as if concentrating. “He’s remembering coming to Gran’s wake. He was here”

Her eyes widened. “It’s a man named Rene Lenier.” She shuddered. “I can hear what he’s done to others and what he wants to do to me.”

I gripped her shoulders. "Shield your mind," I ordered before bending down to kiss her forehead. I could now hear and smell the human in the woods, which meant that Sookie's "range" was superior to a vampire's senses.

I knew that I would be pleased about that when I had time to contemplate it later.

"I won't be long," I assured.

"What will you do?" she asked.

"Your call. Human authorities or vampire justice," I said. Only for her would I make such an offer.

"The families of his victims deserve closure, and Jason needs to be totally exonerated."

"Very well," I said, not letting my disappointment show.

I listened to the serial killer's progress toward the back door as I quietly opened and flew out the front one. In less than a minutes, I had him in my thrall and was glamouring him to collect any evidence he'd kept from his victims; such men always kept souvenirs. I glamourised him to drive straight to the police station with all the evidence and to confess until *all* of his crimes were spilled. I told him that the guilt had been eating at him and that his only chance for cleansing his soul was a full confession.

He was on his way within another three minutes, and I rejoined Sookie inside.

SOOKIE POV

"You glamourised him?" I asked.

“I did,” Eric responded. “His first stop is to gather any evidence that could be used against him. Then he will drive straight to the police station and tell them of all of his crimes. Oh – and he is not to harm anyone on his way.”

“Thank you,” I whispered.

“You should pack,” he said, clearly hoping to distract me from the disturbing thoughts I’d just heard.

I appreciated the gesture. “What about my brother?” I asked as we climbed the stairs. “Won’t he be in danger; I mean – he’s not a telepath and – uh – probably doesn’t have that spark thingy, but . . .” Honestly, I didn’t know how to finish my sentence.

I knew that Jason blamed me for Gran’s death – at least to a certain extent. And our relationship was strained at best at the moment, but I still worried about him.

Eric looked thoughtful for a moment. “Without the essential spark, I fear that Niall wouldn’t claim him. And Desmond seems limited by Fintan’s request of him.”

“Why wouldn’t Niall claim him?” I asked, my frustration clear. “He’s just as much family as I am!”

Eric sighed, something that was still odd for me to witness, but also a sign that he was letting his guard down a bit with me.

“Fairies are an odd bunch,” he observed. “Fae women are limited in the number of times that their bodies can produce children, for it takes much magic for them to maintain a pregnancy. Plus, wars have taken much of the population. Niall and a few others learned that this realm – the human realm – could be quite helpful in the

production of fairies, though one of the ways that this was accomplished was quite controversial with his enemies.”

I gestured for him to explain as I began packing some clothing into Gran’s old suitcase.

“When Fae women spend time in this realm, their bodies seem to actually become more fortified when they try to have children; thus, it is not uncommon for them to spend several years on this realm, even coming here while they are pregnant.” He shrugged. “Perhaps, it is something in the earth itself – some mineral or plant on this planet that bolsters their bodies? The Fae might know the specific cause, but I do not. Overall, this practice has not been disapproved of by the fairies. On the other hand, the production of hybrid children with humans has been *very* much disapproved of by some fairy factions.”

“Hybrids like me?” I asked.

He nodded. “Yes. Being part Fae will protect you from most in this realm, but you will likely still be assigned guards by Niall or Desmond.” He paused. “And – if they don’t do it – I will. The factions that hates hybrids will make you a target, especially because of your connection to Niall.”

I gasped. “So I’m trading one set of enemies for another one!”

“Welcome to being a Supernatural, Miss Stackhouse,” Eric said somewhat wryly.

“What if I just wanna be normal?” I asked. And – yes – I’ll admit that my tone was teeming with self-pity. But it had been a hard day!

And a long one!!

He lifted an eyebrow. "You have another option."

"What?"

"Your death could be faked and you could go into hiding—*forever*. You would never be able to contact your family or friends again, and you could never return here. But—if that's what you want—I'll make it happen."

I gasped. "No. That's not what I want," I whimpered. Okay—maybe I whined a little.

Luckily, Eric was showing tremendous patience.

"Well then—give yourself the time you spend with Desmond to accept your new position in the world. There are bonuses, after all."

"Like what?" I asked sourly.

He grinned. "You were asking me about Jason earlier. Well—guess what *you* will be able to do once you are declared the ward of a demon and the offspring of a fairy prince."

I shrugged.

"You can extend protection to your brother—so that the penalty of fucking with him will be death. And—in the meantime—I'll make sure that there are some Weres keeping an eye on him during the day, and I'll assign a vampire to shadow him at night."

"I can—uh—do that? Extend protection to the people I love?" I asked.

"Yes. As a Supernatural, you can basically claim him—or other unclaimed humans—as a part of your retinue. As a *human*, however, you are powerless."

“That doesn’t seem quite fair,” I said bitterly.

He shrugged. “Them’s the rules.”

I couldn’t help but to chuckle at his use of slang.

I also couldn’t help that I *liked* Eric Northman – more with every minute, in fact.

Chapter 08: The Beginning

ERIC POV

Sookie's expression changed suddenly.

She closed her eyes. "I can hear you again," she whispered.

I was glad to see that she didn't seem afraid this time.

"What is it like?" I asked.

"At first, I thought it was like a snake pit – where every thought and impulse you had was slithering around."

I chuckled. "Doesn't sound very flattering.

She shrugged, though her eyes stayed closed. "Sorry. But it *is* like lots of writhing tubes of light. And there's a weight to your thoughts. There are so many things going through your head! How do you keep them all straight?"

"Practice," I said simply. "Can you pick up any *specific* thoughts?"

She bit her lip and closed her eyes even tighter. "One is the same as earlier – the same as last night."

"Last night, too?"

"Yeah," she admitted. "I've heard you three times." Her eyes popped open.

"But now your thoughts are gone again! It lasts only a few seconds."

"What was the thought?"

"That you wanted me – to possess me. To *keep* me."

I chuckled. "Quite true."

“But you are holding yourself back,” she whispered.

“Not really,” I said. “I am simply *choosing* which of the snakes in my head has the best plan for getting you.”

“And which snake is that?” she asked.

“The one that tells me that we should get to know each other,” I said self-assuredly. “I think that my *like* for you will grow, and I am confident that you will enjoy me more and more with time, too.”

She laughed. “Oh—you *are* confident. Huh?”

I nodded. “Yes. And patient. You need time to adjust to the new realities which have been presented to you tonight. You need time to realize that Bill is not indicative of all men or vampires—or vampire men,” I winked. “You need time, and I have plenty of it.”

“Speaking of which,” she asked as she put a few pictures into her suitcase, cushioning them with clothing, “when will I see you again?”

“Already anxious?” I smirked.

“Honestly?”

I nodded.

“Yes. I *already* like you, Eric. Bill said things against you, but I know not to believe them now, and—from everything I’ve seen about you—I *want* to get to know you. At the very least, I could learn a good deal about history from you.”

I laughed. “Well, there is that! Desmond lives in New Orleans. And I’m supposed to attend a conference there with the other Louisiana sheriffs next week.”

“Will the queen be there?” she asked with a frown.

“The conference is being held in an out-building on her estate, but she is bored by the actual running of her kingdom. I wouldn’t expect her to drop by.”

“Will you get into trouble for any of this?” she asked, motioning between us.

I shook my head. “Two words: plausible deniability. Sophie-Anne was attempting to poach in Area 5 by sending Compton. I had no idea that you were coveted by her because she didn’t tell me about you.”

“Shouldn’t you have reported me?” Sookie asked astutely.

I grinned and nodded. “Of course. But Sophie-Anne has made it clear that she doesn’t want to deal with matters of the state except for once a month. Thus, new assets are logged in monthly Sheriffs’ reports. The end of the month is next week. I will most *certainly* include a report of meeting you at Fangtasia, becoming aware of your potential gift during the raid, confirming the efficacy of said gift at Fangtasia last night, and then securing guards to look after you. I will even report that I came here tonight – to explain the guard situation. *Sadly,*” I intoned, “the demon, Desmond Cataliades, was already here when I arrived. That is when he made clear that the guards wouldn’t be needed, for you were being claimed as his ward. Given the fact that I – *unfortunately* – arrived *after* your blood tie with Compton had been severed, I couldn’t act to keep you from the demon. *By luck,* however, the man who’d been killing women who associated with vampires showed up while I was here, and I made sure he was taken care of. But – *sadly* – you left Area 5 with your guardian. Indeed, I will make a thorough report of our dealings, Miss Stackhouse – just as I am required.”

“But we met last month,” she reminded. “Was I in your report then?”

I grinned. “That is the best part! I *did* mention that Bill Compton had checked into Area 5 and that he’d introduced me to his claimed human, who *might* prove of use. I reported that I intended to test your value when an opportunity arose.”

“You’re good at covering your ass – and at telling lies,” she said with a frown.

“I only lie to people I don’t respect or like,” I returned. “And – even then – *only* when it benefits me – *and* I cannot get caught,” I added with a smirk.

She took in what I was saying.

“Sookie, I am wise enough to know that lying to you wouldn’t be of benefit to me.”

She nodded in acceptance.

Thank the gods.

“Why do you think that you’re the only vampire I’ve ever heard?” she asked.

“I have my theories,” I smirked.

“What are they?”

“Well – I’m the oldest that you have ever met. Maybe my thoughts are just ‘stronger.’”

She nodded. “Okay. That seems reasonable. What’s another possibility?”

“Maybe you just *want* to hear me,” I said taking a step toward her.

“Another?” she asked, licking her lips.

I focused on those lips. I couldn’t help myself.

"Maybe *I* want you to hear me," I responded as I moved so that I was standing right in front of her.

"You never told me why you are being so nice in all of this – why you are helping me?" she asked even as she focused on my lips.

I leaned down and gave her the gentlest of kisses.

"Possibility," I whispered.

Just then, we both looked toward the window. I'd heard an automobile rattling its way loudly down the battered driveway. That was on my list of things to fix as "caretaker" of Sookie's home. She'd just have to be mad afterwards at my highhanded ways.

With her, I figured that – at times – asking for forgiveness would be expedient to asking for permission.

Sookie had obviously heard thoughts entering her range.

"Wow! It's like they're buzzing!" she exclaimed.

"Demons," I confirmed when they were within my range of scent.

"Three," she said.

I nodded. "Likely Desmond and the flowers."

"Flowers?"

"His nieces Gladiola and Diantha. You'll like them," I smiled.

She looked a little unsure, but latched her suitcase. I carried it downstairs as she grabbed her purse.

She opened the door as soon as there was a knock.

“Hi, Mr. Cataliades,” she said tentatively, taking in Desmond’s rotund figure and shaking his hand.

“Call me Desmond,” he smiled warmly. “Are you ready, dear?”

She looked around. “Can I take a minute to say goodbye to the house?”

The demon nodded, and he and I stood in the entryway as Sookie walked into a room that must have been her Gran’s bedroom.

“May I call upon you next week?” I asked the demon. “The yearly Sheriffs’ meeting is then, but I will have some free time.”

Desmond’s eyes twinkled as he looked up at me. “I think you like my goddaughter, Eric.”

I chuckled. “I do.”

“Your actions *will* be honorable toward her, or I will destroy you with fireballs,” he said bluntly.

“Added incentive,” I chuckled again.

He smiled. “Excellent! Niall will disapprove of your courtship of Sookie, of course, but I know you won’t let that stop you.”

“No,” I confirmed with a smirk.

“Anyway,” he offered, “that’s why Fin made sure that *I* would be her legal guardian.”

“Why didn’t you come for her sooner? Her life hasn’t been easy – you know,” I commented quietly.

Desmond nodded. "Fin wanted for his offspring to be shielded and kept secret if possible for as long as the fairy war brewed. But that's not possible now."

"I told Sookie of the danger from Niall's enemies," I reported.

"I'm already arranging for a Britlingen to be her full-time guard after she leaves my immediate care."

"Fintan must have left a *great* deal of money," I commented.

"Yes!" Desmond grinned. "And most is in investments and still growing larger. Sookie has no idea how wealthy she could be."

"Best to ease her into that."

He chuckled. "Of course, some of the fortune must be set aside for the other decedent who has shown a spark."

"Another?"

"Yes," the demon reported. "Hadley had a child. In truth, I've known that Hadley was with the queen for a while, but the association seemed good for her, and I had no idea that she was using information about her cousin to garner favor. She dumped her son onto his father when he was born. And she has made *very* few attempts to contact him during the years. But — given her loose lips about Sookie — I think it is wise to act on the child's behalf now," he sighed.

I smiled to myself. "Sookie will be glad to have more family. By the way, do you have bottled water in your vehicle?" I asked suddenly.

He nodded. "Sure. And on the plane. Why?"

“Good. Sookie should drink more water before she rests to help to offset the severing spell.”

He slapped me on the back affectionately.

“You are welcome next week, Northman! In fact, I insist that you stay at my estate—*and* extend your visit a few days extra! After all, we have a lot of legal matters to discuss. And I want to discuss some,” he paused, “investment opportunities with you,” he added with a wink.

“Are you playing matchmaker?” I smirked.

“Just offering you opportunity. Of course, if Sookie doesn’t want to spend time with you, my estate is large. It will be *her* choice.”

I nodded in acknowledgment.

Sookie stepped out of her Gran’s room with an afghan.

“Can I—uh—take this?” she asked tentatively.

“You can take anything you wish, dear,” Desmond smiled.

“Thanks.” She looked up at me. “What about Sam? He’ll expect me at work tomorrow.”

“Oh—Sam Merlotte will no longer be an issue,” Desmond said darkly. “I financed his business venture in return for his service, and tomorrow morning, he will be receiving legal paperwork kicking him out of *my* establishment. And he *will* be leaving this area too—tomorrow,” the demon added, his eyes darkening until they were almost black. “He still owes me, and I have an assignment in Uruguay that should suit him *very* well.”

“You won’t hurt him – will you?” Sookie asked.

“I *should*, but I anticipated that you wouldn’t want that, so I am simply giving him a shit assignment,” Desmond said with a cruel smile.

“Uh – okay,” Sookie responded. “But what about Merlotte’s. A lot of people count on it for jobs.”

Desmond looked at me. “Northman – do you know of someone who can step in as manager of the place?”

“Human, Were, or vampire?” I asked.

He chuckled. “Were. I’m not sure Bon Temps is ready for a vampire.”

“What time will the shifter receive his news?” I asked.

“Ten. If your recommendation can be there by then, I’ll have papers for him or her to sign taking over the running of the place.”

I nodded. I knew of a few worthy Weres in Area 5 who would appreciate the consistent work. Plus, I’m sure that Colonel Flood knew of others. And – unlike Merlotte – they would be good watchdogs over the town!

Pun intended!

“Sam’s got other properties too,” Sookie frowned.

Desmond shook his head. “No – he manages other investments of *mine*.”

I chuckled. “I’ll have *two* Weres waiting at ten. If Sam gives your courier any trouble, they can help. And they can share in whatever management opportunities you have – if that is acceptable.”

"Ohtheshifterwillnotbeaproblem," Diantha said with a scowl. She'd moved so that she was behind her uncle.

Sookie frowned, trying to decipher Diantha's quick sentence. It was difficult for me to understand her at times too!

"Sookie, this is my niece, Diantha. Gladiola is still in the car," Desmond said.

"Nice to meet you," Sookie said.

"Youtoo. Wearegonnahavelotsoffun!" Diantha said.

Again, it took Sookie a moment before the confusion left her face.

"Di is taking care of Merlotte's walking papers," Desmond smirked.

I chuckled. Diantha could kill as fast as she could talk.

"So," Sookie sighed, looking up at me. "I guess this is goodbye for now." She bit her bottom lip worriedly.

I touched her cheek and she leaned into my palm. We both sighed at the contact.

"Possibility," she whispered.

I nodded in agreement. "Worry about nothing," I told her. "Your brother will be guarded by sunrise. Compton will be informed of your change in status tomorrow night. I'll place a guard on this house and see to its upkeep while you are gone."

Desmond passed Sookie a piece of paper.

"Sign this," the demon instructed.

"What is it?" Sookie asked.

"Power of attorney to let Eric pay your bills and such, and he is required to keep a careful accounting of all he does," the demon added with a chuckle.

Sookie opened the short document and quickly read it. “Okay – uh – looks good,” Sookie stammered, though obviously torn about accepting help.

“Remember, it is only an advance,” I reminded, handing her a pen.

She nodded and signed the document before handing it back to Desmond.

“I’ll fax you a copy tomorrow night,” Desmond told me before taking Sookie’s suitcase from me. “See you in the car,” he added knowingly. Diantha followed him.

Sookie and I stepped out onto the porch and I waited for her to lock up the house.

“It’s been a long night,” she said, looking up at me.

“Not all bad though?” I asked.

“Not all bad,” she agreed, standing on her tiptoes to initiate a kiss.

This time, I didn’t settle for just a peck, and she didn’t either.

Once she was breathless, I let her go.

“This is only the beginning,” I whispered, before taking her hand and walking her to the car.

The End.