

# TENTERHOOKS

*by California Kat*

## **SUMMARY:**

A “What if” story starting in the middle of Book 4. What if Sookie had said “yes” when Eric suggested they return to “their home” before the witch war? What if she’d chosen her own desire to “keep” him over her impulse to ensure that his memories were returned? (Story inspired by a reader who would like to remain anonymous.)

## **ORIGINAL PROMPT:**

*Could you please write a story starting in Book 4? I always wondered what would happen if Sookie said “yes” to Eric before the Witch War, when he offered to give up everything to stay with her. We all know that she says no and that he loses his memories of her. But what if she’d said, YES, turned around the car and driven back to her house?—from A.R.*

## **DISCLAIMER:**

I own no characters or plotlines related to *True Blood* or the *Southern Vampire Mysteries*. I write for my own pleasure (and yours) only and make no profit from my work.

## **MANY THANKS TO:**

Three people helped to make this story possible.

1. My friend (who wants to remain anonymous) for the inspiration
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**SEPHRENIA / S BEAUTIFUL  
BANNER  
FOR THE STORY**



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# TENTERHOOKS

"My very heart-strings are on the tenters." —John Ford's *Broken Heart*

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## CHAPTER 01: MY ERIC

JANUARY 5, 2005

SOOKIE POV

[A/N: *Dead to the World* quoted in italics]

*"We could go back," Eric said. In the dome light of the car, his face looked hard as stone.*

*"We could go back to your house. I can stay with you always. We can know each other's bodies in every way, night after night. I could love you." His nostrils flared, and he looked suddenly proud. "I could work. You would not be poor. I would help you."*

"Sounds like a marriage," I said.

"Yes," Eric concurred. "I will speak to your brother, and I will ask him for your hand," he added—as if I were fishing for him to follow protocol.

I thought that he and I were well beyond that.

Pam stepped out onto the front porch of her home. Eric and I *should* have been heading inside for the war meeting, but neither of us moved. I knew that Pam still felt Eric—still kept track of him through their bond.

I couldn't look at him in that moment, so I looked at her, shining in the moonlight.

Eric's vampire child was a beautiful specimen of "life" – though she was also death personified. Her blue eyes shined even in the limited light, and I could tell that she was looking at me. And – *yes* – she was judging me too.

I was used to that part.

But her eyes also shone with understanding. Being able to feel him, she – *surely* – felt his contentment and his preferences.

I was counting on that – on her. Any doubt from her, and I was marching Eric straight inside that house!

Of course, Pam couldn't feel my own guilt – my selfishness.

My love.

Pam looked down and away. And then she looked back up at me and gave me the tiniest of nods.

Was it permission? Was it acknowledgement of my self-interest? Was it understanding of my need to *keep* him?

Or was it something deeper than that? Pam liked me – *for a human*. But I had no illusions; I knew that she didn't much care about my life or my desires.

No. If she was agreeing with the fact that Eric and I were not staying, then it was somehow for *Eric's* sake.

"My progeny accepts that we wish to find a life together," Eric said confidently as if he'd been reading my thoughts.

"Maybe," I sighed as Pam returned into her house.

“She knows that I have been made happy by this decision,” the vampire added, reaching out to take my hand.

“Okay,” I nodded before putting the car into reverse. As I pulled out into the street, I contemplated going back. A block down the street, I contemplated the same.

“Do not fret so much,” Eric said thoughtfully.

“You feel my emotions?” I asked.

“Hmmm,” he acknowledged. “Guilt—yes. And uncertainty.”

“I’m taking your life from you,” I said softly.

“I *chose* this life,” he returned. “I did! The *other* me—whatever he is, wherever he’s gone—I cannot speak for him or act for him. Maybe it is not fair to those in *his* life, but I cannot split myself in two. And I want to live, Sookie. *Me!*”

My Eric looked momentarily sulky, but then sure of himself again.

“*He* had a thousand years,” Eric continued. “I will ask for but one human lifetime—to spend with you. And then I will allow Pam to reverse the spell—if she learns how to do so from the witch.”

I gasped and looked over at him. “You’d do that? Live a whole lifetime and then give yourself up?”

“If it allays your guilt—then yes,” he responded.

I took a deep breath. “What if we start building a life together and then you decide that it’s too,” I paused, “*little* for you?”

“Impossible,” Eric insisted.

“Nothing is impossible when it comes to the supernatural world,” I sighed. “I’ve been learning that the hard way.”

“I won’t grow tired of the life *I’ve chosen*,” Eric said stubbornly.

“Promise me something,” I said, trying to sound firm. “If you do get tired of it—if you ever change your mind—promise me that you’ll go to Pam. Don’t stay just for me—out of obligation or guilt. Or pity. I couldn’t bear that—okay?”

Eric looked sullen for a moment. Clearly, he wanted to argue with me. Clearly, he wanted to insist that he’d never stop wanting me.

But I knew the deck was stacked against us. Still, I was placing a very large bet on us and risking my heart *again*—but in a way much more profound than I’d ever risked it with Bill. However, I felt “brave” in that moment—because the man I was trying to “win” was all I had ever wanted.

He “got” me. He wanted me. I “got” him. I wanted him.

In that way, the situation was simple.

I sighed. Louisiana was full of people who gambled on the large boats in the Mississippi River or in the Gulf of Mexico. I knew I was making the same kind of selfish bet that people made with their kids’ college savings accounts or with the paychecks their families needed for groceries.

But there was also a part of me that agreed that this Eric—*my* Eric—had the right to a life too.

Yes—that belief supported my own selfish inclinations. But it was true nonetheless.



And at the root of it all, I loved Eric—*my* Eric—though I was still too chicken shit to say it aloud.

The simple fact was that I couldn't deny him—not even to allay my guilt, not even to be the “better” person.

So I took him home with me.

Again.

And this time, I would keep him there—unless *he* decided to go.

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## PAM POV

I was a selfish bitch, and I wanted *my* Eric back—just as much as Sookie wanted to keep hers.

I resented the telepath, though I liked her more than most other blood-bags. Also, I understood her motivations.

Even in his current form, Eric was a great vampire.

A great man—not to be confused with a *hu*-man.

I think that Eric had been bored when he made me. I think that he'd been lonely. Of course, by all accounts, I'd taken to my vampirism with no regrets regarding what I'd left behind.

I have always known that I amused Eric in ways that went well beyond the physical. In fact, we both seemed relieved when I gained enough control over my vampire libido to become “choosy” in my bed partners. He thought I was beautiful—of course. But we were not each other's first choices of sexual partners.

Or second.

Or third.

You get my point.

As magnificent as Eric was, I had always known that my maker had scars so deep that he would disappear into their caverns if he ever let himself.

I knew that many of these scars stemmed from his maker, a bastard I'd thankfully never had to meet because he'd lost "interest" in Eric.

Actually, "he'd lost interest—*eventually*," Eric had said.

I'd never pushed for information on Appius Livius Ocella, but Eric had—over the years—hinted at the nature of his maker's "interest."

Eric had never used the word "rape" to describe what Ocella had done, but I knew my maker had *never* preferred males. Oh—he had sometimes had to "act" with men to get something he wanted or needed. And bloodlust did tend to cloud a vampire's usual choices, but I knew that—on the rare occasions that Eric had been with men during my lifetime—he'd never been a bottom.

Not in any sense of the word.

In purely sexual terms, the "bottom"—when it came to male gay sex—was the one who "received." The "top" was the one who "gave."

Often, the "top" was also the dominant in the relationship: the "man" so to speak. However, there were certainly exceptions.

Of course, I didn't know anything about male-on-male sex—at least not in a physical sense. Despite some interesting studies I'd read—and despite my own experimentation with the so-called “female prostate”—I had no idea what the male prostate was like.

The gay men that I knew—both vampires and humans—tended to rave about the prostate, especially if they were “bottoms.” They indicated that the stimulation of it with fingers or dicks made orgasms “transcendental.”

*Whatever.* I'd take my clit over a prostate any day of the fucking week.

Of course, I also knew gay men—“tops” more often than not—who didn't like “ass-play” done upon them. They were simply attracted to males, so that was whom they desired to fuck.

Again, I'd take my equipment over a cock any day of the week. But, then again, not even my maker had ever been able to give me an orgasm by dick alone. He'd always had to play with my clit, too, in order to get me off.

Especially after I'd first been turned, I'd tried all kinds of sex—both with Eric and with other men and women. I'd even asked my maker for anal sex one night. With a disturbingly haunted look in his eyes, he'd bristled at that idea, but had provided me with a human male—a glamoured one—who was of “reasonable length” to fulfill my wish the very next night.

“Reasonable” had translated into four and a half inches and about as wide as a thick carrot. I'd been angry at Eric for the “insufficient” human—*at first.*

But my maker had asked me—very sincerely—to accept the man for my first anal experience.

So—to please him—I had.

I'd soon learned that Eric had glamoured the man concerning “how to prepare my body.” Since I was an anal virgin at the time, my maker had insisted that it was necessary. I'd wondered at that—since vampires had such a high pain tolerance. But then Eric had lectured that when the body was not prepped, the experience was painful—even for a vampire.

I'd gone along—just wanting to “get off” in a new way.

As soon as the human had “prepped” me with oils and had given me a *very* nice round of cunnilingus—also per Eric's instructions—I'd realized why Eric had made all the fuss. The act of anal sex was fucking painful, and even though I *might* have had some masochistic tendencies—at the time—I didn't like the pain and the pressure of anal sex.

Oh—I had orgasmed during the act. *Eventually.*

Eric had made sure that the human stimulated my clit throughout the sex, but I never tried anal again. A vampire's body always returned to its initial state, so—while I might have gotten used to the feeling and the pain of being penetrated that way—I would have felt discomfort every time.

Every. Single. Time.

That was why it was truly cruel to turn a virgin woman—in my humble opinion. I had not been one of those at my own turning. As a teen, I'd snuck out of my room at night way too many times for that.

I smirked at the memories, but that expression fell away when I recalled Eric telling me that “he’d *eventually* gotten used to his master’s attentions”—that he’d eventually “learned to like them to a *certain* extent.”

He’d also once said that Ocella had figured out worse things to do to him than to take his body.

Certainly—not everything Eric had ever said about Ocella had been bad. Clearly, he’d learned many lessons from his own maker, and Ocella was a *great* vampire in many ways—great at surviving and strategizing. But Eric had also made clear that some of his maker’s “lessons” would *never* be transmitted on to me.

And—perhaps most ominously of all—my maker had once told me that he remembered his maker and his lessons *every night of his life*.

I had seen my maker “break” men when torturing them. Eric could be relentless. He’d learned that from Ocella. However, I’d always *felt* him compartmentalizing when he did such things.

Hiding in a way.

I had guessed that it was because he spent his first centuries as a vampire being well and truly broken.

Indeed, for a man like Eric—so rooted in honor and respect and pride—being broken would have been devastating.

But this *new* Eric—the one in Sookie’s care—was different. He was blissfully ignorant of all the pain and agony that *my* Eric had endured. The new one had never been broken. He didn’t carry the scars and the memories of his maker’s abuse in cavernous internal

disfigurements. He didn't carry the fear that his maker might become "intrigued" by him once more.

Yes—I wanted *my* Eric back, but I couldn't ignore the fact that the one present in the world at that moment was happier than my maker had ever been.

Content.

Free from his past.

Free from duties he hated.

Free from a business that had begun to bore him in ways that it didn't bore me.

I sometimes wondered if Eric kept Fangtasia running for me. I knew that he'd gotten "over it" only a short time after we'd opened the bar, though he dutifully took to his throne every night.

A throne that had been my idea.

And—as far as being sheriff went—Eric despised the bureaucracy involved. However, he didn't like to be fucked with; he didn't want to live under the rule of another.

Thus, Eric ran Area 5 like a company. He was CEO, and Sophie-Anne was the type of "owner" who didn't ask questions as long as the profits stayed high. In fact, Eric had made very clear "rules" with Sophie-Anne when he'd become her sheriff.

Rule number one: He would be loyal and never seek her crown—*if* she left him to rule his area in peace.

Rule number two: He would raise the profits of his area so that she'd never have to interfere.

Rule number three: If there was an outside threat, he'd come to her aid.

Rule number four: If he ever found her spying on him or trying to micromanage him, all bets were off.

“Fuck!” I muttered to myself.

I knew what to do about the witch war. That would go on as planned. I’d figure out the cure for Eric’s “problem,” but I would hold off on using it. I was just glad that it was a myth that spells died with their casters because I *did* intend to kill Hallow and her brother—her whole fucking coven.

*After* “playing” with them—that is—and *carefully* extracting the information I required.

I would also—in deference to both the “new” Eric and Sookie—endeavor not to kill the “innocents” that Hallow had conscripted into service.

But there was one question I didn’t know how to answer once the war was waged and won.

“How the fuck am I going to deal with Sophie-Anne?” I muttered aloud.

“You have no idea how bad the situation really is,” Bill Compton said from behind me.

## CHAPTER 2: GIRL TALK

FEBRUARY 5, 2005 (ONE MONTH AFTER THE PREVIOUS CHAPTER)

### SOOKIE POV

I'd worked the lunch shift at Merlotte's, and I was on my way home; it was 3:30 p.m. It was a sunny day and unseasonably warm for early February. The warmth made me long for spring and sun bathing.

"I'm sure that Eric will love me smelling like the sun all the time!" I said to myself.

I grinned.

Despite Sam's vocal and *loud* internal disapproval of my actions—something that really made me question our friendship—he had agreed to give me only lunch shifts beginning the second week of January. As the most senior waitress at Merlotte's—other than Arlene, who had gotten to pick her shifts for years, I might add—I'd figured that I should have the right to choose mine as well.

Sam wasn't happy about my choices, but the other waitresses weren't sad at all about my picks! Holly, who'd come out of the Witch War unscathed—but heavily glamoured—was especially glad to be able to get more of the "prime" shifts that I'd needed to take in the past.

Truth be told—the lunch shift was preferable to me—for a variety of reasons. First, working during the days allowed me to have more time with Eric. That's why Sam was upset. But there was another reason, and this was that one that Eric had focused on as we'd discussed my choice.



Other than the fact that the tips weren't as good, lunch shifts had always been my favorites. Merlotte's tended to be quieter. Oh—there were still ugly thoughts to endure, but they were fewer and farther between. The tables filled more slowly and then tapered off in the afternoons. My own shields could build and then relax with the crowd. Thus, I could keep up my practice with my shields without coming home with a headache.

It was nice.

Of course, I would never have been able to take just lunch shifts if it weren't for Eric. I smiled when I thought about my husband.

*Husband.*

I looked down at the relatively plain, but beautiful wedding band on my finger. It was white gold, but etched with runes from Eric's human time. The runes conveyed Eric's vows to me: to love me, to honor me above all others, and to take care of me.

Eric had, funnily enough, gotten work on Alcide's construction crew. Basically, his job was to do any demolition work—whether it was ripping out a set of cabinets that needed to be replaced or gutting an entire house that had been damaged by mold. Alcide paid Eric by the task—not by the hour.

Thankfully.

And, let me tell you, Eric *quickly* finished tasks! He was already thinking about starting his own demolition company, though he would still work for Alcide on a freelance basis and at the same rate.

I still found it weird to see that Alcide and Eric were friendly, but that's exactly what they were.

Of course, I hadn't seen them together that much, but Eric talked about his "boss" in a warm manner. And the novelty—and oddness—of the situation had apparently worn off for Alcide, too. His employee was Eric, *not* the Sheriff.

Given the fact that the Were had gotten back together with Debbie Pelt—who'd even fought beside him during the Witch War—I didn't socialize with Alcide beyond a wave hello the few times I'd dropped Eric off at a site. I had seen enough to know that Alcide and my husband shook hands each time they greeted each other. It wasn't a "normal" handshake, however. I figured it belonged to either the Viking culture or the Were one. It didn't really matter which.

I truly did hope that things worked out for Alcide, and—if he wanted to be with Debbie—then so be it.

Luckily, I hadn't seen her. And, hopefully, my being married to Eric would keep her crazy brand of jealousy well under wraps.

I smiled again as I glanced at my ring.

After the Witch War, it had taken Eric only a few days to decide upon a job he could do. And then he'd contacted the person that he wanted to do that job for. My Eric, it turned out, was just as convincing as that other one, though in a different way.

Mine presented his arguments with the logic of his counterpart, but with none of the threats.

Nonetheless, Alcide had hired him.

After a week of working, Eric had gone to see Jason—without my knowledge—and had asked for "my family's permission to wed" me.

Those had been Eric's *exact* words, according to Jason.

My brother had apparently been too flabbergasted to speak as Eric listed his attributes and made promises to care for my wellbeing. Jason *did* have the good sense to turn down the bride-price that Eric had offered to pay for my hand. And—thank God—he'd also had the cultural awareness enough to know that Eric didn't intend his offer as him *buying* me.

Sometimes Jason was smarter than he looked. Or maybe he was too dumb to think about how a bride price might have appeared to some.

Regardless of his reasons, Jason gave his blessing. Neither my husband nor my brother gave me too many details about their meeting, but I do know that Jason hadn't been glamoured, and I took that as a good sign that things had gone well.

Later that very night, Eric had gotten down on one knee and had presented me with the ring I now wore, as well as plane tickets to Vermont. We eloped the next weekend—*after* I'd gotten Pam's blessing, too.

I sighed.

Pam.

She was much *less* of an enigma to me now than she'd been before.

And she'd become an ally to me—and to the “new” Eric. I just hadn't known why at first.

The night after the Witch War, Pam had come by the house to give Eric and me a “report.” The witches had been “subdued”—which I figured really meant killed and/or tortured.

The spell that Hallow—a.k.a. Marnie Stonebrook—had used on Eric and its “cure” had been “extracted” from the Were-witch and had been “confirmed” by her brother, Mark Stonebrook.

Eric and I had been told that the spell could be broken at any time, and when Eric told Pam to lock away that information, the vampiress had nodded and left—only to meet me at Merlotte’s the very next night, the night of my last night shift at the bar.

I sighed as I remembered that meeting.

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#### **FLASHBACK: JANUARY 7, 2005 (TWO NIGHTS AFTER THE WITCH WAR)**

“Hello, Sookie,” Pam purred out of the darkness as I made my way to my car.

“Eric was supposed to meet me here,” I said by way of greeting.

It was my last night shift at Merlotte’s, and Eric was quite protective.

“I stopped by the house on my way here—to deliver some of Eric’s clothing. And other incidentals,” she said offhandedly. “I asked if I might escort you home tonight and convinced him that we needed some ‘girl-talk.’”

“Girl-talk?” I asked.

“Yes. Eric thinks it’s something we do all the time,” Pam smirked. “It is good—in *many* ways—that he doesn’t remember everything.”

The way that she’d said “many” made me cringe.

“Get in,” Pam said, gesturing to the driver’s side, though she seemed to hate the idea of riding in my vehicle. “Or I can drive if you want,” she added with an evil grin.

“No thanks,” I responded.

She shrugged and waited for me to get in and unlock the passenger door for her.

Once we were on our way to Gran's house—or my and Eric's house now—Pam didn't pull any punches.

"I'm letting Eric stay as he is because I love him and he *is* happier now," she opened.

"Uh—huh? Uh?" I asked, with decided unintelligence.

"Since I've known him, Eric has had times of what *could* be called happiness. And he does have a certain *joie de vivre*. But, every night—before he was supposedly cursed by Hallow—he had to work *very* hard to conceal and suppress *all* of the *many* things that have hurt him. Every. Single. Night."

"Things?" I asked with trepidation, having to concentrate to keep on the road.

"Eric's maker introduced him to a kind of hell that I cannot imagine," Pam answered bluntly.

At these words, I did pull over.

"I knew I should have driven," she stated flatly.

"Just tell me, Pam," I ordered.

Her eyebrow rose.

"Please," I added.

She nodded, but looked sad as she began. "Appius Livius Ocella saw Eric—in all of his human glory—and he couldn't resist turning him. Ocella made Eric to be his plaything. Heterosexual to the core, Eric was *raped* night after night—from what I've been able to infer from his vague and enigmatic comments over the years. So his *virgin* body experienced pain

each time Ocella took it, for it would heal each time. But one can get used to physical pain. It doesn't lessen, but one can steel himself to it."

Pam paused, but didn't bother to even "seem" as if she were taking a breath. "As you can imagine, a being such as Eric can *never* become accustomed to the idea of losing his ability to choose."

"Oh God!" I gasped in horror as Pam's words sunk in. I closed my eyes tightly.

"My sister, Karin, has implied that Appius found other ways to take the spirit of the Viking as well—though Eric has been trying to rebuild that spirit since his maker let him go."

"Karin?"

"Eric's first child," Pam explained. "Eric put me into contact with her about a hundred years ago, but he and she remain estranged. I know only that the estrangement has something to do with Appius."

"Eric has another child?"

"He is a thousand years old," Pam stated as if that answered my question. "What is important is that she knows more—saw more—though she, too, talks in riddles." Pam rolled her eyes. "Karin did tell me that Ocella doesn't allow even Eric to call him by his first name and that Ocella," she paused, "liked him on his knees."

I let out a sob.

"Do try not to cry. He will smell it on you," Pam chastised.

I nodded and did my best to suppress my tears.

“I cannot be sure, but I think that Eric was forced by Ocella to turn Karin and that it was most decidedly against her will. I think that Eric was forced to do other things that were against her will too. And I believe that is what finally broke him,” Pam sighed. “But I have no confirmation of any of this—just intuition.”

I couldn't hold in my tears anymore.

“I knew it,” Pam said with long suffering as she pulled out tissues—seemingly from her bra.

“Sorry,” I sniffled.

Pam shook her head, but went on. “Once he was broken, Eric held no more fascination for Ocella. He was a finished project—a *perfect* creation in that bastard's eyes. The only good thing about that was that Eric became tedious to Ocella, and—though he has never released Eric as a maker should release a child as old as my master—Ocella sent him from his sight and took up other pursuits. I firmly believe that Eric keeps himself in a simple, *boring* portion of the world because he fears Ocella would want him back, otherwise.” The vampiress paused. “Even in his businesses, Eric has never chosen what *he* preferred most, though he does have a way of making anything work. I think that he fears Ocella will sweep in and take anything good away. He even keeps even me at arm's length—to a certain extent. And I think that his fear of Ocella somehow harming you is why he fought against his feelings for you for so long.”

“Feelings? For me?” I asked.

Pam snorted. “Dumb blonde, indeed,” she chided under her breath. “He has wanted you from the start and cared about your wellbeing since you cared about his.”

“I warned him about the undercover cop,” I said with realization.

“Yes—since then,” Pam confirmed. “Why else would he have protected you from Long Shadow—when the fall-out from that was so damned substantial?”

“Huh?” I asked, again not being able to ask a question properly.

Pam sighed as if I should already know the answer. “The payment to Long Shadow’s maker alone was astronomical, not to mention the fines for protecting a human at the expense of a vampire. Hell! The Supernatural Council threatened to put him in a silver coffin for a hundred years! It was only telling them that you were no ordinary human that got him out of that. Of course, he told only the six current Council members and demanded their secrecy!”

“Huh?”

“Foolish woman! Why else do you think you got roped into helping King Stan of Texas?”

“Huh?”

“Stan’s on the Council!” Pam said as if she were speaking commonsense and not Vampirese! “You don’t think that Eric would have put you into that situation unless he had no other choice—do you?” She shook her head. “Anyway, that’s not why I came to speak with you. I came to tell you that Ocella wounded Eric beyond repair, but now Eric’s not wounded anymore. I also came to tell you what Hallow’s curse *truly* entailed.”

“What?” I asked, though I was afraid to.



“That Eric would find his heart’s desire only to lose it and then be slowly driven insane by the loss, for the spell will cause him to despise what he loves most,” she said flatly. “He will be literally torn in two.”

I gasped.

Pam continued. “Hallow didn’t, of course, know *specifically* where the initial spell would take him, but she did know that it would take Eric to the thing that would make him most happy. But—ironically—it was when she went to lift the initial spell that the curse would have truly set in.”

“What do you mean?” I asked, tears still in my eyes.

“Hallow always intended to lift the curse. Lifting it is actually quite easy. Just a few words chanted by a witch—even a weak one—when Eric is within fifty miles will do the trick. Eric will get his memories back—all *except* the ones related to his heart’s content. Those will be taken from him, though he will be cursed to feel as if there is something missing. He will be compelled to despise that *something*, thereby slowly going insane. A truly horrible curse,” Pam explained, almost as if she admired it.

“He’d forget me? Hate me?” I asked with horror. “He’d be destroyed by not remembering?”

“Eventually—yes,” Pam said matter-of-factly. But, like I said, he’d forget just the time that has occurred since the initial spell was cast. He’d get everything else back: all the pain and the suffering. And the good things too,” Pam commented, “like me. But he’d lose the life that would make him happiest—the one that is making his heart content, and he’d be

cursed to feel the pain of that loss all the days of his remaining existence. On top of everything that he's *already* gone through."

I cried again.

"Sookie, the part of the spell Eric is stuck in is his 'best life'—his ideal life," Pam summed up. "I *won't* take that from him and will endeavor to protect it."

"Oh God, Pam. What do I do?" I asked.

"Protect that life even more fiercely than I will," she said resolutely. "I think it will be a good life for you, too."

"He's already said that he will take back his old memories once I die," I whispered.

Pam nodded. "That will, hopefully, be many years away. And—after that—maybe I can tell him about you after the 'true' curse takes effect. Feeling the loss of his memories might not be as bad as feeling the loss of you—by that time. Plus, I am already trying to find ways to counteract Hallow's work."

She paused as uncertainty entered her eyes; I'd never seen that look from her before.

"I don't know," she shook her head, sadly. "Maybe it will become worse for him with time, but," she straightened her back, "I would rather he get the happiness he can—wouldn't you? And you could always choose to become vampire—to prevent him from ever losing you."

"Pam, I . . .," I started.

"Shhh," she sounded. "Don't think about that now. That thought is for a future night. Plus, you know Eric would want you to make the right choice for *you*. So make *that* one. Anything else would make him more miserable."

I nodded. And then I had a horrible thought. “Can Ocella feel Eric?”

“Only that he’s alive. According to my Eric, Ocella keeps tabs on him, but only in a cursory way. Most of the time, their bond is closed on Ocella’s end. Also, the rat bastard’s on the other side of the planet in Vietnam right now. Thank God! And—as long as he stays there—he won’t be able to feel that Eric is finally happy.”

I sighed with relief.

“Eric told me once that Ocella checked in on his general state of being only once every half a century or so, and the last time was just four years ago,” Pam shared. “I say we don’t worry about the next check-in until it’s time to.”

I nodded, though my heart still held some dread. Forty-six years was a long time. But I now felt a different kind of ticking time bomb in my mind than there had been before. I no longer feared Eric’s leaving me—not after what Pam had said—but I did fear Ocella returning.

“You make him happy,” Pam said, pulling me from my fear-filled thoughts. “A fundamental part of *himself* knew you would, but Eric resisted that because of,” she paused, “what had happened to him long ago. Just continue as you are—okay? But *stop* with the guilt you feel. *Stop* the worry that you are taking something from him. He mentioned those things to me last night *and* tonight. He worries for you, and his worries may cause him to leave this *life*,” the vampiress sighed. “And if he orders me to undo Hallow’s ‘curse’ and thereby induce the ‘real’ fucking curse, I will have to. Just let yourself be happy with him, Sookie.”

I sobbed again.

“*You* are his heart’s desire. Know that,” the vampiress soothed, even as she prompted me to get out of the car so that we could change places and she could drive us the rest of the way.

When we got home, I explained my tears to Eric by saying that “girl-talk” was always emotional. I hadn’t been lying.

## CHAPTER 03: STRANGE BEDFELLOWS

FLASHBACK: JANUARY 5, 2005 (THE NIGHT OF THE WITCH WAR)

PAM POV

“So nice of you to join us for the fight,” I intoned, looking at Bill through narrowed eyes. He looked better that way; in fact, the less I could see of him, the better.

“I saw Eric and Sookie drive away,” he said guardedly.

“What they do isn’t any of your business,” I replied.

“Is it true what Chow said?” Bill asked.

“I don’t know what Chow said to you, but I’m sure I will take pleasure in punishing him for his indiscretion,” I smirked.

“Has Eric lost his memories?” Bill pushed.

My fangs swept downward and I pushed him against the wall in my hallway, my hand at his throat.

“You will keep that confidential—won’t you, Billy boy?” I asked with a snarl.

He looked like he was ready to shit himself; of course, he was incapable of doing so.

All the pity—especially for him. He looked rather constipated—as always.

“He’s not going to take back his memories—is he?” Bill asked rather nervously.

“That is none of your business either,” I said sternly, gripping his throat tighter.

“It is the queen’s,” Bill returned, his voice croaking.

“You let me worry about that,” I returned.

“I can’t,” he said, his expression contrite.

Truly contrite.

*That* gave me pause.

“You will tell me all you know after this battle,” I told him, my tone brooking no argument.

“Yes,” he said with a nod. “I will.”

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Three vampires had been lost during the Witch War: Chow, whose propensity for gossip had pissed me off anyway; Charles Twining, a brand new vampire to Area 5 who had been trying to ingratiate himself to Eric (fucking pirate wannabe!); and Mickey, a brutal mother fucker I’d never liked.

All-in-all, I couldn’t have picked three better vampires to die, though Chow’s death made for more work for me. I figured that Clancy would make a lovely partner, however. And he’d proven to be a draw for the fangbangers at Fangtasia too. He was not as popular as Eric, of course, but numbers were solid when he took the throne.

The Were-pack had also lost three members during the war. And the evenness of loss actually made things easier all around for Supernatural relations in Area 5. Colonel Flood had been injured but not killed, and I got the impression that he’d be open to working together in the future too.

We’d even managed to spare many of the innocent humans.

Thanks to a lovely little witch I’d hired from New Orleans to help out—and I mean lovely in the “biblical sense”—Hallow wasn’t able to cast any of her spells at me as I questioned her. Indeed, Amelia would be getting a bonus for her work after I met with Bill.

A bonus in the form of orgasms from the master—me.

The only thing that had pissed me off had been the ease at which Hallow and her brother had given up their information. Of course, Hallow *wanted* to see the spell completed, so she'd offered up those instructions immediately.

*Too* immediately.

So I'd pressed and found out the true nature of the curse.

I was a sadistic bitch, but Hallow's spell was more evil than even I might have fathomed.

I needed to up my game.

The witches had been questioned and then killed in my favorite place in the whole wide world, Fangtasia's basement.

Bill was waiting for me as I left it.

"Eric's office," I said simply, knowing that was the only place other than the basement that I could guarantee hadn't been bugged. There were devices in place preventing that. And magic to back those up.

I sat behind Eric's desk, while Bill took a seat in front of it.

"I ask only that you hear me out—before you decide whether or not you will kill me," he opened.

Bold.

I nodded in agreement.

Having kept all of the annoying habits of his human days, Bill sighed and then cleared his throat.

I rolled my eyes.

“I didn’t choose to be turned,” he began. “And after I was, I became a monster.” He shook his head. “I don’t know if it was always in me or if Lorena brought it out of me, but I was a nightmare—even to myself.” He sighed again. “It was also the war—I think, though I don’t like making excuses for my sins.” He looked agonized, and I almost felt compassion for him—just *almost*.

“The Civil War was a hell that I cannot compare to any other hell I have witnessed,” he said matter-of-factly. “Some romanticize it, but the war itself had little romance—beyond the clean uniforms the officers first put on. But those soon became stained with blood and filth.” He cringed. “In trenches in Vicksburg, I slaughtered with bayonets and rocks—when I ran out of bullets. I killed so that I would not die. And I lost my humanity then—even before Lorena took it.”

I was tempted to tell him that he could keep his sob story to himself, but I got the distinct impression that the vampire in front of me wasn’t telling me his story in order for me to feel compassion for him. He was telling me because it was needed context for what was coming.

“I began to feel compassion again—no, it was guilt—after I drained a human that reminded me of my daughter. That was thirty years after I became a vampire.” He shook his head. “In fact, the girl I drained looked so like my daughter that I wept over her body. Lorena thought I’d gone crazy. But I think I became sane again—shocked into sanity by the horror of murdering a child.”

He paused for a moment.



“I did not become a saint, though I did begin resisting my maker after that—resisting the lifestyle of killing that both Lorena and I had embraced before then. Eventually, she let me strike out on my own when she became tired of my protests. I worked for a while as a procurer in Tennessee—for the king there. And when I proved good at my work, he traded me to Sophie-Anne to clear a debt.”

“Eric and I knew you’d been a part of her court,” I said, many theories coming into focus in my mind. “But we didn’t know in what capacity you’d served.”

“Sophie-Anne didn’t broadcast my skill, especially with the Great Revelation plans already in the works when I joined her. Almost fourteen months ago, I found her a particularly lovely human. That human turned out to know about a telepath in Area 5.”

“Sophie-Anne sent you here to poach from Eric’s area,” I growled.

“Yes. I was to confirm Sookie’s skill under the guise of moving back to Bon Temps to live in my human home,” Bill conveyed. “I killed my remaining relative myself. He was elderly, and my queen ordered it,” he added dispassionately.

I shook my head. “After you confirmed her skill, what were you to do?”

“Glamour her to accompany me to New Orleans. And when glamour didn’t work, I set out to get my blood inside of her—to make her feelings develop for me. The queen decided that seduction was better anyway—especially after Eric learned of Sookie and her skill. She counted on Eric’s innate honor.”

“She knew that he would not steal Sookie from you, even though you were an underling,” I commented.

He nodded in confirmation. “I was to win her, get her to marry me, and settle down with her. Then, after a few month, I was to get a job offer in New Orleans and move there with her. Eric would have never been the wiser that the Queen was behind it all. Thus, he would have never had reason to complain or to rebel. Sophie-Anne would have had her cake and been able to eat it too,” Bill seethed. “Quite literally—as she fully intended to feed from Sookie.”

“Obviously, something changed,” I observed.

“The monster I’d become had—as I said before—begun to remember what having a conscience was like. Sookie helped me to remember other things—good things. Love, compassion, and selflessness.

“I realized—soon after meeting Sookie—that I didn’t want Sophie-Anne to get ahold of her. To ruin her. That’s why—when Lorena called me—I gave Sookie to Eric,” he recounted.

He shook his head. “I do not deserve Sookie. I know that. So I pushed her away emotionally even before Lorena called. But then Sookie saved me from Lorena and killed her, freeing me forever. And I thanked her by doing the worst thing imaginable.”

I braced myself for his words.

“I raped her,” he continued, looking agonized. “Yet she has already forgiven me for that violation because I was suffering from intense blood loss at the time and didn’t realize it was her.

I found myself growling.

“By the time I came to myself, it was too late. And knowing what I did to her will haunt me even more than any of the other sins I have committed,” Bill added.

“Why are you telling me all this?” I asked him.

“I am putting myself at your service—just as I am at Sookie’s. From all accounts that I’ve heard since I got back from Peru, Sookie is happy. If it is Eric who makes her that way, then I will defend him, too.”

I let silence build in the room for several minutes as I studied him.

“Son of a bitch!” I cursed finally.

“What?”

“I believe you,” I responded.

He smirked.

“Don’t get too comfortable,” I grinned evilly. “You haven’t heard how I’m going to use you yet.”

His smirk dropped, only to be replaced by a look of sincerity. “I’m ready,” he said.

“Start by calling in Bubba,” I instructed. “I’ll call Thalia. Both are loyal to Eric, and both will be needed.”

Bill nodded and pulled out his phone even as I pulled out mine.

Necessity—*and love*—truly did lead to strange bedfellows.

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FEBRUARY 9, 2005 (FIVE WEEKS AFTER THE PREVIOUS SCENE)

SOPHIE-ANNE POV

The news had come to me the week before that Sookie and Eric had married in a human ceremony in Vermont. And—though I was pissed off that my Sheriff had not sought my permission—there was no rule that indicated he had to in order to take a human as a pet or even as a bonded. And human marriage was, of course, unprecedented.

Bill Compton had turned out to be somewhat inept, though I still held out some hope that he might succeed. He had been clumsy at courting the telepath and useless at bringing me my prize thus far. Still, I was prepared to be patient. After all, Bill had never failed in his procurement work before. And Bill assured me that the Viking would eventually “cheat” on Sookie, thus alienating her from him.

I chuckled to myself, unable to believe that the human had actually asked for fidelity from the vampire.

I was broken from my thoughts as Rasul was led into my throne room by Sigebert. He bowed before me. “My queen, you have a visitor.”

“Who is it?” I asked.

“A were-fox named Debbie Pelt. She says that she has vital information from Area 5.”

I nodded that she be admitted, even as I narrowed my eyes at the obvious V-junkie before me. “You have information for me?” I asked after she’d bowed out of respect—and fear.

“Yes,” she said, her voice shaky. “But it’s going to cost you.”

I smirked. “If the information is good, I will give you all the V you wish, Ms. Pelt. Is that satisfactory?”

Her eyes widened. “Yes. Okay. Uh—things in Area 5 have been weird lately.”

“Weird?” I asked.

“It’s the Sheriff. At the beginning of the year, he was the victim of a spell that erased his memories.”

“What?” I demanded my fangs coming down in anger. Why hadn’t I been informed?!?

“The witch’s name was Hallow, and we killed her almost a month ago, but the Sheriff hasn’t taken back his place,” Debbie reported, shaking in the wake of my anger. “Nor has he taken back his memories as far as I can tell.”

“How do you know this?” I asked.

“My fiancé—well ex-fiancé. The Sheriff works for him.”

“Eric works for a human?” I asked incredulously.

“No. Alcide’s a Were,” she returned, more haughtily than she should have.

“What else?” I asked, unimpressed by her attitude.

“Um—as far as I’ve been able to find out, Northman’s child is covering for him—pretending that all is well. The other vampires in Area 5 are going along with it, as are the Weres in the Longshadow pack.”

I contemplated for a moment. Eric had always inspired loyalty—maybe even too much loyalty. I’d not spoken to the Viking in many months, but that wasn’t unusual. Pam was almost always the go-between in Eric and my working relationship. We both preferred it that way.

Bill had told me that Northman had taken up residence with his “wife,” which was a tricky situation for me. Their marriage was public, which made it impossible to kidnap her without suspicion. That’s where Bill came in. He was supposed to continue to try to romance her. He was supposed to comfort her and win her back once Eric’s attentions strayed.

But what if Eric was not “Eric?”

Bill had said nothing about the memory charm. Then again, he’d been in Peru during the first of the year and might not have been informed about the situation. Obviously, Northman’s child was trying to cover things up.

“Is the Sheriff’s condition widely known?” I asked.

Debbie shook her head. “No. I think some of the people that fought the witches knew, but I didn’t know—not until I saw the Sheriff with Alcide at a work site two weeks ago.”

I nodded. “Is there any more that you can tell me?”

“Just that Sookie, the Sheriff’s wife, is a thieving whore,” Debbie said bitterly.

“How so?” I asked.

“Alcide’s hung up on her—has been for months,” The were-fox seethed.

“And is she hung up on him, too?” I asked with amusement.

“No! She fawns over her fucking vampire!” the bitch said.

“So your *ex* is hung up on Sookie, but she gives him no encouragement. Yet *she* is the whore?” I questioned, shaking my head at the curiousness of the unquestioning female mind.

I looked at my child, Andre. He deserved a treat. “Make sure that Ms. Pelt has spilled her guts completely before literally spilling her guts—will you?” I asked offhandedly.

“Wait!” the bitch yelled. She followed that up with a variety of colorful expletives.

I ignored her continued cursing and ranting as Andre took her from the throne-room. The world wouldn’t miss her.

I seethed. I hated being outmaneuvered. I despised feeling beaten.

Eric Northman had come to me decades before, offering his brawn—and brains—to my Queendom. He was slightly younger than I, though he was known to be very strong; however, his child didn’t match up to the strength of my own children. Thus, I wasn’t threatened by the Viking. I had even agreed to his “rules.”

Of course, I’d never expected for there to be a telepath in Area 5. They were so rare, after all.

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“You know all she knows,” Andre said when he returned to the throne-room an hour later. “And I think it is safe to say that Compton is *not* going to succeed with the telepath.”

“No worries,” I said, smiling at the idea that had been forming in my head for the past hour. “Compton won’t be needed. I know someone who can succeed with the Viking.”

## CHAPTER 04: AS NIGHT FOLLOWS DAY

“There is that awful moment when you realize that you're falling in love. That should be the most joyful moment, and actually it's not. It's always a moment that's full of fear because you know, as night follows day, the joy is going to rapidly be followed by some pain or other.

All the angst of a relationship.” –Helen Mirren

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FEBRUARY 5, 2005 (4 DAYS BEFORE THE PREVIOUS; PICKS UP FROM MID-CHAPTER 2)

### SOOKIE POV

I shook all thoughts of Appius Livius Ocella from my head as I turned onto the rocky driveway that Eric had purchased for me even *before* Hallow's spell.

It had been a “token of love that could be couched in the practical” Pam had told me. She'd also told me that Eric had planned to write the driveway off as “a necessity for an asset” as if using the term “asset” would show all others that I wasn't important to him.

The *other* Eric, it had seemed, had always been interested in making sure that my importance to him and my potential importance to the Supernatural world was obscured—at least in the perceptions of others.

It made me love my husband even more. It made me appreciate the other Eric more too.

I got out of the car and hurried toward the back door—though I had no fear. I could sense a Were guard in the woods—supplied by Pam, of course. Similarly, Bubba or Thalia often patrolled the woods at night.



No—I did not hurry out of necessity or because of danger. I was anxious to see my husband, even though he was still dead for the day.

I smiled as I bounded up the stairs. Eric had literally demolished the upstairs of the house two and a half weeks before—as a wedding gift. And then—after having observed one of Alcide’s crews for about half a night, he had made for us a large, light-tight suite, complete with a luxurious bathroom. It had taken him only two night; needless to say, I’d been amazed by the speed of his work!

The thing I liked most about the suite was that I could be with my husband during the daytime. There was no more need for the little cubby—though it was still around for guests.

Wanting to be close to him, I stripped and curled myself against his cold body. He felt like heaven against my sore muscles.

We’d spent about an hour one night arguing about whether or not I should continue to work. In many ways, Eric was a Viking man—as in straight out of that era. And he felt like my work in the home was more than enough contribution to the household. I’d argued that I needed consistent contact with humans to keep my shields strong. We’d compromised on the idea of day shifts.

We’d compromised again when he’d decided that forming his own demolition company would be more fulfilling than working for someone else. He’d asked me if I would be the “day manager” for his new business once it was up and running. In that way, I would be able to practice my shields with humans and Weres, but would be out of a situation that was often unpleasant for me.

He was right. Working at Merlotte's was often unpleasant. So I'd agreed.

After that, he'd begun to call his new brain-child "our business."

For once, I didn't feel like a dead weight—pardon the pun—when it came to a set of big plans. As Eric had been making them, I'd discovered that I had a decent head for business and had even offered quite a few ideas. I was intending to take some business courses, too—so that I could offer even more.

I smiled. I was excited about the new business—excited about being a true partner in it. Like Eric himself, it was a gift.

Until the new venture was open and flourishing, however, I had decided to continue working at Merlotte's. But I would soon approach Sam about cutting out a couple of shifts a week since Eric and my household was now a two-income one. I sighed. I'm sure Sam was going to shit a few more bricks when I changed my schedule again, but he could just add them to his collection.

I smiled as I thought of all Eric had already done to "provide for me." My box freezer was literally teeming with meat from the animals that Eric had hunted. He truly was a Viking through and through, and he'd quickly "replenished the stores," as he'd put it. Not only had he known how to field dress the animals, but he'd also skinned them and cut the meat into steaks and such that even Jason had been impressed by. In fact, I had enough pheasant, quail, wild boar, and venison to serve as my protein for a long time.

In addition, the house itself had never looked better—at least not during my lifetime. With only a little guidance concerning modern tools from Alcide and the Internet, Eric was

on his way to being a carpentry wizard. He took pride in the home in a way that even Gran might have envied, and he was always repairing or improving something.

“Why have I awoken to you sad, min kära?” he asked as he turned to face me.

“I was thinking about Gran. She would have loved you.”

He grinned. “Yes. I *am* a good husband,” he said unabashedly.

I giggled. “That you are.”

“Speaking of which,” he leered. “I believe that it is part of my obligation to come to ‘know’ your body even more tonight.”

I felt my heat rising, and I welcomed his cool as we made love.

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**FEBRUARY 11, 2005 (SIX NIGHTS LATER, AN HOUR AFTER SUNDOWN)**

**SOOKIE POV**

Our fingers were thread together—wedding ring to wedding ring.

“A man would not have had a ring in my time,” he said of the band of gold I’d gotten to match the band he’d given me.

“Don’t you like it?” I asked. I knew that he did. We’d bonded on our wedding night—as in, formed the final part of our permanent blood bond (which Pam had needed to explain to us). Thus, I knew that he was happy to wear the ring.

“Hmm . . . . Are you asking if I *like* being claimed?” he asked teasingly.

“Do you?” I teased back.

“Only by you,” he responded before kissing me hard.

God, I loved his kisses.

“So—do you have work tonight?” I asked him.

“Yes,” he responded, “but I just have to pull up the existing tile from a small bathroom. The job is scheduled for 4:00 a.m. It won’t take long.”

“Mmm,” I moaned. “You’ll want a bath after pulling up all those tiles.”

“But not alone,” he growled as he kissed my neck.

He never did like to bathe alone, and since I didn’t have to work the next day, I could stay up and have it ready for him.

We were interrupted from having a pre-bath shower by a knock on the door.

I had modified my schedule several weeks before, so it wasn’t “late” for the visit, though it was after midnight. I tended to sleep from about 3:30 a.m. to 9:30 a.m. each day; six hours was plenty of sleep for me, given the fact that I was regularly taking Eric’s blood. And I needed to be at Merlotte’s by 10:30 a.m. on the days I worked.

“Two vampires,” I said, using my extra sense to identify the voids.

“Pam and Bill,” Eric reported, though the second name was said sourly.

Eric had not warmed to our neighbor—not that I blamed him. Bill hadn’t been around much that I’d seen, though Eric had reported that he was often in his home across the cemetery. In fact, I’d seen Bill only once since he’d returned from Peru. He’d brought Eric and me a wedding gift—a set of *silver* silverware, a customary Southern gift but, *perhaps*, a figurative stab at Eric.

I wasn’t sure. Bill had seemed sincere when he’d given us the gift.

Regardless, Eric was always a pragmatist. Thus, he'd taught me how each item in the set could be used as a weapon against a vampire. How he knew the knowledge that he relayed, I didn't know. Nor did I want to. I simply listened and I learned.

As it turned out, Bill's gift had been practical. But it would never grace the Stackhouse-Northman table.

Despite the unwelcome visitor and the slightly less unwelcome visitor, Eric knew how I was. He immediately put on jeans and a T-shirt.

"I will get the door and make sure they have TrueBloods," he assured, kissing my forehead.

I nodded and raised my lips to nick his chin. I appreciated that he knew me so well. Some might call my husband "pussy-whipped," but I tended to think that they would be only the most ignorant of people—those who didn't think men could be polite without suddenly becoming "pussies." That very thought revolted me, for I knew that Eric was *all* man.

He was the modern, and he was the ancient. A perfect mix.

And Eric didn't apologize or hide from his desire to make me happy, just as I didn't shy away from a complementary desire to make him happy. Moreover, he recalled the part of his Viking heritage that would welcome and ally. And—even if he disliked Bill—he did regard his child as an ally.

I walked down the stairs only minutes after Eric had—having put on sweats and pulled my hair into a loose pony-tail.

I could tell from the somber faces of our visitors that *much* was wrong. Eric was waiting for me on the couch, and I went to sit next to my husband.

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## BILL POV

I'd always had a gift for glamour. I had no problem glamouring humans or Weres—even from the start of my second life. The only exception had been Sookie.

I'd grown to love her. And I loved her still, but I could tell that she was happy with the Viking.

Content.

Her life was “right” for her, and I was getting ready to take that away from her.

I hated myself all the more for it.

My vampire nature made me desire to kill Eric Northman—especially now that he was more “vulnerable”—for he had the woman I still wanted.

As for the human nature I had left?

Well—it just wanted to thank Eric.

Pam and I had tried hard to keep the couple in front of us insulated. Hell—I would likely be flayed and staked for the lies I'd told to Sophie-Anne during the previous month. But I would do it all again—just to enjoy seeing the light that had been in Sookie's eyes during her time with the vampire next to her.

He was good for her—perfect—in ways that I never could have been.

I regretted that I'd betrayed Sookie, but my fate where she was concerned had been set from the very day that I had introduced Sophie-Anne to her "very special human," Hadley.

No. It had been set from the day I became the Queen's procurer.

What vampire of my age would have turned down a position in Sophie-Anne's court—especially since that position had assured that I could remain somewhat independent of my maker? I'd simply never allowed what lingered of my moral compass "to point" as I'd procured the things—the people—that Sophie-Anne had asked for.

And I'd never concerned myself with their fates after I'd delivered them. I knew that some lived and some died.

But—at least—*some* lived.

With Lorena, I'd killed almost every night—sometimes many times a night. Thus, providing the Queen of Louisiana with the tasty morsels she desired every week or so was a downright cleansing of my soul!

When Sophie-Anne had asked me to secure Sookie—someone who was *not* to be killed but to be "used" for her gift—I'd felt almost "saintly." This time, I was *assured* that my gift of glamour and my skill at procurement would not lead to death.

I'd been grateful.

And then I'd met my "mark."

Sookie Stackhouse.

Honest. Brave.

And completely innocent.

I'd fallen in love with her early on in our association—at least as much as I was still capable of love.

However, the best I'd been able to do for Sookie had been to delay the inevitable, but—in so doing—I'd inadvertently put her in the path of the vampire she'd made her husband.

In Vermont.

Where *I'd* wanted to make her *my* wife.

Pipe dreams.

I thought of my human wife, Sarah—and of the life I'd shared with her once upon a time. Expecting two soul mates in a lifetime—even a vampire lifetime—was expecting too much, apparently.

In truth, I knew that I was not Sookie's soul mate. Our relationship had been based on lies, and Sookie was a truth-teller. I sighed. Ironically, my chance with Sookie had dried up at the same point in time that I'd concentrated 90% of my attentions upon the Queen's database, a deliberate act on my part to divert attention away from Sookie.

Not surprisingly, my change of attention had caused Sookie to question our relationship too. Because of the tie between my blood and hers, I'd known that Sookie was becoming unhappy—well before Lorena had called me. She'd felt ignored and pushed aside.

If I was proud of one thing I'd done, it was this: the part of me—the part that was still moral—had pushed Sookie to the side on purpose. The “good” part of me had made sure that Eric was left as her custodian when I had to go to Lorena.



I was a fucked up kind of matchmaker.

Indeed, I could have given myself a little credit for Sookie's happiness. But I did not. I knew I deserved no credit—no forgiveness.

Vampire instincts to the side, I'd raped Sookie in the trunk of the very car she'd saved me with.

I'd violated her.

If not for Eric tearing into that trunk, I would have killed her.

I'd seen his face in that moment, and it had sobered me of my bloodlust.

I'd known from his expression right away that he was in love with her.

He'd not killed me for one reason only: that love.

I was lucky to be alive—still undead.

From the moment I'd regained an ounce of myself, I'd sworn to the God of my humanity that I would do whatever I could to protect her and to serve him—come what may. I owed *both* of them my life.

So—yes—I might have been risking torture and death at the hands of my queen, but I didn't give a fuck. And—yes—I had to stand by and watch Sookie be with another man, but I knew *he* deserved her. Thus, I had worked with Pam—more like followed her orders—for the last month. And I had kept my eyes opened for trouble. I had lied to Queen Sophie-Anne and her child, Andre, multiple times. I had opened my home to Thalia and Bubba. I had started a version of the database that Pam and I intended to use to manipulate, blackmail, or destroy anyone who threatened the bubble around Sookie and *her* Eric. I'd glamourised

humans to think they'd seen Eric—the Sheriff—at Fangtasia. Basically, I'd done whatever Pam had deemed necessary.

But it had all been for naught.

For there was one force that Pam and I couldn't protect them from.

## CHAPTER 05: CHOICES WILL SHOW

“It is our choices... that show what we truly are, far more than our abilities.” —J. K. Rowling

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### SOOKIE POV

“The night has come when you will hate me fully,” Bill said matter-of-factly, looking me straight in the eye.

“What?” I asked.

“The full truth can no longer be held in, Eric,” Pam added, looking at her maker sadly.

My stomach fell into a pit, and I sank into Eric’s side.

I had a very strong feeling that the time bomb connected to our life was about to explode.

“What do you have to say, Bill?” Eric asked, saving me from having to ask. My husband was sending me strength through our bond, even as he was attempting to hide his own anxiety. I appreciated both gestures of love, and I sent him my strength and comfort in return. Our fingers were locked together as we prepared to listen to Bill’s tale.

“I was—even after I moved here—Queen Sophie-Anne’s procurer,” Bill began.

“A procurer is someone who secures donors and interesting humans for a monarch,” Pam clarified for both Eric and me.

I felt all my muscles tightening and my breath getting caught in my lungs. Eric rubbed circles on my back.

“Continue, Bill,” Pam ordered.

Bill nodded and sighed.

“Your cousin was the first to mention you, Sookie,” he said.

“Hadley?”

“Yes. I found her in a haze of drugs and nearly dead, but she smelled lovely. She was just the kind of pet that the queen likes.”

“Pet?” I squeaked out.

Bill nodded. “Hadley soon became the Queen’s favorite pet because of her delicious blood, but not even blood could cover up her lack of education and interesting ideas. Thus, Sophie-Anne was quickly becoming annoyed with her—bored. However, Hadley was smart enough to regale the queen with stories of her interesting family.”

“My wife’s telepathy,” Eric seethed.

Bill nodded in confirmation. “Hadley was not above exaggeration, so the queen asked me to come here to confirm Sookie’s status. The situation, however, was tenuous.”

“Because of me? My *former* self?” Eric ventured.

“Indeed,” Bill confirmed, trying to ignore the tears that had risen into my eyes as I came to understand the implications of all he was saying.

“The queen agreed—long ago—not to put a toe into your Area without your knowledge and approval,” Pam supplied for Eric. “The consequence would have been your taking her throne. She has kept to that agreement for decades.”

“Could *he* have done that? Taken her crown?” Eric asked, speaking of his former self.

“Hell yes,” Pam returned, even as Bill responded, “Likely.”

“I was sent to assess Sookie’s talents and to bring her to the queen,” Bill continued, “preferably voluntarily. But, ultimately, by any means necessary.”

I gasped and let out a sob as Eric growled.

“I loved you *before* we had sex for the first time,” Bill said, as if hoping to allay my horror and Eric’s wrath. “And that fact makes my continued dishonesty prey upon my mind all the more,” he added. “So I *do* suffer.”

“So you should,” Eric growled uncharitably.

I wasn’t feeling charitable either; in fact, I wanted to rescind his invitation. And I could tell from the bond that Eric wanted to kill Bill. My husband was holding back for me. And I was holding back because I knew Bill had more to tell.

“The database idea I came up with was a good diversion from you,” Bill continued. “The queen didn’t want it worked on in her court, lest it become known widely, so as long as I could report that you and I were together, she was satisfied. But then Lorena called . . .,” he said, his voice trailing off and sounding hollow.

Somewhere along the line, I’d begun to sob quietly and Eric had pulled me against his body—protectively. “The Rattray attack?” I asked, needing to know how far Bill’s procurement strategies had gone.

“Staged,” Bill admitted shamefully. “Both of the attacks were staged. I wanted my blood in you so that I could influence you—since glamour didn’t work.”

“Did you?” I asked. “Did you influence me with it?”

“Yes,” he confessed. “As much as I was able. I did all that I could to soften your heart towards me. I would have lost all chance with you after the incident with Malcolm’s

nest had I not had blood in you.” He glanced at Eric and then at me again. “Before the Longshadow incident, I gave you more blood—not to make you stronger for the night, as I said at the time, but to make sure I stayed in you affections,” he added, glancing back at Eric.

I heard my husband’s fangs go down, but I stilled him by leaning into him even more. Even though Eric’s deadliest weapons were ready to attack, his touch was still gentle.

Bill closed his eyes for a moment; when he opened them, they were rimmed with red. “I deserve your wrath,” he said, looking contritely at first Eric and then me. “I did horrible things to you, and my queen’s orders were only the beginning of the pain I caused you,” he acknowledged, reminding me of the incident in the trunk.

I cringed, and Eric held me.

“My life is yours,” Bill said softly.

“He has been lying to the queen for a month,” Pam relayed.

“Explain,” Eric ordered.

“I initially told Sophie-Anne that you were on vacation when Hallow placed you under her spell,” the vampiress informed.

“When the witch made me—*me!*” Eric corrected.

“Yes,” Pam said.

“And what have you done in regards to Sophie-Anne since then?” Eric asked.

I looked from my husband to Pam. He and I had asked several times what had happened with Eric’s Sheriff job. She had told us again and again that “things had been

taken care of” and that she’d taken over as Sheriff of Area 5. She’d also told us that the queen was fine with it.

“I can forge your signature perfectly,” Pam answered. “And the vampires of Area 5 are loyal to you—and to me.”

“You are *still* covering for me,” Eric stated agitatedly. “Covering up my memory loss.”

“Of course I am! All the work is getting done—more efficiently than before, I might add. Alcide’s people are sworn to secrecy. Fangtasia’s profits are holding. And you always sent me to Sheriffs’ meetings anyway,” Pam said.

“And Sookie?” Eric asked.

“The queen has asked questions—of course,” Bill said. “I’ve informed her that I’m still attempting to win back her favor.

“Bill told her that you two had wed, though he said it was in complete secret. That put a real set of brakes on Sophie-Anne’s plans for Sookie, given the combination of her previous deal with you and the human ceremony,” Pam smirked.

“But the situation has changed,” Bill added gravely.

“Changed?” I asked, intuiting that the next words spoken would alter my life.

“Yes,” Pam said sadly. “We learned tonight from Rasul—a spy Eric installed in the queen’s court—that Sophie-Anne has learned of Eric’s memory loss. And she has called in someone who can control Eric.”

I felt my stomach drop. I knew whom Pam was referring to without asking.

Appius Livius Ocella!

Eric and I both sat in stunned silence as Pam recounted a similar tale for Eric as the one she'd recounted to me in the car a month before.

She told him about Ocella and his treatment of the *other* Eric, though she left out many of the details. She also told him about the true nature of Hallow's spell.

We were all silent for a while after that as my Eric digested everything.

"My maker is coming here to hurt me?" he finally asked, sounding dumbfounded.

"No," Pam corrected. "He is coming to take *everything* from you—to break you. And he will hurt you and Sookie more than even Hallow's spell coming to fruition would." The vampiress looked agonized. "The intelligence I've gathered says Ocella will be arriving in Louisiana tomorrow night—though I'm not sure at what time."

"Tomorrow?" I gasped.

"We are lucky Rasul gave us any warning at all," Pam commented. "There is still time to," she paused, "make choices."

"We'll run," Eric tried, sounding scared and desperate.

"We can't," I responded. "He's your maker. He can track you—anywhere. He's probably just keeping your bond closed because he wants to surprise you—catch you off-guard."

"I'm sorry, master," Pam said contritely. "I didn't foresee this possibility. But Sophie-Anne wants Sookie with a covetousness I'd not counted upon. And she is willing to sacrifice *you* to get her."

"Oh, God, Eric!" I cried out in agony as I realized that there was only one thing that might save my husband from his maker: Hallow's spell.



He held me tighter.

“We’ll fight him,” my Viking growled.

“Your maker is old enough to defeat all of us—even if we worked together,” Bill reasoned. “Even with the help of all the Area 5 vampires and Weres, he would likely win.”

“Plus, he will be able to order you to do anything he wants,” Pam added sadly.

Again, there were several moments of silence.

“He’ll order me to kill Sookie,” Eric gasped, as his body literally shook against mine.

“No,” Pam said with a mixture of sadness and resolution. “That would be too quick. Plus, he will have had instructions from the Queen.” She paused, as if gathering her composure, and then went on resolutely. “Ocella will likely order you *only* to hurt her. His goal will be to break you again—to break this ‘new’ you. And he *will* too,” Pam said sadly.

“He knows that you are innately good, and that goodness is what he will attack.”

“Change him back,” I said suddenly, even though the very words broke my heart.

“The old Eric! Ocella won’t care about him—right? *That* Eric won’t be intriguing—right! That Eric’s already broken! I’ll go to the queen voluntarily—tonight!”

“No!” Eric yelled.

I looked up at him and then I placed myself completely into his arms, hugging him close. “Eric, this is the only way! Don’t you see? I can’t let him hurt you like he did before! I can’t! I love you too much!”

“I will be hurt *more* if I lose you—lose my memories of you!” he said back fiercely.

“Pam told us that.”

“I love you!” I told my husband. “I would do anything for you. But this life that we’ve built—we can’t keep it anymore!” I felt my heart break further. “But we *can* keep you safe from Ocella. I need to know that you are not under his thumb.”

“And I cannot let you be under the queen’s thumb!” he said just as fiercely. He looked at Pam. “She’s my bonded. Doesn’t that count for anything?”

“Your maker can override a bond with a human,” Pam said sadly. “He can even,” she paused, “claim her for himself.”

“Oh Gods!” Eric cried out, red tears falling from his eyes. “No!”

“There is an elder witch on her way here,” Pam said with sadness and maybe a trace of hope. “I’ve had her working on ways to counteract Hallow’s spell since I learned of all its parts. Octavia is bringing all she needs to sever your bond so that Ocella *cannot* simply take Sookie. After that, she will undo Hallow’s spell, setting into motion the true curse.”

“No!” Eric yelled. “I won’t have it!”

“Octavia believes that she’s found a way to mitigate the effects. She believes . . .”

“I still won’t have it!” Eric interrupted his child.

“Let her talk,” I said, my voice sounding hollow. “Please.”

Eric growled, but was silent as Pam explained.

“Hallow’s spell is complicated, but Octavia thinks she can prevent you from despising the desire of your heart—Sookie. She thinks that she can trick the spell into letting you have your memories back at some point—given the right trigger.”

“What trigger?” I asked, my voice croaking with a sob.

“She doesn’t know,” Pam said helplessly. “It could be a scent. A touch. Anything. But the important part would be that Eric would not hate you. And that means that he would not tear himself apart. He would not be driven insane.”

“Good enough,” I said decidedly.

“Sookie,” he protested.

“As miserable as you will both be,” Pam said sadly, “I see no other way to keep Ocella from destroying you both even more. We have to let loose the rest of Hallow’s curse.”

“I’ll be gone,” Eric said hauntingly. “I’ll be dead.”

“No,” I said insistently, looking up at him. “You are inside of *him*. I know it. It took *his* heart—his heart’s desire—to make you come to me. Right? If Octavia can do what she says, we might find our way back to each other again. And, even if she can’t, you’d be safe from Ocella.”

“What of you?” Eric asked. “Ocella could still hurt you.”

“We think he’ll quickly lose interest in Sookie after he discovers that you have severed your bond and broken Hallow’s spell,” Pam said. “We will simply make him believe that breaking the bond was your idea—*after* Hallow’s memory spell was lifted. Plus, Ocella won’t want to alienate the queen.”

“What if he learns the truth—that we are doing all this to try to stop him from hurting Eric?” I asked.

“It might not matter to him,” Pam conveyed. “Regardless, I can think of no other way to prevent Ocella from doing maximum damage to you both.”

Eric shook his head. “But I will be trapped in him.”

I shrugged even as more tears fell. “Maybe. But I won’t let you *stay* trapped. I promise.”

Everyone knew the moment that Eric relented. Even if they couldn’t hear my heart snapping in two, they saw the Viking’s shoulders slump.

The room was silent for several minutes after that.

“Bubba will claim you,” Pam said to me, “after the bond is gone. Bill’s blood is already gone from you, and he would be a bad choice anyway. So would I,” she added.

“Bubba?” I asked.

“He’s not affiliated with a state and *everyone* protects him,” Pam informed. “In fact, the Supernatural Council has a special edict in place to kill anyone who harms him, which is why the Mississippi vampires so quickly changed their plans when they’d learned they had him.” She paused. “He’ll give you blood after your bond with Eric is broken.”

“And Bubba is also a good choice because he will have no romantic inclinations towards you,” Bill added.

“He *is* a good choice,” I assured. I had to hand it to Pam and Bill. They were doing what they could to limit the threats all around us. I just hoped that it worked to save Eric.

“When will the witch be here?” I asked.

“4:00 a.m.,” Pam responded. “Bubba is due by 5:00 a.m.”

It was two o’clock.

“Leave us until 4:00 a.m. then?” I requested of Pam and Bill.

Looking defeated, they did. I turned to look at my husband and even tried to give him a smile of comfort.

I'd had him more than a month. I'd been as happy as a person could be for more than a month.

It was more happiness than I'd ever thought I'd get—more than I'd ever thought I'd deserved before. And *his* life—both of them—meant more to me than mine.

So I needed to be strong—strong for him—until he was gone.

## CHAPTER 06: PROMISE ME

“Promise me you’ll always remember: You’re braver than you believe, and stronger than you seem, and smarter than you think.”—A. A. Milne

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### ERIC POV

I saw her working hard to steel herself, to be strong—for me. She even managed to muster a smile. Again, for me. But I felt her sorrow, just as I felt my own.

The bond could not lie.

At least until it was gone.

Sookie would be losing a husband—a helpmeet. I found that I could remember my human days, just not my vampire life. My human memories seemed clear. A thousand years before, I’d seen the expression that was now on her face; it was the one that wives would give to their wounded husbands when they were brought back—near-death—to my human village. If they didn’t die in battle, it was amazing how long the men would cling to life. They would almost always make it home. Once there, the wives always managed to smile at them, to comfort them, and to hold them as they passed into the halls of the dead.

Only after their deaths would the wives disappear into the woods for a while. I now knew that they did that so that they could break down. As strong and as brave as any woman in my human time—or any other time I knew about—Sookie was holding herself together.

“We have pictures, Eric,” she tried to comfort, “pictures of our wedding—pictures of our life. And I’ll carry our memories—always. Once Ocella is gone, I’ll give them all to you,” she swore.

“But *I* will be gone,” I returned. From the way they stung, I could tell that my eyes were rimming with red tears. I felt as if I were facing a battle that would most certainly kill me. I had a choice: to fall on my own sword or to let my enemy torture me and harm the one I loved the most.

The choice was made. I would fall on my sword—though not fighting Ocella went against my instincts. However, there was nothing to be done for it. Pam had told us of the horrors my maker had perpetrated against the other “me” in the past; in fact, I could tell that she’d held back. Still, I would gladly suffer them if I could return to my wife at the end of them. But then Pam had said the two things that had made that impossible: first, Ocella could—as my maker—command me to harm Sookie; second, he could simply demand her for himself.

Not. Going. To. Happen.

I would rather meet the fucking sun!

So—yes—I would fall on my sword.

“I will be gone,” I said again, though my previous words still seemed to be echoing in the room.

“No. You’re a part of the other Eric,” Sookie said, likely trying to convince us both. “I *know* it. Just a lost part. He *might* remember eventually. Octavia is going to do whatever she can to make that happen. And then you will come back to me.”

I didn't want to point out the fact that we didn't know this witch—Octavia. I didn't want to point out the fact that I didn't trust her. I had cause *not* to trust witches, after all. But I wouldn't take away the hope that Sookie would have to carry for the both of us once I was gone.

“I will not have the memories of our life, Sookie. *I* will be lost to you. Our marriage. *Us*. We will be no more,” I said sadly, feeling blood slip from my eyes.

“We'll both be *safe* though—at least safer from Ocella. You'll be making me safe,” she said, knowing those words would comfort me.

And they did.

I knew that no additional conversation would change what was to be, so I picked my wife up into my arms and carried her to our bed.

There, we made love for the last time.

And then we held each other, waiting for our fate.

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## SOOKIE POV

Octavia Fant was a beautiful black woman of about seventy years old. And, from her accent, I could tell that she was Bayou born and bred.

Power emanated from her in waves, and she “took charge” as soon as she arrived at my and Eric's home.

Soon to be just my house again.

Gran's house.



Octavia took one look at Eric and me and cursed under her breath, mumbling something about it being harder to break a bond when it was based upon love.

Then, she sent Bill and Pam off to get several ingredients she would need for her spell.

With Eric and me following, she walked to the hearth of the home and nodded her head before closing her eyes. “There is magic here already,” she said enigmatically. “It has agreed to help me in my efforts.”

She turned around to face Eric and me. Her eyes were kind, but I could tell that she wasn’t the kind of woman who would give false hope. Or pull punches.

For what felt like the millionth time on a night that had begun so happily, my stomach dropped.

“Pam gave me Hallow’s spell book only a month ago, and to undo a spell as complicated as the one you have fallen under,” she said, looking up at Eric, “I would have to know all of the intricacies of her magic. I have learned the logic and the creativity woven into her simpler spells, but it would take me years to truly understand the nuances of her most complex curses.”

“What are you saying?” Eric asked.

“I cannot undo what Hallow has done to you,” she said pityingly, but then she smiled a little. “But like the third fairy in the “Sleeping Beauty” tome, I can mitigate the curse. Hallow’s curse is that the man you are *right now* will be destroyed fully—annihilated so completely that he will be like broken glass in your mind. After the curse comes to full fruition, those shards will slowly cut away at the rest of you—forever harming you as you are

compelled to touch them. Compelled to try to remember what you long for so much. And—yes—you will feel them; you will understand them as the agents of your pain—but you will be able to do *nothing* to stop yourself from trying to piece them together. But that will be impossible. And you will believe with complete certainty that each shard—each pain—is being caused by Sookie. You will likely feel that hurting her or killing her will stop your own pain, but it will make it worse. You will eventually lose yourself and likely meet the sun—if you aren't killed before then.

I gasped, hearing the spell described in such a horrible way.

“I believe that the only loophole in Hallow’s spell is *you*,” Octavia continued, looking at Eric pointedly. “*This* you. Hallow never could have imagined that *your* life would become so full and vibrant. She intended to shatter you and set the true curse upon the *other* you within a week of the initial spell. But she was unable to do so.”

She closed her eyes and smiled. “Yes—you are a fully formed person now—with dreams and hopes and love. Those things are tangible, and I believe I can use magic to insulate them—insulate you—from Hallow’s curse. I am hoping that my magic will ensure that *you* don’t shatter once Hallow’s spell is completed.

“Will the *other* me be able to remember *this* me?” Eric asked.

“Like I told your progeny, I do not know. My magic will do what it can, but to protect you, I will have to hide you in a sense—send you to the deepest recesses of a vast vampire mind which has been collecting memories for a thousand years. The memory of *this* you could remain trapped.”

“But as long as he’s not destroyed,” I asked hopefully, “the curse won’t rip him apart?”

“It will still do damage,” Octavia said seriously. “He will still feel longing for a life that he cannot quite touch, and he will know that you are at the center of that life. He will be frustrated by not remembering; his feelings will seem foreign—wrong. You see, that Eric will not remember forming those feelings.”

“So he won’t trust them,” I sighed.

“Certainly not at first,” Octavia acknowledged. “Plus, I will literally be locking a part of Eric away from himself. He will miss that part even if he doesn’t understand what is missing.”

I gripped *my* Eric’s hand tighter, wondering how the “old” Eric would change once he lost the things that made up my husband.

Seeing my worry, Octavia tried to allay my fears. “That Eric will still be the man he was before; his personality won’t change completely,” she assured.

“But it will be altered?” Eric asked.

Octavia nodded. “Yes. Do you know anything about the drugs humans take for depression?”

Both Eric and I shook our heads. “No,” he said.

“They work—in a way—to hinder our strongest reactions, both good and bad. The people on them still *feel*. They can still be happy and sad—but just not as happy. Just not as sad,” she explained. “And many people dislike this sensation, for they sense that their reactions are not quite,” she paused, “*right*.”

She smiled gently. “But with time—who knows? And maybe *you* will eventually float to the surface of *his* mind,” the witch told my husband. “If something unlocks *you*, then he will feel complete again. I cannot tell you how the knowledge of this life will affect him, however,” she added closing her eyes.

Eric pulled me closer to his side and then looked down at me. “I will remember loving you, and I *will* return to this home—to this hearth. I swear it,” he vowed with certainty.

I clung to him as he embraced me as if our very lives depended upon our touch.

After a few moments, Octavia spoke. “The things that Pam and Bill are getting for me will put you to sleep, Sookie. Otherwise, the breaking of the bond would be very painful because there is much love between you two—much connection. I’m afraid you would not survive the pain.”

“Good,” Eric said firmly. “It is good that Sookie will not have to feel the pain of it.”

“But what about Eric?” I asked. “Can’t you wait for him to die for the day?”

Octavia shook her head. “No. I will need him awake so that I can use my magic to insulate *him* before I finish Hallow’s curse.”

Just then, Pam and Bill arrived with their supplies. Bubba was in tow.

“Hi, Mister Eric. Miss Sookie,” Bubba said politely. If he would have had a cap, he would have tipped it.

Octavia looked at Bill and then Pam. “Take those things into the kitchen.” The two complied without argument.

She turned softer eyes toward Bubba. “We met once.”

The vampire smiled and nodded. “I remember. My maker couldn’t figure out why I was sick. And you were the one that told him that I’d do better with animal blood to drink. And I’ve felt just fine ever since then—just as long as I don’t drink too much human blood or the new TrueBlood.”

The witch smiled. “Do you have a place to stay for the day?”

Bubba looked a little confused and then shrugged.

“You will stay with me, Bubba,” Bill said as he and Pam came back into the living room.

Octavia nodded. “Come here at first dark tomorrow and exchange blood with Sookie.”

Bubba nodded.

“You don’t mind—do you?” I had the presence of mind to ask Bubba.

“Not at all!” Bubba said quickly and kindly. “I can protect you better this way—you know. I hope you don’t mind if I just take a sip of your blood though—and I’ll have to leave to find a cat right after. Bad taste and all.”

I chuckled a little, though I certainly felt no mirth. “Thank you, Bubba,” I said, reaching out to pat his arm.

Octavia looked at me and then at Eric. “I will need fifteen minutes to construct Sookie’s tonic. Then we must get started. You should go to your light-tight room.”

She didn’t say that we should also say our goodbyes.

She didn’t need to.

## ERIC POV

“Promise me you’ll open our business—*your* business now?” I asked her. Knowing that she would have means without having to be tied to the shifter made me feel marginally better. I didn’t know Sam Merlotte well enough to hate him, and I knew my bonded wife too well to expend any jealousy where he was concerned. But I didn’t like how his thoughts made Sookie feel. And I didn’t like the thought of her continued work in a place where she was not appreciated—where she could not shine and flourish.

“Without you to do the heavy lifting?” she asked me, trying to joke a little, despite the fact that she was shaking like a leaf.

“Alcide knows people, and you’ll have funds.”

“No, Eric,” she reminded softly, “I won’t.”

I knew that she’d always lived month-to-month, paycheck-to-paycheck, with ends sometimes not quite meeting. With my work, I had helped to alleviate her burdens. And we had lived simply, so even though I’d been working only a month, we’d already saved a little money. But I had promised to care for her for her *whole* life. I had vowed this to both her and to her family. And I aimed to fulfill that promise.

“Pam set up an account a month ago—for *us*,” I said. “But it was the money of the *other* me, so I didn’t want to use it.”

“Eric, I don’t . . . .”

I interrupted. “No, Sookie. On this I will be firm. I know you are modern. And I, too, wanted to do things on our own—*together*—without using what the other Eric had. But I

made vows to you. If I had died in war during my human days, my family would have stepped in to make sure you had all you needed.”

“Eric . . .,” she started again.

Again, I interrupted. “I will have Pam take my name off the account. There is enough money in it for you to begin the company and to get out of waitressing. I know it hurts you to keep that job. I know of the headaches you get from working evening shifts. Please agree with this.”

She was still shaking her head, so I kept going.

“Or—don’t open the company. Do something else with the money,” I begged. “Pam told me that the other me is very wealthy, so he won’t miss the money. Please. Do this for me—for yourself. For us. Do anything you wish with the money. Even if it’s just keeping your day shifts or not having to worry again about how to make ends meet. Use it that way. Promise me!” I insisted. “It’s the only consolation I will have as I,” I paused, “disappear.”

“You won’t disappear,” Sookie insisted, trying to sound confident. “Octavia said that you’ll still be inside of him and that he might remember. Either way, you won’t be gone!” she cried.

“All the more reason to use the account,” I said gently. “Anyway,” I added, thumbing away tears that were now flowing freely from her eyes. “Aren’t wives supposed to obey husbands?”

“No,” she said, her lip quivering. “We are supposed to cherish them. But I agree to use the account—for you.”

“Thank you,” I said, feeling relief. “I’m sorry I am leaving you. I’m sorry that this curse is affecting you as much as it is affecting me. I’m sorry that my maker is endangering you as he is me.”

“Never be sorry!” she said fiercely. “You gave me my best life, Eric,” she choked out, “my heart’s desire. No matter what, it’s what I *chose*. It’s what I *choose*.”

I nodded. I could hear the witch beginning to climb the stairs. She was walking slowly. Sookie sensed her coming too, and her blue eyes filled with love and despair.

“No more night shifts at Merlotte’s. It hurts you,” I insisted.

She nodded in agreement.

“Take those classes you were talking about. The ones you can do on the computer.”

“I will,” she promised.

My emotions settled.

“I am glad I have lived this life,” I said. “I will never regret it, even if I cannot remember it. Promise me you’ll remember our life when I cannot.”

“I will,” she swore, “and as soon as Appius is gone, I’ll tell you everything. And I’ll give you all the pictures.”

“And this,” I said, taking off my wedding ring. “Keep this safe for me.”

“I promise.”



## CHAPTER 07: OVER

MARCH 11, 2005: ONE MONTH LATER

SOOKIE POV

“Time is such an odd thing,” I marveled to myself as I parked my old car near the back door of Gran’s house. The old pickup truck that Eric had bought for work still sat in its spot, but it hadn’t been driven since he’d gone.

March had come in “like a lion,” and I hurried into the house in order to escape the frigid cold and wind.

Well—at twenty degrees, it was frigid for Louisiana.

I quickly turned on some water so that I could make some hot tea.

I was still working the day shifts, but I’d changed my schedule so that I went to bed around midnight—not that I did much sleeping.

I was still looking forward to the spring, but time seemed to have slowed down. My days with Eric—my time being a wife and being happy—had passed in a blink. By contrast, all the days since he’d gone away had passed in elongated spurts of work followed by even longer periods of loneliness at home.

Simply put, the house seemed dead without the dead man living in it.

With the mechanical movements of a human who’d decided to stay alive merely out of habit, I placed a bag of tea into a cup and waited for the kettle to hiss.

Meanwhile, I took off the cranberry red coat that had been a gift from the “new-old” Eric. I clung to that coat with every hope in my body. Did it mean that a little of him had

remembered me? Truly cared for me? I knew from Pam that even that “old” Eric had wanted me—had had affection for me. But Eric had also been the king of suppression—out of necessity.

The coat had arrived two days after he’d left. How he’d managed to send it without Ocella knowing, I didn’t know. But I truly doubted his maker would have allowed the gesture.

There had been a card.

*Your outerwear is unacceptable. -E.*

My own Eric hadn’t been worldly enough to notice the threadbare condition of my coat. He’d not had experience with new fashions or fine materials. To him, my coat had been perfectly fine—probably a lot more luxurious than the “coats” that his human kin had worn.

But the “real” Eric noticed such things.

Of course, I wore the new coat. And I hoped like hell that the “new-old Eric” would remember me eventually.

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**FEBRUARY 12, 2005 (1 MONTH EARLIER—THE NIGHT AFTER THE CURSE WAS COMPLETED)**

**ERIC POV**

To say that I woke up disoriented would suggest that I could understand *anything* about the condition in which I awoke. I did not. In a thousand years, I’d never woken up in a place I’d not be down.

But here I was in a foreign space.

I inhaled deeply.

I smelled *me*—everywhere.

Sookie Stackhouse—everywhere.

I stood up and looked around the large bedroom. The bed I'd been in was big, and I knew right away that I'd built the frame, though I had no recollection of doing so. Still, I knew. Wood had not been worked in the Viking way for almost a millennium. It took a true Viking to know that, too.

And I was one.

I walked to the closet. I saw that half of the clothing was mine—though some of it was certainly “new” to me. I recognized garments in the other half of the closet as things Sookie had worn in my presence and knew that the rest of the clothing belonged to her too.

I looked on the dresser.

A wedding photo.

Me and her.

We looked happy.

I was lost.

A feeling within me indicated a numbness: a broken bond.

I looked frantically around the room searching for more clues, and then I stretched out my senses to assess the rest of the home.

I smelled Sookie almost directly below me. Her heart was racing, but I couldn't *feel* her at all—not in the way that the blood tie had enabled me to feel her emotions in the past.

But there was *something* there. I wanted to go to her. But I stopped myself.

My phone rang. I answered. It was Pam.

“Come to Fangtasia,” she said. “I’ll explain everything. Just. Don’t. Hurt. Sookie.”

“Hurt her? Why would I do that? And what am I doing here?” I asked, confused.

“And why do I feel as if a bond in me has died?”

“What else do you feel?” she asked cautiously.

“Confused. And I don’t fucking like it!” I growled back, tired of the feeling already.

“There was a witch’s spell,” she said.

“A witch?” I asked.

“Yes. It made you forget who you were.”

“What?”

“You have been living with Sookie for a month—without your previous memories. You married her.”

“I saw the fucking pictures!” I yelled.

“Just know this: Sookie is *not* to blame for the situation. She just took care of you while you had amnesia. And she didn’t prevent me from seeking a cure,” my child added quickly.

“And you found one?”

“Yes. And, once I did, the bond was a problem. I knew that you wouldn’t want to have a bond that you didn’t agree to. Was I wrong?”

“No,” I growled.

“For that reason, the bond that amnesiac you and Sookie made was broken when the witch’s spell was.”

I felt that Pam was holding information back. “What aren’t you telling me?” I asked.

“Sophie-Anne—she sent Bill Compton to procure Sookie months ago,” she said.

“What?” I asked angrily. “She dared to poach in my area?”

“Yes. And I’ll tell you all about it when you come in,” she added. “Just know that Sookie both protected you and then cooperated when I brought you a cure.”

“I will be there soon,” I said before hanging up. I looked down. I had on blue jeans and a T-shirt; though not a usual combination I’d choose, both garments were mine and both smelled strongly of Sookie.

It was—disconcerting.

I’d heard of memory spells before, but never those that could affect vampires. I rushed to the closet and chose clothing that smelled more of cleaning detergent. Then I put on my boots.

In addition to feeling the broken bond that I’d obviously made with Sookie at some point, I also felt a nagging sensation that I ought to be doing something other than what I was.

I didn’t like it. It was disconcerting. All of my feelings were disconcerting—especially when I thought of the telepath!

I contemplated leaving through the window, but I went downstairs instead.

Sookie was sitting at a table I didn’t recognize, but knew immediately that I’d made.

“That is a good quality table,” I commented.

She nodded in agreement, though she said nothing. Food lay untouched in front of her. And a full cup of coffee that had obviously run cold was next to the food.

“You and I married?”

Another nod.

“I stayed here while I was cursed?”

Another nod.

I found that I missed her speaking to me—the way she was always ready to challenge me.

“I fucked you?” I asked, trying to get a rise.

“Many times,” she whispered.

I was about to offer to fuck her again when that nagging feeling came back to me.

My fangs slid down as anger tore through me. “I do *not* like feeling!” I yelled.

“I know,” she whispered.

“What am I feeling?” I asked, confused as hell.

Before she could answer, I felt something else.

Something I recognized.

My eyes widened.

“What is it?” Sookie asked.

“My maker! Rescind my invitation and Pam’s! Now!” I yelled before zipping from the room and then from the house. Ocella was close—probably less than fifty miles away from me.

I flew as fast as I could toward Fangtasia, glad that he was calling me there rather than coming to me at Sookie’s—even though a tiny part of me wished that he would just kill her—since I could not do it myself. Since I’d known her, Sookie had arguably affected me a

little too much, and—now—I felt even “more” for her, though the feelings seemed alien to me.

What had the fucking witch done to me?!?

I pushed thoughts of Sookie and witches away as I began to steel myself for seeing my maker. I felt emptier and emptier with every mile I flew toward him—and away from her.

But I couldn't go back. My maker was calling.

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“On your knees, boy,” Ocella greeted as soon as I entered Fangtasia.

It was my maker's standard greeting. I still remembered it.

I still remembered not to disobey. Head lowered, I fell to my knees before him immediately.

“Look at me!” he ordered.

“Do you know me?” he asked. There was a younger vampire next to him—one who looked about fourteen but was obviously more than 100 years old.

“Of course, master,” I replied, trying to keep my voice calm, my emotions suppressed.

I felt Pam near the bar, but I didn't dare look her way. Thankfully, Fangtasia had not yet opened for the night.

I heard my maker's zipper lower.

I knew what to do when that happened too. And I did it, feeling nothing but a sense of emptiness that threatened to overwhelm me.

“Please me and I might not kill the telepath when I visit her later,” my maker said sickly.

I turned off my mind as I performed a physical act I detested.

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## THAT SAME NIGHT, TWO HOURS LATER

### SOOKIE POV

Appius Livius Ocella showed up at my house three hours after Eric had left. I felt his void. And then I heard what sounded like whizzing as he seemed to be looking around.

I was sitting on the stairs—more numb than anything else. Pam had speculated that Ocella would come. And I’d been waiting for my husband’s maker.

It looked as though he was going to make me wait a little longer as he scouted around.

I closed my eyes, reliving the night thus far. I had woken up—groggy as hell—an hour before sunset on what I had already labeled in my mind at S-Day.

As in “Sucks to be Sookie Day.”

I’d felt numb all over, though I was waiting for the pain. Octavia had said that the tonic might take a bit to wear off.

I’d gotten out of bed because I’d been too nervous to stay in it with Eric—whom I had known would be waking up without his memories of our time together. I’d used the bathroom. I’d showered. I’d made coffee. I’d made food. I’d sat at the beautiful table that Eric had made for the dining room—in one of the two chairs that had been finished. The others were still in the little work shed out back. They were half-made.



I'd waited.

Sunset had come and Eric had risen.

He'd been the Sheriff of Area 5—a jarring presence after the time I'd spent with *my* Eric.

Despite hearing a slight thud from outside, I kept my eyes closed and kept remembering.

Not surprisingly, Eric had been somewhat cold—somewhat aloof. Confused. Suspicious. I'd speculated that he was feeling the loss of his heart's desire without ever remembering that he'd had it.

I just hoped that *my* Eric was intact within him—somewhere.

So that *this* Eric could survive Hallow's true curse.

And then—my nightmare had come true as Ocella had clearly called him. I had paced for a while before my legs no longer seemed to want to work. Then I'd sat on the stairs.

Waiting.

The only interruption had been from Bubba, who had quickly come into the house to give me his blood. He'd left right after taking a drop of mine—again apologizing for needing to find something to “rinse me down.”

I had, as Eric had ordered, rescinded his invitation and then Pam's—since an invitation automatically applied to all members of a bloodline.

I'd thought that it had broken what was left of my heart to rescind my husband's welcome to our home, but I'd been wrong, for my heart seemed to be breaking anew by the minute.

There was another thud outside, this time from the front porch. Appius Livius Ocella knocked on my door at 10:03 p.m.

I steeled myself and opened the door, but I was careful to stay out of his grip.

"Are *you* the human wife of my child?" Ocella asked.

"I am," I answered, "but Eric no longer remembers our marriage."

"Oh—I know that," Ocella grinned. "But his mouth was busy, so I would like for you to explain the situation to me," he ordered.

I immediately understood the implications of Ocella's words. He'd violated Eric. However, from Pam, through Eric's commands, Ocella had likely heard everything. So I made sure that I spoke the truth, though without giving details. "Eric was cursed by a witch on the first night of January. Her name was Hallow. She took his memory, and he came here. I took him in and we fell in love while he was here. His child came last night with a cure for him. He became *himself* again and cannot remember what we had. Our bond was broken by his request," I recounted, not bothering to squelch my tears.

"You love him," Ocella leered.

"Of course," I returned. "But, like I said, he doesn't remember us."

"Still, he seems to care about what happens to you," Ocella commented.

"I am a telepath," I returned. "I helped Eric find a thief in his business. I gained him profits in Dallas. I am," I paused and let out a sob, "useful."

“I think he cares about you for more reasons than that,” Ocella replied.

“He’s always wanted to fuck me,” I said crudely.

“And did he?” Ocella asked.

“Not before he lost his memories,” I responded.

“Would you fuck him now?” he asked.

“Yes, but it would be difficult since there’s no way in hell I would invite him into this home,” I returned.

Ocella laughed heartily. “I like you. You are feisty. Would you like being a vampire?” he asked. “I could have fun with you.”

I cringed.

“Come out of the house so that I can show you just how much fun,” he tried glamouring.

“No thank you. And, just so you know, glamour doesn’t work on me,” I said, trying to keep my emotions in check. Fear and anger and despair seemed to be working very hard to replace the numbness I’d been feeling.

“A woman with manners. I like that,” Ocella chuckled. “Do you know that you are coveted by the Queen of this state?” he asked with a smirk.

“I have learned that very recently—yes.”

He inhaled deeply.

“My child’s scent is all around this place, but not inside your blood.”

“Pam’s witch eradicated my and Eric’s blood connection when she was here.”

The ancient vampire grinned.

“Did that hurt?” he asked.

“I was sedated,” I said evenly, now having to work even harder to keep my emotions in check.

Ocella looked disappointed, and for the first time, I noticed a younger vampire in the shadows.

“Don’t worry. I hurt now. I ache,” I informed.

At that Ocella smiled. “So does Eric, but he doesn’t know why. It is most,” he paused, “amusing.”

The vampire in the shadows growled as if jealous, but Ocella ignored him.

He was silent for several moments.

“The Queen had gotten my hopes up,” he said wistfully. “I’d been promised that I would find my child a blank slate. An empty canvas,” he added.

Still trying to keep my emotions from overwhelming me, I said nothing in answer to that comment.

“I would claim you myself, but I can sense that you’ve *already* been claimed by another.”

“I’m a hot commodity.”

“I could burn down this house around you, drain you, and present your dead body to Eric.”

“He would be sorry to lose an *asset*,” I said, wondering if I was telling the truth – fearing that I was. “He would be,” I paused, “disappointed.”

“You really do love him,” Ocella grinned.

“With all that I am,” I said again.

“And if I brought him *here* and flailed him alive?” he asked. “*And* set your house alit?”

“I would stay in this house and let it burn me to death while I prayed for my husband,” I answered as sobs escaped me.

“I believe you would,” he grinned. “That would hurt my child a great deal—I think.”

“He’d get over it,” I answered.

“Yes,” he said contemplatively. “I think that he would. But—tell me—would you get over losing him?” he asked.

“No. And I have lost him already,” I answered honestly.

“Yes you have.”

Ocella left Gran’s home cackling.

Truth be told, I didn’t want him to leave. I didn’t want him to return to where Eric was.

But I knew that’s where he was going.

The weight of my sorrow and my pain took me down to the floor.

## CHAPTER 08: FAIRY GODMOTHER

APRIL 11, 2005 TWO MONTHS LATER

SOOKIE POV

“Take that off,” Claudine ordered, looking at the necklace I was wearing; it held Eric’s wedding ring.

“No!” I insisted.

She shook her head. “It makes noise—when you move. Weres could hear it.”

I looked down at the necklace I’d worn since my husband had left. I wore it around my neck on the simple gold chain Eric had given me on our wedding night.

My Eric was not into “gaudy” things. He’d still had Pam help him find what he’d wanted, but he’d chosen things that would have been deemed “fine” when he was a human.

Thus I’d gotten a relatively simple, though lovely engagement/wedding ring.

And I’d received a beautiful, though certainly not gaudy gold chain on our wedding night.

I nodded at my “fairy godmother” and took off the necklace. I would be back for it.

I hated to take it off. I hardly ever did, but I had my priorities.

One simply didn’t sneak into an ancient vampire’s lair to kill him when wearing clinking jewelry, after all.

And that was just what I was going to do.

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FLASHBACK: FEBRUARY 13, 2005

## SOOKIE POV

7:00 a.m. on the day after my husband left our home found me scrubbing the oven. It didn't need the treatment, but I was scrubbing all the same.

Before the scrubbing, I'd been crying. In fact, as soon as Ocella had left, I'd broken down—all the adrenaline that had been keeping me relatively “together” had gone away as soon as my one task for the night had been completed. I'd confronted Ocella. Hopefully, I'd convinced him that I cared for Eric a great deal—and that he cared for me much less.

Octavia's tonic had worn off sometime during the demented vampire's visit, so—unsurprisingly—I'd sunk down right onto the floor in the entry way as soon as I'd closed the front door. And I'd wept.

More like convulsed.

It was several hours before I'd dragged myself to the kitchen to get a glass of water to replenish some of the liquid I'd cried out. And it was in there that I'd noticed the oven cleaner I'd bought a few days before, intending to clean the appliance on my next day off.

I had sighed with relief when I realized that that day off had come and that I wasn't expected at Merlotte's at 10:30 a.m. It was a small miracle. Of course, I wouldn't have been able to make it anyway.

That oven cleaner had seemed like both a savior and an inspiration.

I'd decided to clean in order to keep the tears at bay, not that it had stopped a few from slipping out now and then. But it was better than curling up and dying in the entryway—right?

With how I felt, I wasn't sure. Maybe withering away would be better than trying to go on without my husband. "My Eric," I whispered.

I shook my head. "Clean, Sookie. Just clean," I ordered myself, trying to channel my inner Gran—the woman with the backbone so strong that even old age couldn't crack it.

"You *will* clean," I added. In fact, I'd already planned a whole cleaning regimen. I was going to eradicate any dust, dirt, or lint that was downstairs. I didn't think I could face the upstairs yet—and maybe not for a while. Eric's presence was too "there."

But that was okay.

"And there's your car too," I promised myself. "And no one ever said things can't be cleaned more than once," I added, already running down the list of cleaning supplies in the house and hoping they'd last through the day.

I shouldn't have worried about that though.

I should have known that it wouldn't take my emotions long to override my desperate scrubbing.

I was feeling the after-effects of a broken bond. And I was mourning the loss of the man I loved—*my* Eric—even as I was rattled with worry for the Eric who'd been "restored." Had Octavia succeeded in mitigating the effects of the Hallow's spell on Eric's psyche? Would he remember me—eventually?

And—even more importantly—what would Ocella do to him now that he wasn't the "blank, empty canvas," that the evil bastard had wanted to find. What had Ocella *already* done?



I closed my eyes when the tears blurred them, but I kept up my scrubbing till it was fingernails doing the work even more than scrub-brush. It had been very clear to me the night before that Ocella had shown up in Louisiana for one reason and one reason only: in hopes of finding a memoryless, “fresh” vampire that he could break anew.

“Sadistic bastard!” I yelled, opening my eyes and scrubbing even harder.

I noticed that there was a little pre-dawn “grey” coming through the kitchen window, and automatically, I looked at the refrigerator and scanned the chart I’d printed up of sunrise and sunset times. Of course, Eric didn’t need it, but I liked having it for my own reference.

I let out a sob. Normally, Eric would be crawling into bed next to me around this time—often just getting home from one of his jobs. My hands shaking, I dropped the oven cleaner and my diminished scrub brush as I realized that I’d never feel that again—the sensation of the man I loved cuddling his coolness against my warmth.

I half-laughed and half-sobbed out in memory.

It was a “game” between us. Eric would try not to wake me up each morning. Of course, when he failed, it was more than fine. He’d still get kisses and hugs and maybe even a little more as his consolation prize. But there would be no more pre-sunrise, gentle love-making sessions.

I put my hand over my chest. I felt hollow—numb—an effect of losing the bond according to Octavia. Worse than that, however, I had no sense of Eric. I’d grown to love *feeling* his life. I’d grown to love feeling his emotions and sharing mine with him.

There had been so much love and joy in him as he'd learned about the new world he'd found himself in with the gusto and cleverness—and joy—of the vampire he would have been had Ocella not tried to pull that brightness out of him.

My Eric did all things—little or big—with a kind of thoughtfulness that I'd rarely seen in modern times. Whether he was building a simple fire or fixing all the squeaks in the old stairs or seeding the lawn in the dead of the night, he took pride in his labors. I'd taken so much pride in him.

And I'd been awed when he'd done the same for me.

I lay on the kitchen floor, feet away from where I'd found Gran dead, and I shook with weeping and loss.

As I felt the slight heat from the first ray of the sun come through the window to touch my skin, I heard a “popping” noise.

“Claudine?” I'd gasped. I'd not spoken to her in a long time—not since the night she'd saved me after I'd fallen asleep at the wheel. She'd also managed to enthrall a group of supernaturals—including Eric—that night. And now she was in my kitchen.

“What has happened to you?!” Claudine half-asked and half-demanded, the worry clear in her eyes.

I wasn't sure how to answer that question so that it could be understood by anyone.

“My husband's gone,” I finally said.

“Your heart has broken,” she clarified for me. “I've felt your pain all night, but I could not come to you during the night because of the vampires.” She seemed to be looking

around—maybe judging my ability to clean. Maybe looking for stray vampires in the shadows.

I had raised myself a bit off of the floor upon her dramatic entrance, but now I felt too heavy to stay that way.

“Poor dear,” Claudine sighed as I lay back down. I closed my eyes; I heard another little popping and wondered if she’d gone.

But then I realized that I still sensed her with my “extra” sense. I couldn’t read her thoughts, but that was good. I didn’t think I’d be able to bear any thoughts beyond my own right then.

Another reason to be glad that I had the day off.

“Drink this. You’ll feel better,” Claudine coaxed.

When I peeled my swollen eyes open, I saw that she’d knelt beside me and was holding a cup that certainly hadn’t come out of my kitchen. In it was a clear liquid.

“What is it?” I asked weakly.

“You are hurting. This won’t heal your soul, but it will soothe the physical pain of the broken bond.”

Maybe I was too stupid to ask more questions. Or maybe I just didn’t care in that moment what happened to me. Either way, I drank.

The liquid was sweet and felt tingly on my tongue. Its effects were immediate. My pain was still there, but it felt as if someone were holding a cold compress over my soul.

“Come,” Claudine said, helping me to my feet before helping me to the couch.

APRIL 11, 2005, TEN MINUTES AFTER SUNRISE

SOOKIE POV

I was snapped out of my recollections as Claudine handed me the stake I intended to use on Ocella.

After she'd found me on the kitchen floor two months before, Claudine had sat with me on the couch all day, periodically producing more drinks for me to consume. At first, we'd been silent, but eventually I'd opened my mouth and then spilled everything about my relationships with both Erics. I'd told her about Hallow's true curse. I'd told her about Ocella. I'd told her about the choice I'd made back in January—my choice to “keep” Eric. I'd told her that I just knew that I was being punished for my selfishness.

I'd wanted—*so badly*—to keep him after all.

I'd wanted—*so badly*—to be happy.

But who said I deserved him? Who said that I should be happy?

I'd cried all this out irrationally and messily. I'd needed to.

Of course, after my conversation with Pam in January, I'd pretty much set aside my guilt and had concentrated on building a happy life with—and *for* Eric.

*But that wasn't the fucking point!*

The point was that—on that day—my guilt had been easier for me to focus upon than my lost love!

After I'd spilled my guts, Claudine had spilled some news of her own. It turned out that I was like her—a fairy. However, I was not full-blooded. I'd taken in the news that Gran

had been unfaithful to her husband with the shock of someone who'd been clubbed over the head after being hit by a truck.

Claudine had told me that my great-grandfather, who was a fairy prince of some kind, would need to be told some parts of the story I'd told her—which explained her timing for telling me about him. Niall had, apparently, been hoping to hide his connection to me from his enemies for as long as possible. However—in order to keep the queen from coming after me more “directly”—Claudine had figured that Niall would want to “claim” me.

Or—as Claudine had put it—Niall would threaten to unleash hell onto Sophie-Anne if she didn't leave me alone.

Fan-fucking-tastic! More claiming. But not by the one I'd wanted to re-claim me.

I'd felt like laughing, but I really hadn't been able to.

Still, I'd been grateful—both to Claudine and the mysterious Niall.

Though tied to Bubba, I'd been happy for the added security that Niall would give me from the Queen of Louisiana. The only issue had been that Niall had enemies—fairy enemies—who might harm me.

They could join the club.

Once again, Claudine brought me back to the present by speaking.

“Ready?” she asked me.

I nodded. We were both dressed in black. We were staying in a house—“arranged for” by Niall—which was about ten miles away from Ocella's resting place near Vienna, Austria. Sadly, there had been no time for sightseeing—not that I had much inclination.

Luckily, Claudine had been to Niall's house before and had, therefore, been able to “pop” us there—since I was of her bloodline. Really lucky! I still didn't have my passport.

The fairy took out a vial and told me to drink its contents. I followed directions. She did the same from a second vial. I knew the liquid was designed to conceal our scents.

The plan we were following had been a “gift” —from my great-grandfather.

I heard a loud “pop” and turned to see Niall standing there.

“All is ready,” he said.

## CHAPTER 09: LIMITS

MARCH 28, 2005, TWO WEEKS BEFORE THE PREVIOUS SCENE

SOOKIE POV

I was “functional.”

I went to work when I was scheduled to do so.

I took orders for food and drinks and served them to customers who thought I looked like shit, but stopped just short of saying aloud that they’d known “all along” that the vampire would leave me.

Of course, that didn’t stop their thoughts.

The cattier of the women—those who’d *seen* Eric and coveted him—were not surprised in the least that he’d moved on. Vampires, after all, weren’t known for fidelity. The women’s thoughts included their own fantasies involving my husband. And they also included uncharitable thoughts about me. They thought about every flaw they perceived in me—every one of them a reason why someone like Eric would never want someone like me. And I got to hear them all.

Often in stereo—since catty women tended to be pack animals.

But those thoughts were better than the ones from the religious “right.” They viewed me as forever “tainted.” They celebrated in my obvious pain; in fact, they thought I deserved worse than I was getting. Many had wanted for me to be found “drained on the side of the road” just so their point about vampires might be proven.

Most of them still held out hope that that would happen.

Arlene somehow managed to mix these two mindsets into one, even as she vocally tried to reassure me by saying things like “Ah, honey. Don’t you worry none. You’re better off without that Vamper.”

Of course, even as she’d been *comforting* me, her mind had been screaming that I was a “vamp tramp.” I think it was safe to say that Arlene and my friendship had run its course.

Holly, being a part of the supernatural world herself, had “nicer” thoughts. Of course, she’d also thought that it’d be just a matter of time before my “fake world with *fake* Eric” came crashing down. But at least she felt bad for my loss.

Sam’s thoughts were, in a lot of ways, the hardest to bear. He’d not come right out and said, “I told you so,” but he’d certainly thought it enough. He also wondered when it would be the right time to “step in” and ask me out; he didn’t want to have to compete with Bill if that “bloodsucker” asked first, however. Plus, Sam worried that yet another vamp might come out of the woodwork; he speculated that I’d take up with just about anyone with fangs.

Disappointingly, none of Sam’s thoughts *about* me had included a thought *for* me. He had never felt bad that I’d lost a husband. Hell—he’d never even recognized that I was married. In fact, he’d thought of my whole marriage to Eric as just a way that the vampires had manipulated me—as if I couldn’t make up my own mind about whom I chose.

I knew damned well whom I *wasn’t* going to choose at any point in the future! Sam Merlotte!

In fact, I’d come to a decision. I didn’t need to deal with the shit I’d been dealing with for all my life from the people of Bon Temps! I was tired of being kind to them—only



to be met by their hurtful thoughts. Oh—there were a handful of people that had come through for me. Hoyt Fortenberry had never thought unkindly about me, though he sometimes had a hard time not thinking about his mother’s uncharitable thoughts. But that was only because he was thinking about how he disagreed with her.

And Tara had been great. She’d tried to cheer me up more than once, even as she’d had truly compassionate thoughts regarding my situation. And Jason, too, had come through for me—though he’d wanted to “stake” Eric at first for not fulfilling his promise to “take care of me.”

But then I’d explained the situation to Jason, though I’d not told him everything. After that, he’d been understanding and kind, even bringing groceries over a couple of times—*without* expecting me to use them to cook for him. I’d dipped into his thoughts the first time he’d done that—to make sure that he wasn’t craving a home-cooked meal. He was, but he didn’t have any desire for me to make him one; in fact, he’d insisted upon making me a meal that night. Of course, he didn’t know how to do much more than warm things up. But I appreciated the frozen lasagna just the same. Apparently, during his talk with Eric, my Viking had told him how men had once taken care of their female kin.

Eric’s words had shamed Jason to a certain extent. And they’d changed him—for the better. Jason had vowed to be a better brother to me—just as I’d always tried to be a good sister.

Somehow, I’d managed to hold in my tears until after Jason had left.

However, beyond Hoyt, Tara, and Jason, no one in town supported me. No one in town had even felt bad that my husband had left me. Secretly, in the depths of their minds, they were all glad for their various reasons!

They celebrated my pain.

Thus, I was done serving them. I didn't have to anymore. The way I looked at it, *both* Eric's had made sure that I could be happier in this life—and I'd decided to honor them.

"Sam, you got a sec?" I asked after I'd handed off my section to Holly.

"Sure, cher," he said brightly.

I cringed a little at his endearment for me. It no longer seemed sincere, especially since his thoughts were very clear to me as he placed a hand on the small of my back and "guided" me to his office.

If I hadn't been busy listening to his thoughts, I would have swatted that hand away and then slapped his face.

Sam hoped that I was going to "apologize" to him for being down in the dumps lately. He expected that I was going to tell him that I'd be back to my old self soon. I suppose I couldn't blame him. I'd told him something similar after Gran's death had annihilated me and then again after Bill and I had broken up. It was to Sam's discredit that he'd accepted my apologies—both times—instead of telling me that I hadn't needed to make them. I shook my head. I supposed that I had always apologized for showing my true feelings, but I was done with that.

"What do you need, cher?" he asked as we both sat down—him in his office chair behind his desk and me in the folding chair in front of it.

“I’m putting in my notice,” I said firmly. “I’ll work my shifts for two more weeks if you need, but—if you can find people willing to take them—I’d appreciate it.”

Clearly, Sam hadn’t been expecting that.

“What? But, cher, what are you going to do?” he stammered. “Don’t tell me that you are gonna work for the vamps again!” he added a little angrily.

Strike one.

“No, Sam,” I said, keeping calm. “I’m going to start school in the summer. I was gonna try to hold out and keep this job until then, but I can’t deal with people’s thoughts about me anymore.”

“Come on,” he said softly, trying to coax me into reconsidering. “You know how the gossip mills work around here. The talk about Eric—uh—leavin’—uh—will be replaced by the next scandal soon enough.”

“Gossip *isn’t* why I’m leaving, Sam. People’s thoughts have been downright cruel, and I’m tired of trying to put on a smile and be accepted by them.”

“Cher, you have to ignore the ignorant people in this town,” Sam said almost paternally.

“Then I’ll be needing to ignore you too, Sam Merlotte,” I said, my back straight. “Your thoughts are the most hurtful of all because I truly thought you cared about me once upon a time. But you don’t. You judge me—as both naïve and as wrong in all my choices. You weren’t—not even for a second—sorry for me when you learned that my *husband* had left me. In fact, you were glad about that, though you pretended that you felt bad for me. If I weren’t a telepath, I might have even believed you. But I *am* a telepath. And because of Eric,

I have started to accept that part of myself as being beneficial. That's why I can say definitively that it's not Eric who's the problem. It's *you*—and most of the other people in this town—that don't accept me.”

“Cher, you know that's not true,” Sam tried.

“What's not true? That you judge my decisions and me? That you were glad my marriage broke up because you see us together in the future?”

He seemed to be fumbling for an answer, so I helped him out. “Sam, here's the truth. You didn't pursue me until others did—*vampire* others. Have you ever considered that?”

“Sookie, I . . . .”

I interrupted. “And you *certainly* never told me the truth about yourself until you were forced.”

“Sookie, I'm sorry,” he said, sounding sincere. In fact, I knew that he *was* sorry. But he was also trying to figure out how to get me to forgive him and to overlook any mistakes he'd made.

I sighed. Strike two—for him.

“I know you are sorry,” I said softly. “And I hope that we can part as friends.” I sighed. “But it's gonna take me a while to trust you again.”

I stood up.

“Wait just a minute there!” Sam said, standing up too. “You can trust vamps, but not me? Cher, that's just fucked up.”

Strike three. Sam was out.

“I don’t trust all vampires. And even if I did, it wouldn’t matter in this situation.” I shook my head. “That picture you have in your thoughts—the one with us together in the future? That woman’s not me! It never was.”

“Being around *them* has changed you,” Sam fumed. “I knew they’d bring nothing but unhappiness to you.”

“That’s where you’re wrong,” I said shaking my head again. “Eric brought me more happiness than I’ve ever had!”

“And then he left!” Sam yelled cruelly, trying to drive in his point.

Point driven. If he’d not already struck out in the friendship department, he would have then.

“Yes he did,” I said to Sam, trying to keep my voice steady. “But *you* never bothered to ask why. You never bothered to offer me the shoulder of a true friend to cry on. You offered judgment. And you offered yourself congratulations.” I moved to get my purse. “I think staying friends is impossible at this point. Don’t you?”

“But, cher, I could make you happy,” Sam said.

Almost at the door, I spun around on my heels. I’m sure the incredulous look on my face spoke volumes. “No, Sam. You couldn’t.” I took a breath and calmed down, trying to remember that—many years before—Sam had hired me when very few in Bon Temps would have considered it. “I’ll still work my normal shifts for the next two weeks—if you can’t find anyone that wants them—but I’ll quit on the spot if you say *anything* to me outside of work-talk.”

“What are you going to do for money?” he asked bitterly.

A part of me wanted to yell out that my finances were none of his damned business. But I didn't. Another part simply wanted to walk away without a word and slam the door off of its fucking hinges. But I didn't.

I was a fucking lady!

And I was Eric's wife!

So I looked Sam square in the eyes and told him the truth. "My husband has provided for me."

With those words, I left.

By the time I got home, a message had been left for me on the machine. An angry sounding Sam said he wouldn't be needing me for my shifts. I was *more* than fine with that.

Part of me had known what Sam's reaction would be, but I'd hoped—for the sake of the scrap of friendship I'd still wanted with him—that I'd be wrong.

I sighed and quickly showered before doing a little work on my budget. Back in January, Pam had brought a computer with Eric's other "effects." The next day, high-speed Internet had been installed. Eric hadn't known about it—or even what it was. And I hadn't thought it worthwhile to fight Pam on it.

Together, my husband and I had "learned" to use the online world for our benefit. And—after Eric left—no one had come to pick up the computer, and no one had disconnected the Internet, so I continued to use them.

I looked at the figures on the spreadsheet. I would have to start tapping into the account that *my* Eric had left for me. I had a fleeting thought that new-old Eric might try to take the money back.

However, I pushed that thought aside. I knew that, as long as Ocella wasn't involved, Eric would never do something so petty. Regardless, Pam had made sure that only my name was on the account.

I looked at the figures and resolved, once again, to use the money. After all, I'd accepted it from my husband; I'd made promises to him. There was \$500,000 in the account. I intended to use it to support me while I took some college classes. Then I'd use it to start a business—maybe even the demolition company that *my* Eric had been planning. After all, much of the groundwork had already been done for it. And I'd helped with that work.

I smiled. Because of Eric, I knew that I could start and run a successful company, but I wanted at least a little education first. And—who knows—I might change my mind about the work I wanted to do. It was nice to have the option of keeping my options open—for a change.

At 6:00 p.m. on the dot, there was a knock on the door. I rose. I'd been waiting for the visitor.

"Great-granddaughter," the distinguished-looking fairy greeted as I opened the door.

"Niall," I returned, the name still sounding foreign to my lips. "It's nice to meet you. Uh—come in. Please. Can I get you something to drink? Eat?"

"No thank you," the fairy said, looking around as I led him to the living room.

"You have a lovely home," he commented.

My breath caught a little as I realized that the space no longer seemed like home. I glanced at the fireplace. I'd had to move the afghan upstairs, though the pictures of my and

Eric's wedding were still on the mantle. I'd been sleeping on the couch—as I couldn't bring myself to sleep in the bed I'd shared with Eric *or* in Gran's old room. Neither one of them felt like they could be mine.

In fact, I'd been contemplating moving.

"You are troubled," Niall observed.

"Just sad," I returned, not feeling the need to hide my feelings from the fairy.

"Ah—yes," Niall said, glancing at the mantle. "You've had a difficult time."

I wanted to yell out that "difficult" didn't even begin to describe it, but my manners kicked in, and I offered him a seat instead.

He sat on the couch as if the action were somehow novel. I sat in Gran's old armchair.

"I have news," he relayed.

"Claudine told me you needed to tell me something," I responded.

"Did she also tell you that I was anxious to meet you?" he smiled.

"Yes," I nodded.

"I am sorry I couldn't meet you before."

"It's okay," I lied. In fact, I was a little mad that I'd had family that I'd never known about. Jason still didn't know about them, for Claudine had asked that I not tell him.

That was yet *another* source of guilt for me, but I had reluctantly agreed.

For now.

"I have met with the Queen of this state," Niall said casually, leaning back in his seat.

I leaned forward. "You have?"



“Yes,” he confirmed. “And she has *graciously* offered you her protection—from afar, of course.”

“In exchange for what?” I asked. I was no longer naïve. I knew that things were not freely given in the Supernatural world—not when politics were involved.

Love was another matter.

“For me *not* killing her and her vampire children,” Niall returned, suddenly looking very much like the predator that Claudine had assured me he could be.

“You are to be left alone by any vampires with whom you do not wish to associate,” Niall continued firmly. “If you are not, I will make sure that the Queen suffers. She has already taken one of my kin from me,” he said as his jaw clenched in anger.

“Hadley?” I asked.

“Yes,” Niall confirmed. “She is vampire now.” He shook his head. “She aimed to betray you *again*—you know. She was going to call you—to somehow get you to come see her in New Orleans so that the queen could take you while you were there. You must *never* trust her—never accept *anything* from her.”

I sighed. “I won’t.”

“There is a child, too.”

“A child?” I asked.

“Hadley had a son before her turning. She and Sophie-Anne intended to use the knowledge of him to make you come to them. Will you trust me to take care of him? Will you stand firm and not allow yourself to be manipulated by this information?”

“How did you know what Hadley and the queen were planning?”

He grinned, and I could see his pointed teeth. “I am a very strong telepath,” he conveyed.

I took a breath. I’d heard snippets from vampire minds more than once. It seemed clear that Niall could hear them better, though I didn’t ask him to elaborate.

“The child has the essential spark—like you,” Niall continued. “I have already moved his father and him to somewhere safe, and I have given the child his own version of Claudine.”

I considered for a moment. What could I do for the child except bring unwanted attention his way? “Okay. That’s good,” I said.

Niall nodded, looking pleased with my response.

“What about other vampires—those from other states?” I asked.

“If you are not protected, Sophie-Anne and her kin will be killed. She knows this. Thankfully, I have influence with the Supernatural Council. And there are now other protections in place for you as well,” he said somewhat vaguely. I thought about asking questions, but then I thought better of it.

“Thank you,” I said sincerely.

“I don’t fear vampires harming you as much as I fear those from my own world,” he said wearily. “But I have already taken steps to bar their ability to come to this realm.”

“What steps?” I asked.

“I have closed all portals between the fairy world and this one except for one. That one is available to only me at this time, and I must expend a great deal of magic to pass through it.”

“So everyone else is stuck?” I asked.

“Fairies in this realm—like Claudine—were contacted and offered the choice to return home. Some took it. Some didn’t. I will reassess the situation in a decade or so.”

“Oh. Uh—is the danger to me really that great?”

Niall nodded. “Once it is known in Faerie that I have placed my protection over you, my enemies will guess that we are related. So—yes—it would become much more dangerous for you. But I have, hopefully, ensured that that won’t happen.”

“But your people are no longer free to travel back and forth,” I sighed.

“Most are where they wish to be. And fairies have long lives. So a decade won’t be a lot of time to wait. Like I said, I will reassess the situation then. Perhaps my enemies will be no more. In the meantime, I will keep tabs on you through Claudine, and if the Queen reneges, I *will* act accordingly,” he added ominously.

I didn’t ask what—specifically—he would do.

“Before I leave, I would like to give you a gift,” Niall smiled.

“A gift?” I asked. “What gift?”

He shrugged. “You decide. I wish to make up for not coming into your life sooner. Tell me—is there anything you desire? If it is in my power to get it, then it is yours.”

“Can you remove Hallow’s spell from Eric?” I asked hopefully.

He shook his head sadly. “Claudine told me of the situation. I am afraid that I cannot counteract a witch’s magic.”

I closed my eyes. “Okay then. Can you help me kill someone?”

“Kill?” Niall asked with surprise. “You do not seem like the kind who would wish to kill.”

“I’ve made an exception.”

## CHAPTER 10: BE KILLED TO KILL

“All men kill the thing they hate, too, unless, of course, it kills them first.”—James Thurber

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STILL MARCH 28, 2005

SOOKIE POV

Niall had been gone for two hours when I heard another knock on my door.

A vampire.

I used my gift to find Bubba in the woods, where he'd stayed since he and I had been blood-tied.

Bill had been by a few times since Eric had left. He'd been decent—for lack of a better word—answering my questions about Eric and Pam with tact and vagueness. I'd heard from neither of them directly since Eric had left.

Bill had said that Eric was “much altered—though similar to how he was before Hallow's initial spell.” He'd said that Eric was “much occupied due to the visit from his maker.” He'd said that both Pam and Eric were focused on “seeing to Ocella's needs.”

But he'd also let me know that Eric and Pam were alive—and that Ocella seemed to be becoming bored.

I hurried to the front door, hoping to get more news.

“Eric,” I gasped, looking up at my husband—even though it was decidedly *not* him.

“No matter what happens, *don't* invite me in,” he hissed quietly, though the words seemed to cause him pain.

I realized immediately that he—this Eric—was trying to protect me from Ocella. And that act meant the world to me.

“I won’t,” I assured.

Eric nodded.

We stood there looking at each other for a moment. He was pale and closed off emotionally in a way I’d never seen.

“Are you okay?” I asked.

“I am vampire. My status remains unchanged,” he replied, his words as cold as his expression.

“Is—uh—Ocella still in town?”

“Do *not* say my maker’s name!” Eric yelled, becoming immediately angry.

“Okay. I won’t,” I responded gently—gingerly—lowering my eyes to look at my feet. “I meant no disrespect.”

I kept my eyes down so that I wouldn’t cry.

“My maker is nearby,” Eric said with significance. “You must have permission to say his name—any of them.”

I stretched out my telepathy, and—sure enough—at the edge of my range were two other voids. They moved closer, obviously to within hearing range.

As they did, Eric’s demeanor and tone became colder. “Pam told me and my maker all she knew about my time here. She regaled us with tales of my domestication. She claims I wore flannel at times?”

“Yes.”

I saw Eric stiffen slightly as Ocella emerged from the tree line to stand closer.

“You must know that any incarnation of me that you knew *then* was false.”

“I know,” I whispered, pulling my eyes up to his.

“My queen has explained to me that—although I no longer claim you—I am to offer you protection,” he added. “Apparently, you have a powerful relative pulling some strings.”

I nodded. “Yes.”

“The queen has also conveyed that your relative wishes for any work you do for vampires to be negotiated through him from now on.”

“That is true.”

“Pity,” Eric said flatly. “I liked having my own telepath on retainer—as it were. But all good things end; you know that—right?” he asked with a twinge of cruelty.

Eric’s words bit into me. Whether or not he was “acting” for the benefit of his maker, there was truth to them—an undeniable, piercing truth.

I nodded, but said nothing. I looked into his ocean-blue eyes. With his maker “visiting,” they’d lost their life to a great extent. But I could still see *him* in there. No—I could still see *both* Erics.

When I didn’t speak, he spoke again. “I have come to tell you that I will obey my Queen, but now that you cannot be my asset, our personal association will cease.”

“I understand,” I said, though I could feel tears mounting in my eyes.

“My maker is planning to return to his home next week, but he has ordered that I *never* seek you out or speak with you again after tonight. Do you understand?” he asked, his jaw tight.

“I understand,” I responded, even as my tears began to fall.

“He has also ordered me to kill you—in the most torturous way I can conceive—if you seek out my attentions.”

“I understand,” I croaked.

“I have commanded Pam not to speak directly with you either. So if you have difficulties, you must contact the Area investigator.”

I nodded.

“My maker believes that my,” he paused, “association with you has weakened me. He has reminded me that humans are not worth my time beyond feeding from them and taking my pleasure with them. He has asked that I express to you how glad I am that you will soon be out of my life.”

“I understand,” I sobbed out.

“Here,” he said, thrusting a manila envelope toward me—so that it was partially through the invisible barrier that kept him outside.

I took the envelope, making sure that I didn’t touch his hand.

“Open it now,” he ordered.

I did. There were annulment papers inside.

“Sign,” he ordered again.

Though my eyes were now clouded from my tears, I did as he bid me, in order to insure that Ocella had no reason to punish him.

After I was done, Eric spoke again, his tone even colder than before.

“Put one copy in the envelope. The other is yours.”



I nodded and followed his directions.

“Pam regaled my maker and me with information regarding Hallow’s curse, too. You should know that I feel *no regret* in leaving you. I feel no aching as the curse indicated I would. Obviously, that means that you were never my so-called heart’s desire. Vampires cannot love; thus, the witch’s curse failed. My heart’s desire is as it was before: serving my maker when he requires me.”

I cringed.

His fangs elongated and he suddenly looked scarier than I’d ever seen him before. “You are not worthy of my attentions, human, and you may *not* keep my name! You will arrange for it to be changed back to ‘Stackhouse’ immediately. Understood?!?” he boomed out.

“Yes,” I whispered, handing him the envelope with his copy of the papers that dissolved the only marriage I would ever know.

He turned without a goodbye and flew into the night sky.

I felt Ocella and his little shadow moving away moments later.

I couldn’t wait to drive a fucking stake through his black heart!

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**APRIL 11, 2005: NEAR VIENNA, AUSTRIA, ONE HOUR AFTER SUNRISE**

**SOOKIE POV**

To give me my gift, Niall had called in many of the favors he had left in the human realm. It had taken him almost a week to find out where Appius Livius Ocella rested most nights, though the vampire had not yet returned “home” from the United States.

Niall, using his abilities to conceal his scent and to read pretty much anyone's mind he wanted, had learned how to penetrate Ocella's lair. Apparently, my fairy great-grandfather also had the gift of mind control—almost like glamour. He had “influenced” one of Ocella's heavily-glamoured “day-humans” to give him a tour of Ocella's home, and then he'd swept that memory from the man's brain. Niall had seen everything in the home, except for Ocella's bedchamber.

After that, it was just a matter of time—as we waited for Appius to arrive home.

The first night that he did, Claudine had come to me, and we “popped” to Austria.

Niall had been doing some final reconnaissance. Hiding in Ocella's compound he'd “listened” in to the evil bastard's head to make sure there were no security measures unknown to the day-people. There were not. Ocella counted on his day-people being good little Renfields. Of course, he'd glamoured them never to reveal his secrets; however, he didn't foresee that a fairy could see around that glamour. My own telepathy enabled me only to sense when glamour had occurred, but I could never quite see what the glamour had concealed. But Niall was much stronger.

Thus, he'd also pulled the code to Ocella's bedchamber from the vampire's mind as Ocella had entered it.

“Ready?” my great-grandfather asked.

I nodded.

“We must be absolutely quiet until we are in the bedchamber. Weres are on duty just beyond where we are teleporting.”

Claudine and I nodded as we took Niall's hands.

Since he'd "visited" before, Niall "popped" us into the hallway outside of Ocella's sleeping quarters. Then he immediately entered the code that gave us access to my enemy. Once inside, we all seemed to let out a collective breath of relief.

"Hurry," was Niall's only instruction.

There was another vampire in the bed next to my target. I figured he must be Alexei, Ocella's other child, whom Bill had told me about. Ocella's shadow.

From Bill's account, I knew that Alexei had been a Russian royal, a Romanov. He had been turned too late to prevent some "damage." But—unlike the benevolent Bubba—Alexei was a maniac, completely dependent upon his maker's commands for every ounce of his limited control.

I was disgusted to see the form of a teenaged boy tangled in the arms of my beloved's tormenter. It was clear that Alexei had been what I would consider "under-aged" when he'd been turned, and it was also clear that Ocella had made him his lover.

"Sick bastard," I muttered.

I moved so that I was standing over the prone body of Ocella. A part of me wished that he was awake. But the wiser part of me knew *that* wish wasn't wise. Claudine and Niall were both looking at the door, swords drawn and at the ready.

"The child will need to be destroyed, too," Niall said quietly, glancing over his shoulder.

I nodded, already reconciling myself to the fact that I'd have to kill Alexei as well. Neither Niall nor Claudine could do the killing. Niall had told me something about a fairy leaving behind a magical imprint when killing. I didn't understand that fully, but the

important part was that a human-fairy hybrid didn't. And, gift or not, Niall didn't want to risk starting an all-out war with the vampires. I didn't blame him.

I took a deep breath and then I struck.

It took me only twenty seconds to kill both of them.

I killed Ocella first.

I didn't care how fucking old he was. Or how strong.

I didn't care that I had so quickly and so easily snuffed out an ancient life.

I didn't care that Eric had been ordered by him to dissolve our marriage.

I didn't care because Eric was *still my husband!* And he would stay that way in my heart. I'd promised to love him. I'd promised to honor him. I'd promised to do those things in sickness and in health. I'd promised to do those things in good times and bad.

By killing his maker, I simply felt that I was fulfilling my vows to my husband.

I felt a flash of guilt as I looked at Alexei's remains—until I recalled some of what Bill had told me about him. Yes. I figured the world was much better off as I looked at the two piles of vampire on the bed.

"Ready?" Niall asked.

I shook my head. On the bedtable, an unfolded document had caught my eye, one with my husband's name on it. I took it and quickly read the opening paragraph. It was a proposal from Ocella to Freyda, the Queen of Oklahoma. I quickly scanned the first page. Basically, Ocella was offering to sell his child to Freyda in exchange for a great deal of money. I thanked God that the item hadn't yet been signed or sent. I put the document into my shirt, so it would "pop" with me. I intended to burn it—after I ripped it to pieces.

“Sookie,” Niall said in a warning tone.

“I’m ready now,” I told him.

## CHAPTER 11: DREAMS

Hold fast to dreams  
For if dreams die  
Life is a broken-winged bird  
That cannot fly.

Hold fast to dreams  
For when dreams go  
Life is a barren field  
Frozen with snow.

“Dreams”—Langston Hughes

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DECEMBER 31, 2005, 6:00 P.M.

SOOKIE POV

I played with the ring on my finger. It was New Year’s Eve. After midnight, it would be what I considered my unofficial anniversary with Eric. I looked at one of the pictures we’d taken together at our wedding in Vermont. I smiled. Jason had been the photographer, while Pam had been barking instructions. Surprisingly, the picture had turned out perfectly.

“You sure you don’t wanna come with us?” Tray Dawson asked. After the Were’s shop had closed due to the hard times Hurricane Katrina had brought with her, I’d hired

him up in a flash. After only two business courses that had bored me to tears, I'd decided that practical experience would beat educational ones. Plus, Hurricane Katrina had changed everything the previous August.

I'd already been moving to open my business in late July, and I'd even hired two workers already. After Katrina, the work had poured in. As could be expected, the demolition business was booming all over the Gulf Region—even in Northern Louisiana, but I kept my company's profits low in order to help the victims. However, the government and insurance companies were my biggest clients. Them—I charged full price.

“Did you get in touch with Alcide?” I asked.

“Yep. He's given our name to that contractor.”

I smiled up at the manager of my team. “Excellent!” In fact, Alcide's company and mine had done several projects in conjunction—not that it hadn't been awkward at times.

Alcide had never been good at understanding concepts like “boundaries” and “appropriate friend behavior.” About two months before, things had come to a head. Alcide had come in for a kiss, but—thankfully—I'd “heard” his intentions with enough notice to duck away. After that, we'd had a frank talk. I liked Alcide. I was even willing to stay his friend, but I was not willing to date anyone while there remained any chance of getting my husband back.

When the Were had tried to convince me that “my” Eric was gone, I told him some truths that I would have preferred to keep to myself. First, I told him that I would *never* date him, specifically, because he took back Debbie, even after I'd almost been killed because of her actions. Second, I told him what Bill had told me a few months before: Debbie, in her

bitterness, had been the one to tell Sophie-Anne about Eric's amnesiac condition the year before.

I made sure that Alcide knew I didn't blame him for Debbie's actions, but that I did question his judgement. *And* I questioned what he might have inadvertently or purposefully led Debbie to believe. After all, my romantic history with Alcide included us *pretending* to date and him kissing me *once*—when we were both rebounding! Alcide had been the one to introduce the notion that there had been more between us—right after Bill had raped and almost killed me no less! And Debbie had never believed him when he changed his story.

Wonder why?

Regardless, I made sure Alcide understood that I didn't see him at a potential romantic partner—not anymore.

To his credit, he had accepted that, but I'd kept things as professional as possible since then, and I'd delegated much of the contact with Alcide to Tray. Good leaders delegate the jobs they don't want—right?

For my office, I was renting a little place next to Tara's Togs; Bill, of all people, was my landlord. I entered a couple of numbers into my spreadsheet. My little company was already turning a profit, after being open for only four months.

Sure—Eric had done a lot of the planning, but I'd seen it through. I was proud.

Tray was still looking at me. "Sookie?" he interrupted my thoughts. "You *know* what I want. It's New Year's! And you've been working hard. Have a drink with us. Just. One. Drink!"

"You know what?" I said smiling up at him. "I think I will."



Tray grinned and offered me an arm. He'd become a good friend, protective like a brother. It helped that he had zero attraction for me.

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I almost drove my car to the employees' section at the back of the bar, but I stopped myself just in time and parked in front. I'd not stepped a foot into Merlotte's since I'd stopped working there, though I'd seen a lot of the "usual" customers in places like the grocery store and the bank. And Jason had, certainly, kept me abreast of all the gossip.

Surprisingly enough, many people's thoughts about me had changed now that I was a "businesswoman" and had been "vampire-free" for almost a year.

Most of them now thought about my marriage to Eric as an "unfortunate period for an otherwise 'decent—though odd—girl.'" Of course, some of them wondered if I'd found a new Sugar Daddy to fund my business, though the current story going around was that I'd found a stash of Stackhouse gold buried during the Civil War.

Showed how fickle humans could be. And how fucking little they knew!

I still considered my time with Eric to be my most fortunate period.

I sat in my car for a moment, contemplating whether or not to go in.

The last thing I wanted was any drama.

I sighed and closed my eyes.

After killing Ocella, I'd returned home. The following night, Pam—released from her maker's command to ostracize me—had come to the house, delivering a bouquet of dark pink roses. I'd looked them up and found that they meant thankfulness.

The next night Pam had come back with a sprig of fir. I'd looked that up too. It meant "time."

Eric was asking for time.

I'd asked Pam if she wanted to take Eric the things of his that remained at the house. With a shake of her head and a wink, she'd told me that he'd asked that they stay where they were.

I did, however, send him three things.

Copies of all the pictures of us.

A letter telling him *everything* I could remember about what we'd had together.

And irises.

They stood for hope.

Bubba was still a constant presence in my life—guarding me every night since I'd had his blood. He had become a good friend, and we enjoyed listening to Gran's old records, though I'd hidden the Elvis ones.

After Ocella was dead and gone, I'd found the courage to move back into the bedroom I'd shared with Eric. Over the months, it had smelled less and less like him, though I'd never washed a couple of his flannel shirts. Whether "current" Eric liked them or not, those shirts had suited *my* Eric, and they held onto his scent.

As did the afghan.

Not counting Alcide's attempt, I'd had two offers to "date" during the previous year, but both were from humans—one a fellow student in my very first college class and one a client. Neither had tempted me.

In my mind and my heart, I was still married, after all.

In early May—a month after I’d killed Ocella—Pam had come to me again.

Again at Eric’s request.

She’d brought purple hyacinths, a flower asking for my forgiveness.

When I’d asked Pam why Eric was asking for my forgiveness when the spell hadn’t been his fault, she’d sat me down—never a good sign—and told me about Appius’s time in Shreveport. Apparently, Ocella had ordered Eric to fuck fangbangers left and right—obviously to hurt his child and take away his control again. According to Pam, Ocella also enjoyed watching Eric fuck someone else before fucking him.

Pam hadn’t pulled any punches when she’d discussed the darkness of the weeks when Ocella was “visiting.” Eventually, Ocella had decided that the “funniest” thing he could do regarding me was to make Eric get an annulment and force him to shun me. Eric was an expert at repressing his feelings when his maker was around, but even he hadn’t been able to convince his maker that he had no feelings for me. However, Ocella liked the idea of Eric caring about an object he could never have.

It had been a hurt that would have kept on hurting.

If I wouldn’t have staked the bastard!

Of course, Ocella’s commands died with the fucker!

Pam had told me that Eric couldn’t come to me yet—for a variety of reasons. However, she’d assured me that one of them wasn’t because he despised me. Clearly, Octavia’s counter-spell had helped to mitigate the damage of Hallow’s curse, though Eric couldn’t remember his time with me. The curse had brought with it other repercussions,

too. Eric felt a longing for something he couldn't quite grasp. He also felt violated—thankfully not by me—but by the one who had taken his memories.

The one who had tried to curse him even more profoundly.

And he felt guilt about causing me pain and about dissolving our marriage—though he'd been ordered to do so by Ocella—thus the flowers.

Pam had also volunteered that Eric's sexual encounters with others had ended immediately after his maker was no longer there to compel him to do things. For the foreseeable future, Eric had committed to feeding only from bags and fucking no one.

When I'd asked Pam what Eric's status with the queen was, the vampiress's lips had twitched upward into an evil smile.

“They have called it even. Eric expressed his contrition that she'd not been informed of his memory loss, and Sophie-Anne expressed regret that she'd attempted to poach in Area 5. Given the fact that Niall has claimed you, the queen now considers the whole situation to be a “non-matter.”

I had raised an eyebrow to that. I would bet a lot of money that Eric didn't see it as a “non-matter.” But, again, I'd learned not to ask questions that might lead to more harm than good. I sent Pam back to Eric with Eric's ring and the assurance that there was nothing for me to forgive.

In my mind, Ocella was a rapist; every time he'd forced his will or his body upon Eric, he'd violated him. Eric wasn't to blame for any of it. I just prayed that Eric believed that too.

Pam hadn't contacted me again, and the sprig of fir I had gotten once a week since then was the only contact I had with him. He still needed more time.

So I continued to give it.

I sighed when my phone buzzed. It was a text from Tray wondering where I was. I grabbed my purse, squared my shoulders, and prepared to go into my old workplace to have a drink with my employees—all of whom were also real friends to me. I was resolved. I wasn't going to let Sam's presence—or anyone else's—interfere with my choices.

Quickly, I'd spied my employees at a table in the far corner, and then I took a moment to look around. Arlene was giving me “the eye.” Jason had said that she'd become “full Fellowship” now that she was dating a fanatic.

Not surprising. Hell—it was surprising that she hadn't become “full serial killer” when she'd been with Rene. It was sad, but there just wasn't much independent thought in her.

Thankfully, “my boys” had sat in Holly's section.

As I passed the bar, I nodded to Sam, whom I had heard was dating a shifter. He didn't bother to nod back.

Asshole.

Jason, Tray, Jin Akinto, and Michael Knight greeted me with a synchronized “Hi boss-lady!” as if they'd been practicing.

Yes—I'd hired my brother to work for me. After all, he was *excellent* at destroying things.

But he and I had also built a much better relationship over the previous year, too. Before her death, Gran had sort of forced us to get along. Now—we just chose to.

I was glad that Sam didn't come by to visit our table. I could still feel his bitterness and disapproval, and I'd long since disavowed both things from my life.

At a certain point, Tara joined us—and then J.B., who was seriously trying to get her attention. Halleigh Bellefleur came by to ask me if I had time to meet with her the following Monday. I agreed. Then Hoyt came by to see if I was taking applications for employment. I hired him on the spot and then bought another round for the table as the guys—especially Jason and Hoyt—celebrated. Mostly, I just sipped on a gin and tonic and laughed a lot as “my boys” told stories that were likely not “exactly” true.

At 11:30 p.m., I bid my farewells. Tray insisted on walking me to my car and then made sure I was okay. He really was a good person. I assured him that I was and then took off.

In truth, I had no desire to chime in the New Year at Merlotte's again.

I wanted to go home.

I had a wish to make and a bath to take.

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**DECEMBER 31, 2005, 11:30 P.M.**

**ERIC POV**

I landed in front of the house that had haunted all the “day-dreams” I'd had during my downtime for the last ten months. Sookie wasn't home.

“Ah, hey, Mister Eric!” Bubba greeted fondly, as he came out of the woods. “Miss Sookie's not home yet.”

He didn't seem concerned. “Do you know where she is?” I asked.

“Sure! She texted me on that nice phone you got me.”

“And what did she say?” I asked patiently.

“Oh!” Bubba exclaimed as if suddenly realizing that he should have led with this information. “She’s at Merlotte’s with her employees, but she said she’d be home by midnight.

I nodded.

“Well—I just wanted to say howdy,” Bubba said. “I was doin’ some huntin’ and I’d like to get back to it.”

“Of course.”

“Happy New Year, Mister Eric!” he enthused as he zipped back toward the trees.

“And to you,” I responded.

I sighed. I had smelled Sookie’s blood in him—but the scent was faint and fading. It was clear that Bubba was romantically indifferent to her, which was good—for him—since indifference had never been a word that I could use where she was concerned.

Anything but that.

I’d memorized all of the pictures from the box she’d sent months before.

Her face. Her eyes dancing right out of the photos and so full of love that they were hard to look at sometimes.

My face. But with a smile I’d never seen on it in any mirror. And happy, carefree eyes that matched Sookie’s.

After Appius had gone, Pam had told me that, at first, she'd agreed to let me stay in my memory-less state—because she'd felt pure happiness from me. Then, of course, she'd learned about Hallow's curse.

Pam's plan—when I'd had no memories—was to eventually pull me out “for show.” She'd wanted to give me and Sookie a few months of honeymoon time, and then she'd planned to train the other me to be “me” when required. Meanwhile, she had brought in Clancy to help with the bar and had been doing all the Sheriff's work mostly by herself—though a contrite Bill had assisted her with some things.

However, Pam's plans had failed because Sophie-Anne—the bitch—had wanted “her” telepath like I spoiled child lusts after a toy. She'd resented the fact that Niall Brigant had swooped in to claim Sookie as kin. She'd resented me—even more—for getting in her way.

So she'd placed a phone call to Ocella.

*No! Appius!*

I smiled. Now that he was dead, I could call that prick whatever I liked, including Pam's favorite: “puss-filled dick sore.”

I closed my eyes and felt my hands balling into fists. Though he'd given me a second life, Appius Livius Ocella had been the bane of my existence. I'd hated him from the start, and then I'd been “programmed” to “love” him.

It had been nighttime in Louisiana when he'd died in Austria. The bond breaking had hurt like a son of a bitch, but—knowing what I was feeling—I laughed through the pain. Hell! I celebrated the pain!



To say I was glad he was dead would be an understatement.

Elation.

Joy.

Jubilation.

Relief.

Gratefulness.

I knew—even as my bond with my maker died—who had killed him. Sookie.

I looked down at the wedding ring she'd sent to me—the one I'd seen myself wearing in the pictures. After receiving it, I'd put it on every morning before succumbing to my day-death. However, upon waking, it was necessary that I take it off—until tonight.

I thought about the long letter that she'd written for me; it had detailed all of her memories of our life “together.” She'd held nothing back.

But, unlike her, I had needed to hold back, though I had wanted to come to Sookie right after my maker was no more. But it wasn't safe.

The queen had reneged on our deal. And she'd called Appius. If Hallow's spell hadn't been “completed,” my maker would have taken the innocent canvas that had been Sookie's husband and destroyed him.

And I knew that he would have found a way to destroy Sookie too—because that would have hurt me the most. It was a good thing Appius hadn't realized that *that* truth was no different for me than it had been for the “other me.”

I'd learned—the hard way—how to hold some things back from Appius. Otherwise, I would not have retained any semblance of myself following his “training.”

I couldn't prevent my maker from realizing that I cared about Sookie. But I had held back the fact that I had love for her—memories or not.

Luckily, Appius had quickly lost interest in me since he perceived that I was “my usual self.” I had learned how to bore him, and he had a jealous Alexei to focus upon. Of course, before he'd left, he'd spent a few weeks reminding me who was the master.

Now that he was gone, I could allow myself to truly feel my hatred of him for the first time in almost a millennium. It felt fucking good!

But it was eclipsed by the love and the longing I had for another.

I left Sookie's porch to make my way to the section of the road where she had found “her Eric” the year before. The letter had told me all about it.

I sat and I waited, spending several minutes contemplating the past twenty-four hours.

I was now the King of Louisiana. I had never wanted a kingship, but Sophie-Anne's acts—both to poach in my territory and to send my sadistic maker after me when I was most vulnerable—were unforgivable. And then the cunt had dared to ask me to sell V in order to replenish her *personal* coffers after Hurricane Katrina!

It had taken me a while to come up with a take-over plan that was foolproof. Thankfully, I'd known that Sookie was safe from my queen because Sophie-Anne had truly been scared shitless of Niall. I was just grateful to him. Because of him, my EX-queen had been held at bay until I could take her head.

Killing Sophie-Anne had been satisfying—so fucking satisfying! Thalia had had the honor of killing Andre. Waldo and Hadley were also no more—thanks to Pam and Bill. The

“Berts” had been “harder” kills to make because I actually appreciated them. But they would have been obsessed to avenge their maker if they’d lived, so they had to go too. I took out one of them and Rasul took out the other.

Once Sophie-Anne and her children were gone, almost all of the other vampires in court had bowed down to me and accepted me as the new king. Those who didn’t were quickly dealt with. But, truth be told, there was no love-loss for Sophie-Anne in Louisiana.

For decades, Sophie-Anne had overtaxed her subjects. After Katrina, she’d added to the taxes in order to repair the damages to *her* estates, but she’d done very little to help displaced vampires in and around New Orleans, nor had she helped the city itself.

Selfish bitch. No one would miss her.

Every vampire who had sworn fealty to me knew that I could be a brutal bastard, but I was also a fair ruler of my people, too. And I was actually *a leader*, rather than an entitled child on a throne.

Needless to say, the Supernatural Council had approved my kingship earlier that night.

My first order of business? A protection edict for Sookie Stackhouse.

My second? Selling off Sophie-Anne’s “crowned” jewels to begin helping with the rebuilding of New Orleans.

I heard Sookie’s car before I saw it. I smiled, feeling tenderness for her—and pride. Whenever I thought of her now, my feelings seemed to come from two places—almost like an echo in a deep canyon. I’d talked to Octavia while I was in New Orleans, and she’d

posited that the “other Eric” was slowly rising to the surface. She couldn’t be sure, but she did tell me that my aura looked better—whatever the fuck that meant.

Witches!

I rose to my feet and waited for Sookie.

She now had a successful business—which the “other me” had apparently dreamed up. But she still drove the yellow piece of shit she always had.

I’d come to respect the part of her that refused to relinquish that car.

She found use in things as long as they continued to work. And she didn’t discard things just because she could.

I stepped out into the road, though I was careful not to impede her way.

She passed me.

I heard brakes moments later. But I didn’t turn around until Sookie’s car door had opened and then closed.

“You didn’t lose your memories again—did you?” Sookie asked me as she came toward me. She stopped when she was about fifteen feet away.

“No. But I haven’t remembered *us* either,” I said truthfully.

I heard her sigh. “Um—okay.” She shivered from the cold or maybe from the fear of the hurt I could cause to her. But I was done with causing her pain.

I walked slowly toward her.

“I don’t need to remember *him* to know that *I* love you, Sookie,” I said.

She gasped.

“The only question is whether you can love *this* me.”

She glanced at my left hand. The ring she'd given to "him" was there. I just hoped she'd let me keep it.

"You have always been him," she said, running the rest of the way to me.

I caught her in my arms.

Warm. Beautiful. Home.

I kissed her because I couldn't help myself.

I didn't want to help myself. I kissed her harder.

Warm. Beautiful. Home.

When she was breathless, I reluctantly pulled away.

"I don't remember," I said again.

"I can help you with that part," she promised.

She already had.

"I'm the King of Louisiana," I added.

She gasped, but then shrugged. "I figured that might happen."

"You always did 'get' me," I smirked.

She smirked back. "You *know* that I won't give up my business—right?"

I chuckled. "I was going to ask if I could moonlight as one of your employees."

"You were always good at tearing things down," she said, a smile playing at her lips.

"I'm good at building things too," I responded sincerely. "And I want to build a lot of things with you."

"Good," she sighed, taking my hand and leading me to her piece of shit car; I knew I wouldn't quite fit in it.

But that was okay—because I somehow knew that I *would* fit into Sookie’s life in the ways that mattered. And I somehow also knew that I’d remember the “other Eric” soon enough. Meanwhile, I didn’t mind simply being in love with her *as me*.

**THE END.**

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A/N: Well that's it. Some of you have shared that you liked the disjointed time-lines. Others of you decidedly did NOT. It was an experiment on my part. I did the flashbacks and the time jumps in order to try to recreate the sensation that Eric felt.

The disorientation of memories not quite fitting in the right place.

The need to do a double-take and go backwards (or forwards) to remember where you'd been before.

But still with missing gaps.

Perhaps, this was beyond my skill to get right, but I appreciate your patience for letting me try it.

I have to thank my wonderful friend who gave me the idea for this story and the "SHORTS" that I'm composing by reader request. She has finally given me permission to share her initials: A.R. But she continues to want to be anonymous beyond that. Love ya, A.R! 😊  
I hope you liked this story. I'd not intended it to be so angsty, and A.R. was shocked when I told her what my plan had become. She'd wanted pastoral and idyllic—NO ANGST. But she got Ocella! She has, thankfully, forgiven me.

Best to you all,

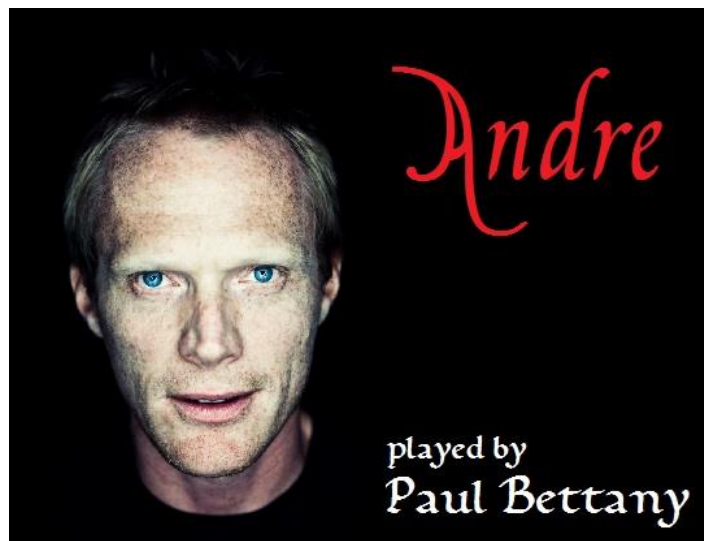
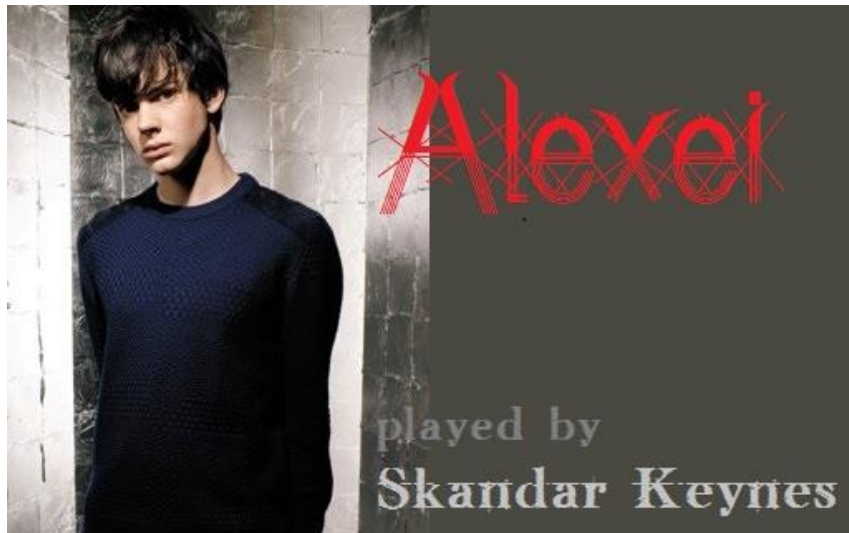
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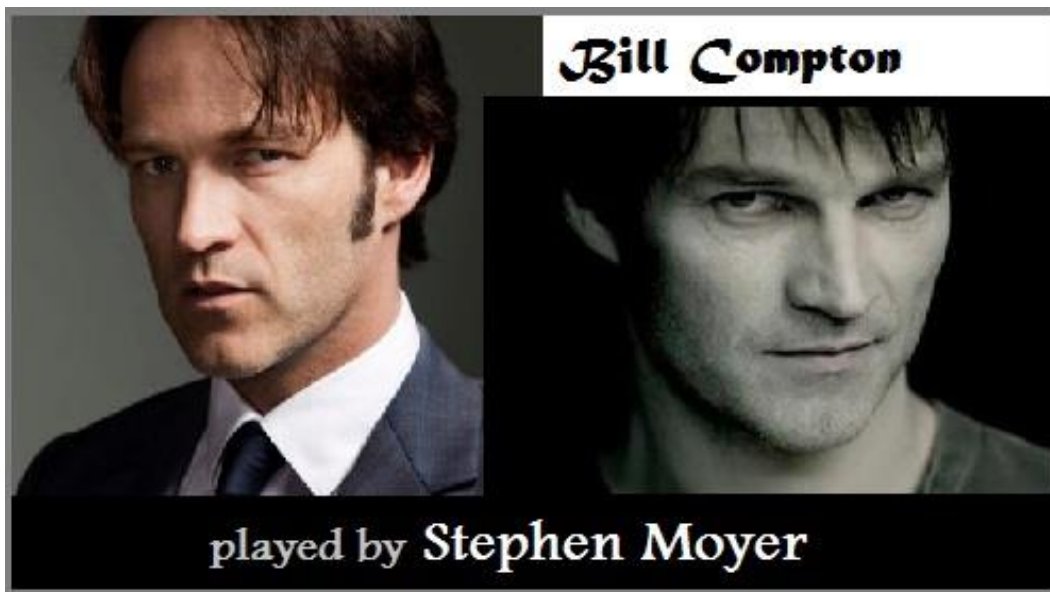
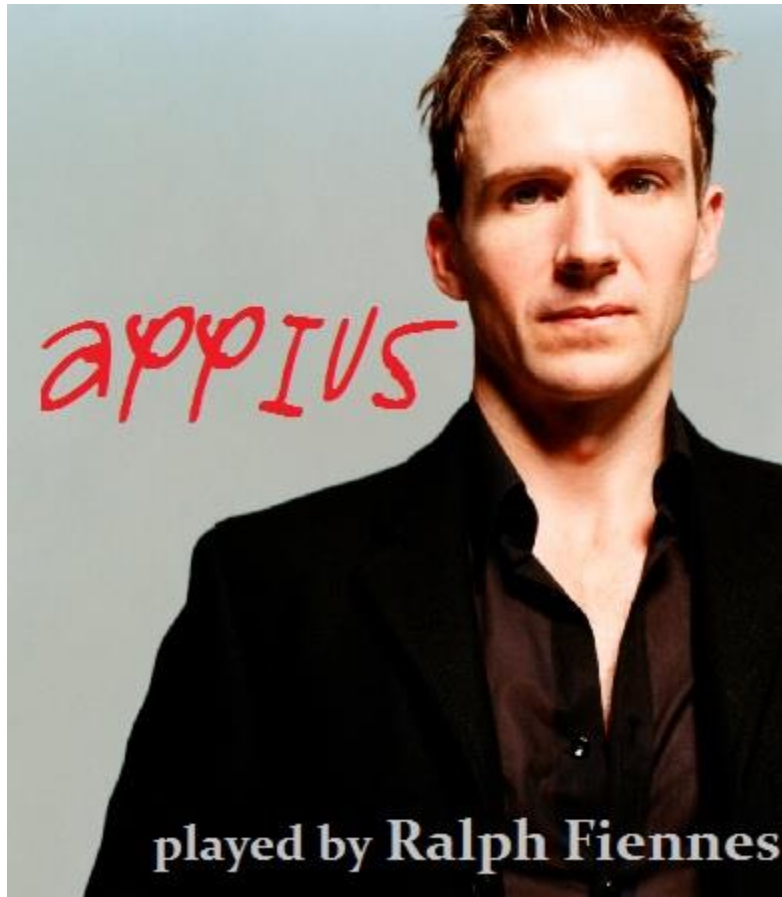
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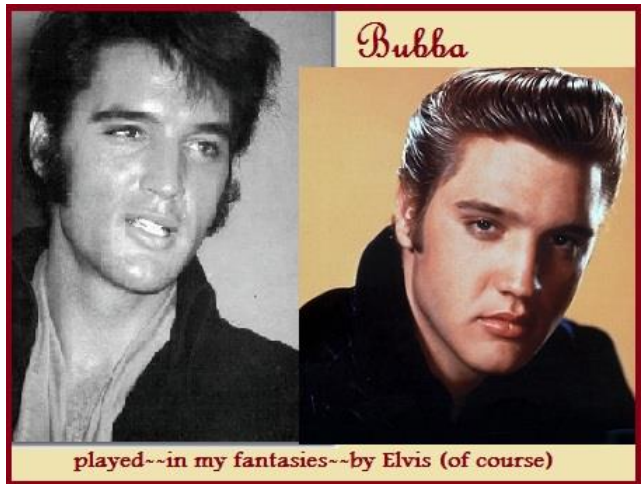
Following are some of the actors I would “cast” for various roles in this story (if I could have my dream cast).











**H**adley



played by  
**Lindsey Haun**

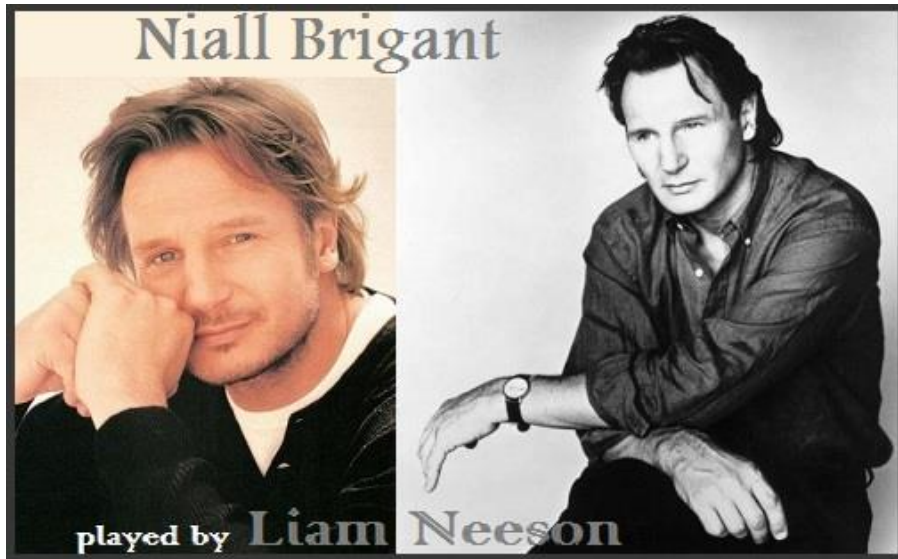


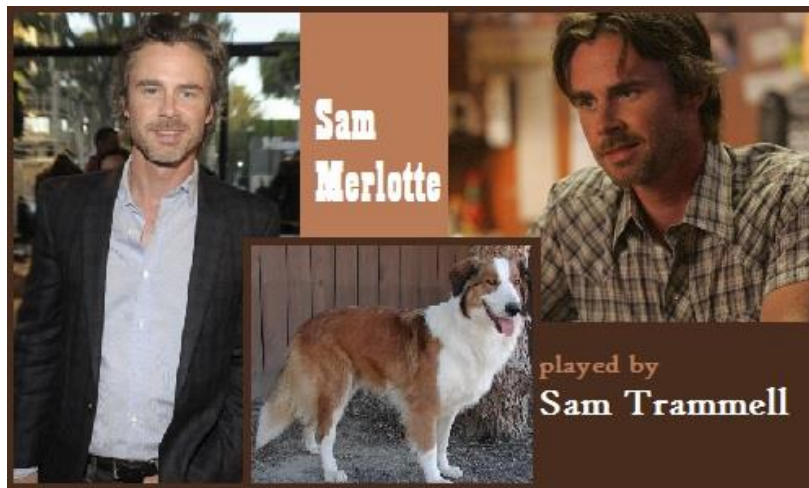
played by  
**Gabrielle Anwar**



**Jason  
Stackhouse**

played by **Ryan Kwanten**





Tray Dawson



played by Karl Urban

