

PART 2 OF THE
COMFORTABLY
NUMB SERIES

TOUCH THE FLAME



CALIFORNIA KAT

SUMMARY: This is the first sequel to *Comfortably Numb*. Eric and Sookie may have decided to fight against Appius's influence in Eric's life, but that doesn't mean smooth sailing for them. New challenges and tragedies will befall them. Will they find a way to stay together through them? Or will Appius drive them apart—or worse?

READ FIRST: This story will make no sense at all without *Comfortably Numb*. If you've not read it, I hope that you will.

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

STORY TITLE: The title of this sequel is from the lyrics of the U2 song "Where the Streets Have No Name." (I own no rights to this song.)



CAST: When I write, it is always with certain actors in mind. In my ideal production, I would have unlimited money to get them all to work on the “show” I’m imagining. Throughout this piece, you will see character banners for most of the people introduced; these are made by **SEPHRENIA**, who is always so kind in creating images to go along with my work. At the very end of the story is a cast list, which includes both actor and character names. I own none of the pictures used to illustrate the characters of this story.

OUR STARS: Eric & Sookie



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TOUCH THE FLAME

Chapter 01: Appointment

Bobby woke up to the feeling of soft lips on his cock, and he sure as hell didn't mind that.

"Mmmm," he sounded roughly. "For a self-proclaimed hater of dicks, you do that so well."

Pam looked up from her task. "Well your cock is one of the few I've liked," she grinned as she moved her hand up and down his member.



“So good,” he panted, holding her hair in a ponytail as she took him into her mouth again. He knew enough about Pam to know that if he thrust upward, she would stop, so he kept his body still.

“What has you so wound up at,” he glanced at the clock, “5:00 in the morning?”

“Mmmm,” she hummed around his cock. “A good dream.”

“Oh God,” he murmured as she took the hand that had been playing with his balls and pressed a finger—hard—against his perineum.

“You like a little kink, don’t you?” Pam purred from around his dick.

“I like *your* kink,” he reminded as she moved her finger to stimulate his rear entrance.

Forty minutes later, they were both sated and showered, though they’d settled back into bed.

“You’re the only one I’ve ever let do that,” Bobby commented as Pam leaned over him to grab one of his cigarettes from the nook behind the bed. She didn’t smoke often, but she did enjoy a post coital cigarette every now and then.

“I’ve figured that out,” she winked, “though you’ve seemed to enjoy it every time I’ve done it.”

“I gotta tell you—the first time was a real eye opener,” he chuckled, remembering the first time Pam had decided to make it her personal mission to find his prostate gland and then stimulate it until he came only from that. Bobby had never been attracted to men, but in that moment, he had understood the attraction of anal sex. Of course, Pam’s thin finger was as far as he was willing to go in that arena.

She leaned against the headboard and lit up her cigarette.

Bobby grabbed one and did the same. He chuckled when Pam glared at him. “Hey—you know I never smoke in your house unless you’re smoking.”

Pam—in all other situations—hated cigarettes and hated Bobby smoking them, especially around her. In fact, she required that he brush his teeth and gargle mouthwash for a full minute if he wanted to kiss her at all after he’d been smoking.

“I don’t like you smoking in my house,” she said, taking a big puff of her own cigarette before grabbing a beautiful ashtray and setting it down in the nook of the headboard—where they could both reach it.

“You’re the most infuriating woman I know,” Bobby said, though he was still chuckling. “Who else would take a cigarette from a smoker, light up after sex with him, and then deny him the same privilege?”

Pam shrugged. “I don’t care.”

Bobby smiled slyly. “You know—you only want one of those when I *really* get you off.”

Pam rolled her eyes but didn’t contradict him. In fact, Bobby had been able to tell that he’d gotten her off a couple of times. After she’d brought him to a mind-numbing orgasm, he’d returned the favor, and Pam wasn’t shy about telling him exactly where she wanted him to be and what she wanted him to do during oral sex. If she weren’t so goddamned sexy, he might have been annoyed by it.

“Like I said, I woke up from a hot dream,” she smirked, trying to deflate his ego—no doubt.

“Must have been a good one. Was I in it?”

“No,” Pam answered, her smirk growing. “Wrong gender.”

Bobby chuckled. “Let me get this straight. You had a dream in which you were having sex with a woman and then you woke up and felt the need to give me a blow job?”

Pam shrugged. “You were the only thing available.”

Bobby snorted. “I’ll try not to take offense.”

“You shouldn’t—not really,” Pam said her face falling a bit as she took another drag of her cigarette.

“What’s wrong?” Bobby asked perceptively.

“Nothing,” she tried.

“Bullshit,” Bobby returned.

“Fine,” Pam glared at him. “It’s just that I’ve been dreaming of this person a lot.”

Bobby’s lips curved into a half-smile/half-smirk. “Pammy, are *you* in love?”

“God no!” Pam protested quickly, her voice a bit squeaky.

Bobby’s smile widened. “I think the lady doth protest too much.”

Pam took a drag of her cigarette and blew the smoke out slowly.

Bobby’s playful demeanor, as well as his impulse to relentlessly tease his “friend with benefits,” faltered when he saw the serious look on Pam’s face. “Tell me about her,” he requested sincerely.

Pam sighed. “It’s Sookie’s Brooklyn roommate.”

“Amelia?” Bobby asked. “I thought the two of you were just having fun.”

“Yeah,” Pam said. “We decided to keep things casual and to continue seeing others. She’s a lot more ‘bi’ than I am.”

Bobby took a drag of his cigarette. “And that scares you?” he asked perceptively.

Pam sighed. “You know I’m a lesbian.”

He looked at her skeptically.

“I make an exception with you. But I don’t have an interest in trying other men anymore. However, I’ve been with a lot of so-called *bi*-sexual women who don’t know what they want. They like to ‘play’ with other women, but only until they find their Prince Charming, but that usually doesn’t bother me because I’m just playing with them too.”

“But you really like Amelia, and you’re afraid she’s just dallying with the idea of being a lesbian, so you’re afraid to commit.”

“You’re an asshole sometimes,” Pam said, reaching over to put out her finished cigarette and take another.

Bobby shook his head a little. In Pam-speak, those words meant that he’d hit the nail on the head with his assessment of what was going on.

“The worst part,” Pam said, “is that I woke up from my dream feeling a little guilty that I’d slept with you.”

“So you decided to alleviate that guilt by blowing me?” Bobby asked with a chuckle. “And then by fucking me again?”

She glared at him. “I’m trying to be serious here.”

“Sorry,” Bobby said as he too lit another cigarette. He got another glare for that, but just rolled his eyes and motioned to the lit cigarette in her fingers.

“Anyway—yeah—I figured that getting off would stop those pangs of guilt, especially since you’re *very* good at distracting me.”

Bobby grinned. “Well—you’ve trained me well.”

“Damned right,” Pam snarked as she raised a perfect eyebrow. In fact, she had taught Bobby many, many things about pleasing a woman with oral sex.

“It didn’t work—did it?”

“What?” Pam asked evasively.

“The guilt came back after the orgasm—I mean orgasms.”

“Yeah,” she admitted.

“You should go for it then,” Bobby advised. “From what I’ve seen, Amelia’s nice—a little too ‘new aged’ for my taste, but nice. And she’s my cousin Claudine’s best friend. And when I asked about Amelia, Claudine had nice things to say.”



“Why would you ask about Amelia? You’re not interested in her—are you?” Pam asked a little jealously.

“Down girl,” Bobby chuckled. “No. I checked into her a little because of her connection to Sookie. I wanted to try to gauge her trustworthiness in keeping Eric and Sookie’s relationship a secret.”

Pam bit her lip a little. “So you investigated her?”

“Just enough,” Bobby answered. “And I asked Claudine about her, but that’s all. She seems like a good person, Pam, and I don’t think she’d yank your chain if she wasn’t into you. So if you want something more exclusive, ask for it,” he counseled, bringing his hand to her

cheek in a tender motion. “I’d miss the hell out of our little rendezvous, but I know I’m not the one for you—at least not in the long run.”

“Yeah,” she said bringing her own hand up to stroke his cheek, “but sometimes I wish you were, Bobby.”

Not wanting things to become too serious, he lightened the mood. “But I’m not willing to get a sex-change operation for you, and since I wasn’t made with a vagina, you find me lacking.”

“A nice pair of tits would help too,” she said, her usual sarcasm rising into her voice.

“Those too.” He leaned over and kissed her lips softly. “Try with Amelia, Pam. Just tell her what you want, and see if she wants it too.”

“And if she doesn’t?” Pam asked a bit insecurely.

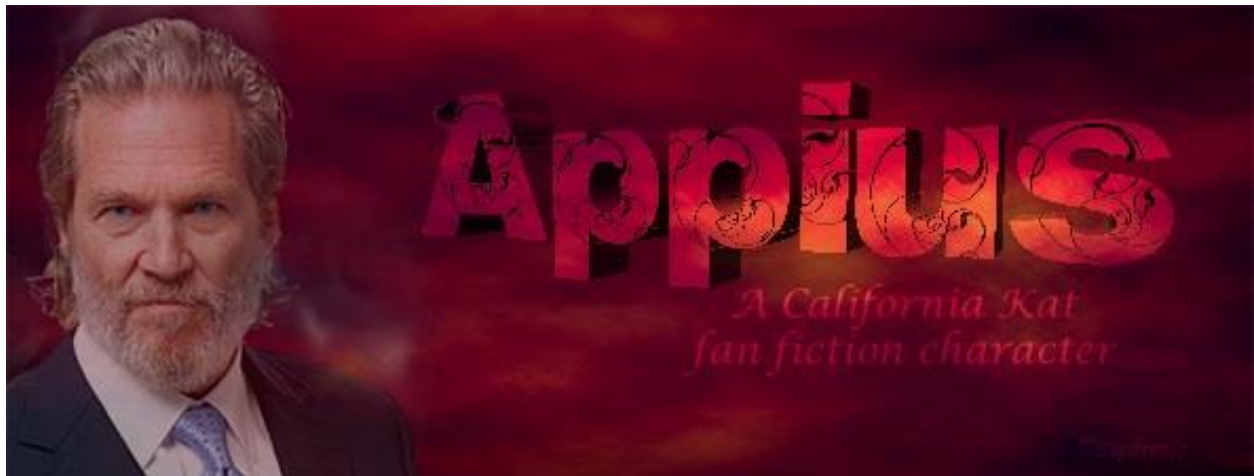
“Then you’ll have to decide whether to keep seeing her—because if you really like her, but she sees it as casual, she’ll hurt you without meaning to. And I wouldn’t want to see that.”

Bobby kissed Pam one more time and put out his cigarette before getting out of bed.

“Hey—where are you going?” Pam asked.

Bobby glanced at the clock. “I have an appointment at 8:00,” he said as he put on his pants. He’d decided it was better not to tell Pam about the listening device Nora had planted. He’d leave it up to Eric to decide who to tell about this latest piece of his father’s duplicity.

Bobby sighed. If he thought that Eric would forgive him for doing it, Bobby would arrange for Appius to have an “accident.” God knows—Bobby had met enough nefarious people in his line of work to set something up. However, Bobby couldn’t do that to his friend or to the woman in bed in front of him—at least, not unless they asked.



Moreover, he still felt that death would be too damned good for Appius Northman. After all, he'd been the cause of decades of pain for his “brother,” and—make no mistake—Bobby truly thought of Eric Northman as his brother, more than ever.

And as the older “brother,” Bobby felt damned protective of Eric. Since Sookie had been in his life, Eric had been opening himself up more than he ever had before; he was no longer holding back the part of himself that was most important.

It had almost broken Bobby’s heart to see Eric sunken onto his knees and looking into his half-empty closet as if his world had been taken from him. In truth, that had been why Bobby

had needed to seek out Pam. He'd needed a little comforting of his own after seeing Eric so distraught.

Bobby intuited that it wasn't even the bug being planted that had ultimately broken Eric down like that. If it were just Eric living in the house—if it had been the Eric of a year ago—he would have likely “accepted” his father's surveillance of his office without putting up a fight. After all, unlike Bobby—and *certainly* unlike Appius—Eric was truly an honorable man. Thus, he had very little to hide.

Of course, before Sookie, Eric had allowed himself nothing that would have needed to be hidden.

Bobby sighed. He could tell that what had truly crushed Eric was the thought of losing Sookie—the thought that his relationship with her *would* have been discovered by that listening device. And then Appius would have known what would hurt Eric the most. And Sookie's being hurt had obviously caused great fear in his friend.

Bobby shook his head a little. He couldn't help but to share Eric's concern, and he cringed when he thought about Appius learning of Sookie and Eric's relationship, but what truly worried him was that Appius would find out just how much Sookie meant to Eric. Appius would do anything he could to hurt Sookie if he knew the depth of Eric's feelings for her. And Sookie had plenty of things in her past that could hurt her, even though she wasn't to blame for any of them.

“What's got you so frowny over there?” Pam asked as she got out of bed and pulled on her robe.

“Just thinking about my appointment.”

“What kind of appointment do you have at 8:00 on a Sunday morning?” she asked, her hands on her hips.

“Proctologist,” he grinned.

“Didn’t you already have your proctologist appointment this morning?” she deadpanned.

He chuckled as he moved toward her, and then he dipped her into a toe-curling kiss.

“What the fuck was that for?” Pam asked breathlessly when he lifted her up.

“Just in case things work out with Amelia, I wanted one last kiss,” he grinned rakishly.

Pam shook her head a little, but then looked concerned. “Bobby, if things do work out, I don’t want to lose you as my,” she paused, “friend. You get me—probably better than anyone else does or could,” she admitted begrudgingly.

He pulled her into a warm hug. “You and I will always be friends, Pammy. It’s only the ‘with benefits’ part that’s variable.”

For once, as Pam tightened her arms around him, she didn’t even mind that Bobby had called her “Pammy.”

Bobby walked from the elevator straight into the parking garage. Both Eric and Pam had three parking spaces that came with their homes, and since they never used them all, Bobby always parked in the garage when he came over.

He was a little surprised to find someone waiting for him next to his car.

“Henry,” Bobby said as he approached the car and saw Henry Jiles there. He’d developed a friendship with the head of security over the last couple of months. Henry had a wry wit and a subtle quiriness that appealed to Bobby. Plus, the ex-Navy SEAL’s work—and his fast thinking the night before—had made Bobby admire the chief of security for Eric’s

building even more. Right then, however, Henry's face told him that he'd be saying something Bobby didn't want to hear.



“Bobby,” Henry returned, “are you heading to Brooklyn?”

Bobby nodded. “Yeah. I was planning to go home, change, and then head over to the Brownstone.”

“I’m riding over with you,” Henry said, his tone brooking no argument.

“When I saw you, I kind of figured you might,” Bobby smirked. He pushed the button to unlock his car and wasn’t surprised when Henry beat him inside.

“Where do you live?” Henry asked.

“A loft—on the Lowest East. What’s all this about?” Bobby asked. “I can’t imagine that you’re just trying to save on gas money.”

Henry chuckled. “I’ll tell you on the way. Blake and I aren’t sure, but Eric and Sookie might have a bigger problem than we thought.”

Chapter 02: Caught

“Set the table?” Sookie asked as she leaned back into Eric’s body even as she flipped the pancakes.

“For five?” Eric asked.

“Six. Just in case Amelia gets up.”

“I’m up,” Amelia said as she groggily dragged into the room. “But I don’t have to stay if you guys need privacy once Bobby, Henry, and Blake get here.”



Sookie looked at Eric.

“No—stay. It’s okay. Maybe you’ll have some ideas.” He looked over at Sookie. “And there’s some good news too—so stay for that.”

“Sure,” Amelia said, quickly grabbing a huge coffee cup and filling it. She took a long drink. “Oh, God. That’s good.” Immediately, she looked a little more awake. “And I’m always happy to hear good news.” Suddenly excited, she looked at Sookie. “You’re not pregnant—are you?”

Sookie almost spit out the drink of coffee she’d just taken.

“No,” she blushed and then looked at Eric.

“Then what is it?” Amelia asked.

“We’ll tell you when the others get here,” Eric and Sookie both answered at the same time before grinning widely at each other.

“Geez,” Amelia said with mock disgust. “You two are so damned cute sometimes that it turns my stomach.”

“That’s the coffee hitting the tequila,” Sookie said cheekily, even as she continued smiling at Eric.

“Can you give me a hint?” Amelia pouted before taking another long drink of coffee.

Amelia’s question reminded both Eric and Sookie of the conversation they’d had right before they finally fell asleep for what turned out to be a two-hour nap since Sookie had set the alarm for 7:00 a.m. After they’d decided that they were “it” for each other and that Eric was going to break his contract with Appius on his thirty-fifth birthday, they’d talked about having children and the insecurities each of them had because they didn’t have good examples to follow. But they agreed that they both wanted to be parents anyway; actually, they agreed that they wanted to become parents *together*.

However, they’d decided to wait until Eric was truly free from Appius’s influence, which would be several years from then, but they were not in a hurry anyway. Still, they’d both gone to sleep with smiles on their faces as they’d thought about having a family together.

During his two hours of sleep, Eric had dreamed of being on Lake Vänern with that family—*his* family. He and Sookie were on a boat and watching over a small blond child, who was splashing merrily in the water. It had been the most vivid “happy” dream he’d ever experienced. He’d had recurring nightmares when he was a kid, and those had also been intense.

But the vibrant dream he'd had that morning was also the dream that he'd decided to pursue for his real life too, and because of that, he felt like a weight had been taken from him.

Sookie's phone rang, and she reached for it on the counter.

"Bobby," she said, handing it to Eric. "Talk to him while I make more pancakes."

Eric nodded and answered the phone.

"Hey, you on your way?" he asked lightheartedly.

As he listened to what Bobby had to say, Eric's carefree expression burned from his face.

"Eric?" Sookie asked, immediately sensing and seeing his mood change.

After listening for a few more moments, Eric hung up.

His expression was now a mixture of anger and fear as he looked at Sookie.

"Eric?" she asked again.

"They're here," he said stiffly. He looked at Amelia. "Would you mind unlocking your back door? They'll be coming in that way in about one minute."

Amelia looked a little confused, but went through the kitchen to the utility room. The back door was located there and led out to a large courtyard shared by the residents of the buildings on that block. Since she was on the first floor, Amelia had a small patio right outside of her home too.

Sookie immediately turned off the gas burners and went to Eric's side, but before she could ask him what had happened, he took her into his arms and buried his face into her hair.

"One day, you'll realize that being with me is more trouble than it's worth," he whispered.

"You're worth any trouble, Eric," Sookie assured, even as she wrapped her arms around him more tightly.

A few seconds later, Amelia came into the kitchen with Bobby, Blake, and Henry. All three men looked grim.

“Good morning,” Henry said with the air of formality Sookie associated with his being an ex-Marine.

“Sookie. Eric,” Blake greeted with a little nod. He took a deep breath and spoke to them like the detective he was. “I need to know a couple of things before we talk this all through.”

“What things?” Sookie asked, even as Eric nodded next to her.

“Have any of you been outside today?” Blake asked, including Amelia in the question too.

“I brought in the paper an hour ago,” Eric said.

“From the front stoop?”

Eric nodded.

“Was Sookie with you when you did?” Blake questioned.

“No,” Eric answered. “Sookie was in the bathroom then.”

“And you? Have you been out of the house at all?” Blake asked Amelia.

“I just got up, so no,” she answered, clearly mystified by the questioning.

“Bobby?” Sookie asked, looking for answers.

“We’ll explain in a minute,” Bobby soothed. “Right now, just answer Blake’s questions.”

Sookie bit her lip nervously, but nodded.

“Have any of you spent time in the front living room this morning?” Blake asked. “The drapes are open in there.”

“Well,” Sookie responded, “you have to walk through there from my room to get to the kitchen, so yeah. I’ve walked through there a couple of times now.”

“With Eric?” Blake asked.

“No,” she answered. “He was already in the kitchen making coffee when I came in here, and he’s been reading the paper.”

“And you?” Blake asked Amelia.

“My room is down that hall.” Amelia pointed away from the front room. “And I came straight to the kitchen.”

“You?” he asked Eric.

“I went from the hall leading to Sookie’s bedroom into the living room this morning, and then I went to the front door, and then I came in here. Sookie’s right. I haven’t left this room since then.”

Henry and Bobby looked at Blake.

“That should be okay,” Blake said.

“What should be okay?” Sookie asked, her frustration level obviously rising.

“Just give Blake one more minute, Sookie,” Henry requested, speaking in a brotherly tone that was obviously meant to comfort her.

“What about last night?” Blake asked, looking from Eric to Sookie. “Did you two talk in the living room or—uh—do anything else there?”

“No,” Eric answered. “We went straight back to Sookie’s room when I got here.”

“Your room is in the back? Facing the courtyard?” Blake asked.

Sookie nodded.

“And the curtains are closed in your room?” he followed up.

“Yes,” she answered. “And there are mini-blinds too.”

“Good,” Blake said. “And you Amelia? Were you in the living room at all after Eric and Sookie went to her bedroom?”

Amelia shook her head. “No. I mean yes. I went to my bedroom when we heard Eric’s taxi pull up. But I came out about an hour later to grab a glass of water. I went to the front door to double check that all the locks were set, and then I turned on the alarm. I stepped into the living room to shut off the light Sookie and I’d had on.”

“And your bedroom faces the front of the house—correct?”

Amelia nodded.

“And your curtains are closed? Have they been closed all night and this morning?”

Amelia nodded again. “Yeah, and there’s a shade in there too.”

Blake nodded. “Could you go close the drapes in the living room?”

Though still obviously confused, Amelia moved to do as directed.

“Wait,” Blake said halting her with his tone. “The only street-facing windows are in your bedroom, the living room, and the dining room—correct?” he asked pointing to the dining room, which they could see from where they were all standing in the kitchen?” The heavy drapes in that rarely-used room were already pulled tightly shut.

“There’s an office on the other side of the living room, but I always keep those blinds closed when I’m not in there,” Amelia responded.

Blake looked back at Sookie, who seemed to be bursting at the seams with tension. “Just one more thing, Sookie,” Blake promised. “Who answered the door for Eric last night?”

“I did,” she said, her voice quivering a little.

“And did you walk outside at all when you did that?” he asked.

“Yes,” she responded.

“Did you kiss him in the doorway—or even hug him?”

Sookie closed her eyes to remember. “Yes. We held each other for a little while—maybe twenty seconds or so? Then, I remember taking his hand and pulling him inside. We went straight to the bedroom.”

“You were holding hands as you went?” Blake asked.

“Yeah,” Eric answered.

Blake nodded and moved toward the front of the house as Amelia came back to the kitchen. About thirty seconds later, he walked back in.

“I think it’s okay,” Blake said.

Bobby nodded and looked at Amelia. “Is there a room in the back of the house that can fit us all so that we can sit down and talk?”

“Yeah—a sitting room. I’ll go close the drapes,” she said, catching on—at least a little bit—to what was happening.

Blake nodded at Amelia. “Thanks. He’s watching from the front and will probably stay there, but it’s good to be cautious.”

Forgetting completely about breakfast, Sookie grasped Eric’s hand tightly. “Who’s the *he*?”

“Let’s go sit,” Eric said, suddenly feeling very tired and heavy with worries again.

Sookie nodded and led the group to the sitting room where Amelia had already closed the vertical blinds and was now pulling the drapes. She flipped on the light in the corner of the room before taking a seat on the large couch. Henry and Blake also took places on the couch as

Sookie and Eric sat on the loveseat. Bobby stayed standing, even though there was a chair left over.

It was actually Henry who started speaking. “Eric, after I put you in the taxi last night, I went right back up to your house since Blake had gotten back with the screening equipment. It wasn’t until Blake and I came back down about an hour later that I talked to Rasul.” Henry looked at Eric. “He told us that he’d seen a big guy hanging around out front around the time you and I came down. Rasul said that he didn’t see the guy’s face clearly, but something had stood out about him, and it’d been bugging him while I was up at your house. So Rasul did a patrol around the building, but there was nothing suspicious. Then, he did a runback of the video footage near the front entrance and got a shot of the guy, but it wasn’t clear. When he showed me the image after I returned downstairs, I recognized the guy’s tattoo.”

“Sigebert,” Eric sighed. “Or Wybert.”





Blake held out his cell phone for Eric and Sookie to see. On it was the image of a large man. His face was turned, but a tattoo of a dragon could be seen clearly on his arm.

“But that’s not at Eric’s. That’s from right outside of this building!” Sookie exclaimed nervously.

“Yeah,” Blake confirmed. “I took it about five minutes before Bobby and Henry got here this morning.” He sighed. “Once Henry recognized the man who’d been in front of Eric’s building as one of the men whom Eric’s father had sent to snoop around in the past, I decided to come here to make sure he’d not followed you. After finding the listening device, we thought that it would be better to be safe than sorry.”

“We should have called you,” Henry said contritely, “but we knew that Eric would have already arrived by then, so any potential damage would have already been done. And we honestly didn’t think that ‘the Bert’ could have made it to a vehicle in time to tail you last night.”

Eric sighed. “This is all my fault. I should have seen him. I always see them when they’re following!” He raked the hand that wasn’t holding Sookie’s through his hair. “I’ve *always* been careful, but last night, I was,” he paused, “upset.”

Henry nodded. “There is no reason to suspect that he had been following you before last night. After Blake left, Tray and I went back over the surveillance footage around the building. We used the Berts’ drivers’ license photos—which Blake got for us—to run the facial recognition program that Thalia installed last year. Hell! We even ran the tattoo through the system. We can safely say that neither Sigebert nor Wybert has been picked up on any of our cameras during the last month.”





“But he followed me here last night,” Eric sighed.

“I didn’t think so at first,” Blake admitted. “Given the fact that we saw the man on the security footage right around the time you were put into the cab, it would have been very difficult for him to get to a vehicle and follow you. We’d figured that you’d gotten away clear. But, as I said, I came out here to sniff around anyway—just to be absolutely sure. After I got here, I maneuvered around outside for a while, but I didn’t see anyone suspicious. Just to be safe, though, I took up a position in the brownstone across the street. I figured that if I didn’t see ‘the Bert’ by this morning, he’d not managed to track Eric here.”



“But he *was* there,” Sookie whimpered.

Blake nodded. “This morning—right before I left my position to come over here—he parked a vehicle across the street—in the perfect location to monitor the front entrance of this building. He got out of his car and approached the house—probably trying to see if he could see in through the front windows, but from my own observations, I already knew that only the living room curtains were open. And those weren’t even opened fully. I don’t know if ‘the Bert’ has been here all night, but we have to assume that he has been here for at least part of it. He moved his car to its current position right after the street-sweepers went through.”

Bobby sighed. “He may not even have followed you at all, Eric. He could have gotten the information about your destination from the cabby that drove you here, but we can’t be sure.”

Sookie sniffled a little as Eric pulled her closer to him.

“As soon as I spotted ‘the Bert,’” Blake continued, “I called Henry and told him and Bobby to approach from where he couldn’t see them. He’d gone back to his car by then.”

Eric sighed. “So—best case scenario—he got here just a little while ago and has seen nothing.”

Blake nodded. “Yes. And—worst case scenario—he managed to follow the cab you were in last night.” He took a breath. “He would have needed to keep at a fair distance, especially when you entered this neighborhood,” he added. “It’s quiet, and you would have likely spotted him otherwise.” He exchanged a look with Henry.

“Unless you were distracted,” Henry said somberly.

“I was,” Eric admitted in a low tone.

Blake picked up, “Well, even if he was close, he would have been unable to see much of Sookie—if he saw her at all—given the ivy around the front entrance and the fact that the light isn’t especially bright.”

Bobby ran his hand through his hair. “But we are going to be cautious and work off of the assumption that he *did* catch a glimpse of her.”

“Shit,” Sookie said, pretty much summing up what they all felt.

“Listen, Sook, from what you’ve said, even if he drove by last night at the exact moment when he could have seen you hugging and then taking Eric’s hand, those are innocent enough gestures,” Bobby comforted.

“But they’ll know who lives here,” Sookie said.

“No,” Amelia chimed in, “they won’t know who you are. Your name isn’t on the lease, and I didn’t exactly file the proper paperwork when you moved in here.” She looked at Blake a little guiltily. “So—uh—they’ll think Eric was here spending the night with *me*, and that’s what you *want* them to think—right?” she finished, looking at Bobby.

“Yes,” Bobby answered. “A liaison with you is something that Appius wouldn’t mind.”

“Because of who my family is!” Amelia said with realization. She looked at Sookie. “This is really good! I mean—it sucks, but it’s good. The worst that could happen is that they think you’re my friend—someone who happened to be over when Eric was here. Hell! They might even figure that we had a threesome, but they won’t know who you are, and even if this ‘Bert’ asshole had been standing right at the window of the living room, the sheer curtains were drawn the whole time, and his view would have been obstructed.”

“Yes,” Blake said. “I agree. As I said, I was watching from the Brownstone across the street for much of the night, and the first time I saw ‘the Bert’ get close to the building was this

morning. Maybe he peered in last night before I arrived, but—from what you’ve said—he wouldn’t have seen much.”

“So Appius will think Eric’s having an affair with Amelia?” Sookie asked.

“If we are lucky—yes,” Bobby said.

“But what if he saw Sookie greeting me?” Eric asked with concern. “Though they are of similar heights and builds, Sookie is blonde, while Amelia is brunette.”

“You just hugged right?” Bobby asked to clarify.

Eric ran his hand through his hair. “Yes—but I don’t want him asking questions.”

“Hopefully, ‘the Bert’ didn’t see that there was a blonde here at all,” Bobby said.

“But what if he did?” Eric pushed, his voice laced with anxiety.

“No problem!” Amelia said excitedly. “I’ve been thinking about going blonde for a while; in fact, I bought one of those temporary color kits to see what it would look like before I did it for real. And I don’t mind pretending Eric and I have a *thing*—not as long as we can tell Pam the truth.”

“Thanks, Amelia,” Eric said sincerely, “but I can’t ask you to get involved in my troubles.”

“You didn’t ask,” she said simply. “And it’s really not that big of a deal.” She giggled. “It’s not like Sookie’s going to kick my ass when she finds out about our ‘clandestine affair,’” she said dramatically.

Sookie got up and went over to hug Amelia. “I’ve never had a friend like you,” she whispered.

Amelia looked at her and smiled. “Look around the room,” she said in a low voice. “I think you have at least three others, and then there’s Pam and Thalia too. Any one of us would

walk through fire for you, Sookie. And we'd walk through fire for you too," she added, looking at Eric.

"She's right," Bobby said. "And it's high time you started believing that," he said, looking right at Eric.

Eric closed his eyes tightly, taking in Bobby's words but not knowing exactly how to process them yet. "What about the listening device in our home?" Eric asked as Sookie returned to his side. "Or is it devices?"

"There's just the one in the office," Blake confirmed. "I swept the whole house for other signals—the terrace, too."

"And then Thalia did it a second time early this morning," Henry said, "after our military contact came through with the more sophisticated equipment Bobby told you about. Thalia has also swept the elevator, lobby, and parking lot—for both passive and active surveillance devices."

"Did you take the bug out?" Eric asked.

"No," Bobby said cautiously. "We needed to talk to you first."

"Why the fuck not? What's there to talk about?" Eric asked angrily.

"The second it's taken out, Appius will know you found it, and then he'll redouble his efforts to know what you're doing."

Eric closed his eyes again and retook Sookie's hand. "But I won't live there without Sookie. And what if the bug picks up our talking—even from another room?"

"That won't happen," Henry said. "One of Thalia's jobs in the Navy was to plant or block listening devices a whole hell of a lot more sophisticated than the one Appius is using. And when I set up the system at Carmichael Plaza, I used Thalia—as well as some of my

contacts in Naval Intelligence—to make sure that it was state-of-the-art. Thalia’s already been able to find the signal of Appius’s device, *and* she’s already hacked into it.”

“Thalia is a computer hacker?” Sookie asked with surprise.

Henry chuckled. “My little sis was one of the best computer hackers in the Navy,” he offered proudly. “Right now, Appius is listening to the sounds coming from one of the bedrooms on the fourth floor of the tower.”

“The fourth floor?” Sookie asked.

“Yeah,” Henry smiled. “It’s the one empty unit in the tower. We surveil all empty units so that if a realtor comes in with a client, we can make sure everything stays on the up-and-up. Thalia has basically replaced the audio feed from your place with the audio feed from the fourth floor—so that Appius will still hear the sounds of the building, like the air conditioning unit.”

“What if someone comes to look at the unit?” Sookie asked.

“Don’t worry,” Henry responded. “The owners put such a high price on it that no one has looked in months, and—even if they did—an appointment must be made, so Thalia can easily move the signal back to Eric’s office during those times.”

“So Appius will only hear *when* and *what* we want him to hear?” Eric asked for clarification.

“Yep,” Bobby said.

“That’ll be handy,” Sookie said, trying to sound as positive as she could in light of the fact that Appius was trying to spy on Eric.

“And there’s no way that a mistake could happen with what Thalia’s got set up?” Eric asked.

“No way,” Henry said. “But Thalia says she wants a bonus,” he added with a smirk.

Eric chuckled. “She’ll get one.”

“I’ll tell her.”

“So,” Eric sighed. “How do we get out of here? And how do we get Sigebert off of my ass? Sookie and I have a date at the MET.”

Bobby chuckled. “Well—if Amelia really is willing to dye her hair, I say that needs to happen first. How long does that take to do?”

“I could have it done in an hour,” she said, “even less if wet hair is okay for what you have in mind.”

“Perfect,” Bobby responded, understanding even better now why Pam would be attracted to Amelia.

“I’ll get started,” the soon-to-be-blonde said, standing up. “Why don’t you all go have breakfast and then bring me up to speed on the plan once I have the dye on?”

Sookie stood up and gave Amelia another hug before turning to the others. “You guys want coffee?”

“Love some,” Henry, Blake, and Bobby answered in concert as Sookie began to lead them to the kitchen.

“Bobby?” Eric said, signaling for his friend to stay behind for a minute. “What do you really think?” he asked when the others were out of earshot.

“I think we got lucky. We’ll be able to contain this *and* to use it to our benefit. If I’m guessing right, then Appius probably had you followed because he was suspicious when Isabel left early last night. And by coming here, you inadvertently gave him a reason why you’d want to get rid of Isabel so quickly. Appius will think that you are having an affair with Amelia on the side, and we can use the listening device to solidify that notion. *And* we’ll ‘show’ him Amelia

today and have you two kiss or something to give him a nice show when you say goodbye to her.”



Eric immediately tensed. “I won’t do anything that could be considered cheating on Sookie.” He closed his eyes for a moment. “I’m going to marry her, Bobby. I’m going to break the contract on my thirty-fifth birthday and marry her.”

Bobby’s mouth turned upward into a grin. “Good! That contract is idiotic anyway!”

“Idiotic?” Eric asked with surprise. “*You* helped me draw it up.”

“Yeah—well—I always hated the idea of you still under your father’s thumb in *any* way, but being CEO of Northman Publishing was what you wanted at the time.” He sighed. “I won’t deny the fact that I had been hoping that you would find something you wanted more—before you got married to someone you didn’t really love. But—you have to be sure. Between the CEO, the NP stock, and the trust fund, you are giving up a lot.”

“Sookie’s worth everything I’m giving up—and more,” Eric said passionately. “But that’s not what I’m worried about. I’m worried about the others that this will affect.”

“I know. But you can’t take the world onto your shoulders, Eric.” Bobby sighed.

Eric sighed as well. “I used to think that I *deserved* the whole world on my shoulders.”

The two men were silent for a moment.

“I’m glad you’ve found her,” Bobby finally said.

“Me too, Bobby, but Sookie and I need to bide our time. The sooner Appius finds out about her, the worse it will be for us and for my team at NP. I want to give them time to build safety nets for themselves. And—as you know—it’s just not feasible for me to break the contract before my thirty-fifth birthday.”

Bobby nodded. “Okay. And to that end, by the end of the day—if we play our cards right—we’ll have let Appius hear all he needs to in order to leave you alone for a long time.”

Eric nodded. “I figure I’ll be at Northman Publishing for three and a half more years. And then I want to sell the NP stock that I put in Mormor’s name and set up a trust for her. Initially, I thought that I’d be able to eventually buy your NP stock, but that won’t be possible now. Maybe we could get Appius to buy yours at the same time he seizes mine?”



“How will he be able to have more stock and still keep the company public?” Bobby asked.

“A loophole. He would likely put the stock in Appius’s Jr.’s name and then put it into a trust he’d control. I don’t really care how he does it though. I want no remaining ties to him once I leave the company.”

Bobby shrugged. “I wouldn’t sell my stock to Appius—only you. I’ll hold onto mine. You might change your mind and want it someday. And Appius has no idea I have the stock anyway.”

Eric nodded. “I just wanted to give you the heads up and tell you that I won’t be needing it now, so you can sell it.”

“Okay,” Bobby responded. “But what if Appius has something up his sleeve? Something more that he will do to you when you break the contract?”

“That’s where I need your help,” Eric said at a low volume. “The contract is clear about what I will lose if I break it—and I’m prepared for that—but I’m afraid he’ll try to hurt Sookie. So I need information on him which will prevent that from happening.”

“You’re willing to blackmail him?” Bobby asked with a smile.

“Now I am. For Sookie. And,” he paused, “for me too—*finally*.”

Bobby smiled wider—almost wickedly. “I have some things already, some proof of his homosexuality. The scare of the scandal might be enough to force him to back off of you and Sookie once you breach the contract, but I’ll try to find more.”

“Bobby, I want to keep all this as far away from Sookie as possible.”

“She’d want to stand with you,” Bobby said cautiously.

“I know, and everything I tell her *will* be the truth, but I don’t want to have to tell her anything that might make her feel guilt. And I certainly don’t want her incriminated in any

blackmail that I must do later! And,” he paused, “I also don’t want her to know how far I’ll go to hurt Appius if he tries to hurt us.”

Bobby nodded. “I understand.”

Chapter 03: The Cat and the Serpent

The first thing that Eric did when he got home was to check to make sure that everything of Sookie's was back in place as he *needed* it to be. He breathed a sigh of relief to find that it was.

Courtesy of Bobby's forethought, a new phone had been delivered to the building that morning, and the SID card from Eric's old phone had been moved to it. He answered as it rang.

"Will you be ready in fifteen minutes?" Henry asked.

"Yes," Eric answered and then hung up.

He went to the kitchen—as far away from the bug as he could get—and called Octavia Fant, who was the woman from whom Sookie and he were getting their kitten. Sookie had heard about Octavia through Amelia. Octavia was, according to Amelia, an "eccentric," and for Amelia to say something like that about someone *else* was pretty significant.



Octavia ran a very small and specialized animal rescue and adoption service. In particular, she would rescue pregnant female cats that were due to be euthanized by the animal shelter in her area. She would care for the cats and their kittens until the babies were weaned.

Then she would find homes for all of them. Her service had become quite popular, so Sookie and Eric had been on a waitlist until their kitten had been born seven weeks before. Sookie and he had been the last in line to get a kitten from the litter, so they'd not picked their pet. All they knew was that the kitten was a boy and that he was yellow and white. Like expectant parents, they were anxious to meet him.

Eric asked Octavia if there was any way that he and Sookie could pick up the kitten that afternoon, despite the fact that they'd been told to come the next Sunday. He explained to the woman that he had a good reason and left it at that. The elder woman agreed since she was planning on completing the kittens' weaning process that same day.

Their kitten—Sookie's long-awaited birthday gift—would be coming home!

Eric sighed. He and Sookie had had a long discussion about where to put the litter box and had finally decided on the bathroom in the guest bedroom. Sookie had set things up the previous week when he'd had to spend long hours at the office with the Chinese delegation. He took a minute to ready the kitten's food and water dishes in the kitchen before making sure that the litter box was filled.

While he was in the guest bathroom, he got a text from Henry, telling him that the office bug was now officially "listening." Eric took a deep breath and went into his office. He made a point to shuffle a few papers before picking up the house phone. He dialed Liang's number first; it didn't take Eric long to find out that the Chinese delegation had everything they required. That done, he dialed Amelia even as he pulled the script Bobby had come up with from his pocket.

It had taken all the acting skills that Eric possessed to pretend to be affectionate with a woman other than Sookie when he left Amelia's brownstone that morning—though he'd flat out refused the suggestion that they kiss. It wasn't that he didn't like Amelia; it just seemed wrong

to even touch a woman other than Sookie now. Even when Isabel had taken his hand the night before, he'd had to refrain from his instinct to pull away from his friend.

But he'd done what he needed to do. He'd given Amelia a long hug outside of her home and he'd even nuzzled her neck a little—just as they'd planned. But that was all he'd been able to do before his kissed her cheek and left in a cab. His only consolation was that he was positive that Sigebert had been snapping pictures of it all.

“You miss me already?” Amelia answered the phone in a sultry tone.

“You know I do,” Eric replied huskily, trying to read his line like he meant it. All of his years of hiding his true feelings aided him greatly. “Why don't you come over tonight?” he asked. “That new blond hair of yours makes me want to do all kinds of things to you—*naughty* things.”

“Don't you think you were naughty enough last night?” she asked coyly. “I mean—I can't believe you went to a party with Isabel and then came over and fucked me—twice.”

Eric chuckled. “I didn't *go* to a party; it was here. And don't tell me you're jealous of Isabel.”

“No,” Amelia laughed.

“So—tonight?” Eric asked.

“Yes—definitely.”

“How about 9:00?”

“I can't wait,” she said hanging up.

Eric ended his call, left the office, and then texted Henry. Within a minute, Henry was calling him.

“The bug’s signal is being intercepted again. You can come down the stairs of the fire escape. Blake’s waiting in the garage with his car. ‘The Bert’ is across the street monitoring the front entrance and the garage exit. So just duck on your way out.”

“Thanks Henry,” Eric said.

“Don’t mention it. Sookie’s waiting.”

Eric and Sookie had chosen the number of the gallery they would visit the previous morning—before she’d left for Amelia’s house in Brooklyn. But now that seemed like a *very* long time ago.

It was before Appius had Nora put a bug into Eric’s office.

It was before Appius had Eric followed.

It was before Eric and Amelia had been forced to practically make out on Amelia’s front stoop!

Sookie smiled softly. It was also before Eric told her that he was willing to change his whole life for her.

It was before he made clear that she was his priority.

It was before they talked about staying together for the rest of their lives.

It was before he asked her to marry him.

It was before they decided they wanted to have children together.

It was before she knew that her life with Eric would continue.

It was before she knew that love and happiness would continue to fill her existence.

Yes. So much had happened since they’d picked that day’s gallery.

“You look beautiful,” Eric said from behind her.

She turned around to face him.

“Hey you,” she said, smiling up at him as he bent down to kiss her softly on the lips.

“What have you seen so far?” he asked.

“I just got here. I was waiting for you,” she responded as she looked around Gallery 135, which was full of facsimiles of paintings from ancient Egypt. There were also two large sculptures, both of which depicted the goddess Sakhmet, who had the head of a lioness.



Eric and Sookie explored at a leisurely pace. Most Sundays, they walked apart, meandering in and out of each other’s path, but that Sunday, they kept their hands tightly linked and walked through the gallery together.

“I have a surprise for later,” Eric said with a boyish grin after they were done “discovering” the gallery.

“Oh?” she asked, enjoying his easy grin and the light in his eyes. “You wanna tell me over lunch?”

He nodded and led them out of the gallery. As always, they visited the place where they’d first kissed, Gallery 823, before leaving to grab their lunch.



“So what’s the surprise?” Sookie asked as they made their way to the Great Lawn with their food.

“I called Octavia, and the kitten’s ready to come home!”

Sookie squealed a little.

“I thought you’d be excited,” Eric smiled.

Sookie rose up to her tiptoes and kissed him. “I thought we had to wait until next week.”

“I told Octavia that we had a good reason for wanting the kitten early, and she said that he’s pretty much weaned and ready for action.”

“How will we get him home? We don’t have our carrier with us.”

Eric smiled again. “I brought it with me to the museum. Ben’s holding it.”

Sookie smiled widely. “I can’t believe we’re gonna have a kitten today!”

“Yeah,” Eric said. “I know it sounds a little cheesy, but after yesterday, I just didn’t want to wait for any part of our life to begin.”

“That *is* cheesy, Mr. Northman, but I like it,” she said leaning in to embrace him.

Eric reveled in his Sundays with Sookie at the MET and in Central Park. They seemed sacred to him—a kind of church that fed his soul more than any religion he'd ever known. And—ironically—it was through them that he had begun to believe that God might really be out there, watching over him after such a long absence from his life.

As they always did on Sundays, Eric and Sookie had spent most of the morning looking through that day's gallery. Then they'd had lunch in the park. That day—it had been hotdogs from their favorite vendor.

Eric's favorite part of Sundays—by far—had become their time in the park, especially after they ate. Sookie had taken to bringing a thin blanket in her backpack, and they would lie on the ground if the weather permitted. Sookie would always prop herself up on her side so that she could write, and Eric would lie curled up so that his head was resting on the comfortable valley created above her hips. He especially enjoyed how she would unconsciously play with his hair as she gathered her thoughts. And he would often drift away into a nap.

After Sookie was done with her notes, they would return to the MET, chat with Ben and his crew for a while, and then go back to that day's gallery, where Sookie and he would talk about what they liked and disliked as they walked around the room again. Then—as always—Sookie would take her single picture to capture the piece that most struck her.

About two months before, Eric had finally told Sookie about the betting pool among Ben's crew, but instead of feeling self-conscious, Sookie had just laughed about it, and then—in typical Sookie fashion—she'd begun to bring a fresh-baked bag of cookies to the previous week's winner, thereby endearing herself to Ben's crew even more.

Yes. Eric loved their Sunday routine very much, but on that particular Sunday, they were both anxious to leave the museum a little early because they wanted to go get the newest member of their family.

Still, Sookie went through her process—though in a somewhat abbreviated form—recording the parts of the interesting gallery that she wanted to remember.

“There are a lot of cats in here,” Eric observed as they walked around the gallery one final time.

Sookie giggled. “I know, after you told me we were getting the kitten today, I noticed that there were tons of cats in here—including these!” She pointed to the two large sculptures of Sakhmet.

Eric chuckled. “We could name the kitten Sakhmet.”

“But he’s a boy, and Sakhmet is a goddess’s name,” Sookie reminded.

“True,” Eric observed. “Then—we should name him after your favorite today,” he said with a mischievous grin.

“And you think you know my favorite today?” she asked with a challenging lilt to her voice.

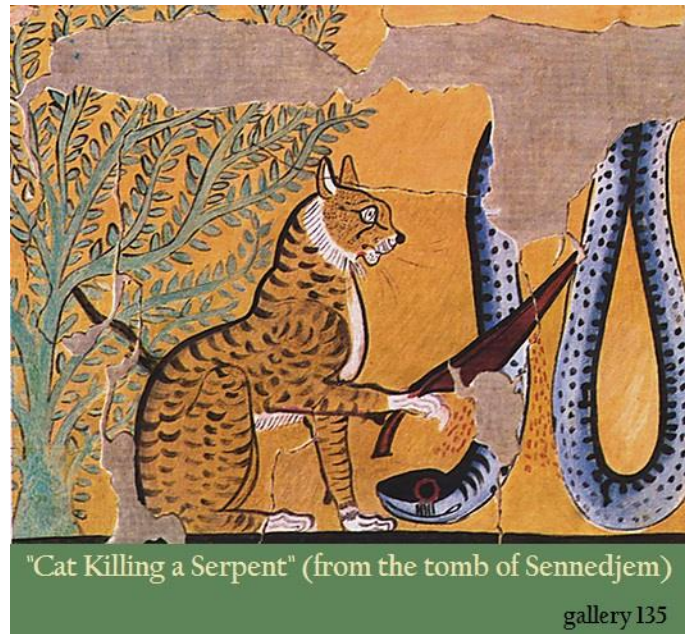
“Well—I know *I* have a favorite, and our favorites usually match up.”

She walked over to him and embraced him. “So? What’s his name gonna be then?”

“Ned,” Eric answered confidently.

“Ned?” Sookie asked, looking around in confusion.

“Yeah,” Eric said as he walked them over to a facsimile of a yellow striped cat. The facsimile was called “Cat Killing a Serpent”; it was from the Tomb of Sennedjem.



Sookie looked at the facsimile carefully. Indeed, it was the one she'd chosen for her favorite piece of the day. Even before she'd known about the impending arrival of the new member of their family, she'd been drawn to the image of the strong cat killing the serpent. Though the story behind the facsimile was not included in the museum's description of the piece, Sookie had recently copy-edited a book on Egyptian lore, and the story of the cat depicted in the facsimile had struck her then.

The tale of the cat and the serpent was from the Egyptian *Book of the Dead*. Ra, the sun god, took the form of a cat in order to destroy Apep, the spirit of darkness and destruction, who was hell-bent on stealing the light of the sun. In his jealousy, Apep, the snake, wanted to punish the well-loved Ra—which would, in turn, punish anyone who loved the light; he literally wanted to encircle the world and squeeze until it was only an empty, crushed shell. Apep was also unique among ancient Egyptian deities in that he could not be reasoned with; his evil consumed him. So he wanted to consume all good.

Sookie shivered a little. The facsimile had stood out to her from the moment she'd walked into the room. Eric called her "min sol" or "my sun" sometimes, but he was also the thing that most lit her own life. And she certainly viewed Appius as evil incarnate. She sighed. Appius was even more evil in her eyes because he focused seemingly all of his spite at his son, while pouring affection onto his other children, especially Nora. Her own mother, Michelle, had done the same when it came to Jason. Sookie often wondered how a parent could love one child so much and seemingly despise the other.

Yes. The story portrayed in the facsimile was appropriate, given Appius's most recent actions. However, when Eric had told her about getting their kitten that day, her choice had been solidified in her mind.

Sookie stared at the caption of the facsimile for a minute before she giggled. Looking at the name "Senedjem," who was the occupant of the tomb where the painting had been found, she saw the word "ned" in the middle.

"Definitely Ned," she said, taking out her camera and snapping her picture.

There were seven kittens in the litter that Ned belonged to, but *their* kitten stood out to Eric and Sookie from the moment they stepped into the room where Octavia was keeping Ned and his siblings. For one thing, he seemed to latch onto Sookie and Eric right away—quite literally. In fact, the little kitten seemed part dare-devil as he launched himself onto Eric's jeans and began to climb the long way up his leg.



“Just be careful that he doesn’t do that on your bare legs,” Octavia chuckled. “You got a scratching post like I suggested—right?”

“Yes,” Sookie answered as she scooped little Ned off of Eric’s jeans once he’d reached his mid-thigh. “He’s so cute!” she exclaimed as she petted the purring ball of fur. “I can’t believe he wasn’t the first one picked.”

Octavia chuckled. “He was the runt of the litter, and he was a little withdrawn from the others when he was younger—though you wouldn’t know it now. In fact, that’s one of the reasons why I didn’t encourage you two to come and meet him when he was younger. For the first two weeks or so, I wasn’t sure he’d make it, but he’s been thriving lately.” She winked at them, “And—as you can see—he’s now the little extrovert, especially with people. He enjoys playing with his litter-mates, but he seems to enjoy playing with people even more.”

Sookie grinned at the little yellow and white striped kitten that was squirming to get back to the floor. As soon as she put him down, however, he started to climb Eric’s jeans again, much to the delight of both Eric and Sookie.

“Well, he seems to like you two. That’s for sure!” Octavia laughed.

“So—where’s Ned’s mom?” Sookie asked.

Octavia explained that—for the past week—the mother cat had been let into the room only once a day to feed the kittens; otherwise, they were eating kitten food mixed with a little pet milk. Octavia also shared that she’d decided to keep Ned’s mom since she was such a sweet cat. Generally, she found homes for the moms too, but Octavia had become attached to Ned’s mom.

Octavia let Eric carry Ned with them as she led them out to her sunroom, where the mother cat was lazing on a comfortable-looking chair. The cat briefly looked up at them and then immediately laid her head back down as if to pretend that one of her kittens was *not* in the room.

Octavia chuckled. “If you’d been holding little Ned like that six weeks ago, she would have gotten very agitated. However, when the kittens start to get sharp teeth, the momma cats start to prefer being *away* from their offspring.” She chuckled a little louder. “Bailey here complains every time I make her go see them now, but she was a really good momma until her milk started drying up. Today will be the last time I put her with them. Would you like to see Ned nurse for the last time?”

“Sure!” Sookie said as she stroked Ned’s soft fur. He was currently sprawled out on his back in Eric’s large hands; he looked as if he wanted to play and to sleep at the same time.

Octavia chuckled as she picked up Bailey. “Your little Ned there sleeps like the dead for most of the day, but he loves to explore when he’s awake. I’m glad that you two have a big house for him to roam in. But I’ll send you home with a water bottle.”

“Water bottle?” Eric asked, as they followed Octavia back to the room where Ned’s litter mates were. Bailey was wiggling with dissatisfaction.

“For my money,” Octavia answered, “the best way to train a kitten not to scratch what you don’t want him to scratch is to squirt him with a little water when he misbehaves.” She entered the room and put Bailey into a little cat bed. Immediately sensing their mother was there, all the other kittens, who had been curled up asleep, popped up and ran over to her like vampires smelling fresh blood.

Octavia laughed, “*That’s* why Bailey’s tired of them.”

Eric chuckled as Octavia motioned for him to set Ned down near Bailey. Though Ned wasn’t as rabid-seeming as the other kittens, he was excited at the prospect of milk, and it wasn’t long before he was latched on to a teat. Bailey’s expression could only be described as “long-suffering” in that moment.

“Now I always do a little basic training with my kittens to make sure that they behave.” Octavia pointed over to the couch in the room. “For instance, they crawl all over that, but you don’t see any claw marks because I squirt them if they start trying to scratch it. In fact, now all you have to do is shake the bottle, and most of them will stop doing whatever it was that they were doing before.”

“So I assume, then, that we won’t need to give Ned baths?” Eric asked.

“Not unless you like being clawed,” Octavia chuckled. “Most cats hate water, and they keep themselves clean well enough. They are pretty self-sufficient really. A scoop of the litter box each day, and fresh water and food is all he’ll need. I can already tell that y’all are gonna give him plenty of love and spoil him rotten. So he’ll be a happy little lad.”

Sookie smiled. “Will we have to train him to use the litter box?”

“Nope,” Octavia responded. “He’s already trained. Just make sure you show him where the litter box is right when you get home. And I always suggest that you feed the kitten near the

litter box—at least at first. It'll help your Ned to establish his territory. And since he's a boy, be sure to get him neutered right at four months old. It's safe then, and he'll be young enough so that he hasn't yet felt the need to mark anything. He'd likely not feel the urge to mark his territory anyway, given the fact that you two have never had other pets in your home, but it's better to be safe than sorry."

Sookie nodded, even as she took some mental notes. Eric and she had already researched how to care for a kitten, and they'd even found a vet who was close to them and who got great reviews; however, Octavia was giving them some good practical advice.

Bailey seemed to have reached her limit and got up, leaving the kittens in a squirming pile behind her. Quickly she moved toward the door, and Octavia let her out with a chuckle.

"It'll be best to let his food settle for about half an hour before you take him—so that he won't get sick on the ride," Octavia advised, "but if you need to leave now, that's fine. Otherwise, I can show you around a bit."

"We're not in a hurry," Eric said, looking down at his watch. It was only 4:30 p.m.

"Good!" Octavia said. "I'll take you around to meet the various cats and kittens I have right now."

"So—uh—how did you start doing all this?" Sookie asked.

"After my husband died and my kids grew up and left, I had so much excess space that I almost decided to move, but I love this old house. My husband left me well-provided for, and, though I work part-time with Amelia at her shop, I was looking for something else to fill my time." She smiled a little. "My husband was always bringing in strays, and one day—about six months after he passed away—this pregnant cat showed up on my front stoop. And then things just went from there!"

Sookie smiled. “Amelia said that lots of people come by the store, looking to get one of your kittens.”

“Yes,” Octavia smiled. “I’ve already converted four of the rooms downstairs into what I call ‘kitten stations.’ I try to keep up a rotation so that I have litters at various stages,” she explained, as she led them into a room where there was a pregnant cat sitting in a window seat.

“Wow! She looks like she’s about to pop!” Sookie exclaimed as she reached out and let the cat smell her before petting it. She’d read to do that on a website.

“She is!” Octavia chuckled. “This momma cat’s real sweet. You can feel the babies squirming around in her belly if you want.”

Sookie moved her hand over the cat’s belly and smiled widely. “Oh, my goodness!”

Eric reached out and touched the cat too. A look of awe settled onto his face, especially considering the fact that Sookie and he had talked about children only that morning.

Octavia smiled at the couple. “I go by the animal shelter I work with every two weeks or so and get another pregnant cat. They try to let me take the ones that are closest to their due dates, instead of euthanizing them.”

“It’s awful that they’ll do that!” Sookie said with a frown. Though she understood that the stray animal population needed to be limited, she still felt bad for all the kittens who had been euthanized right along with their mothers.

“Well the man that runs the shelter I work with hates it too, but he has to follow city ordinances. Like I said, he keeps the mothers as long as he can, hoping someone will adopt them, and I try to take the ones like this momma—the ones who are nearing their time and haven’t been adopted yet. I got this little—I mean *big*—girl only two days ago.”

Next, Octavia led Eric and Sookie to a room across the hall where a litter of four tiny black kittens was lying next to their mother's warm body; their eyes were still sealed shut. The mother cat, who was also jet black, was bathing them. She hardly looked up from her task to regard her visitors.

"These kittens are only a week old," Octavia explained. "So the momma cat's really territorial about them. However, you can pick one up if you want. I try to get the kittens used to human touch."

Sookie bent down and picked up one of the black kittens. Bending down beside her, Eric also picking one up and stroked the wiggling kitten gently. After a minute or so, the momma cat started to look a little perturbed, so they put the kittens back against her and rose. Immediately, she started rewashing the two returned kittens.

Octavia chuckled. "Momma cats are funny. She's working on getting your scent off of them right now." Octavia led Eric and Sookie to one more room; inside was a litter of only two five-week-old kittens.

"If little Ned hadn't made it, this would have been your litter," Octavia said with a smile. "As you know, I put people on a waitlist and they get the litter they get. Otherwise, they'd all clamor for kittens like these."

"These are Persians—right?" Sookie asked, looking at the long-haired kittens.

"Yep," Octavia returned. "And they're pretty coveted. Usually I don't get pure breeds like this; however, this momma cat was brought into the pound when she was already extremely pregnant. In fact, the manager of the shelter called me and asked that I come get her right away. Thankfully, I had an empty room because she had her litter that very night!"

“Well they’re cute,” Eric said, “but I’m glad we got Ned. These have,” he paused, “smashed noses. They look like something Sophie-Anne would want.”

Sookie giggled. “I agree, but they *are* cute. Of course, I think all kittens are pretty cute.”

Octavia smiled and then led Eric and Sookie to her kitchen where she offered them some iced tea and went over some information with them. She didn’t charge a fee for the kitten; however, she did take donations, which she used to keep up her service and to pay her granddaughter to help her with the cats. Octavia said that she would take any amount that they wanted to give, but her eyes grew momentarily wide when she read the number on the check Eric had given her.

Octavia talked to Eric and Sookie about the shots she would suggest for their kitten—though, since Ned wouldn’t be around other animals, she explained that some immunizations weren’t really necessary.

Sookie asked about whether they should let Ned out onto their terrace, and Octavia said that she’d never heard of a cat that had just jumped off of a balcony—like Sookie feared he might. She chuckled and informed them that cats’ instincts and intelligence kept them from jumping anywhere unless they saw a good landing spot. She did suggest that they wait to take him outside until he was a little older, but that he’d be okay out there and would likely enjoy sunning himself outdoors. She also suggested that they plant a pot of cat grass for him to enjoy when he was outside.

When Sookie shared her fear that Ned might get hurt trying to get into the elevator, Octavia suggested that they use the spray bottle to train him to stay away from it if he seemed overly curious. She assured that he would learn soon enough.

Their business and chatting complete, Octavia led them back to the room where Ned and his litter were being kept. Eric and Sookie had bought a fabric carrying case for him since it had a soft bed inside, and—as Eric had been instructed—there was a towel in there too. The kittens, all curled together in what looked to be a milk coma, were sleeping soundly, so Octavia carefully lifted Ned and tucked him into the carrier. The kitten barely stirred.

“I know you’ll enjoy him,” Octavia smiled as she led Sookie and Eric to the door and handed Sookie a bag with a couple of cans of soft kitten food, some pet milk, an empty water bottle, and some brochures. There were several other identical bags on the table, so Sookie knew that each new set of “parents” got one, but she thought it was a nice gesture nonetheless, and she hugged Octavia and thanked her profusely for taking such good care of the newest member of her and Eric’s little family.

Chapter 04: We Shall Fight

“We shall defend our island, whatever the cost may be, we shall fight on the beaches, we shall fight on the landing grounds, we shall fight in the fields and in the streets, we shall fight in the hills; we shall never surrender.”—Winston Churchill

Other than a few nervous minutes for Ned when Eric and Sookie first got him into the taxi, the kitten slept on the ride to his new home. Although Tray texted to tell them that there was no sign of Sigebert, Eric and Sookie decided to play it safe by meeting him at the service entrance of Carmichael Tower.

In fact, Eric and Sookie had decided to play it safe for a while. They’d never gone into work together. Given the fact that Eric generally needed to arrive at least an hour before she did, that generally wasn’t even an issue, but they often went for evening walks together along the Hudson. They decided to put those on hold—at least temporarily. Beyond that, it was really only the weekends that they had to be more careful about being seen leaving or arriving together, and they knew that Henry and his team would help.

Ned popped wide awake as soon as they got home, and his mission seemed to be to smell everything. Eric and Sookie carefully followed Octavia’s instructions and took him to the room with his litter box first. While he was digging in it—seemingly intent to scatter a good deal of the litter on the floor—Sookie sat on the edge of the tub and watched the kitten, and Eric brought a little broom and dustpan from the utility room.

“We’re gonna have to leave those back here,” Sookie chuckled, gesturing toward the broom and then the floor.

Eric laughed and then felt almost proud when he saw Ned using the litter box for what it was meant to be used for before moving a seemingly huge pile of litter to cover his “work.”

“Well, at least he seems to have learned where to take a shit quickly,” he chuckled as he handed the water dish to Sookie, who filled it from the faucet. As soon as she set it down—on the other side of the room so that it wouldn’t fall victim to Ned’s future excavations in the litter box—the kitten ran over to it and took a drink. Meanwhile, Eric put a tiny bit of dry kitten food, moistened by water as Octavia had suggested, into the food bowl and set it down. Ned immediately chomped about half of it down before wandering out into the guest room to sniff around.

Eric and Sookie ordered pizza and spent the evening watching Ned’s various discoveries or being his pillow when he decided to collapse for one of his frequent cat-naps. They soon learned that Octavia’s assessment of their kitten was spot on. He did love to explore, but when he was ready to sleep, he slept like a log. He would find where Eric and Sookie were sitting, claw his way up Eric’s jeans like a spelunker, and then settle onto one of his humans—sometimes both of them. When he would awaken, Eric or Sookie would always take him back to the guest bathroom, which they’d already started calling Ned’s room, so that the kitten would continue getting used to his domain.

It wasn’t until 8:00 p.m. that Eric and Sookie’s mood became heavier as the first of their guests, Bobby, arrived. Amelia arrived a few minutes later, followed soon after by Pam. Henry and Thalia came up a few minutes after that, while Blake had stayed behind to babysit Thalia’s kids in the home they all shared downstairs.

After the group met Ned, who thrived on the attention of the humans, Eric and Sookie got everyone drinks. Then they all settled into the lounge in the “gray” part of the house.

Everyone was amused when Ned crawled up Pam’s designer slacks so that he could join the others on the couch. The look on Pam’s face as she tried to figure out how to deal with the

kitten, whom she immediately dubbed the “clothing cleaver,” made everyone laugh—except for Pam.

Eric quickly got up and saved the kitten from “Aunt Pam” before bringing him to the opposite couch where Sookie, he, and Bobby had settled. The levity in the room quickly faded, however, as Eric began to tell Pam about what Nora had done the night before. He told her about the bug in his office, he told her about one of the Berts finding him at Amelia’s brownstone, and then he told her about the plan to make it seem as if Amelia and he had been having a series of rendezvous so that Sookie would be kept out of everything.

“Is that why you dyed your hair?” Pam asked Amelia after Eric had finished speaking.

“Yeah,” Amelia smiled. “Sookie opened the door for Eric last night, so the Bert might have glimpsed her. We thought it’d be better to play it safe and to make me a blonde.”

“Good,” Pam said. “Because when I saw you tonight, I was worried that you’d gone ‘Single-White-Female’ on me.”

Everyone laughed as Pam leaned in and gave Amelia a little kiss. Given the fact that Pam wasn’t generally one for public displays of attention, the gesture indicated her gratefulness more than any words could. Next, Pam got up and moved to the empty space next to Eric. She cuddled into his side for a moment before returning to her original spot.

The two siblings just looked at each other for a moment before Pam spoke up. “I’ve tried to hate Appius for your sake, but I can’t. However, I want you to know that I love you *more*, bror, and it has now come down to a clear choice. And I pick you.” She paused. “I swear that if our father gives me an ultimatum not to see you, I’ll cut ties with him—even if it means that I have to leave NP. I have a hard enough time not kicking his ass as it is.”

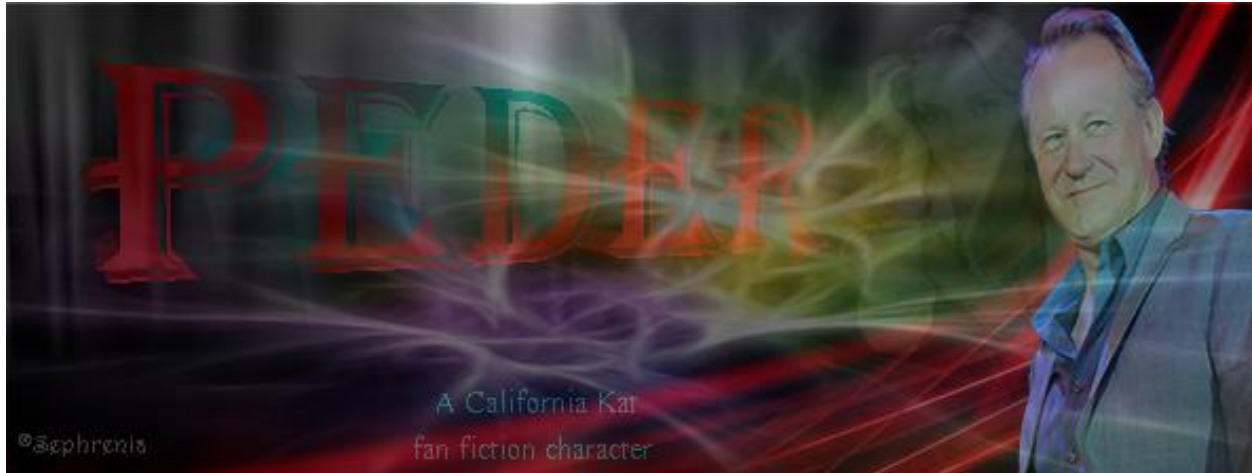
Eric smiled in appreciation. “It’s important that you don’t do that, Pam.” He took a deep breath and looked at Sookie, who was looking back at him and smiling a little. Little Ned was lying curled up on her lap—oblivious to everything except the string on Sookie’s hoodie.

Eric took another deep breath and looked around the room. He sighed. “Some of you know part of what I’m about to say, but Sookie and I feel it is important that you all know. We need your help, so you deserve to know. And Blake should know too,” Eric said in Henry’s direction. “Would you tell him for us?”

The ex-Navy SEAL nodded.

Eric took another deep breath. “My mother, Stella Larsson Northman, had a long-term affair with a man named Peder Lang. Though my parents had an open marriage, my mother hid her relationship with Peder. Complicating things was the fact that Peder, Stella, and Appius had a relationship altogether in college. Appius fell in love with both Peder and Stella.” Eric paused. “From what I can tell, Appius thought that *he* was the center of the relationship—that both Peder and Stella loved him, but *not* each other. When he found out that they loved each other too, he couldn’t stand it. He asked my mother to give Peder up to prove her love. She agreed and seemed to do just that. And then Appius broke ties with Peder.”





“But your mother didn’t really give Peder up,” Thalia commented perceptively.

“No,” Eric responded. “She chose Appius in *almost* every way. She married him and was a good partner to him. And I believe that she loved him very much. However, a couple of times a year, she would meet Peder. My father found out right after she died. And he became certain that I was Peder’s son.” Eric raked his hand through his hair. “I will spare you the details, but suffice it to say that Appius took it upon himself to,” he paused, “punish me for my mother’s infidelity, and he set into motion a plan to get me to sign away—to him—what remained of my maternal grandfather’s fortune. I fell into his trap, and right after I merged Johan Larsson’s company with NP, Appius hit me with the news that I was not his son. But,” Eric scoffed ruefully, “the joke was on him. The DNA test showed that I was his.”

“Lemme guess,” Henry said, “he *didn’t* apologize.”

“No,” Eric said gravely. “His reaction was to blackmail me into signing a contract with him. It was a contract that I thought I could live with,” he said, looking at Sookie. “But I was wrong about that.”

“What does it entail?” Thalia asked warily.

“I am to become CEO of NP when I turn thirty-five; in exchange for *almost* complete autonomy, I will have to report to Appius once a year and keep the company performing up to a certain standard.”

“And if you don’t?” Henry asked.

“Then Appius or someone he appoints will come in and take things over for a year, though I will stay on as CEO officially—at a much lower salary, of course. My term as CEO is to be twenty years, and—after that time is over—I am to be summarily dismissed. I will get a trust fund left for me by my grandparents, but I will be forced to sell all my NP stock to Appius or his agent. But—those are *not* the parts of the contract that I can no longer live with.”

“What are those parts?” Thalia asked.

Eric sighed. “Another clause entails that I have to marry before I turn thirty-five and that the woman must meet certain qualifications.”

“And Sookie wouldn’t be qualified?” Henry asked, his words terse and his jaw tightened.

Eric shook his head. “No. She wouldn’t, but I *won’t* give her up.”

“And you’ve known this all along?” Henry asked Sookie.

“Yes. Eric told me the truth from the start,” she responded, smiling a little at the protectiveness in Henry’s tone. “And I was ready to settle for the time we could have.”

“But now we’re both *done* with settling,” Eric said defiantly.

“What is the penalty when you break the contract?” Henry asked Eric perceptively. “I know that Appius Northman would have put one into your contract.”

Eric nodded. “Yes. And there is really only one window during which I can feasibly break it too.”

“His thirty-fifth birthday,” Bobby clarified. “There is an ‘escape clause’ of sorts on that day; otherwise, he will be forced to pay Appius ten billion dollars.”

Thalia whistled. “Geez!”

Eric nodded. “Geez indeed. And, if I couldn’t pay, I’d have to plead guilty of stealing from NP. Suffice it to say that breaking the contract before or after my thirty-fifth birthday would likely land me in prison for fifteen years—at least.”

Pam gasped.

Eric looked around at everyone. “But on my thirty-fifth birthday, I *am* going to breach that contract. I’m *not* going to let Sookie go.”

Pam sat stunned for a moment. “You realize that Father won’t allow you to be CEO then.”

Eric nodded. “I know and I’m okay with that. But that’s not all he’s going to do.”

“What will he do?” Henry asked.

“When I breach the contract, he will take my stock and my trust fund. He will also stop paying my grandmother her stipend—a stipend which provides most of her income. And he will immediately shut down my division at NP, firing everyone.” Eric took a deep breath and let it out slowly. “A hundred and four people will be harmed when I break that contract, but I *have* to break it.” He closed his eyes, and when he opened them again, it was to look at Sookie. His eyes held unshed tears. “I can’t live like I’d been living before Sookie came into my life—not anymore.”

She took his hand firmly, but gently. “Eric is going to warn the people in his division as he can and—if necessary—we’ll try to help them financially until they are able to find other

jobs.” She squeezed his hand even as Ned bounced from her lap to his. “We’ll do everything we can for them.”

Eric sighed and gave her a little nod. “Yes. And I have a way to make sure that Mormor is taken care of too.”

“I can help,” Pam said.

Eric smiled at her. “Thanks.”

“What about your home?” Pam asked, looking around the room.

Eric inhaled deeply. “I won’t deny that I love it here, and I hope to find work that will let Sookie and me keep it, but it is just a collection of walls in the end.” He looked at Sookie. “And home is wherever we can be together now.”

She squeezed his hand again, trying to convey to him with her eyes just how grateful she was for his words and for what he was going to give up for her.

Eric garnered his strength from her. He took another deep breath and looked back at Pam. “I’ll have to break ties to everyone in the family except you, Alexei, and maybe Gracie—if Tamara lets me stay in contact with her without Appius knowing.”

“What about Appius Jr. You love him,” Pam said.

“Once I breach the contract and go against Appius’s wishes, you and I both know that he won’t allow me access to A.J. I figure that Tamara may defy Appius and let me stay in contact with Gracie—though I don’t want to create any trouble for either of them. Alexei will do what he wants. And I know that I won’t lose you. Hopefully, when A.J. is older, I can initiate some contact with him so that he knows how much I want to be a brother to him, but I know that Appius will try to block it just to hurt me.” Eric sighed. “He may very well give you that ultimatum you mentioned. Or he might fire you from NP.”

Pam let out a haggard breath and nodded in understanding. “I will be prepared. But what will you do for work?” she asked her brother.

Eric sighed and dragged the hand that wasn’t holding Sookie’s through his hair. “I will try to get another job in publishing; however, Appius will likely attempt to interfere with those plans as long as I am in the States. Sookie and I might move to Europe or Asia so I can work there. Europe would make more sense since I can speak Swedish and French. I’d hate to leave New York, but if it comes to that, I’ll have to. But—hopefully—Appius will forget that I exist and leave me alone.”

“He won’t,” Pam said. “He’ll try to keep hurting you.”

Eric laughed ruefully. “That’s what I figure. But we’ll survive.”

“And you’ll really go with him if he has to move?” Pam asked Sookie.

“Yes,” she answered without hesitation.

Eric squeezed Sookie’s hand. “Once I’m completely free of Appius, Sookie and I are going to get married and start a family.”

Pam smiled at them both. “You’ll make each other happy.”

“We already do,” Eric said quietly.

Pam nodded. “Yeah. And as long as you promise that your little spawns won’t be as hard on my Chanel as the clothing cleaver there, I’ll happily be Aunt Pam to your teacups.”

Eric chuckled. “No guarantees.”

Bobby glanced at his watch. “I hate to interrupt one of Pam’s rare *human* moments,” he said with a little snark and a wink in her direction, “but we’d better plan for what happens after 9:00 p.m. We have only fifteen or so minutes until show time.”

Pam glared at Bobby as he distributed copies of the “script” he’d drafted for that night’s “actors.”

Meanwhile, Thalia opened her laptop and accessed the program that she was using to tamper with the listening device’s signal.

Appius locked the door to his office and turned on his computer before pouring himself a glass of his favorite scotch and settling into his comfortable desk chair. Its upholstery was made from the skin of a porosus crocodile—a saltwater crocodile. The eighteen feet-long beast had been found in northern Australia in the Adelaide River. The saltwater crocodile was the largest of all reptiles. It was adaptable and deadly—a standard for all apex predators. Sitting in the chair reminded Appius of who he was, of who he needed to be, and of who Stella had *made* him to be.

He glanced at the Revolutionary War era clock on his mantle and saw that it was 8:46 p.m. He knew that he would soon have a full report from Sigebert, and he’d received a text from Wybert a half an hour before. Apparently, Ms. Amelia Broadway—or Amelia *Carmichael*—hadn’t been able to wait until 9:00 to visit Eric. She’d arrived at his home at a little after 8:00 p.m.

Appius savored his drink as his computer loaded the program he was using to overhear what went on in Eric’s home office. So far, he had been quite amused by what he’d learned. Appius smiled. He would need to send Stan a thank you note for securing the listening device for him. An FBI “friend” of Stan’s—a woman by the name of Lorena Krasiki—had gotten it.



Appius chuckled. He loved what a little bit of money and a good connection could accomplish. He also loved that—because of a little side-deal he’d made with Lorena—he now had proof that Stan was cheating on his wife. With Lorena! Of course, Stan had been sleeping with Appius’s own mother for almost a decade; however, Appius would never allow his beloved mother to become embroiled in a scandal. But that wouldn’t stop him from using other dirt against Stan—if it ever became necessary.

He took a long drink. While it was important to have dirt on one’s enemies, he felt that it was *essential* to have dirt on one’s friends.

Appius stretched out his legs under his desk and leaned back in his chair. The program that monitored the listening device was actually quite ingenious. It cycled through any ambient noise and recorded only things that reached a certain decibel level. Thus, Appius was immediately able to tell that Eric likely hadn't been in his office since that morning. Sadly, Appius held out very little hope that he'd overhear anything of substance that night, and he lamented once again that he'd not been able to plant more bugs in Eric's home, but he comforted himself with the knowledge that he'd be at least be one step ahead of Eric when it came to the business and personal affairs his eldest child conducted from his home office.

Appius typed out a quick text to Lorena, asking her if she could get her hands on more listening devices—as well as a tracking device for Eric's personal vehicle. Eric didn't seem to drive his Corvette often; thus, Appius hadn't bothered with tracking it before. However, the elder Northman now felt the impulse to learn more about his son than ever.

Like a shark with blood in the water, he could sniff out that Eric had secrets just waiting to be discovered.

Sipping his whiskey, Appius listened once more to the recordings from that morning. Like a good little soldier, Eric had made sure that the Chinese delegation was taken care of before moving on to personal matters. Appius sighed and pulled out a cigar. He hated to admit it, but Eric couldn't be faulted for how he'd handled things with the delegation from Guangzhou Press—or most matters of business, as a matter of fact. Though Appius had criticized Eric the night before for his almost-subservient behavior to Mr. Li and his people, Eric's behavior was probably just what the Chinese executive had been expecting.

Unlike his pliable son, Appius hated the notion of adapting himself for anyone else. He'd always had the opinion that if people wanted to do business with him, then *they* needed to adapt to him!

He chuckled as he listened once more to his son's side of a conversation with Amelia. It seemed that Eric had no compunction about sleeping around on Isabel Edgington. At first when he'd heard that Eric had rushed away from his home in order to meet up with a woman, Appius had been upset that Eric might fuck up things with Russell's daughter. However, once he read Sigebert's preliminary report giving the identity of the resident of the house Eric went to in Brooklyn, he had been much less dismayed.



The Carmichael family was at least as worthy of a potential alliance as the de Castros or the Edgingtons. Of course, Appius had hoped to manipulate Eric into marrying Freyda. Yes—he'd reveled in the notion of the erratic Miss de Castro driving Eric to an early grave. And, truth be told, he still had a few plans in reserve where the unbalanced woman was concerned, but if Eric continued being stubborn and kept insisting upon making his own choice about his wife, he could do much worse than Isabel or Amelia.



Heck—maybe the Carmichaels would be best. After all, when Copley’s wife had been alive, Cope had been one of Appius’s closest friends. However, Cope had changed from the single-minded, driven businessman he’d once been after he lost his life-partner. He’d pulled himself out of the New York social scene for the most part, and he now stayed in the Hamptons almost fulltime. And when Cope was in Manhattan, he tended to spend his time with his grandchildren—instead of at the exclusive University Club, where the most powerful men of the city congregated for society.



The elder Northman sighed. Truth be told, it had likely been Nora’s behavior at the NP party two years before that had initiated Cope’s withdrawal from Appius. But he didn’t blame

Nora for the situation. After all, Cope had been single, and Nora had always been attracted to powerful men. No—he blamed Eric. Eric had been the one to escalate the situation by literally pulling Nora away from Cope and causing a spectacle. Appius pushed his fingers against the bridge of his nose to alleviate the tension that was building there. If Eric had just left things alone that night, Nora and Cope may very well have gotten together.

However, if Eric married Amelia Carmichael—or Broadway or whatever she wanted to call herself—it might work out well to Appius’s advantage. And it might help him to reestablish his friendship with Cope as well.

In fact, Amelia was just as good of a choice as Isabel in most ways. Sadly, Amelia wasn’t an only child, but she would inherit a good deal of money nonetheless, maybe even more than her brother since Paul Carmichael would likely inherit the company. The Carmichaels were “old money,” and they had loads of it. Yes—Appius thought—the introduction of Amelia into the scenario wasn’t bad at all. Now—if Eric fucked it up with one of the women, he’d have the other to fall back on.



His cigar trimmed and lit, Appius enjoyed a few puffs before opening and reading Sigebert’s full report, which had just arrived in his in-box.

Sigebert had arrived outside of Eric's building the night before only a couple of minutes before Eric left it; luckily, however, Sigebert had been able to follow the cab that took Eric to Brooklyn. As he drove by the house, trying to get a glimpse of who answered the door, Sigebert had only seen a blonde pull Eric into the brownstone. And by the time he'd parked and returned to scope out the building, there was no sign of anyone. He'd caught a glimpse of someone an hour later, but the lights had been turned off before he could get a clear view. Given that the occupants of the home were obviously in for the night, Sigebert had returned to his car and contacted his connections in order to discover the identity of the woman Eric was visiting.

Appius scrolled through the pictures of Eric and Amelia, which Sigebert had snapped that morning and which were included in his report. Appius had actually seen the girl—Amelia—a few times, though it had been several years before. And even though the girl's hair was now a different color, Appius had no trouble recognizing her. She was the spitting image of her mother.

It certainly seemed that his son was quite "close" with her. And that supposition had been confirmed by the phone call exchanged by them about an hour later once Eric had returned home. Sigebert had watched Eric's building for another few hours before leaving in order to continue his research on Amelia. Appius chuckled. Apparently the eccentric girl ran some kind of Wiccan/magic shop in the Village. Appius didn't have a problem with that, however. In many ways it would be better if Eric married a relatively mindless or "flighty" woman. Then, he'd control her money, which Appius figured Eric would use to expand the company, even though he'd ultimately get no return for his troubles.

With satisfaction, Appius leaned further back in his chair and thought about his son's desperate need to please him—to earn his approval. Of course, he would never give it, but it was amusing to watch Eric squirm for it.

After Appius had discovered that Eric was his biological son, he had briefly considered trying to accept the child and building a relationship with him, but Eric would be forever tainted by his mother in Appius's eyes. He was too much like her. And—if anything—Appius's hatred for Eric continued to grow with each passing day.

But that didn't seem to matter at all to Eric. Appius could still tell that the boy longed for acceptance and love. God knows, Appius had done his best to make sure that he'd never found either. Appius lamented the fact that Eric derived any pleasure from his relationships with Isabel and Amelia, but—at the end of the day—he knew that they were relationships based on position and convenience, not love. At best, Eric would have a marriage like the ones Appius had had with Tamara or Beth or Sophie-Anne. All of those relationships had been profitable, but none had been personally satisfying to Appius—beyond the children the women had given him.





Appius also hated the fact that Eric found pleasure in his work, but—then again—Appius knew firsthand that work was not a strong enough elixir to make someone content. Eric clearly craved family and love, and as long as Appius was able to control Eric’s access to those things, he would be able to easily maintain control over his son. He just needed to make sure that Eric never found out about John Northman’s Will. Appius scoffed. He refused to acknowledge John Northman as his father anymore—not after his betrayal!

He took several deep and calming breaths. Given the fact that only he, his mother, Nora, and Cataliades knew about the Will, the chances of Eric learning of it weren’t great. However,

Appius wouldn't put it past his father to have left Eric a clue or a letter regarding the Will's contents, and that possibility was what Appius feared the most.

Meanwhile, Appius would continue to dangle just enough carrots in front of Eric in order to keep him in line. Relationships with his siblings were definitely some of those carrots. For some reason Appius couldn't fathom, all of his other children seemed drawn to Eric in some way; even Nora was reticent about doing Eric harm, though Appius had been able to use her loyalty to him in order to get her to do what he needed.

Appius figured it was natural for Pam to be somewhat close to her brother. Appius hadn't liked it, but she had spent quite a bit of time with Eric when they'd both visited Stella's parents in Sweden. Appius had hated letting Pam have anything to do with the Larssons, especially Elsa, who was just as duplicitous as her daughter in Appius's opinion. However, Appius had to allow it so that he wouldn't show his hand too soon.

Luckily, Eric had clearly never told Pam anything about the paternity test; otherwise, she would have confronted him about it.

Appius chuckled. No—Pamela was his spitfire and had never been able to keep anything close to the vest; thus, he would know if Eric ever tried to turn her against him.

Appius took a puff of his cigar and considered Eric's relationship with his other children. Over the years, Alexei and Eric had become relatively close during the few weeks when he was in the house for his winter breaks. Appius had been enraged when he discovered that Eric had taught Alexei how to swim. Appius had been planning to secure the boy lessons since Alexei had been somewhat frightened of the water.



Eric's teaching Alexei had forever raised Eric in Alexei's estimation. Even now, when Alexei chose to come home for Christmas—which he didn't do often—his middle son would seek out Eric to speak with. There was something about Eric that seemed to calm down his younger brother, and—more than once—Appius had thought about asking Eric to speak with Alexei regarding his wild antics. But in the end, Appius didn't want to encourage that relationship or give Eric any position of value in the family.

Then there were Gracie and Appius, Jr., both of whom had gravitated toward Eric even in their infancy and even though Eric was so rarely in the house. Appius wasn't able to fathom how Eric so drew them to him, but the elder Northman had and would continue to use that knowledge to keep Eric on his hook.



And—of course—Appius knew that Eric loved NP, especially his own division, which was growing and flourishing.

Appius smiled. Yes—he had ultimate control over everything that Eric valued or wanted. And the best thing was that Eric had no idea of the control that he *could* have—if he knew of John Northman’s Will. Appius was determined to keep it that way.

As Appius puffed on his cigar, he was surprised when the program running the surveillance equipment clicked. That meant that there was a live signal. Appius smiled in anticipation.

“So *this* is where you work when you’re home,” a female voice said.

Amelia—Appius thought to himself.

“What? You wouldn’t call what we just did in the bedroom *work*?” came Eric’s smooth reply.

Amelia giggled. “I’d call *that* a work out.”

Eric chuckled and then Appius heard a muffled sound that seemed to indicate that the couple he was listening to was sharing a kiss.

“I want to take you on my desk,” Eric practically growled.

“Mmmm,” Amelia responded. “That sounds nice, but I’d rather have you in your hot tub—as you suggested earlier.”

“Why not both?” Eric asked gruffly as there were more muffled noises, this time accompanied by moans and grunts.

Appius was about to turn off the system, given the fact that he didn’t want to hear his own son having sex, when he heard a phone ring in Eric’s office. He sat forward with interest, wondering who could be calling.

Chapter 05: Purgatory

“Shhhh,” Eric requested of his companion, who let out a muffled giggle.

“Hello Isabel,” he said a moment later, obviously having answered the phone.

There was a pause.

“No—I’m just hanging out with Amelia. What’s up?” Eric asked.

Appius chuckled at his son’s brazenness.

A few moments later, Eric’s voice was heard again. “Sure. I’m free October 13? What’s the event?” he asked.

There was another pause.

“Yes. That sounds fine. I assume it’s black tie?”

Another pause.

“Alright then. Oh—and we’re still on for the fifth—right?”

Another pause.

“Good. And, Izzy, remember you can spend the night then if you wish.”

After another pause, Eric chuckled and then obviously hung up the phone.

“What’s so funny?” Amelia asked.

Appius was curious too.

“Isabel just said that she’d be busy with her young boy toy after the event on the fifth,” Eric laughed.

“So—he’s really just nineteen?”

“Yeah—or twenty.”

“And he was an intern at her father’s company?”

“Yeah.”

“Did they get together while he was working for her—*under* her?” Amelia giggled.

“No. You know Izzy. She’s too careful about that kind of thing. She waited until he was done with the summer internship to start up something with him.”

“Is it serious?”

“Oh God no!” Eric responded. “She’s just toying with him.”

“Kind of like I’m toying with you?” she purred.

Appius heard more muffled noises and then an out-of-breath Eric.

“*Exactly* like that.”

Amelia giggled. “Well—I suppose you’re toying with me too. So it’s only fair”

“Yes—it’s all *very* convenient.”

“Do you really like the blond hair?” she asked. “I’m thinking of making it permanent—at least for a while,” she giggled.

“I love it. And temporary permanence sounds about right,” he chuckled.

“Good,” she responded. “So—Isabel really has no problem with knowing I’m here with you? Ravaging you?”

“Of course not!” Eric exclaimed. “Izzy knows that you and I just fuck. And it’s not like she and I will ever be exclusive—even after we marry.”

Appius sat forward in his chair a little more, now riveted by the information he was gleaning from the conversation.

“I’d think you’d want to marry for love,” Amelia said with a little pout in her voice.

“Why would anyone do that?” Eric asked incredulously. “My father may be a rat bastard, but he’s got *that* aspect of life right on.”

Amelia laughed. “Do you really hate the great and powerful Appius Northman?” she asked dramatically.

Eric sighed. “No.”

“He does seem a little hard on you—at least, according to Isabel.”

There was a momentary lull in the conversation as if Eric were thinking about his response.

“My father is a hard man, and I did hate him for a while, but we’ve come to an understanding—he and I. We even have a contract.”

“A contract?”

“Yes. The basics are that I get married before I turn 35—to someone who meets his set of standards, of course—and I become CEO for a couple of decades. After that, I should be ready to retire anyway. It’s a win-win.”

“And—of course—your father would approve of *perfect* Isabel Edgington and her *perfect* fortune,” Amelia said sarcastically.

“You know—he’d approve of you too,” Eric responded seriously. “And I think *I* would prefer you too. You’re so,” he chuckled, “flexible.”

Amelia giggled. “You know I don’t want to get married, and you know I usually like women too.”

Eric laughed out loud. “All the better! Just think of the threesomes we could have.”

“Oh I have,” Amelia answered. There were more muffled noises after that and the sound of furniture scraping on the wood floor.

“Mmmm,” Eric sounded. “You and I could fuck like rabbits for years to come, sweet Amelia. We could have a couple of kids. And we could maintain our independence in most ways.”

“No thanks,” she said a little breathlessly. “No offense, but I’m not sure I’d want you for years, and I *definitely* don’t want to shoot out any brats.”

“Well—if you change your mind, let me know.” He sighed. “I’m ambivalent about the kids’ thing too,” he said flippantly. “But I have to produce or adopt at least one according to the terms of the contract. But—no matter—there’s no reason why you and I can’t continue to have our fun even after Izzy and I marry—if we want.”

“When are you planning to do that?” Amelia asked.

Appius sat forward a little more.

“At the last fucking possible minute: the weekend before I turn thirty-five,” Eric laughed. “We’ve decided not even to get publicly engaged. We’ll just elope in Vegas when the time comes. Thankfully, Izzy isn’t the romantic type, and she wants her freedom for as long as possible—just like I want mine.”

“But you’ll still be free,” Amelia purred.

“Yes,” Eric said, “but Izzy and I will both have to be more,” he paused, “discreet, and we’ve agreed not to see other people until she’s pregnant. Hopefully, that doesn’t take too long.”

“I can’t really see you as a father,” Amelia chuckled.

“I like kids, *and*,” he paused dramatically, “I can afford a nanny,”

They both chuckled.

“Plus,” he added, “Izzy wants a couple of kids, and she’s told me that she wants them to be mine, so as long as you don’t change your mind, I think she’s my best choice.”

Amelia laughed. “Don’t ever let her hear you say it that way. It sounds like you see her as some kind of consolation prize.”

Appius could almost picture Eric shrugging. “No—I just see marriage as an obligation that I have to fulfill: a hoop to jump through.” He sighed audibly. “Anyway, I think I’d prefer you. You make me laugh more, and Izzy seems to prefer her younger men when it comes to sex.”

Amelia giggled. “So your ego’s been bruised.”

Eric chuckled. “Maybe—a little. That’s why I need you to stroke it,” he said suggestively.

“Mmmm,” she sounded.

Appius heard a few muffled noises.

“Like this?” Amelia purred.

“Yes,” Eric panted.

There were more muffled noises and the sound of a grumble.

“Hey—why’d you stop?” Eric asked with a pout.

“I don’t want your ego to get too big,” she said coquettishly.

He chuckled. “You didn’t complain about its size earlier.”

“Hmm. Anyway, I’m still curious. Why Izzy? I mean—she’s nice and all, but why be with someone who doesn’t prefer you?”

Eric scoffed. “It’s not like *you* would prefer me if we were together for long either. And I don’t want a vapid wife with no independent thought! No. The thing that you and Izzy have in common is that you are both capable of having an intelligent conversation—at least on occasion,” he added teasingly.

Appius heard what sounded like a smack to Eric's bare shoulder.

"Hey," he said with mock injury. "I'm just saying that I appreciate both you and Izzy—a lot more than I would some mindless debutante who trailed me around like a romantic schoolgirl. And I don't have to lie to you. Neither of you has any false notions of what I can give you."

"I suppose that's a comfort," Amelia said after some consideration.

"More than you know. But—realistically—Isabel is the better choice for me for marriage."

"Hey!" Amelia cried out, sounding a bit offended.

Eric chuckled. "Hey yourself. *You* are the one who said that you don't want kids or marriage. And Isabel *does*—with me. Of course, if you change your mind in the next three and a half years, that's a different story, and we could have this conversation again."

"I won't be changing my mind, Eric," Amelia warned.

"Fine," he responded somewhat indifferently. "Izzy and I already have an arrangement anyway. And, frankly, as long as I find someone willing to bear my children and to give me my freedom, I'm fine with almost anyone."

"As long as she meets your father's standards," Amelia reminded.

"Of course," Eric said. "In fact, that's why I'm not really fucking around with too many other women right now. For one thing, I prefer fucking you, and Izzy's nice for a lay sometimes as well. Other women just complicate things."

"You're such a sweet talker," Amelia deadpanned.

"Would you prefer I talk dirty to you?" Eric purred suggestively.

"Abso-fucking-lutely," Amelia returned, "*especially* if you do it in the hot tub."

"I thought we were starting on the desk," Eric said.

“I’m leaving in an hour and I want the tub,” Amelia insisted.

“Fine,” Eric chuckled.

Appius heard what seemed to be Eric picking Amelia up.

“We’ll do it your way this time,” Eric said, “but I reserve the right to fuck you on my desk another time.”

Amelia giggled.

Appius listened to footsteps leave the room and then something that sounded like a door closing. And then there was silence. He got up and poured himself another Scotch before returning to his seat.

The fifteen minutes that Amelia and Eric read through their lines for Appius’s benefit was definitely the most awkward fifteen minutes of Sookie’s life. However, she knew that it was probably much more awkward for Amelia and Eric—especially Amelia.

The moment that Eric had read through his script—complete with stage directions from Bobby—Eric had threatened to rip it *and* Bobby in two. However, then Bobby clarified that the things he had called the “extra bits”—which included the kissing and the moaning and the grunting and the pawing and the pushing around of items on the desk—were meant for Eric and Sookie to do.

While Amelia was in the room!

Hearing that, it had been Sookie who had almost torn up the script. However, Bobby had convinced Eric and Sookie that it would be best if a little fooling around was thrown into the performance so that it sounded more authentic. And since Eric and Amelia certainly didn’t want to fool around with each other, Sookie would be “filling in” for that part of the act.

Bobby would have volunteered himself and Pam to do that part, but the fewer people in the room, the better. Plus, if the looks passing between Pam and Amelia were any indication, they were probably going to be moving toward that more exclusive relationship Pam had been wanting, and Bobby didn't want to throw a wrench into that by making Amelia witness him playing tonsil hockey with her soon-to-be girlfriend.

Eventually, it was decided that Sookie would already be sitting on Eric's desk when Thalia relinquished control of the listening device. Eric and Amelia would then walk into the office together and begin their lines. And when Eric was supposedly fooling around with Amelia, he would actually be fooling around with Sookie. Bobby led the reluctant actors through a rehearsal of sorts, and then to ensure that it wouldn't sound as if Amelia was too far away from Eric, it was determined that Eric would have to lift Amelia up on the desk before the first "make-out" session with Sookie. At Sookie's insistence, Amelia swore that she would close her eyes during those parts.

So that he wouldn't steal the show, so to speak, Ned was left with Henry and Bobby since "Aunt" Pam refused to watch out for him. Meanwhile, from the master bedroom, Thalia had pretended to be Isabel and had called Eric during the scene. Then she'd moved to the sitting room where she'd awaited Eric's signal to take back control of the listening device.

In truth, the performance had gone flawlessly, and despite the fact that they were play-acting, the passion between Eric and Sookie had flared as it always did. The only hitch had come when Eric had to lift Sookie from the desk once the show was over. Amelia had been unable to miss the erection Eric had gotten from pawing Sookie, and she'd gasped and then giggled a little. Thankfully, those sounds had fit with the script.

Right after the “performance” was over, Thalia hijacked the signal from Appius’s bug again. And then the group moved back to the gray lounge after Eric and Sookie had made sure Ned had some kitten chow and fresh pet milk. They were happy to hear from Henry that their little guy had visited “his” room and his litter box on his own while they were away from him.

The group made small talk while Bobby and Thalia refreshed everyone’s drinks.

Right as the duo reentered the room with several newly opened beers, Henry received a text from Rasul, which indicated that “the Bert” who’d been staking out the building had just left.

A collective sigh of relief spread around the room.

“Do you really think it worked already?” Sookie asked nervously as she leaned into Eric so that Ned could settle onto them both.

Bobby and Eric shared a look, and then Bobby nodded.

“It likely did work, but I’ll be keeping an eye on Sigebert and Wybert for a while—just to be sure,” Bobby said.

“What if they see you watching them?” Eric asked pragmatically.

Bobby rolled his eyes. “They won’t see me, and you know it. Those buffoons stick out like sore thumbs; you know that the only reason you missed the Bert yesterday was because you were” He paused.

“Freaking out?” Eric asked with a hint of a smirk.

Bobby smirked back. “Yeah.”

“Just in case, I should probably leave in half an hour or so—since that’s when I said I was going to,” Amelia said, looking at Pam.

Pam took that as her cue to get up. “Then let’s make the most of that time,” she said to Amelia. She reached her hand out to the other woman, and her expression softened markedly when Amelia stood with her.

Pam looked at Eric. “Can I hitch a ride to work tomorrow?”

Eric nodded. “Sure—but I’m leaving at 6:00 a.m.”

Pam cringed a little, but then nodded in affirmation as she led Amelia toward the elevators after kissing Eric on the cheek.

“Are they together now?” Henry asked in Bobby’s direction. “*Together-together?*”

“That seems to be what Pam wants,” Bobby indicated.

“Amelia too,” Sookie smiled. “At least that’s what I think she wants.”

“And now all they have to do is communicate that fact with each other,” Thalia observed dryly. “And I’ll wager fifty bucks that it takes them a year to get that done.”

Everyone in the room chuckled at the truth of that statement before Henry turned serious. “Tray took advantage of the timeframe between the Berts’ visits and installed a camera pointing directly toward where they’ve been stationing themselves. The camera’s well-concealed, so they’re unlikely to spot it. As long as the Berts stay predictable, which I’m sure they will, we’ll know when one of them is here, and we’ll text you, but—for now—I think it’s best if Sookie doesn’t use the front entrance.”

Eric nodded, even as Sookie went to protest. “But I have to leave the building to get to work.”

“Rasul or I can drive you to the 86th Street station in the mornings,” Henry said, his voice firm.

“And when she comes home?” Eric asked.

“*She* can talk for herself,” Sookie said. “And *she* likes the walk home. So *she*’s gonna keep doing it.”

Eric looked at her with concern in his eyes.

“But I’ll text Henry when I’m a block away,” Sookie sighed, trying to ease Eric’s fears, “and I won’t come in through the main entrance.”

Henry smiled at Sookie. More and more every day, she was speaking up for herself, and the little spitfire, who was coming into her own, was becoming even more endearing to him.

Eric looked at Henry, who quickly nodded in agreement to the plan.

Thalia spoke up even as she was checking something on her laptop. “I have some information about the listening device.”

“What is it?” Sookie asked nervously, leaning into Eric a little more. Ned, now completely stretched out onto his back in the crack at the juncture of their thighs, didn’t move.

“Just as I thought when I first saw it,” Thalia said cautiously, “it’s Government Issue, but it’s not next-generation. The SEALs are using more sophisticated, passive devices, which are a lot more difficult to detect,” Thalia informed. “The one Appius is using is passive—in that it only activates when the sound goes above a certain decibel level—but it generates a continuous signal. It’s the kind of thing the FBI was using ten or so years ago.”

“How do you know all that?” Eric asked.

Thalia shrugged. “Part of my job in the Navy was sweeping for surveillance equipment. We had a lot of locals helping us out, but it was sometimes difficult to tell friend from foe.”

Eric nodded in understanding, once more amazed at the service both Thalia and Henry had done for their country.

“Are you sure you’re not going to have a problem controlling the signal?” Sookie asked.

“Nah—that part’s easy,” Thalia assured. “I’m just using a simple hacking program to hijack Appius’s signal.”

“You should call Isabel tomorrow,” Bobby said to Eric, “and explain what’s going on—at least as it pertains to her.”

“Will she help?” Henry asked.

“Yeah,” Eric responded. “She’ll help. This doesn’t change anything between Isabel and me—not really. And I think she’ll definitely be willing to pretend that we have a secret marriage arrangement, especially since we sort of did.”

“She won’t be bitter—when you tell her that’s off?” Thalia asked.

Eric shook his head. “No. We were each other’s back-up plan, but it’s not like there is an emotional attachment between us—not beyond friendship, at least.”

Bobby nodded. “Eric’s right. Isabel is much too pragmatic to be vindictive.”

“And,” Eric added, “things might be even easier for her after tonight. Given what we let Appius hear, it won’t matter if Isabel’s seen with other men. Just as long as Appius thinks we’re going to elope right before my thirty-fifth birthday, nothing else we do will really matter—as long as she doesn’t decide to marry anyone else in that time, that is.”

Bobby sighed. “We can cross that bridge if we come to it. Meanwhile, you just need to be careful.”

“This little guy is going to cramp my style,” Eric chuckled. He and Sookie were facing each other in their bed, and little Ned had planted himself between them so that he could receive petting from both of them.

“You seemed to manage earlier,” Sookie said with a coy smile.

He chuckled. “Yeah—I have to hand it to the little fella. He definitely seemed to know when to make himself scarce.”

“He was probably scared of all the noises you were making,” Sookie smiled shyly as she moved her petting to Eric’s bare chest.

“The noises *I* was making?”

“Mmm hmm.”

“What about your noises, Miss Stackhouse?”

“What noises?” she replied with false ignorance, even as a blush spread across her cheeks. In truth, both Eric and she were almost always very noisy when they made love.

“Shall I remind you, *min älskare*?” Eric asked with a raised eyebrow.

“I think you’d better,” she purred, even as the other purring creature on the bed took the hint and jumped off the bed so that he could further learn his new territory and get away from the earthquake about to happen on the bed.

Appius smiled as he took a puff on his second Cuban cigar of the night. It was a “special occasion,” after all, and he felt like celebrating.

Everything was falling into place perfectly.

He had been relieved to learn that Eric already had an arrangement in place with Isabel Edgington. Appius himself was a big believer that marriages were best when the couple got together based on similar goals, versus antiquated notions of love. The only time he’d ever married for love had ended disastrously. It seemed that Eric was—unwittingly—a chip off the old block in that he recognized that “business-type” marriages were best.

He sighed. Of course, it would be better if Eric were miserable with someone like Freyda, but to live a half-life was the next best thing. It was—after all—the kind of purgatory in which Appius had been forced to live ever since he'd learned of Peder and Stella's betrayal.

He closed his eyes. They were the two people for whom he would have given his life. Ironically, in the end, he *had* given up "life" *because* of them—because of their duplicity.

Whoever said that purgatory was better than hell was a fucking idiot! It was just a different kind of hell—a worse one—for it was close enough to heaven so that Appius knew what he was truly missing.

He took a long swig of his scotch and then opened the bottom drawer of his desk. He reached into the back of the drawer, a trek that his hands had taken so many times over the years that he didn't even need to look. He pulled a well-worn picture out, but kept it face down on his desk for a moment.

Appius sat back and stared at the yellowed paper, even as he listened to the recording of Eric and Amelia again.

He sighed. Eric was behaving just as Appius wanted him to. Clearly, Eric seemed determined to fulfill their contract, which was all Appius could ask for. And—even better—Eric was on his way to a loveless, empty marriage of convenience.

A purgatory.

"It's what he deserves," Appius grumbled into the empty room. "*Her* son doesn't deserve to know love," he continued, "because she took love away from me."

He flipped the picture over and saw the most beautiful sight he'd ever seen. Even after all these years, it still affected him—still made his throat tight and his eyes burn.

The image had been captured moments after Eric had been born. Appius had cut the cord and then watched in awe as the doctor placed the wiggling boy onto his mother's chest. Immediately, Eric had stopped squirming and crying and had looked upward to find the sound of his mother's voice.

Two sets of brilliant blue eyes had locked tenderly together.

That was the moment captured forever on film—the best moment of Appius Northman's life.

His beloved wife. His beloved son. His future. His happiness. His love. His everything.

His fleeting heaven.

Now—his purgatory.

Chapter 06: Reframed Corners

Thursday, December 27, 2012

Snow had been falling in the city since the day before, and even though there was not much accumulation on the ground, large flakes still fluttered through the air almost playfully.

“The city is so quiet when it snows,” Sookie mused from her and Eric’s position in the hot tub. Neither of them was ready to get out just yet. The combination of the intermittent flakes and the hot water was intoxicating. Moreover, they were both feeling lazy after their recent love making.

Eric sighed.

“What is it?” she asked. After six months with him, she knew all of his sighs. And she knew that one had been *weighty*.

“I don’t want to go into the office today,” he sulked a little.

“Poor baby,” she giggled as she leaned up to kiss him.

“You get to stay here all cozy.”

“And naked,” she grinned.

He groaned. “Now I *really* want to stay home.”

Sookie giggled. “Sorry—you’ll just have to hurry up and get your meeting over with so that you can get back and resume nakedness with me.”

Eric sighed again, though somewhat less heavily than before. “Why Appius wanted this update about China today is fucking beyond me.”

“Is it?” Sookie asked, eyebrow rising.

“No,” Eric admitted. “I know that Appius just wants to yank me around by bringing me in on what was meant to be a vacation day.”

“Exactly,” Sookie said. “So just go in, have the meeting, listen to his idiocy for an hour or two, and then come home and forget about it.”

“I like the sound of that last part,” he said nuzzling her neck.

“We should probably get out of this tub before I *literally* turn into a prune,” Sookie sighed, looking at her water-logged fingers.

“Okay,” he agreed, not worrying at all about his nudity as he stood and helped her up. Sookie was nude as well, though she was still not all that comfortable going *au naturel* outside of their home, even though Eric had convinced her that there was no way anyone would see them in their hot tub unless a helicopter was hovering right next to their terrace.

He chuckled as she quickly covered what she called her “lady bits” with a towel and started drying off even as she hurried into the house. At a much more leisurely pace, he turned off and then covered the hot tub before grabbing his own towel. He didn’t bother to dry off much because he knew that Sookie would be heading to the sauna, and he planned to join her there for a steam—and, if he was lucky, a little steaminess.

When he got inside, Ned was waiting expectantly for him. And if a kitten could pout, theirs was doing just that. “I see you’ve been expelled from the sauna?” Eric chuckled as he bent down to pet the quickly-growing kitten. In the three months that they’d had little Ned, he’d quickly established a routine of following Eric and Sookie to whatever room they were in at the time, though if they were in different rooms, he’d generally trail Sookie, especially if she was headed for the kitchen. However, the one room he wasn’t allowed into was the sauna room, and Ned was *not* a happy camper about that!

Eric used his long legs to outpace the feline, who glared at him when he slipped into the sauna room to join Sookie.

Eric chuckled. “Ned is displeased.”

She giggled. “He hates it when we’re in here. I think he thinks this is the party room.”

“It is sometimes,” Eric leered as he dropped his towel and sat next to her.

Sookie gasped a little—as she always did—when she saw his quickly growing cock, rising toward his belly.

“I think that I could go for a little party,” she leered back as she climbed up on his lap and reached backwards to stroke him.

He closed his eyes and groaned. “So good, lover. Your hand feels so good.”

“I think I can find something that feels even better,” she said coyly.

He brought his hand between their bodies and did some stroking of his own, dragging his fingers through her folds in long caresses, just as he knew she liked. The evidence of her arousal soon became apparent, as he rubbed little circles around her clit.

She moaned at his touch and then raised her hips and angled his cock so that he would slide into her. Once he was fully sheathed, she whimpered a little as he grabbed her hips to keep her from moving.

“I love feeling you like this—feeling every part of you,” he croaked out, his voice laced with arousal and intense emotions that practically quivered from his body.

She kissed him passionately and sighed with relief as he used his hands to move her rather than to hold her stationary.

“God, you’re big, Mr. Northman,” she muttered.

“And you’re good for my ego, Miss Stackhouse,” he grunted as he increased the pace of their joining.

She dragged her hand between them and began rubbing her own clit, which was a relatively new move on her part, as she sought her own pleasure.

Eric growled at the sight. “You look so fucking erotic when you do that.”

She opened her eyes and looked into his; seeing the passion there, she couldn’t help but to moan. “You do it,” she ordered as she took one of his hands and moved it to her clit.

He obliged, even as he felt her silky walls begin to squeeze him as she purposely contracted her inner muscles.

“*Fan!*” he yelled out as she moved the hand that wasn’t holding onto him for dear life behind them so that she could cup and play with his balls.

“*Fan!*” he yelled again as he hurried the movements of his fingers against her clit and began to spill his seed into her. Thanks to his talented fingers, her own orgasm followed his within moments. She arched her back and continued to ride him slowly as the vibrations of their releases lessened.

They were both panting from their exertion in the heated sauna.

“I can’t believe we’ve been together for more than six months,” Eric observed once they’d calmed down a little.

“Getting tired of me?” Sookie asked playfully.

He shook his head as he pulled her body against his. “Never. I can’t believe it because every day just seems to get better—not just the sex but everything,” he said sincerely.

She pulled back so that she could look into his eyes. “I know.”

They heard Ned’s impatient pawing against the door.

“I should probably get a quick shower and head in,” Eric said, though he didn’t seem to want to move anywhere.

She smiled at him. “Go—so that you can come back. I have some work I want to do for Sam anyway.”



He nodded and reluctantly pulled out of her before using the towel she’d brought in to clean her up a little and then grabbing his own towel to wrap around her. He turned off the sauna and led her out of the room where they found Ned waiting with a very displeased and impatient look on his cute face.

Both of them chuckled as they bent down to pet their kitten before Sookie picked up the feline, who immediately began to purr loudly, which signaled that he’d forgiven them for *daring* to go somewhere without him.

Sookie plugged in her laptop at the small kitchen table and stirred the soup she was making as she waited for her computer to boot up and load the manuscript Sam had wanted her to begin copyediting over her extended holiday time. Smelling the aroma of the beef in the vegetable beef soup had been enough to cause Ned to take up his favored position in the kitchen—the area right under a human’s feet. She giggled as he looked up at her hopefully.

“Sorry little one,” she said as she reached down to pet him. It’s just your daddy that’s naughty enough to sneak you bites.”

Seemingly understanding her words, Ned trotted over to his little bed in the corner of the kitchen and spun around a few times before flopping down sulkily.

Sookie giggled again and then let her eyes stay in the corner of the room for just a second or two before pulling them down to her kitten.

“Your daddy was being very clever—and awesome—when he stationed you there,” Sookie said to the feline.

In fact, Eric did have a reason for putting Ned’s bed where he had. Of all the rooms in their home, Sookie had found herself staring into the corner of the kitchen the most. And when she got “stuck” in the corner like that, it was still challenging for her to “get out.”

Looking into the corner like that seemed to be an automatic fallback for Sookie when she was cooking, especially if she was just mindlessly tending to something. Sookie had tried to use the television or the iPod dock in the room to provide herself with distractions, but neither had worked completely. However, the presence of Ned in the corner always drew her eyes away from the blankness she would find herself moving into.

As always, Eric’s presence and unspoken gestures in her life had worked to change something negative into something positive.

And she was trying to do the same for him—every single day.

To say that they had been growing as a couple since that June day when Eric was waiting for her on the bench he’d arranged to be put right in front of “their” painting in “their” gallery at the MET would have been an understatement.

And to say that they hadn't each been growing as individuals would have been an even bigger understatement.

Both Eric and Sookie continued to see Claudine every Tuesday night—like clockwork. The only exception to that had been Christmas day and the Tuesday of Thanksgiving week. That week, both of their grandmothers had invaded their home for a week, though—thankfully—they'd stayed in Pam's two guestrooms since Eric and Sookie had only one guestroom, and it was Ned's domain. However, during the days, the older women had often been at Eric and Sookie's home. But the couple didn't complain—not at all! Their grandmothers had insisted upon “playing in the kitchen,” and the results had been delicious. In fact, even Pam had allowed herself to gain five pounds over the holidays.

The day after Thanksgiving, Eric and Sookie had gone out and bought their first Christmas tree. Oh—they'd each been around the festive trees before, but neither of them had ever purchased one before. And since the tree wouldn't be delivered for a couple of hours, Sookie had insisted that they drive to the closest Target—the one in East Harlem—and pick out decorations for it. Eric knew that they could have afforded much more expensive accouterments for their tree, but Sookie reminded him that Ned would probably break most of the ornaments with his rambunctious play. Plus, neither of them had ever decorated a tree before, so they didn't really know where else they could go to shop for decorations—especially if they wanted to make only one stop.

To their great credit, both Gran and Mormor had made themselves scarce so that Sookie and Eric could decorate their tree by themselves. The two matriarchs had kept to the kitchen—gossiping, cooking more delicious food, and planning a trip to New Orleans—while Eric and Sookie had learned how to trim a tree together, though they certainly had Ned's “participation”

during the process. The little kitten, of course, thought that the whole operation was just for his benefit. And he became an expert tree climber almost immediately. Eric and Sookie had just shrugged it off and decided to let their kitten have his fun, though they were determined not to let him play with his new “toy” when the lights were turned on—even if that meant rarely turning them on.

But—just in case—one of the tree “accessories” was a nice, new fire extinguisher.

Because their grandmothers were both present, Eric and Sookie had decided to have their family Christmas on the Saturday after Thanksgiving since the two matriarchs were leaving the next day and they would not see them for Christmas since Mormor would be traveling with some friends and Gran would be spending Christmas with Hadley that year.

Eric and Sookie had opted to exchange their main gifts that day too, leaving only stockings for each other on Christmas day. And Sookie had insisted on a maximum dollar amount to keep Eric from filling her stocking with jewels, though he’d been good about not spending excess money on her so far in their relationship.

Sookie smiled as she thought of the festive “family” gathering they’d had on that Saturday after Thanksgiving. Eric and she had invited Henry, Blake, Thalia, her kids, Pam, Amelia, and Bobby. It was just as well that Thalia’s kids were spending the weekend with their paternal grandparents, given Pam’s cringing at the mention of what she called the “teacup humans” attending. And—of course—Mormor and Gran had spent the entire day in the kitchen. Gran had made chicken and dumplings, while Mormor had made *köttsoppa med klimp*, which was a hearty soup with beef and vegetables and a very different kind of dumplings. The grandmothers had also made an array of desserts and homemade breads, and no one had left hungry.

After dinner and a little visiting, Henry, Blake, and Thalia had said their goodbyes, and the others had exchanged gifts. Sookie smiled at the memory of seeing Eric’s face light up at the sight of five gifts piled in front of him. Of course, Sookie’s five gifts were a record number for her as well.

She’d gotten a pretty dress, which had probably cost way too much, from Pam. And Amelia had given her a gift certificate to a spa. Bobby had given her a pair of boots she could wear in the snow. Gran had gifted her a beautiful pair of gloves and a hat that she’d knitted, while Elsa had brought Sookie an old locket that had belonged to her own mother. When Sookie had tried to insist that Pam should have the locket, Pam had just clucked at the piece and said that she had many things passed on from Mormor already, and since Sookie was to be part of the family, she should have the necklace.



Sookie smiled and lovingly put her hand on the locket hanging around her neck. It was beautiful and unique—shaped like a square—and inside, she had put a picture of Eric; her “secret love” had been living right against her heart ever since she’d received the locket.

Eric had given Sookie a coat, which was a present with which Sookie had immediately fallen in love. The coat was a deep red color, and it was both stylish and warm. She could tell that it had been expensive, but it was also exactly what she'd needed.



Sookie's Red Coat

By far, the most enjoyable part of their “pre-Christmas” for Sookie had been watching Eric opening and enjoying each of his gifts. Bobby and Eric had exchanged cigars and scotch, which seemed to be the norm for them. From Pam and Amelia, Eric had gotten an Xbox and several games which had immediately found a home in the “man cave,” and Eric had enjoyed many an hour killing a zombie or two since then. Even Sookie had found that she enjoyed playing the Xbox with Eric, especially since the prizes for winning—and the “punishments” for losing—generally included *extremely* enjoyable things.

Gran had given Eric an afghan that she had crocheted—an afghan which Eric had dubbed the ugliest thing he'd ever seen later that night when he was alone with Sookie. Ugly or not, however, he wrapped it around himself every day when he went out to enjoy his coffee on the terrace. And the afghan had a place of honor in their bedroom.

From Mormor, Eric had gotten a framed blueprint of the lake house, which had been drawn by his morfar. Upon receiving it, he'd squeezed his mormor so tight that Sookie thought the elderly woman would break until—that is—Sookie noticed that Mormor was hugging him back just as tightly.

Sookie's main gift to Eric had been difficult for her to come up with. After all, what did one get for a man who could buy practically anything he wanted? In the end, she'd gotten him "an experience." She knew that Eric loved horses from his grade school days when he'd played polo and helped tend to the horses in the stables, and she'd arranged for a three-day vacation for them to upstate New York in the spring. Their lodging would be a cute bed and breakfast, but the best part was that the B&B was on a ranch, which boasted a variety of horses for both beginners and experts. Eric had been—much to Sookie's relief—over the moon about the gift and had shown his appreciation to her that night.

Several times, in fact.

All in all, the previous months spent with Eric had been better than any heaven Sookie could ever imagine, and their Christmas had been lovely too, despite the fact that Eric had had to spend his requisite time at Appius's house that day. Not surprisingly, there had been no gifts for him there, except for a bright red scarf from Gracie. Of course, Eric had taken all the "required" gifts—including the same one that he always took for Appius. Eric had told her once about his ancestor's pen inside the always carefully wrapped box. And she had witnessed it being returned to him by Markus twice now. Beyond that, Sookie had noticed that Eric had taken the time to choose each of his siblings' gifts very carefully, even Nora's.

Eric had been both looking forward to and dreading Christmas with his family for more than a month. But mostly, he'd regretted that Sookie hadn't been able to go along. He couldn't

wait until he could introduce her to all of his younger siblings, just as Sookie couldn't wait to meet them; however, both Eric and Sookie knew that continued secrecy was for the best.

On Christmas, Eric had spent only four hours at Appius's home—from 10:00 a.m. to around 2:00 p.m. Most of that time had been passed happily. Eric had gotten to visit with Gracie, and a now-talking A.J. had spent the greater part of the morning crawling all over him and then showing him every one of his gifts before asking Eric to help him construct things out of his new blocks. Eric had delighted in his time with his youngest two siblings. Around noon, Alexei had arrived from the airport, and—though his younger brother had asked him not to speak about his fledgling acting pursuits in front of the rest of the family—Alexei and Eric had an easy, enjoyable conversation during their Christmas dinner.

Unfortunately, the day had also included a “meeting” with Appius—as if the Northman patriarch had seen that Eric was happy and had the compulsion to take that happiness away from him. Eric had told Sookie about the litany of his shortcomings that Appius had spewed out during the half-hour meeting in his office; that “gift” had been followed up by Appius ordering Eric to put together a comprehensive report detailing the progress with China, a report he was required to present for scrutiny. After that, Appius had basically “dismissed” Eric, not just from the office, but from the house. And as Eric was saying his hurried goodbyes to his siblings and giving his apologies for his earlier-than-usual exit, Appius was spouting off about Eric needing to leave because he'd “messed up a deal.”

Sookie sighed as she took out ingredients for a batch of chocolate chip cookies, which were Eric's favorite. Appius's need to ruin Eric's holiday and his vacation was the reason why Eric had spent twelve hours working the day before and the reason that he was gone now. So she felt her man deserved the treat.

As she whipped the butter, she thought about just how much she wanted to kick Appius’s ass. That compulsion in her was growing by the day as she became more and more aware of all the “little things” that Appius did to undermine and torment his eldest son.

However, as Sookie looked at the mostly eaten loaf of banana bread on the counter, she couldn’t help but to smile a little. Despite Appius’s “order” and all the work it would entail for him, Eric had still snuck back to the kitchen to pass along little gifts to Margaret and Markus after Appius had “dismissed” him. Their daughter Olivia, who was spending Christmas with her parents, had been working in Northman Publishing’s accounting office since September, and the four of them had chatted for ten minutes or so before Eric left through the kitchen entrance. And—of course—Eric had come home with a gift of food from Margaret.





Though Eric hadn't told his father's cook and butler about his relationship with Sookie, Margaret—using what Eric called her sixth-sense—had pointed out that Eric seemed even happier than he had in June when she'd last seen him.

Sookie smiled a little wider. Knowing that she had added to Eric's happiness made her happy—very happy.

Of course, it wouldn't do for Olivia to know about Sookie and Eric either, but Sookie had made a point to seek out the new employee and to befriend her. Holly and Sookie now often had lunch with Olivia and some others from the accounting department. Their company was much better than Arlene, Dawn, and Maudette's. Sookie had been proud of the fact that she'd

succeeded in reaching out to someone and forming a new friendship. And nobody in the circle of friends that she'd made at work or at the MET or at Carmichael Tower looked at her as if she were "odd."



They all just looked at her as if she were "Sookie."

Sookie smiled at that thought. So much had changed throughout the previous two years. But it had all started with that little spark of connection she had felt when she saw Eric at her first NP party.





In a strange way, Sookie was glad that she'd not “met” Eric officially the first time she saw him. The additional year had given her some time to move herself forward—to learn that *she* could be strong on her own and make healing changes in her life. Claudine had been helping her to love and to accept herself even before Eric gave her his love.

Sookie nodded, knowing that everything had happened in the “right” order. Had she not begun loving herself first, then she would have never trusted Eric’s love. And—had she not begun understanding her own worth first, she would have counted on Eric to provide her with self-worth. And that wouldn’t have worked for either of them—not in the long term. She

understood well that she still had a long way to go in order to overcome the damage that had been done to her by Michelle, but she also knew that she was well along the path.

And that thought made her proud.

What made her even prouder was that Eric had been making similar progress when it came to Appius.

She grinned as she looked at her and Eric's stretching kitten. Since Christmas had fallen on a Tuesday that year, most of the employees at Northman Publishing had been allowed to take a very long weekend; in fact, the copy editing department had closed down at noon on December 21, and most employees hadn't returned to work until the day before, Wednesday, December 26. Sookie and Eric had decided to take even more time off—since Sam continued to hound her about vacation days and Eric's department truly did run like a well-oiled machine.

Other than his meeting with his father that day, Eric had planned to work from home until Sookie's own return date, which was January 2. Meanwhile, Sookie had brought home a project she'd been working on—a new and very long novel written by one of the publishing house's most successful authors. Unfortunately, the writer was notorious for his error-filled manuscripts and for his insistence that his writing was immaculate—even though it clearly wasn't. However, in truth, Sookie didn't mind the project, and she was well-ahead of her deadline; thus, she'd spent most of her vacation cooking or reading or playing with Ned. And—when Eric hadn't been working—she'd enjoyed “play time” with him too.

Sookie smiled as she mixed the cookie dough. Indeed, they'd enjoyed *a lot* of “play time.”

Chapter 07: Coming Through in Waves

There is no pain you are receding

A distant ship's smoke on the horizon

You are only coming through in waves

Your lips move

But I can't hear what you're saying—Pink Floyd, “Comfortably Numb”

Eric had decided to take a taxi to the office so that he could look over his report about NP’s partnership with Guangzhou Press one last time. Luckily, Liang and Guo had been willing to help him move a few publications along a bit more quickly than previously planned, and the government grant had come through to offset the price of printing most of the books. Eric hoped that these things would appease Appius; however, the realist in him knew that his father would find plenty of things to criticize.





Of course, Eric knew that the contract he'd signed with Appius would prevent the older man from interfering with his division too much, especially given the success of that division. But that didn't mean that Appius wouldn't do all he could to make Eric's life miserable for the next hour or two.

Eric ran a hand through his hair and closed his eyes.

"Hard day?" his taxi driver asked in a thick accent that sounded Indian.

"Not so far," Eric answered congenially. "But I expect the next few hours to be difficult."

The driver nodded and then went back to weaving in and out of traffic. Eric made a note of the driver's name. He had a couple particular drivers in town that he always called first if he needed a taxi. Months before, Eric had stopped driving his car to work, given the fact that he feared Appius might try to place some kind of surveillance device on it too. Thalia had checked the vehicle over thoroughly more than once, but Eric didn't want to take any chances.

Plus, the taxi drivers he used seemed to count on him tipping well, and he counted on them to offer the perfect mix of conversation, silence, and efficiency. With the holidays, neither

of his usual taxi drivers had been available that morning, and he was thankful that he'd lucked out with someone who didn't want to carry on a lengthy conversation.

He sat back and closed his eyes. He couldn't help the little smile that tugged on his lips as he recalled his Christmas night with Sookie. Despite the untimely work Appius had given him to do, Eric hadn't let it ruin his and Sookie's first Christmas together. As they'd cooked their dinner together, they'd discussed Eric's time at Appius's house earlier that day, getting the bad parts out of the way first—before dropping the subject of Appius entirely and focusing on Eric's time with his brothers and sisters.

Then they'd eaten in the kitchen before exchanging stockings by the fireplace in the “man-cave.” The smile on Eric's lips etched deeper into his face. It had been the first stocking that he remembered receiving, and Sookie had filled it to the brim.

She'd given him both practical things and fun things. The practical had included the beautiful amber cufflinks he was wearing even then. She'd also gotten him a protective case for his phone—something called an “otter box”—so that no more “breaking incidents” would occur. She'd added a few Xbox games and some books they'd discussed reading together. However, the highlight had been something red and lacy, which Sookie modeled for him—while she was wearing a Santa hat and red high heels. The thought of her in that outfit made him have to adjust himself a bit.



Of course, the best Christmas present had been what was inside of that negligee. And it hadn't even been the sex that he got that night—though it had been pretty damned epic—that had been the best thing. It had been *everything* that came in the package called Sookie. And—because of her—he'd "felt" Christmas for the first time.

For his part, Eric had had a lot of fun filling Sookie's stocking. Having learned of Sookie's love for scarves—both for warmth and to accent an outfit—he had gotten Sookie two for her stocking. One was a hand-painted silk scarf in various shades of blue, which reminded Eric of Sookie's eyes. The other was a soft cashmere scarf which would complement her new coat. He'd added a Kindle, which had earned him many kisses. He'd kept the jewelry that he gave her to a minimum so that he wouldn't get into too much trouble, but—in the museum one day—he'd discovered her love of yellow gems, so he'd gotten her a pair of yellow diamond drop earrings that were relatively modest in their karat count. Of course, those drew one of Sookie's "looks," but he realized that he wasn't in too much trouble when he got several kisses for the earrings too.



His smile broadened again. She'd modeled those earrings for him just the night before. And, given the fact that he had been weary from spending all day on the report now in his hands, seeing her in that jewelry—and nothing else—had certainly been a treat!

"Here we are, sir," the taxi driver said, tearing Eric from his reverie as he came to a quick stop in front of Northman Tower. Eric handed the driver the fare plus a good tip and then steeled himself mentally as he went into the building to face Appius.

Eric had been asked to arrive at noon, which was a common time for his meetings with Appius. Appius enjoyed eating during his meetings with Eric. He always ate at a leisurely pace—looking only half interested as he thumbed through whatever report he was requiring from Eric that day.

Of course, Eric was never asked to partake in any food. In fact, Appius always began their meetings with the same words: "I assume you've already eaten."

It was just one more thing that made Appius an ass in Eric’s eyes—another tactic that he’d used to hurt Eric. Now—after months with Sookie and months in therapy with Claudine—Eric had learned not to allow Appius’s small machinations to affect him. After all, in the grand scheme of things—the scheme that included only Sookie and their true “family”—Appius no longer mattered.

Eric took a deep breath as he studied the others in Appius’s office.

That day, Neave, Lochlan, and Andre were also attending the meeting, and they all scoured through Eric’s report as he sat and waited patiently for the inevitable berating to begin. Thankfully, he had his own private copyeditor at home, so he knew there were no typos in the quickly-constructed report.





Fifty-five minutes after Eric had arrived, Appius had a list of things for him to “deal with.”

As he always did, Eric bore the brunt of Appius’s derisive criticism with forbearance and somehow kept his tone even and matter-of-fact when answering questions.

But Eric’s cool was broken when his phone chimed. As always, Eric had set his iPhone to be silent during his meeting with Appius; however, there was one exception who could interrupt him any time: Sookie. Of course, Eric always kept her informed of when he was meeting with Appius, and she had never contacted him during those times. But he felt better knowing that she *could*—if she ever really needed to.

He took a deep breath. He’d left her only ninety minutes before and knew that she wouldn’t have contacted him unless it was an emergency.

His phone chimed a second time.

“I hope we aren’t keeping you from something *you* interpret as more important,” Appius sneered.

Eric took in his father's baleful glare and made a quick decision. In a choice between Sookie and Appius, there would only ever be one option. He reached into his pocket for his phone.

There were two texts from her.

The first one broke his heart just as it must have broken Sookie's as she'd typed it: "Gran's had a massive heart attack and isn't expected to live. The doctors told me to come as fast as I could."

The second read, "A flight leaves from LaGuardia in eighty minutes."

As he was reading that message, he received a third. "Come later."

Eric found that he was already on his feet and moving toward the door. There was no way that he was going to wait; if Sookie was leaving town in eighty minutes, he would be too.

"Where the fuck are you going?" Appius stormed. "This meeting is *not* over!"

"Yes it is," Eric said.

"I said—this meeting is not over until *I* say it is!" Appius snarled.

Eric turned around to face the man whose DNA made up half of his own. "You're welcome to berate and to critique me later, Father. But for now, we're done here." Eric barely registered the surprise on Appius's face before he left the office and sprinted to the elevator, his phone already in his hand. He texted Bobby for a ride and was happy when his friend indicated that he was only five minutes away. Eric knew that if there was *anyone* in Manhattan who could get him to LaGuardia through traffic, it was Bobby.

As soon as he was outside the building and away from its "ears," he called Sookie.

"Eric," she said his name like a prayer when she answered. "Gran—she's dying."

Eric could tell that Sookie was obviously trying to hold herself together, but was having a difficult time doing so.

“I have to go to Louisiana,” she said.

“I know. Me too,” he replied.

He heard something that sounded like a cross between a sigh and a sob from her.

“You’re coming?”

“Of course, min älskade. Do you know the flight number?”

He heard her sobbing softly, and then he heard Pam’s voice on the line.

“Eric,” Pam said in a strained tone, “Blake’s driving us over to LaGuardia with his siren on so that Sookie can be sure to make the flight. It’s United 1748. It leaves at 3:05 p.m. and connects in Atlanta. It’ll have Sookie in Shreveport in seven and a half hours. It was the shortest duration I could find,” she almost growled.

“How many tickets did you get?” Eric asked, even as Bobby pulled up to the curb and Eric quickly got into the car.

“Two,” Pam said. “Sookie told me to hold off on getting you one since you were in your meeting, but I didn’t listen.” Her voice lowered. “She only texted you when I threatened to take the phone from her and do it myself.”

Eric closed his eyes. It was like Sookie—so like her—to think of him before herself, even in a time of tragedy, but he wasn’t going to let her do that. It was his job to think of her first—to put *her* first. Always. And he was going to do that job in any way he could.

Pam went on. “I packed you a small bag, and I got you a ticket—if you can get to LaGuardia on time.”

Eric held on as Bobby wove his way around the street. “I’ll be there,” he said. “Bobby’s driving me. Tell Sookie that I’ll see her soon.”

“Okay,” Pam said as he disconnected the call.

“Sookie okay?” Bobby asked, sensing that something was very wrong.

“No,” Eric responded. “It’s Gran. She’s had a massive heart attack.” He looked at his friend. “The doctors don’t think she’s going to make it.”

“Shit,” Bobby said with a sigh. He glanced in his rearview mirror.

“Is he back there?” Eric asked. He’d seen one of the Berts following them from NP.

Bobby shook his head. “Not any more. The Bert was on us longer than I would have expected though. They’re getting a little better.”

“But you lost him?” Eric asked to make sure.

“Oh yeah,” Bobby said with a hint of a smirk on his face. “A little better doesn’t mean that they’re any good.”

“Does your great-uncle still have his Leer Jet at LaGuardia?” Eric asked pensively. “The commercial flight won’t put us at the hospital for more than nine hours from now,” he said worriedly. “I’m afraid that won’t be enough time.”

“Uncle Niall—yeah. And—before you ask—yes.”

Bobby whipped out his phone and made a call, even as he continued to zigzag through the traffic with ease. Within minutes, Eric was calling back Pam and telling her that there was a change of plans and that Niall’s private plane could take them straight to Shreveport and that it could be wheels up within fifteen minutes of his and Sookie’s arrival.

When Eric got off the phone with his sister, he looked at Bobby.

“Thank you,” Eric said.

“Don’t mention it. I’m just glad that Uncle Niall keeps his employees on retainer so that he can justify giving them fulltime salaries. The pilot and copilot live only ten minutes from LaGuardia and will beat us there.” Bobby smiled. “They’re a husband and wife team. The jet is being prepped right now; there won’t be a stewardess, but who the fuck cares.”



“Thanks,” Eric said again. “And please thank Niall too.”

Bobby shrugged. “Don’t worry about it. Uncle Niall hardly ever uses the plane anymore, and he’s told me and the Claudes that we can use it whenever we want.”

Eric nodded and closed his eyes. He wished he could send Sookie his strength in that moment—wished it with every fiber of his being. But he couldn’t.

“We’ll be there soon,” Bobby said, patting Eric’s forearm. He didn’t say anything else, but Eric could feel the car speed up a little, though he kept his eyes closed. In that moment, Eric appreciated Bobby more than ever before.

As it turned out, due to his skillful—and probably highly illegal—driving, Bobby was able to beat Blake to LaGuardia’s hangars for private planes by about five minutes. Thus, by the time Eric saw Blake’s car pull up, the pilot had already filed their emergency flight plan, and Bobby had already convinced Eric that it would be best if he came too. Bobby had grabbed his

duffle bag, which held his gym clothes, and was talking to the copilot when Blake pulled up next to a pacing Eric.

Moments later, Eric was doing exactly what his body had been aching to do for the last thirty-three minutes: holding his Sookie.

Fifty minutes earlier

Sookie was taking the last batch of chocolate chip cookies out of the oven when her cell phone rang? Thinking it was likely Amelia or Claudine, she answered without looking at the caller ID.

“Hello?”

“Is this Sookie Stackhouse?” came a female voice she didn’t recognize.

“Yes? Can I ask who’s calling?”

There was a sigh. “My name’s Halleigh Robinson, and I’m a nurse at the LSU Medical Center in Shreveport.”

Immediately, Sookie’s mind began to move a mile a minute. “Gran,” she whispered.

“Yes,” the compassionate voice confirmed. “Your grandmother, Adele Stackhouse, is my patient.”

“What happened?”



“Adele called 9-1-1 early this morning—around 4:00 a.m. An ambulance was dispatched immediately, but given the woman’s rural location, it took ten minutes to reach her.” There was another sigh. “By the time paramedics got there, Adele’s condition was critical; she’d suffered a massive heart attack.”

“Oh my God,” Sookie said, her hand shaking so much that she could barely hold the phone.

Halleigh went on. “The ambulance brought her straight to LSU Med since the hospital in Monroe doesn’t have the facilities to treat her. The trip to Shreveport took forty minutes, and your grandmother’s heart stopped two times along the way, but the paramedics were able to restart it. Immediately upon getting to the hospital, Adele was rushed to emergency surgery, but she was too weak for the length of procedure that was needed to make all the necessary repairs.” She paused. “But they stabilized her the best they could. She’s in ICU right now, and if Adele improves, her doctors are gonna try the surgery again in 24 hours.”

“So she’s alive?” Sookie asked, with a flicker of hope in her voice.

“Yes,” Halleigh responded. “I’m Adele’s primary nurse in the ICU, and I recognized the name ‘Stackhouse’ since I’ve been dating a police officer from Bon Temps. I called my boyfriend, Andy Bellefleur, and he—in turn—called Jason Stackhouse. Is that your brother?”

“Yes,” Sookie whispered.

“Well. He arrived with his mother—your mother—right as Adele was getting out of surgery.” Halleigh’s tone was contrite as she went on. “I apologize for not calling you sooner, Sookie, but I figured your family would take care of all the necessary notifications. But then Adele woke up for a little while about fifteen minutes ago, and she asked for you. She even gave me your phone number.” She paused. “Adele asked that I call you personally and not leave it up to your brother.”

“Thank you,” Sookie said weakly, even as she sank down to the kitchen floor. Immediately Ned was next to her, rubbing her free hand and trying to offer comfort. Sookie gathered him onto her lap, thankful for his warmth.

“Your grandmother’s very weak, but it’s obvious that she’s hanging on for something,” Halleigh said softly. “I think she’s hanging on to see you.”

Sookie let out a sob. “Is she going to die?” she asked.

Halleigh sighed. “The doctor will tell you more, but,” she paused, “I really think you need to get here as soon as you can, Sookie. She’s stable—for now—but even if she’s strong enough for the surgery tomorrow, it’s very dangerous.”

Sookie began to weep outright, and it was at that moment that Pam walked into the room, a pizza in hand. Since Eric had his meeting, the two had planned to eat lunch and watch a chick flick.

“Sookie!” Pam gasped, quickly putting the pizza down on the counter and crouching next to her friend. “What’s wrong?”

Sookie couldn’t speak, so she handed Pam the phone.

“Who’s this?” Pam asked.

As Halleigh relayed the information to Pam about Gran, tears began to gather in Pam’s eyes, but she wiped them away before they fell.

“What’s the prognosis?” she asked.

There was a pause.

“I understand,” Pam said. “If Adele wakes up again, tell her that Sookie is on her way—just as quickly as possible.”

Pam felt as if she’d been hit in the stomach. Adele, the vibrant, beautiful woman who had become like a third grandmother to her, would likely be dead within the next twenty-four hours. In disbelief, she stared at the phone for a moment and then took in the form of her sobbing friend.

Pam shook her head, promising herself that she would call Amelia and cry for her loved one as soon as she got Sookie on a plane, preferably with her brother.

“I’ll call Eric,” she said, beginning to dial Sookie’s phone.

“No!” Sookie said quickly. “His meeting—with Appius.”

“Sookie,” Pam said softly, “you need him, and he’d want to be with you.”

“No,” Sookie cried out, taking the phone from her. “Please.” She looked up at Pam. “Can you help me get tickets? I don’t think I can . . .” Her voice trailed off.

“Don’t worry, Sookie,” Pam assured. She pulled out her own phone and immediately called Henry. After giving him a thirty second version of what was happening and asking if someone could give them a ride to the airport once they made arrangements, she called an old girlfriend, who was a travel agent.

Soon—two tickets to Shreveport via Atlanta were purchased for Sookie and Eric.

Next, Pam texted Bobby, telling him to be ready to pick up Eric from NP if he called and promising him details later.

All Sookie wanted to do was to collapse into Eric’s arms, but—knowing where he was—she couldn’t let herself call him. So she concentrated on staying on her feet as Pam whirled around her making plans and packing bags. Soon after, Henry and Blake joined Pam. And before Sookie knew it, she was in Blake’s car, speeding toward LaGuardia.

She concentrated on remaining numb; it was either that or fall apart.

“Text Eric!” Pam ordered, breaking Sookie out of her trance-like state.

“I can’t,” she whimpered.

“Either you do it, or I will,” Pam warned.

“I can’t,” Sookie repeated, her expression a mixture of stubbornness and despair.

Pam’s voice was softer. “Eric might be out of his meeting already. And—either way—he’d want to know as soon as possible. He loves Gran too. Just do it—please. My call won’t go through if he’s in a meeting.”

“Okay,” Sookie responded wearily. She barely contained her tears as she typed three messages into the phone. The first alerted Eric to the fact that Gran was likely dying. The

second informed him that she was taking off as soon as she could from LaGuardia. The third asked him to come later if he could.

Her phone ringing again shook Sookie to the very core. She feared it might be the nurse—telling her Gran had died—but seeing Eric’s number, her heart leapt.

For all the money in the world, she couldn’t have retold Eric’s words to her, but as soon as she heard his voice, she suddenly “felt” again and knew that if she could just hold on for a little while longer, he would take care of her and everything else.

When she could no longer talk, Pam took the phone, and Sookie closed her eyes. She’d picked up only one thing from her conversation with Eric: he was coming.

Sookie felt Pam’s hand take hers, and she was grateful for the comfort.

“Ned,” Sookie said, trying to think about practical things for a moment.

“Don’t worry. Amelia is going over to your house now. She’ll check on Ned. I’ll even take him for a while if need be.”

Sookie opened her eyes and looked at Pam skeptically.

“What?” Pam asked with a smirk. “It’s not like I’d kill him or anything. I’ll just make sure he doesn’t get into my closet.”

Sookie found herself smiling a little and marveled at the fact that she could still do that. “Thank you, Pam.”

Pam squeezed her hand.

Sookie gave her friend a little nod and then closed her eyes again. She concentrated on the sound of the siren in Blake’s unmarked police car. No one spoke for a little while—until Pam answered Eric’s call and then relayed the information about the changed flight plans.

Sookie said a prayer of thanksgiving for both Eric and Bobby. Because they'd be able to take Bobby's great-uncle's jet, Eric and she would be in Shreveport in fewer than four hours, rather than almost nine. Something inside of Sookie told her that she might not be able to spare the five hours that taking the commercial flight would have added onto her trip.

Despite that sobering thought, Sookie steeled herself, telling herself that she needed to hold it together for just a few more minutes—until she could collapse into Eric. Thankfully, Blake got them through the security gate that led to the hangar quickly, and Sookie let out a deep sigh of relief as she saw the man that she loved already waiting for her.

And then—in the next moment—he was holding her, and then holding her up, and then picking her up.

“I have you,” he promised. “I have you.”

She believed him.

“Well—where the fuck is he!” Appius demanded.

“I lost him,” Sigebert admitted.

“Find him!” Appius yelled, before hanging up the phone.

“I need to know why he left here like he did,” Appius seethed in Andre's direction. “He looked like someone had died.” Appius raked his fingers through his hair in a jerking motion. “I didn't think that he cared about *anything* that much—except for maybe that cunt, Elsa Larsson!”

Andre smiled. “Maybe she died.”

“I only hope for such luck!” Appius sneered. “Whatever it was upset him more than I've seen him upset since he was a fucking child! And I want to know if I can use it against him!”

Andre nodded. “Don’t worry, my love,” he said as he took Appius’s hand in his. “I’ll find out what he’s up to.”

Appius leaned into his lover and allowed himself to be comforted in Andre’s embrace for a moment before he stood up straight again and walked over to the window. He took in the view he’d seen thousands of times—the little kingdom he’d carved out for himself.

He contemplated what he’d just seen from his eldest son. From the time he was eight or so, Eric had been a stoic son of a bitch—harder for Appius to rattle than anyone he’d ever come into contact with. But Appius still knew how to pull Eric’s strings to the point where he’d get a reaction most of the time.

However—he had to hand it to Eric. The boy knew how to keep his emotions close to the vest. The six-year-old child who’d cried in his room when he came home for the winter holiday was long gone, though Appius still hoped to see more of his son’s tears. He’d just not found the perfect formula for eliciting them in a very long time—too long.

But—then again—he’d never seen Eric as he’d been today. *Never* in the six years Eric had been working at Northman’s Publishing had he taken a call or even checked his phone in Appius’s presence. But today, three texts had sent him shooting out the door.

Appius had watched the surveillance footage of Eric literally sprinting through the building. And then Eric’s bastard lawyer Burnham had picked him up.

Appius closed his eyes and remembered Eric’s look as he’d checked his phone. It had started with shock, but immediately had transformed to concern—concern with a touch of grief. That made Appius doubt that Eric’s maternal grandmother had died. No. Eric’s had been a look of worrying and planning. It had been a look of powerlessness even amidst the mustering of strength. It had been a look of longing and suffering.

But on someone else's behalf.

Appius knew that look. He'd seen it in the mirror every single day when his beloved Stella lay dying of cancer.

He turned around and faced Andre. "Eric's in love," Appius said with certainty. "Find out with whom—because I *know* that it's not Isabel or Amelia. Call in Franklin Mott to help."

Andre nodded sinisterly as he dialed his phone.



Chapter 08: Venom and Antivenom

Thankfully, Niall's jet had couch seating in one area, so Eric was able to keep Sookie cradled to him throughout the flight. He rocked her and then sang to her in Swedish—a lullaby that his mormor had once told him that his mother used to sing to him.

Eric couldn't actually remember his mother singing it, nor did he recall the words or tune from his memories. But—after his mormor had told him about it—he'd made a point of memorizing the lullaby nonetheless.

Two hours after takeoff, Sookie's sobbing for the woman who had literally saved her from a life of hell stopped as she fell asleep in Eric's embrace

Only then, did Eric let himself crumble a little. He too owed Adele Stackhouse—owed her everything. Without her, the woman in his arms would have likely never escaped her mother's maliciousness. And—eventually—she would have broken. She would have never come to New York. He would have never seen her—met her. And he—just like her—would have been broken. No—he would have *remained* broken.

Bobby had been on the phone almost the entire time they'd been flying and had stayed near the front of the aircraft in order to give Eric and Sookie as much privacy as possible, but when he saw that Sookie had fallen asleep, he came back to sit on the couch opposite the couple.

He looked at the sleeping woman in his friend's embrace and took a deep breath before speaking. "I have a car waiting for us when we land."

Eric nodded. "I assume you've been in contact with the hospital?" he asked quietly.

Bobby nodded. "It doesn't look good. I managed to talk at length to one of Adele's doctors by pretending to be you."

Eric looked at him in question.

“I figured they’d be more likely to discuss things with her granddaughter’s fiancé than with her granddaughter’s fiancé’s friend.”

Eric nodded in acknowledgement. “What did they tell you?”

“Her cardiologist thinks that she’s suffered at least two heart attacks since early this morning—one of them while on the way to the hospital. The first one was massive, and the second likely sealed her fate,” Bobby added gravely. “When they tried surgery, they were only able to patch her up a little bit before they had to get out. She was just too weak.” He shook his head dejectedly. “The doctor told me that they will try taking her back to surgery if she survives the next twenty four hours, but”

“But they don’t think that’s going to happen,” Eric finished, letting the harsh truth out into the cabin of the plane as he continued to rock the sleeping form of his beloved.

“No,” Bobby said softly, “they don’t. After getting off the phone with the doctor, I contacted the nurse Sookie spoke to—Halleigh Robinson. She was more,” he paused, “forthcoming and direct than the doctor could be. She told me that in her experience, Adele is too far gone to make a recovery. She reiterated that we needed to hurry, but that Adele seems to be tenaciously hanging on for Sookie. I’ve called in a few favors to get us a police escort to the hospital.”

Eric sighed. “We *will* get there in time. We have to. *Please*,” he said as if his words were a prayer. “Sookie deserves to say her goodbyes to Gran.”

Bobby nodded and then tensed. “Halleigh told me that Adele requested and then signed a DNR the last time she was conscious.”

“A ‘do not resuscitate order,’” Eric sighed.

“Yes. Halleigh said that Adele seems to have realized and accepted the likelihood that her heart won’t last the night, and she doesn’t want to prolong things with a ventilator,” Bobby said in barely a whisper, even as he kept an eye on Sookie to make sure she was still asleep.

Eric closed his eyes and let out a long breath. “Are her doctors competent? Would others be better able to treat her?” he asked.

“I contacted Niall, and he used his connections to check out her doctors,” Bobby said with a sigh of his own. “Adele’s lead cardiologist is well-respected and actually specializes in geriatric cases. According to Niall, there are more prominent doctors in the country, but not many better.” He paused. “After I contacted him, Niall called Adele’s cardiologist too. He believes that everything humanly possible is being done for Adele, given her condition and age.”

As Eric opened his eyes, a tear fell from one of them. “Will you thank Niall for his help?”

“I will,” Bobby said. “But he was glad to do it.”

Eric nodded in acknowledgment. He’d only met Niall a couple of times and was grateful to Bobby’s great-uncle for using his connections in the medical field to give Sookie and him peace of mind. Eric wanted—no needed—to be able to tell Sookie that Adele’s doctors were among the best and had done everything possible for her grandmother—for Gran.

“There’s more,” Bobby said, shifting in his chair uncomfortably.

“Tell me,” Eric requested.

“Halleigh said that Sookie’s brother overheard Adele asking for her granddaughter, and he and Sookie’s mother have gotten wind that Sookie’s on her way. According to Halleigh, they are trying to get Sookie barred from seeing Adele.”

“They can’t do that,” Eric growled softly.

Bobby sighed. “Halleigh said that they told the hospital administrator that Sookie’s the one who broke her grandmother’s heart by leaving town. They fed the administrator some bullshit story that seeing Sookie would just upset Adele more.”

“Did the administrator buy it?”

“Halleigh overheard Michelle and Jason talking to the administrator and stepped in. She argued that Adele had clearly asked for Sookie and had even provided her with a telephone number during her first lucid state after surgery, and—since then—Adele has asked for Sookie whenever she awakens, though Adele’s still very groggy. The administrator wants to speak with Sookie before letting her see Adele, but Halleigh has indicated that she will try to help us no matter what—that she’ll even sneak Sookie in if that’s what it takes.”

Eric sighed deeply. “That’s something, at least. Wait—do we know who Gran’s lawyer is?”

Bobby closed his eyes and went through his memory banks. One of the reasons why he was so good at what he did was his photographic memory. “Sid Matt Lancaster was the name on Adele’s husband’s Will.”

“Get in touch with him,” Eric whispered. “If I know Adele, she’s made Sookie the executrix of her Will. If we can get that information to the hospital administrator, we should have no problems getting Sookie in. I want this cleared up *before* we get there if possible. And I want Sookie to be able to see Gran without her brother or her sorry excuse for a mother in the room.”

Bobby nodded. “I’ll make it happen, Eric.” He was silent for a moment. “After you get her through this, you and I are going to have to talk about today. It will likely be a game-

changer.” He sighed. “I don’t think that Appius could be tracking us here, but if I know him, he won’t rest until he finds out what rattled you. He’ll want to exploit it.”

“I know,” Eric said in a tortured voice. “But I *had* to get to her as soon as I found out about Gran.”

“I know,” Bobby reassured. “And—for what it’s worth—I think you did the right thing by leaving that meeting. But there may be consequences.”

“I can’t think about that right now.”

“Well—that’s why you have me,” Bobby replied, getting up and moving back to the front of the plane so that he could get to work on controlling the damage that either Michelle Stackhouse or Appius Northman might try to do.

Eric held onto Sookie tightly as he led her down the hall toward the hospital’s ICU. From the helpful nurse to whom Bobby had been speaking, he knew that they would have to check in at a desk in order to progress to Adele’s room; he also knew that there was a waiting room by that desk. And that was where they would likely encounter Michelle and Jason Stackhouse.

Though Eric had tried to prepare Sookie for the fact that her mother would probably be in that waiting room, he still felt her stiffen and then shake when she saw the woman who Eric knew immediately was her mother.

Michelle Stackhouse was the kind of woman who looked older than her real age, which Eric knew to be around fifty. She was also the kind of woman who’d had what the New York elite called “work done by the wrong doctor.” There was nothing that the New York socialites of his grandmother’s age liked to gossip about more than a woman who’d had “one cut too many”

or who'd "rolled the dice once too often" or who'd "been cut by a quack." All of them whispered about how they would use only "Meryl's doctor" or "Madonna's doctor" if they ever opted for plastic surgery—which they, of course, never admitted to doing.



Eric shook his head a little. His own grandmother, Grace Northman, had had at least three "corrective procedures" that he knew of, and he wasn't really "in the know"—so she'd probably had even more than that. However, Eric had to admit that Grace's own choice of doctor—whether it was Meryl's or Madonna's—had been excellent, for she still looked like a "normal" human. The woman now in front of him did not.

Michelle had obviously once been a beautiful woman, though—because of the sneer that seemed permanently etched onto her face—she didn't hold a candle to her daughter. However, Michelle had had—in Eric's estimation—about five or six Botox injections too many and *all* from the wrong doctor. Moreover, the stench of cigarette smoke clung to her so much that he could smell it from across the room.

“Well—look who *finally* showed up,” a young man, presumably Sookie's brother, drawled from next to the woman.

“Oh—don't be so harsh,” Michelle Stackhouse said sarcastically, “Susanna's a New Yorker now. It's a miracle she even came at all. We *all* know that she cares about *dear Adele only* for her money.”

Hoping that his presence would block Sookie from the venom her mother was spewing, Eric stepped forward so that Sookie was a little behind him. What he really wanted to do was to punch out both Michelle and Jason Stackhouse, but Eric knew that such a thing wouldn't help Sookie—no matter how good it might feel.

“Who's this?” Michelle asked, turning her gaze to Eric and leering at him as if he were a piece of meat.

Eric ignored the look and the question and walked Sookie up to the desk. “Sookie Stackhouse is here to see Adele Stackhouse,” he said.

The attendant looked up nervously. “Just a moment.” She quickly pushed some buttons and made a call. “It'll be just another minute,” the attendant said. “Mrs. Stackhouse's lawyer's back there, and she gets only one visitor at a time.”

“She's awake?” Sookie stammered out.

The attendant smiled a little and nodded to the young woman.

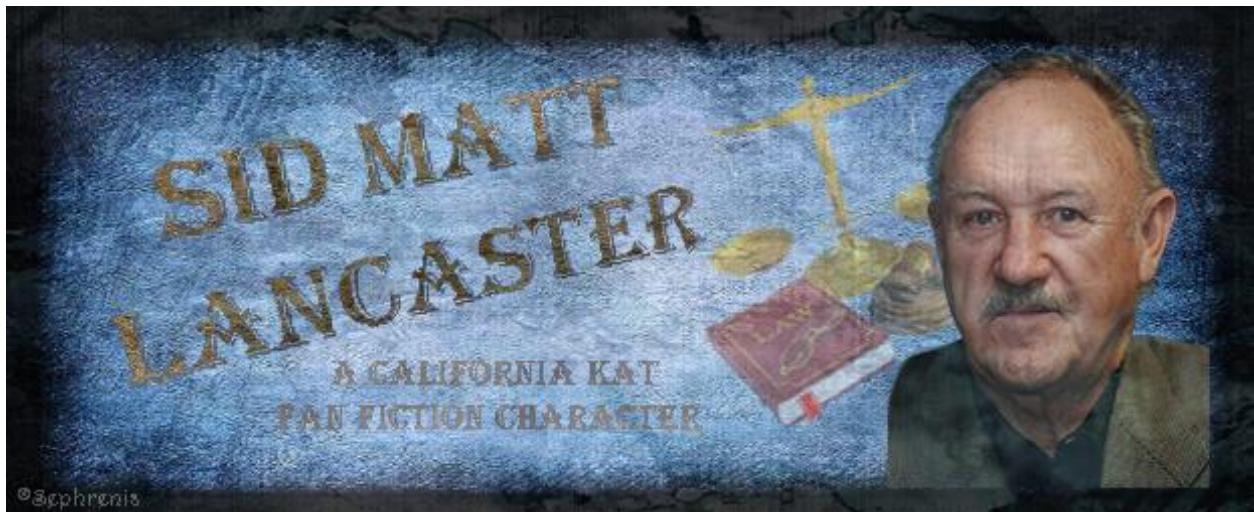
Eric led Sookie over to the seats farthest away from Michelle and Jason and sat down with Sookie practically on his lap. He noticed that Sookie was staring at her mother with a lost look in her eyes.

“Sookie,” Eric whispered in her ear so that only she could hear. “Min sol,” he said when she didn’t look at him right away.

Finally she turned to him.

He spoke quietly, probably too quietly for her even to hear, but he knew that she could read his lips. “I am here. Your gran is here. You are here. No one else matters. Those people don’t matter.”

Her lost look fading just a little, Sookie nodded even as the door leading to the ICU opened and Sid Matt Lancaster came out into the waiting room. He was followed by an attractive African American woman in a navy suit; the woman immediately nodded at Sookie and Eric.



“Miss Stackhouse,” she said, extending her hand, “my name is Kenya Jones, and I’m the hospital administrator. It’s my unpleasant duty to inform you that Jason and Michelle Stackhouse tried to have you barred from Adele Stackhouse’s room.”



“What?” Sookie asked, her heart dropping. Eric’s arm around her shoulder was the only thing that kept her steady.

“Don’t worry,” Kenya said quickly. “After personally hearing from your grandmother and her attorney, I have deemed that barring you would be inappropriate. Since she has been awake, your grandmother has been asking for you.” Kenya smiled comfortingly. “And I know that your being here will bring her great comfort. You can stay with her as long as you like,” she added with a little glare in the direction of the other Stackhouses in the waiting room.

“Thanks,” Sookie stammered as she went up to the front desk again in order to get her visitor’s badge.

“I’m going with her,” Eric said forcefully.

“Only one visitor at a time,” the attendant said regretfully. “And only family or—uh—clergy and council.”

“I’m Miss Stackhouse’s fiancée, and I’m going with her,” Eric said, his tone brooking no argument.

“Susanna doesn’t have a fiancé,” Michelle said nastily from across the room.

“And I don’t see no ring,” Jason added, suddenly next to them at the window.

Sid Matt stepped forward a little. His eyes were clearly red and showed his own sadness; however, he spoke firmly. “Adele visited Miss Stackhouse and her fiancée at Thanksgiving. I can vouch for this young man.” He looked at the administrator. “Surely an exception can be made, given the situation.”

Ms. Jones nodded and turned to the attendant. “Issue both of them badges and let them *both* stay as long as they want.”

“What about Jason?” Michelle piped in. “He’s got a right to say goodbye to his grandmother too.”

“Yeah!” Jason practically yelled. “I got rights here too!”

Ms. Jones stood up a little straighter and addressed the two with an air of authority. “I do *not* appreciate troublemakers coming into my hospital and trying to air family problems when people are ill. Mrs. Stackhouse has made it very clear whom she wants to see, and I believe Jason Stackhouse has already visited her. If she asks for him again, he may go back *after* Miss Stackhouse is done.”

With that, Kenya motioned toward a hospital guard who’d just entered the room. She glared back at Jason and Michelle. “And if either of you causes even the tiniest of disturbances from here on out, you will *both* be escorted from this building.”

“You can’t do that,” Jason insisted unpleasantly.

“I can and I will,” Kenya hissed before turning on her heel and leaving the waiting room.

Thankful that Eric would be going with her, Sookie breathed a sigh of relief and let him lead her through the door as the attendant buzzed them through. They were met by a kind-faced

nurse whose nametag read Halleigh. Eric immediately recognized her name; she was the nurse who had been communicating with them.

“Hello, Sookie,” Halleigh said with a caring smile. “I’m just gonna take you and Mr. Northman here to get gowned up so that you can visit with your grandmother—okay?”

Sookie nodded and then she and Eric followed Halleigh into a little room with a large sink. Halleigh instructed them on how to wash their hands and then outfitted them both with a gown and shoe coverings before taking them down the hall to Adele’s room.

Chapter 09: Magic and Loss

“There’s a bit of magic in everything, and some loss to even things out.”—Lou Reed

Sookie squeezed Eric’s hand tightly as they entered the small hospital room, which was full of various machines. Immediately, a tear slipped down her cheek as she saw Gran lying in the midst of those machines. Adele, who had always been so full of life, now looked small and frail.



“Gran?” Sookie said, a bit uncertainly as she approached.

The elderly woman’s eyes slowly opened and then took a few moments longer to focus.

“Sookie,” came her weak voice. “Eric,” she smiled a little before she frowned. “I must look a fright.”

“You look beautiful, Adele,” Eric said.

“Gran,” she said. “It’s about time you started calling me Gran.”

“You look beautiful, Gran,” Eric repeated, even as Sookie took her grandmother’s hand.

Adele looked up at Sookie. Her words came slowly, but there was still humor behind them. “You’d better keep hold of this one. He knows how to flatter *and* obey. Not many men can do those things these days,” she chuckled to herself, which caused her to cough.

Halleigh appeared out of nowhere to give Adele a drink of water through a straw.

The elderly woman nodded her thanks to the nurse.

“Gran, I . . . ,” Sookie started before more tears began to fall from her eyes.

“It’s alright, darlin’,” Adele said in a soft voice. She continued, still slowly, but with a strength that seemed to be coming from beyond her body. “I know. Dyin’ right now is a shock to me too. I wish I would have lived to see you two have babies.” She closed her eyes and smiled as if she had a secret. “But I can imagine them already. Blonde and tall and beautiful. And if they inherit even a fraction of the kindness and smarts that you two have in spades, they’ll be somethin’ real special. I just wish I could have stuck around long enough to meet them.”

“You *will* meet them,” Sookie said insistently. “You’ll get better. The doctors say that you can have another surgery tomorrow, and they’ll fix you right up.”

Adele opened her eyes and looked at Sookie lovingly. “I think my body’s a little too tired for that, my sweet, sweet Sookie, but you and your Eric here have given me such wonderful memories in the last year of my life.” She sighed. “It seems your granddaddy’s just tired of waitin’ for me. And—to be honest—I’m lookin’ forward to bein’ with him too.”

Adele motioned for some more water, and—again—Halleigh was silently there, doing her best for her patient.

“Oh, Gran,” Sookie said as she buried her face into her grandmother’s hand.

“I won’t tell you not to cry for me,” Adele said, her voice a little less scratchy than before. “God knows, I’ve cried enough in my life to fill an ocean. But I *will* tell you that I don’t want you to mourn for me too much, Sookie. You’ve been sad for far too long in your life as it is, and it’s high time for you to be happy.”

“Oh, Gran,” Sookie repeated.

Adele continued, her voice low, as if she were looking back into her memories. “I’ve lived a mighty fine life. And I got to spend most of it with my soul mate. We raised a family together. I just wish that I’d done better by you and Hadley,” she sighed. “*Those* are my regrets.”

“Don’t say that,” Sookie said. “You saved me, Gran. You gave me a life!”

Gran coughed a little and squeezed Sookie’s hand as much as she could. “I *should* have done more—much sooner—to make sure you were okay. I just didn’t know . . .,” she said, coughing again.

Once more, Halleigh was unobtrusively waiting to offer Adele a sip of water.

“It’s okay, Gran,” Sookie insisted. “You saved me,” she said again. “You made it so I could hear again. You gave me a home and love and support. Without you in my life, I’d still be just a shell. Without you, I wouldn’t have gone to college or to New York. I wouldn’t have found Eric.”

Gran smiled. “You have such a good heart, Sookie. And all I want for you is to have a happy life.” She looked up at Eric and then back at Sookie. “Will you let me speak to your young man for a moment, sweetheart?”

Sookie wiped her eyes. “Okay,” she said a little uncertainly.

Adele looked up at Halleigh. “Will you go with my granddaughter? Maybe get her and Eric some coffees.”

“Ever the hostess,” Eric said softly, bending down and kissing Adele lightly on the forehead from where he was standing next to Sookie.

Adele smiled weakly at him. “I might be dyin’, but that’s no excuse for bad manners,” she winked at him, which elicited a little sob from Sookie.

“Don’t go far,” Adele said to Sookie. Halleigh handed Eric the water cup and then quietly left the room with Sookie.

Adele looked at Eric seriously. “I feel myself fadin’ away more and more every second, but I have some unfinished business, and since you’re in business, I thought we ought to talk alone for a moment.”

“Okay,” Eric said. He couldn’t help but to smile at the still-feisty Adele as he gave her a sip of water.

“I can tell that you and Sookie have all the love in the world for each other. I hope you know how rare that is.”

“I know,” Eric answered honestly as he took Adele’s hand. “I know.”

“Promise me that you’ll make her happy.”

“I will,” Eric swore. “I’ll move heaven and earth to see her smile.”

“Good man,” Adele said with a weary sigh. “You *are* plannin’ to marry her—right?”

“Yes,” Eric said without hesitation. “As soon as I can.”

Adele laughed a little. “I’m glad. You both deserve love—and peace.” She coughed again, this time more harshly.

“Should I get Sookie?” Eric asked. “The nurse?”

“Not quite yet,” Adele said, motioning for another drink. She was silent for a few moments as she seemed to be storing up enough energy to continue speaking. Once again, she looked like she was pulling her strength from a source beyond herself. “I need to tell you some things,” she finally said. “Just you—for now.”

“Okay,” Eric agreed.

“First, I want you and Sookie to stay at my house while you’re here. Otherwise, I’m afraid that viper of a mother of hers will swoop in and clear everything out, and I wanna make sure my granddaughters—both Sookie and Hadley—get anything they want in the house.”

Eric nodded. “Done. Michelle won’t get her hands on anything.”

“Good boy,” Adele said with a devilish smirk before motioning for Eric to come closer; he bent down a little.

“Under my bed is a loose board,” Adele said quietly. “Under it, there’s a box that contains all the love letters my Earl ever wrote to me. I’d like to be buried with those.”

“Of course,” Eric said, his voice full of emotion.

“Love letters are a beautiful thing for a woman to get, Eric. You remember that!” she ordered, though the effort of doing so was clearly taxing for her.

“I will.” Eric couldn’t help but to marvel at Adele’s continued strength of will and her fire as he gave her another drink.

“There’s also a ring in the box with the letters. It’s in an envelope with a letter of its own. The ring has been passed down in the Stackhouse family for generations and generations. Iris, my Earl’s mother, was the last to wear it. But my finger was too damned fat to wear it after her—without the necessary alterations doin’ it harm.” Adele paused and motioned for another drink. After a few moments, she continued. “But Sookie’s fingers are slim and elegant, just like Iris’s. Now—it’s an old ring, and the center stone in it was taken out to be buried with Iris, but it’s still the most valuable thing in the Stackhouse family.”

She coughed again.

“Maybe you should rest for a while,” Eric said softly.

Adele shook her head. “Soon I’ll be restin’ forever. This time I’ve been given—this time with you and Sookie—it’s a gift I don’t plan on wastin’.”

Eric nodded and gave her another drink.

“That ring—the Stackhouse ring—is bound with a lot of love, Eric,” Adele conveyed. “And the letter gives its history. Make sure Sookie knows that history one day. You’ll know when the time’s right.”

“I will,” Eric promised.

“Did you know that my Earl’s parents lived happily together for more than fifty years?”

“No,” Eric shook his head as he gave Adele another drink.

The elderly woman smiled. “Earl always said that they never spoke a single cross word to each other, and I was able to see for myself how much they loved one another—right up to the end. The way that Iris and Finn looked at each other is the same way that you and Sookie look at each other—like you’re swept away.”

She half-sighed and half-coughed before she continued—her voice clearly weakening. “I loved my Earl with all my heart, and I truly think of him as my soul mate, but even we didn’t have that kind of sweeping love.”

She coughed again, and he gave her more water.

“I need you to promise me that you’ll hold onto the love you have for my granddaughter—always.”

“With both hands until the day I die,” he swore. “Always.”

She smiled at him. “I know you’re rich, Eric, but I’d like for you to take the Stackhouse ring, put a new stone into the heart of it, and give it to Sookie when you officially ask for her

hand. I want you to tell her the ring's story, and I want you to tell her how much I approve of you two gettin' married."

I tear rolled down his cheek. "Thank you, Gran. I will."

Gran smiled and sighed with relief—as if the last task that was troubling her was done. "I'd like to see Sookie again, but I need you to stay by her side. It won't be long now," she said tiredly.

"I'll get her," Eric said as he bent down and gave the woman another kiss on her forehead.

"Oh—and you'll be sure to tell Elsa goodbye for me. And tell her I'm sorry we never got to paint up New Orleans together," she added with a fading smile.

Eric nodded and brushed away another tear as he went to get his beloved.

Gran weakened in noticeable stages over the next hour as her coughing increased and her ability to speak decreased, but she didn't sleep. Eric recognized that Gran was fighting for every remaining minute of her life—and fighting to stay awake to enjoy those minutes.

Finally, Halleigh had to put a large oxygen mask over Adele's nose and mouth, in addition to the tube that had already been in her nose.

After that, Gran motioned for the mask to be taken off occasionally and talked in spurts as she could—mostly about Earl and about how proud she was of Sookie and Eric. At about 11:00 p.m., Hadley arrived at the hospital, but because of her HIV viral count, she wasn't allowed back into the ICU. Her husband, Remy Savoy, came in with a cute swaddled infant so that Adele could see her great-grandchild for a final time, and Remy said a short farewell on Hadley's behalf before taking a message to Hadley from Adele. Jason was invited in next, while

Eric and Sookie stayed in the nurse’s lounge so that they wouldn’t have to go back into the waiting room with Michelle. At five minutes until midnight, Sookie and Eric went back into Adele’s room.



By then, Gran needed the oxygen mask all the time, but she gestured for Sookie to come closer and to take off the mask for just a moment. She whispered a final “I love you,” and then slipped into sleep with a serene look on her face.

Not ten minutes later, Adele Stackhouse slipped away from the world, and—if the prayers of those in the room were answered—right into the arms of her waiting Earl.

Chapter 10: A Very Small Place

Bobby looked down at his phone when it beeped. The message was short, but no less heartbreaking for its brevity: “Gran’s gone.”

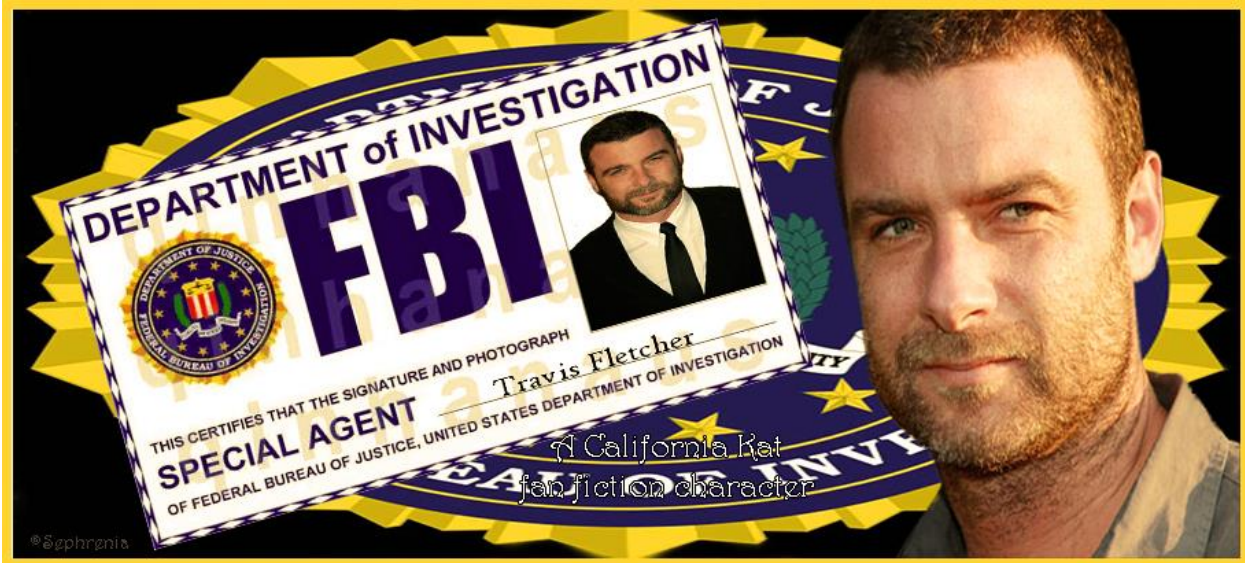
Bobby crushed his finished cigarette into the ashtray he’d found on Adele’s porch and sighed deeply. About ninety minutes before, he’d gotten another text from Eric—one asking him to make sure that Adele’s home was secure until Sookie and he got there. Eric’s concern was that—once Adele was gone—Michelle and Jason would try to get into the home and strip it clean of valuables.

Extremely thankful for a task to keep him busy during the dead of the night, Bobby had immediately traveled to the farmhouse. As much as he liked to take care of things himself, however, he speculated that he would need “official” back-up in order to avoid being arrested for kicking the asses of Sookie’s mother and brother. Of course, he was tempted to knock them out and take them to “visit” their kind in the alligator farm he’d seen on the way to Bon Temps from Shreveport. But he knew that Sookie wouldn’t approve of that—no matter how unimaginably reptilian her mother and sibling were.

It hadn’t taken Bobby long to find the help he needed to keep Michelle and Jason away from the farmhouse—while at the same time ensuring that he would stay out of jail.

A call to a friend in the FBI in NYC had led to a new and trustworthy contact for Bobby. It just so happened that Bobby’s friend had gone to Quantico with an agent in the Shreveport office, Travis Fletcher. A call to Agent Fletcher had yielded a boon. Not only did Fletcher offer

his “off-the-record” assistance—if need be—but also a cousin of the agent’s sister-in-law was a sheriff in Bon Temps, Louisiana, the very town where Adele lived.



Bobby smiled as he called Andy Bellefleur. If there was one thing that he had learned in his line of work, it was that the world could be a *very* small place sometimes.



After Bobby name-dropped Agent Fletcher, Sheriff Bellefleur promised to send a patrol car to make sure that Adele’s home remained unbothered, though he insisted that a “God-fearin’

Christian” like Michelle Stackhouse wouldn’t do anything of harm there since they were “family and all.”

Bobby didn’t believe that for a New York minute.

Bobby’s next call was to Sid Matt Lancaster, who’d left the hospital after Sookie and Eric were situated. Sid Matt agreed to hold vigil at Adele’s as well. Finally, Bobby called a car service and asked if a driver could be made available for Eric and Sookie when they were ready to leave the hospital. Luckily, the car service—though small—had something that would work, and for a little extra money, the driver agreed to go to the hospital immediately and to wait for Eric’s call.

Those tasks complete half an hour before, Bobby had simply been waiting on Adele’s porch for either his new allies or his new enemies or his “brother” and Sookie to arrive. He didn’t exactly trust the sheriff to stop Michelle—since she was “family and all.” And though Sid Matt seemed trustworthy enough, he was clearly on the north-side of eighty years old.

Fifteen minutes after Eric’s text about Adele’s death, a somewhat annoyed-looking Sheriff Andy Bellefleur pulled up, checked in with Bobby, and then took up a position near the end of the driveway. Five minutes after that, a weary-looking Sid Matt Lancaster pulled up.

“Have you heard? Adele’s gone,” Sid Matt sighed resignedly as he got out of his car.

“Yes, Eric let me know,” he answered as he took in the man. He could tell that Sid Matt was quite upset over Adele’s loss, and he couldn’t help but to wonder if the two had been romantically involved. Adele had spoken of Sid Matt a few times over Thanksgiving, and she’d blushed like a schoolgirl when she spoke of him at any length. Plus, there had been the knowing looks exchanged between Elsa and Adele when Sid Matt’s name had been brought up.

Bobby nodded to the elderly gent as Sid Matt spryly climbed the steps of the porch. Bobby couldn't help but to hope that he was right about Adele having romantic "companionship" during the last months of her life. From what Bobby had gathered, it seemed that Sid Matt was worthy of Adele. Not many would have been in Bobby's eyes.

"I'm sorry for your loss," Bobby said sympathetically. "I met Adele only a couple of times, but everything I knew about her told me that she was a wonderful woman." Bobby lit up another cigarette.

"One of the best I ever met," Sid Matt sighed. "You got another one of those?" he asked.

Bobby smiled a little and handed the older man a cigarette and his lighter.

Sid Matt took the offered items. "I haven't touched a cigarette in almost forty years," he chuckled after he coughed following his first inhale. "Once the health risks were known, my wife nagged me till I quit."

"I'm good at quitting them," Bobby smirked. "In fact, I quit all the time. Sadly, I'm just as good at starting up again."

Sid Matt chuckled and looked at Bobby's finger. "You just need a wife to nag you."

"The closest I've ever gotten to that is Eric's sister—and she prefers other women," Bobby intoned.

"No wonder you smoke then," Sid Matt kidded.

Both men chuckled. Sid Matt settled down into the porch swing, even as Bobby sat down on the steps of the porch. Seemingly becoming lost in his memories, Sid Matt stared into the woods surrounding Adele's home. Bobby was happy to give the older man some silence. And he couldn't help but to hope that the peace surrounding the farmhouse would remain in place for

Sid Matt's sake—even though he was craving a little action *and* the opportunity to “justifiably” knock out at least Jason Stackhouse, if not Michelle.

A half an hour after Adele had died peacefully in her sleep, Halleigh returned to her hospital room. The kind nurse had left after Adele passed away in order to give the couple some time alone with the woman they'd lost.

She walked to the opposite side of the bed from the couple. Sookie was cradled on Eric's lap in the small room's only chair. The young woman still held her grandmother's hand in hers, and Eric's chin was resting on Sookie's shoulder.

“If y'all are ready,” Halleigh said softly, “I need to get Miss Adele ready to be taken downstairs.”

Sookie seemed startled by the nurse's voice and sniffled loudly.

“We're keeping you from your job,” Sookie said apologetically.

“Not at all, Sookie,” Halleigh said with a compassionate smile. “I don't mean to rush y'all.”

“It's okay,” Sookie said as she looked at Gran. “I know she's not here anymore. It's just that I want her to be.”

Halleigh reached out and patted Sookie's hand, which was still over her grandmother's. The nurse noticed that the young woman's other hand was tucked safely into the grasp of her man. She couldn't help but to sigh a little as she took them in.

Eric Northman looked like he'd stepped right out of a Hollywood movie. In fact, he'd been the talk of the ward that night, but since Halleigh was happily involved with someone—

albeit a balding, middle-aged someone with a bit of a gut—she'd just appreciated the handsome man silently.

“I knew Miss Adele a little, even before today,” the nurse shared. “That’s why I wanted to be assigned to her and stayed on with her after my shift officially ended.”

“How did you know her?” Sookie asked.

“I recently moved in with my boyfriend in Bon Temps,” Halleigh responded.

“Who’s your boyfriend?” Sookie asked.

“Did you grow up in Bon Temps?”

Sookie nodded in affirmation.

“Then, I reckon you know Andy Bellefleur—right?”

“The sheriff?”

“Yep,” Halleigh answered, her voice conveying her pride in her boyfriend. “I can’t say I’ve met too many people in Bon Temps nicer than Miss Adele. I haven’t socialized much since I work 20-hour shifts three times a week, but Miss Adele always made me feel real welcome at church whenever I could get there.”

Sookie smiled. “That sounds like her.”

Halleigh returned Sookie’s smile. “At church, she talked a little about her granddaughters—about you and your cousin. I could tell she was real proud of both of you.”

“Thank you,” Sookie said, turning her hand over to squeeze Halleigh’s. “I’ll be sure to tell that to Hadley too.”

Halleigh’s smile faded, and she looked at Sookie a little regretfully. “Before he left, Sid Matt dealt with most of the paperwork—with the hospital bill and whatnot. But—I’m sorry. There are a few more papers you’ll have to sign before you go. But I’ve told Sally that you’ll be

there soon, and she's got everything ready so y'all can get in and out."

"Where will . . ." Sookie's voice shook as she stopped midsentence.

"Where will Adele be taken?" Eric asked, intuiting what Sookie was going to ask.

"Sid Matt made the arrangements that Miss Adele asked for," Halleigh said softly. "I'll take the tubes and such out of her, and I'll clean her up a bit. Then she'll go to the morgue until someone from the Bon Temps funeral home comes to get her tomorrow. Then they'll make her look her best for the funeral service."

"Do I—uh—need to do anything?" Sookie asked tearfully.

"No," Halleigh comforted. "I overheard Sid Matt talking with Miss Adele earlier, and she pretty much had everything planned for—just in case. I reckon Sid Matt will call you tomorrow to make arrangements to pick up the dress she wanted to be buried in, but you shouldn't worry about anything tonight," Halleigh said kindly.

"And the paperwork downstairs? What is that for?" Eric asked.

"Mostly—it's so that Miss Adele's personal effects can be released to you," Halleigh informed. "She didn't come in with much, and her nightgown had to be cut off of her, but I think the paramedics grabbed her purse and keys for her, and she had a wedding ring on."

"Thank you," Eric said.

Sookie stood up straight, and Halleigh could tell that the strength that had been an inherent part of Adele Stackhouse had been inherited by her granddaughter.

"We would like for you to come to the funeral if you can, Halleigh," Sookie requested.

"I'd like that," the nurse smiled.

Eric stayed next to Sookie as she signed the papers she needed to sign in order to claim Adele's property; then, he texted the number for the driver Bobby had arranged to take them to Bon Temps. Eric was grateful that Bobby had thought about the fact that he would want a driver. Eric could have driven, of course, but all he really craved was to hold Sookie close as she grieved her great loss. He could tell that she was exhausted—drained both physically and emotionally—and he wanted to get her to Gran's home as soon as possible.

Once they were in the car, Sookie fell asleep against him quickly—something that Eric was very relieved about, especially when he received a text from Bobby after they'd been on the road for about fifteen minutes.

Upon reading the text, Eric quickly dialed his friend.

"Are they still there?" he asked quietly so as not to disturb Sookie.

"We just got rid of them," Bobby responded. "The sheriff had to threaten to arrest them, so it took a little while, but they're gone now. Adele was right. They were *definitely* intending to break into the house. They were each driving a fucking truck, Eric!"

"Was it Sheriff Bellefleur that got them to go?" Eric asked.

"How'd you know his name?"

"Halleigh, Adele's nurse, mentioned him. She was," he paused, "kind to Sookie. She's dating Bellefleur."

"Small world," Bobby observed as if to himself.

"Do you think they'll come back?" Eric asked.

Bobby sighed. "Probably not tonight, but I'm guessing they'll return tomorrow. Sid Matt's being here helped a lot. As Adele's attorney, he was able to spur Officer Bellefleur into action by telling him about the last request Adele made of him."

“Which was?” Eric asked.

“Do you want the quote?” Bobby asked, his voice conveying amusement.

“Yeah,” Eric returned with a small smile of his own.

“Adele told Sid Matt to keep everyone but you and Sookie out of her fuckin’ house. Of course, she also told him to make apologies for her language—though she made clear that she was certain that God would forgive her in this case.”

Eric chuckled softly so that he wouldn’t disturb Sookie. “That sounds *exactly* like Gran. So—will Bellefleur keep an officer there all night?”

“He’s staying until 3:00 a.m., and then he’s sending someone else until noon tomorrow,” Bobby reported. “By then Sid Matt will have filed an injunction banning Michelle Stackhouse and Jason Stackhouse from entering the premises. He left right after Michelle and Jason did in order to get the paperwork started. Plus, I have a call in to a private security firm so that we can get some guards here beginning tomorrow.”

“Good,” Eric sighed. “We’ll be there in about thirty minutes, and I don’t want Sookie to have to deal with any of this—not tonight.”

“She won’t have to,” Bobby promised. “And I’ll be here keeping watch too.”

“Bobby?” Eric said.

“Yeah?”

“I don’t tell you this enough, but you’re probably the best friend I’ve ever have—the best one I *will* ever have.”

“There’s no probably about it,” Bobby said with certainty. “And we are not friends, Eric. You are my brother,” he added before hanging up the phone.

Chapter 11: Grief of Several Kinds

Grief is the price we pay for love.—Queen Elizabeth II

Sunday, December 30

Eric POV

Eric sighed as he turned down the blankets of the bed in Sookie’s old room. Adele had died three nights before.

As it had turned out, Eric couldn’t keep Sookie sheltered from all of her mother’s antics, no matter how hard he’d tried. The morning after Adele’s death, Michelle and Jason Stackhouse had shown up at the house with a U-Haul truck and had tried to convince Sookie to let them take “a few things” that Michelle *swore* they’d been promised.

During the same “conversation,” Michelle had also tried false affection, ridicule, bullying, and guilt. But Eric had stood as a buffer, and—true to his word—Sid Matt had come through with a court order banning Michelle and Jason from entering onto the property without permission. Despite that, however, Eric had still hired two guards from a private security firm recommended by Bobby’s FBI contact in order to make sure that the house stayed secure.

Although Adele had died in the very early hours of Friday morning, her funeral could not be held until the following Thursday, January 3, due to the holidays and the fact that the town’s only funeral director was sick with the flu. Of course, Sam had been quick to offer Sookie all the time off she needed. However, Eric’s work schedule was another matter, and he had needed to scramble in order to move things back.

He sighed again as he thought about how Sookie had tried to convince him to return to Manhattan while she stayed in Bon Temps. But there was no way in hell he was going to leave her alone to bury her gran and to deal with Michelle Stackhouse!

Luckily, Eric had a great team at NP, and his current executive assistant, Clancy—whom he'd hand-selected after he realized that Ginger had been reporting information to his father out of her ignorance of the situation between them—was always on top of things. Added to that was the fact that Eric ran his division with great efficiency, so with the addition of high-speed Internet in Gran's house—which had been installed that afternoon, despite the fact that it was a Sunday—Eric had been able to set up a little office for himself, and he'd already completed all the business he'd previously planned for the Friday before. Given the fact that it was New Year's Eve the next day, there would not be much to do early in the week, but he and Sookie planned to stay through Saturday to settle Gran's affairs, and beginning Wednesday, he would need to do quite a bit of work. And Adele's old dial-up system just wouldn't have been sufficient for that.



Actually, Bobby had been the one to arrange for the high-speed Internet access—in addition to doing about a million other things. Eric had tried to give his friend a raise, though Bobby had told him to “fuck off” when he mentioned it. Eric couldn’t help but to smile a little bit as he recalled that conversation.

Meanwhile, Pam and Amelia had been helping to run interference with Appius. The official story—mentioned casually to Nora by Pam—was that Eric and one of his girlfriends were both very sick with the flu. Pam explained that Eric would be working from home until his doctor said he was no longer contagious and that the girlfriend was also staying with him.

Since Eric had rushed from Appius’s office, Sigebert or Wybert had been watching Carmichael Tower building 24-7, and Amelia was doing her part by staying over. She was actually cat-sitting a very lonely Ned, who’d been banned from Pam’s home twenty minutes into his “visit” after he’d climbed her silk drapes. Of course, Amelia was also spending quality time with Pam.

Thalia, however, was the true star of the deception. Using some equipment Bobby had gotten, Eric recorded himself calling Clancy’s cell phone the evening before; of course, Eric had feigned his best sick-voice. Working her magic, Thalia had made it seem like Eric was speaking from his office at home.

That morning, Pam and Amelia had also given a performance for Appius’s listening pleasure. They’d pretended that they were looking for a book for Eric in his office since he was too sick to get out of bed. They had talked about how Amelia was starting to feel a tad bit better and about how sweet it was of Eric to rush to her side when he’d discovered she was sick—only to fall victim to the flu himself. And—in true Pam fashion—she had made sure to snark that they’d better not infect her.

Eric had also instructed Clancy to send Andre an email explaining that Eric was ill and would likely be working from home for most—if not all—of the upcoming week. The email also conveyed Eric’s apologies for running out of the meeting. Eric explained his sudden departure by saying that he’d learned that a friend of his was ill.

The explanation for Eric’s hasty exit from the meeting was imperfect at best, but the other pieces of the story helped to corroborate it. And they were all hoping that Appius would buy the ruse. The fact that Eric had dropped everything to “rush to Amelia’s side” would be potentially problematic—as would the fact that she was staying over with him. These pieces of news would make it seem as if Eric and Amelia were closer than the “fuck buddies” they’d been portraying themselves to be, but Bobby was already trying to come up with ways to turn the situation to their advantage.

The New Year’s holiday was also convenient, given the fact that the office would be closed for the following two days. That meant that Eric would be missing only three days of work that week. He would also have less work to see to than normal, which, in turn, would mean that he’d be able to put most of his focus where it belonged: on Sookie.

He sighed. Adele had requested that her Will be read before her funeral, so Sid Matt had made arrangements for the reading of the document to occur in his office on the morning of December 31—the next day.

Eric took off his T-shirt and lounge pants and got into bed. He closed his eyes and rubbed his temples for a moment. He wished that he could spare Sookie from having to be in the same room as Michelle, but he couldn’t. Sookie had been named executrix of the Will, so she had to be there. And, unfortunately, both Michelle and Jason were named in the Will as well.

Eric heard the shower turn off and knew that Sookie would be joining him in a moment. It had been during the first shower she'd taken the morning after they arrived that he'd secured the box Adele had told him about. After only a few minutes of searching, he'd found the loose board under Adele's bed. After taking out the ring and the letter explaining its history, Eric had shown Sookie the love letters Adele had spoken about, the letters that Earl had written to her. Bobby had had no trouble making sure that they would be with Adele in her casket so that they would be buried with her.

"What are you thinking about?" Sookie asked as she climbed into bed with him. She was wearing one of Eric's T-shirts and a thick pair of socks, which he knew she'd shed once she'd been in bed for a few minutes.

Eric smiled. "Love letters. Gran suggested that it was a good idea to send them."

Sookie returned his smile and raised her hand to his cheek before leaning in for a soft kiss, which she quickly deepened.

When she pulled back, they were both a little breathless.

"If you're not ready, we don't have to," Eric said.

"I want you," Sookie replied, moving closer to him. "Gran wouldn't want me to stop living. And," she said with a twinkle in her eyes, "she'd want us to get plenty of practice for when we start making her great-grandbabies."

Eric chuckled. "Yes—she seemed to have very *definite* ideas in that regard."

"She really liked you," Sookie said quietly.

"And she really *loved* you."

Sookie sighed. "I should have been here—taking care of her. I shouldn't have," she paused, "held back so much from her for so long."

Eric cradled her cheek in his large palm. “Sookie, Gran didn’t need taking care of. Just think about what she and Mormor got up to in Sweden and then again in Manhattan. She was strong and active—quite literally until the day she died.”

“But if someone would have called the ambulance right away . . .” Sookie stopped midsentence.

“Don’t,” Eric ordered. “Even if you’d been living here, there would have been no guarantee that you would have been home when Gran had her first heart attack.” He sighed. “And she wouldn’t have wanted you to stay in Bon Temps; you know that as well as I do. She knew why you couldn’t stay here. And she loved you, Sookie; she was proud of you and the life you’ve made for yourself.”

A tear slid down Sookie’s cheek as she leaned into Eric’s chest and held on for dear life.

“What do you think she’ll do tomorrow?” she asked after a few moments of quiet.

Knowing exactly which “she” Sookie was referring to, Eric sighed. Being Appius Northman’s hated son had taught him *exactly* what Michelle Stackhouse was capable of doing.

“She’ll try to hurt you—to crush you—any way she can,” he sighed. “But you won’t let her.”

“And you’ll be there,” she said. She didn’t need to ask.

“Yes. I will,” he confirmed. “Right there next to you.”

She kissed his bare chest, even as he placed a gentle kiss on the top of her head.

“I talked to Pam earlier,” Eric said after a while. “We owe her a new sweater—as well as the drapes.”

“Ned?” Sookie asked with a smile in her voice.

“Who else? Apparently, she was trying to prevent him from climbing the Christmas tree.”

Sookie giggled. “Big mistake.”

“On Pam’s part,” he chuckled.

“You know—Ned’s going to be pissed at us when we take the tree down.”

“We’ll just remember not to wear any clothing we value that day.”

She raised herself up to look into his eyes. “Let’s practice that now.”

“Practice what?”

“The not wearing clothing part.”

He chuckled and bent down, capturing her lips with his. It wasn’t long before the few garments they had on were decorating the floor. And not long after that, they were discovering the squeaks in the old bed.

Sookie POV

Sookie knew that she was probably squeezing Eric’s hand way too hard, but she couldn’t stop herself. She looked down at her clothing: blue jeans and a gray cardigan over a light blue camisole—and her red coat, of course. Pam had selected her clothing quickly when she had packed small bags for both Eric and her. Sookie had been happy to see that most of the things packed were casual, though her black work suit was also in there. However, that was for the funeral.

Sookie had had no idea what to wear for the reading of a Will, but she’d done the best she could with what she had.

She needn't have worried. Jason showed up in an old letterman's jacket, a well-worn T-shirt, and dirty-looking jeans. And Michelle Stackhouse looked comically overdressed in her flouncy black dress and veiled black hat. Sookie wanted to tell her mother that the Will had already been written, so there was no longer a need for her to play the part of a dutiful daughter-in-law in public, but she didn't want to have any interaction with Michelle Stackhouse, so she refrained from making the comment.

Of course, avoiding a confrontation with Michelle and Jason was a pipedream, but Sookie was determined to try doing just that.

Sid Matt POV

"What's *he* doing here?" Michelle asked as soon as she saw Eric. "It should be only family!" she yelled venomously in Sookie's direction.

"Right!" Jason echoed, managing to look both confused and personally affronted at the same time.

"Mr. Northman was named in Adele's Will," Sid Matt said calmly, though his face conveyed his disapproval of Michelle's questioning Eric's presence.

Sid Matt had to hold in his sigh as he gestured toward the coffee he'd had his secretary set up on one side of the little conference room. He'd known Michelle Stackhouse her whole life—for fifty years, give or take—but he'd never been privy to the side of her that he'd seen during the past several days.

Of course, he wasn't really surprised to know that there were secrets under the veneer of the Stackhouse family. After all, he was one of the only lawyers in the region; thus, he'd learned

some pretty damned disconcerting things about his friends and neighbors over the years. No—he wasn't surprised; he was just disappointed—but mostly for Adele's and Susanna's sakes.

Sid Matt had known Adele for upwards of seventy years. He'd even been paying her courting calls for the last two of those years! But she'd never shared any indication of her problems with her daughter-in-law, and that fact made him a little sad. Of course, he could have been privy to things if he'd read over Adele's Will or the recent additions to it, but he was not in the practice of doing that sort of thing. No—unless he was asked to help in the writing of it, he was never aware of the specific contents of a client's Will until he previewed it before the official reading. And Adele's final wishes had been no different.

Sid Matt sighed. It was safe to say that—until Bobby Burnham had called him—he would have never imagined that Michelle Stackhouse was anything other than the kind Southern woman she projected herself to be. But a scrape of the surface had revealed something very ugly underneath.

Burnham had contacted Sid Matt the previous Thursday and had told him about Adele's heart attack. Truth be told, Sid Matt had been surprised that he hadn't already heard about it, given the grease with which the gossip mill in Bon Temps usually ran. And, if he would have known, he would have gone to Adele sooner—but for *personal* reasons.

However, Burnham, who had first identified himself as Susanna Stackhouse's lawyer, had requested that Sid Matt drive to the hospital in Shreveport for professional reasons.

The elderly attorney closed his eyes for a moment as he remembered his goodbye with the woman who'd been his friend and who—because of the miracle of Viagra—had also become his lover four months before. Adele had been the second woman that Sid Matt had been forced to say goodbye to well before he was ready. Julia, his wife of fifty years, had been the first.

And—although his relationship with Adele had been different—they had offered each other the companionship they’d been craving, and he’d hoped to enjoy that for years to come.

Julia had been his soul mate. But Adele had made him laugh more than any other person ever had. And—at his age—he knew of the value of laughter.

He’d loved both women, and he would continue to love them until the day he died.

Sid Matt shook his head sadly as he thought about how quickly time passed and how fleeting life was. Adele had been almost ten years his junior, though he could hardly remember a time when she wasn’t a part of his life in some way. She had been his own dear wife’s best friend. And Sid Matt’s brother, Jacob, had been Earl Stackhouse’s closest friend. Hell—Jacob and Earl had even served together in the army!

The elderly gentleman sighed. Both Julia and Jacob had been a little lost when Earl and Adele had moved to New Orleans about a quarter of a century before. Thus, Sid Matt had gone to New Orleans with his wife and/or brother many times over the years in order to visit with the Stackhouses. Of course, Sid Matt had never considered romance with Adele until both of their spouses had passed on.

After Earl’s death, Adele had moved back to Bon Temps. It had seemed natural—sweet even—when Susanna had moved in with the widow, although the teenager hadn’t yet graduated from high school. Around that time, Sid Matt had overheard Michelle Stackhouse telling some people at church that it had been difficult for her to let Susanna move out of her home, but that Adele was so lonely that it was her Christian duty to make sure her mother-in-law was well taken care of.

At the time, Sid Matt had found the mother’s sacrifice to be admirable, and he’d been happy for it for Adele’s sake. Adele certainly hadn’t said or done anything to indicate that she

had trouble with her son's widow. The only hint he'd ever gotten was years before—when Julia had made a comment that Earl and Adele were estranged from their son Corbett. But Sid Matt hadn't asked his wife any questions about that; for better or worse, it had never really been the lawyer's personality to want to delve too far into the personal lives of his friends and acquaintances. Perhaps that was because his profession forced him into those lives too often as it was. And the ever intuitive Adele had probably sensed that about him.

Indeed, except when she was in the throes of passion—at which time she would curse like a sailor—Adele had always been the picture of Southern politeness and restraint. Sid Matt smiled a little.

Of course, Adele could gossip with the best of them. But—thinking back—Sid Matt realized that Adele was someone who preferred gossiping about the good things in life, like who was having a new grandbaby or who was taking a vacation. And she'd never shared negative gossip about her own kin—at least not around him.

It was safe to say that—despite his friendships with Adele and Earl—Sid Matt had never really looked closely at the rest of the Stackhouses, even after Adele had moved back—even after his own romantic interest in her was piqued.

Sid Matt was ashamed to admit that some of that lack of looking had to do with Susanna herself. Everyone in town had always talked about how the girl was “different.” Apparently, she had become deaf during her early childhood, but she could still talk, which was an oddity in and of itself. But she could also “listen” since she'd learned how to read lips. At times, Sid Matt had noticed the way that young Susanna would stare at everyone and everything in a room, her eyes always trained on people's lips even if they were far away from her. It had been disconcerting to Sid Matt when he would glance around a room only to find the little girl's eyes

trained on his mouth as if she were studying it. Most people in town thought the girl to be “strange,” perhaps even “touched in the head.” In truth, he’d felt a little sorry for Michelle Stackhouse, having to deal with such a difficult situation.

And he’d also made a concerted effort to stay out of Susanna’s sightline.

Truth be told, when Susanna had gone off to college, the whole town—including himself—had let out a collective sigh of relief. No longer would they have to monitor their words in public places when “crazy Susan” was in the area.

Since Adele’s death, Sid Matt had spent his nights tossing and turning as he thought about the woman with whom he’d been in a relationship—albeit a “secret” one. The elderly pair had made the decision to keep their own romantic association quiet for “decorum’s” sake. It had been only four years since Sid Matt had lost his wife, and, given the fact that Julia and Adele had remained so close over the years, it hadn’t seemed “proper” to Adele to publicize the fact that she’d “hooked up” with her deceased best friend’s widower. Given that secret, Sid Matt couldn’t help but to wonder what other mysteries Adele had been holding onto—all for the sake of decorum.

Sid Matt had also been thinking about what things might have been like for little Susanna. For the first time, he’d let himself dwell on the little girl in his memories and not on his own discomfort or the things that others in the town had said about her. And when he did linger on that child, he realized what had made him uncomfortable around her in the first place. It was not her lip reading; it was her eyes when she did it. Though they studied, they always seemed devoid of emotion. He’d compared them to the cold eyes of a reptile, and he’d looked away from them. What he *should* have done was to ask “why” her eyes were that way.

He now had a strong feeling that those eyes were so empty because of the veiled woman now crying crocodile tears as her son poured her a cup of coffee.

At the Shreveport hospital—away from the people she knew and wanted to impress—Michelle Stackhouse hadn't seemed to be the same woman he thought he knew at all! Jason also had acted differently. Oh—Sid Matt had known that Jason Stackhouse had grown up to be a bit arrogant and uncouth, and the young man was *certainly* a womanizer, but the lawyer had figured that was a stage of youth. And at the church, at the local fishing spots, or in the cafés and the bar of the little town, the boy was respectful and pleasant enough to the older men of Bon Temps.

But with the strangers at the hospital, Michelle and Jason had behaved differently—*very* differently. As Sid Matt arrived at the ICU waiting room, he could tell that Michelle and Jason had been arguing with the hospital administrator over whether Susanna should be allowed to see Adele—just as Burnham had said they would be doing. Sid Matt had been shocked by their venom—*until* they'd seen him in the room. After that, they'd become more restrained, even claiming that they were doing what they thought was best for Adele—that they were trying to *protect* the old woman from her scheming granddaughter.

To Sid Matt, that dog just didn't hunt!

In private, Adele had actually talked about Susanna quite a bit, and when she did, it was always with great love and pride in her voice. Sid Matt knew that Adele's granddaughter had graduated from college and gotten a Master's degree in English. He knew that she had a good job in New York City and that she was doing well there. In fact, Adele had visited Sookie in New York over Thanksgiving. The previous summer, she'd even gone on a vacation to Sweden with the girl and her beau. And none of those things had indicated that there had been a rift between Adele and the girl she'd called Sookie.

But Michelle and Jason had been insisting that the stress over a falling-out with Sookie had been the cause of Adele's heart attack, and the hospital administrator had been forced to take that possibility into account. However, Halleigh Robinson, whom Michelle and Jason hadn't recognized as Andy Bellefleur's girlfriend—probably since she'd not been living in Bon Temps for long—had attested that Adele had been asking for her granddaughter and had even given Halleigh a phone number for her.

Luckily, Adele had more fully awoken from her sedative by the time Sid Matt arrived. And she was full of the spirit she was known for—despite her weakness. After talking to Halleigh and asking her to call another granddaughter—Hadley—Adele had spoken to both the hospital administrator and Sid Matt. What she'd requested of them was surprising to the lawyer, but he could tell that Adele was as lucid as ever.

First, she'd told them that she didn't want Michelle Stackhouse anywhere near her—lest she try to pull the damned plug—*or* her property—lest she try to take everything that wasn't nailed down and pry up the things that were. And she'd asked to see Sookie and “her young man” as soon as they got there. She also asked that her Will be read *before* her funeral and that Sid Matt look out for Sookie—to make sure she wasn't bothered—while she was in Bon Temps.

After that, Kenya Jones had stepped out of the room so that Adele and he could say a private goodbye. That goodbye had been difficult for Sid Matt, and he'd wanted to stay with Adele, but the feisty woman—true to her stubborn ways—had insisted that he go home. Knowing how being there for his Julia's death had almost killed him, she'd told him that she wanted him to remember her alive and well. She'd had her trademark sparkle in her eye as she'd ordered him to remember what they'd been doing just a week before that—on the kitchen table.

Sid Matt had obeyed Adele's directive. And—in his grief—he'd been grateful that he could slip into “lawyer mode” when honoring her other final requests of him. Even after hearing Adele bar Michelle from her room, however, Sid Matt had been shocked to witness the display between Michelle, Jason, and a clearly distraught Susanna when he and Ms. Jones returned to the waiting room.

Of course, he'd been even more shocked when Burnham had been right about Michelle and Jason showing up at Adele's property the very night she died. It didn't take a genius to understand that they were there—in *two* trucks no less—to take valuables from the home. But when they'd returned the next day with a U-Haul, Sid Matt had wanted to get a bullhorn and shout out from the town square that Michelle Stackhouse was as two-faced as it got! Sadly, he couldn't do that, given the nature of his work.

But he'd really, *really* wanted to.

Trying to separate himself from his own grief at losing Adele, Sid Matt studied the countenances of the people in his conference room, even as he gestured for Judy, his assistant, to set up the tape recorder. He had decided that he was going to record the session just in case someone—namely Michelle—decided to contest the Will. Sid Matt gazed first at Jason Stackhouse, who had a look of eagerness on his face. The lawyer had seen that look many a time; it was the expression of someone who was not grieving at all. Jason Stackhouse was only there to see what he was getting.

Michelle Stackhouse—despite her dramatic mourning weeds—had no less eager eyes than her son, though she tried to hide that fact with an affected frown and the occasional dabbing of her eyes with a lace handkerchief.

No. The only true grief in the room emanated from Susanna and her man. The young woman's eyes were red and swollen, most likely from several days' worth of intermittent crying. Mr. Northman, who was holding Susanna to him like he was her scaffold, looked no less distraught, though his expression was a mixture of grief and concern for the woman next to him. Sid Matt had seen Eric's look before too—though sadly not as often as Jason's or Michelle's. It was the look of an individual who was saddened by the death of someone—but mostly because of the sorrow that had been left behind in someone else. It was one of the more unselfish reactions to death that Sid Matt had witnessed over the years, and the elderly attorney immediately liked the young man even more than he had at the hospital.

“Why don't we all have a seat,” Sid Matt invited. It didn't escape his notice that Mr. Northman waited until Michelle and Jason had chosen their seats before leading Susanna as far away from them as possible and putting himself between them as well. He also noticed the gentle look exchanged between the couple as Eric helped her take off her coat and then pulled out her seat for her. Eric was offering her all of his strength for what was to come, and Susanna was thanking him with her eyes.

Sid Matt smiled a little as he sat down. At his age, he had come to understand that it was often the simplest things that were the most profound and the most permanent. And he knew that looks like the one he had witnessed indicated that the evident love between the couple would endure.

He began. “Now, I've asked Judy, my secretary, to sit in so that these proceedings can be recorded.”

“Why is that necessary, Sid Matt?” Michelle asked, trying to fake congeniality.

Now that he knew her act, Sid Matt didn't have any trouble deciphering it. However, he answered as pleasantly as he could. "It's just to make sure that everything is kept above board, Michelle. It's important that Adele's final wishes are followed—don't you agree?"

Michelle, though clearly displeased, offered a curt nod and dabbed her clearly-dry eyes. "Of course. Anything for dear, *dear* Adele."

Sid Matt looked over at Susanna. "My dear, I know this is an odd question to ask, but what would you like for me to call you? Your name is written as 'Susanna' on the legal documents, but some people in town used to call you 'Susan.' However, your grandmother always called you 'Sookie,' and so does your young man."

"Whatever's fine," the young woman responded somewhat timidly.

Michelle scoffed.

At that, Sookie sat up a little straighter and gave Michelle a look of challenge. "Actually, my friends call me Sookie, Mr. Lancaster. I'd like for you to call me that."

He smiled kindly at her even as he tried to ignore the subtle snorts of derision from the other end of the table.

"Then you must call me Sid Matt, my dear," he said. "Alright," he continued at a louder volume so that it was clear that he was addressing all those present. "This shouldn't take too long. I'll read the Will and the codicil. Then Adele instructed me to read a letter."

Sid Matt pushed a box of Kleenex over toward Sookie but then noticed that Eric had already handed her a handkerchief. He smiled at the young man and gave him a nod.

Indeed—he liked this Eric Northman very much.

Chapter 12: Bequest

Sookie was squeezing his hand tightly, but Eric didn't care about any discomfort he was experiencing. He knew that she needed to hold onto him with all her might at that moment, and he intended to make sure she didn't lose her grip, so he moved his chair so that it was flush with hers and put one of his long arms around her shoulders.

He saw Sookie biting her lip signaling her nervousness as Sid Matt began to speak again: "The Will begins with Adele Stackhouse's declaration of sound mind. The document is dated March 12, 2009 and replaced an earlier Will. I was Adele's attorney of record and hereby testify to her mental acuity. The witnesses of the Will were Mrs. Maxine Fortenberry and Mr. Bud Dearborn. The property is divided according to person, and I will read aloud Adele's words on the division if that is amenable to you all."

"A-men-able?" Jason asked. "Is that fancy lawyer talk?"

Sid Matt sighed but spoke with patience. "I'm just asking if that's okay with y'all, Jason."

Jason nodded his agreement, as did the others in the room.

Sid Matt glanced at Sookie and then looked back at Jason. He read: "To my grandson Jason Stackhouse, I leave the house at 125 Mulberry Road. I also leave \$5,000.00 to cover the property taxes for a couple of years, which will help Jason adapt to home ownership. In addition, Jason is to have his grandfather's wedding ring and stopwatch, both of which the executrix can pass along to him through Sid Matt Lancaster."

"Who's the executrix?" Michelle half-asked and half-demanded.

Sid Matt sighed. "Sookie," he said evenly.

Michelle scoffed. "It should have been me—as Adele's daughter-in-law."

Sid Matt gave Michelle a look that thankfully shut her up for a moment and then continued reading. “To Michelle Stackhouse: I leave \$1,000 on the condition that the directions in the letter accompanying this document are followed.”

“That’s all? That’s all I get? After everything I did for her?” Michelle asked in an indignant and demanding tone.

“Michelle,” Sid Matt said sternly. “Please refrain from outbursts.”

Michelle sank back into her seat and seethed.

“To Susanna Stackhouse, my beloved granddaughter,” Sid Matt continued reading, “I leave the remainder of my estate, including the house and property on Hummingbird Lane and all other monies and property. I also nominate Susanna Stackhouse as the executrix of this Will. I hope that I will not carry much debt when I pass, and I have already paid for my funerary and burial costs; however, I leave it up to Susanna to take care of all remaining debt that I leave behind.”

“How much money?” Michelle demanded in Sookie’s direction. “How much did she swindle that poor woman for?”

“Why ain’t I gettin’ half? Five thousand and that house ain’t half,” Jason piped in.

Sid Matt sighed again, this time more noticeably. “There is a codicil to the Will, which I will read now. It was completed just last August.”

“What the hell’s a con-di-cin-al?” Jason asked.

“It’s an extra part,” Sid Matt explained.

“Does that mean I get extra stuff?” Jason inquired.

Sid Matt ignored Jason’s question and soldiered on. “The codicil doesn’t change Jason’s inheritance and the money set aside for Michelle. However, it does include a few more

provisions; Adele made it up after she'd been reunited with her other granddaughter, Hadley.” He took a breath and then read. “To Hadley Delahoussaye-Savoy and Remy Savoy, I leave \$5,000. To Hunter Savoy, I leave \$5,000, which I direct Susanna to place into a trust for him so it will be ready for his college—should he choose to go. If he does not, the fund is to be released to him when he turns 21.”

“A little kid gets more than me!” Michelle cried out, obviously losing control of the false front she'd been trying to display for Sid Matt. “But I was married to her son and had her grandkids!”

Sid Matt gave her a stern look. “Unfortunately, Hadley and Remy were not able to attend today due to Remy's having to work; however, I've told them that they have been named in the Will. And I will contact Hadley with the specifics after this meeting.” He turned to look at Sookie and Eric. “And they told me to tell you that they'll be at the funeral, Sookie—if you wish to speak to them about the trust. And Hadley asked me to give you her phone number too since she didn't get to see you the other night.”

Sookie nodded.

“There are just a few more gifts that Adele indicated in her codicil.” He read, “To Mrs. Elsa Larsson: I give my enduring thanks. I am so grateful that I found a new best friend—a sister—before I died. I also leave her my prized cookbooks under the condition that she not share my secrets with anyone else except for Sookie who may copy anything she wishes.”

Eric and Sookie both chuckled a little, even as Sookie wiped away a tear.

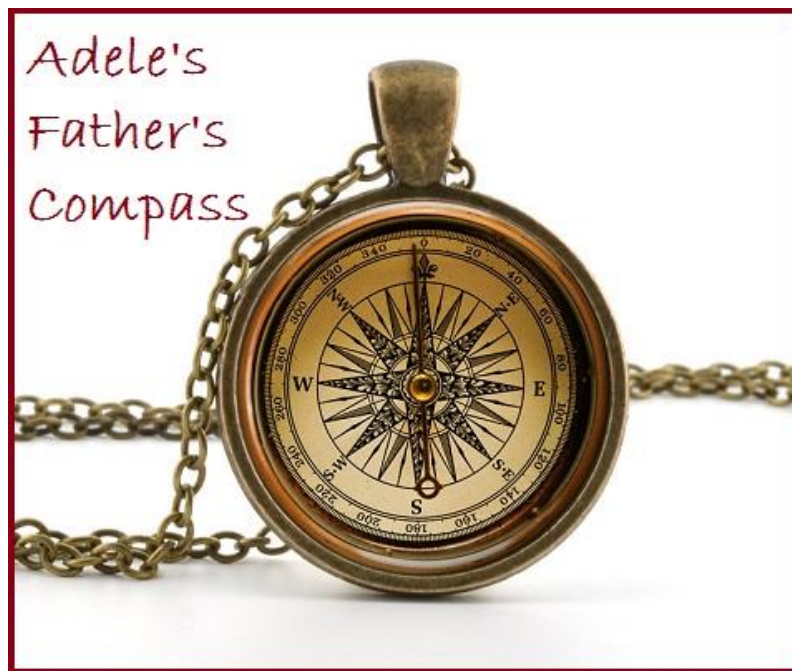
“Who the fuck's this Elsa person?” Jason demanded.

“My grandmother,” Eric said stiffly.

Michelle sighed dramatically as if she were being physically hurt by Adele’s will, but Sid Matt went on. “To Eric Northman, I leave my father’s compass and these words from Edmund Spenser’s *The Faerie Queene*:

What though the sea with waves continual
Doe eat the earth? It is no more at all,
Ne is the earth the less, or loseth ought:
For whatsoever from one place doth fall
Is with the tide unto another brought:
For there is nothing lost, that may be found, if sought.”

[from Book V canto ii verse 39]



Eric sniffled noticeably.

Sid Matt looked at the young man, whose eyes were now shining with unshed tears.

“Adele included a personal message with the poem.” He read, “Eric, you once quoted this stanza to me when we were talking about my love of *The Fairie Queene*. You said you’d had to

memorize it for a class, but I don't want you to just have it in your head, Eric. I want you to find these words in your heart and live them with my dearest Sookie."

There was silence in the room for a few moments. Jason and Michelle both seemed confused by the words of the poem, while Sookie had turned to bury her face in Eric's chest. In turn, his face was in her hair. Sid Matt just let everyone be for a moment.

Michelle was the one who broke the quiet of the room. "Is that all?" she asked, no longer holding in her disdain for Eric and Sookie.

"There's a letter," Sid Matt reported even as he opened a sealed envelope, "but I'm not sure what's in it."

"Well—read it quick," Michelle said sharply and haughtily. "Jason and I need to call our attorney. This Will isn't fair to him! He's Adele's oldest grandson—for God's sake! So *he* should get her estate—not some prodigal who abandoned her family!"

Sid Matt sighed. "I assure you—Adele's Will is iron clad, and only a spouse or a child can contest a Will in the state of Louisiana. Since neither one of you is that, you have no case."

Michelle practically growled. "I won't see *her* gettin' a damned penny!" she seethed toward Sookie.

"Then you'll have to close your eyes," Sid Matt said firmly, "because—even if you did have the right to contest the Will—no judge in the state would find Adele's bequeaths to be inequitable."

"But Grandma was loaded!" Jason cried. "She and Grandpa lived in a mansion in New Orleans."

Sid Matt shook his head and decided to set Michelle and Jason straight so that things might be a little easier for Sookie. Maybe talking about the size of the estate wasn't proper, but it seemed right.

“Actually,” the attorney stated, “most of the money from the sale of Adele and Earl’s *modest* New Orleans home was used to finish paying off the Mulberry Street house that you and your mother did *not* pay for, Jason! The rest of the money was used to make some necessary repairs on the farmhouse when Adele moved into it. And once Adele’s final medical bills are paid and the monetary gifts to you two and Hadley’s family are given out, the majority of Adele’s liquid property will have been gone through. Thus, Sookie will not end up with any more money than Jason.”

“But she gets the farmhouse and all that property!” Michelle complained.

“And Jason gets a property that’s worth almost as much and that’s easier to keep up,” Sid Matt sighed. “Now—let me read Mrs. Stackhouse’s letter so that we can adjourn these proceedings.”

Michelle sighed loudly, but gestured for him to continue, even as she went to light up a cigarette.

“Not in here,” Eric said gruffly, his voice oozing authority. Eric didn’t mind the smoke, but he knew that Sookie would be bothered by it.

Michelle glared at him, but shoved the cigarette back into the pack nonetheless.

Sid Matt cleared his throat, “The letter was updated when Adele added the codicil.” He sat up a little straighter as he began reading.

To all present,

If you are hearing this letter, then it means that I've passed on. I can't help but to foresee that there may be discord because of the way I've split things up, but—to be honest—I don't rightly care. I've lived long enough to know my own mind, and I feel that I've done things fairly.

Jason, as my grandson, I love you very much, but you have let your mother mold you into a man who puts his own needs above others. I've tried to spend time with you over the years, but you've never shown much interest in having a true relationship with me. Heck—Sookie lives in New York, and I have spent more time in the last years with her than with you. That said—you have so much potential, Jason, and I hope that one day you will find your own place in this world. I'm leaving you the home you grew up in, and I hope that—someday—you will meet a good match and have a family of your own.

Sookie, I want to thank you for being such a joy to me. The moment you came to live with me, my existence brightened. I just wish I had known what kind of environment you were growing up in so that I could have helped you earlier. Earl and I should have never allowed something so petty as money to come between us and our son and grandchildren. That is my greatest regret, but my greatest pride is in you. In this last year, I have seen you blossom into the woman I always knew you could be—strong and brave. I pray that you and your Eric will have a wonderful life together, but even if things don't work out with him, I know that you can be happy. Never forget how much you are treasured and how worthy you are of being loved.”

Sid Matt paused for a moment to give Sookie a chance to wipe her eyes. “Do you need a minute?” he asked her gently.

“It’s okay,” Sookie said her voice a mixture of grief and strength.

Sid Matt smiled and continued:

Hadley, I was so happy I got the privilege to reconnect with you and meet your man and your baby boy. I’m leaving you what I can to help you and Remy out, and I’m setting up something to help Hunter with his future. I’m so proud of you for turning your life around and becoming such a fine mother.

The last thing I have to say regards Michelle Stackhouse. You know I have no love-lost for you. You blackmailed me into leaving the house on Mulberry Street to Jason (which I would have done anyway, you heartless wench). You also extorted me out of \$10,000 when I wanted to take Sookie and provide her with a loving home. You did everything in your power to separate Corbett from me and his father. And, worst of all, you abused Sookie! Therefore, you might wonder why I’ve left you \$1,000 more when it could be better spent for my grandchildren and great-grandchild. I’m afraid to say that I’m a selfish woman, and I don’t want you anywhere near my funeral or my burial, so I’m paying for your absence. If you darken either of those events with your noxious presence, then the \$1,000 set aside for you will be forfeit to the estate.”

“She can’t do that!” Michelle screeched.

“She can,” Sid Matt said matter-of-factly. “This letter was notarized and was written by her own hand. I recognize the handwriting. Plus, the Will indicates that there is a stipulation. This is it.”

Michelle stood up and stormed out of the room, yelling about contacting her lawyers.

Jason glared at Sookie. “You were always trouble to this family. Just look at how you’ve upset Momma! If you had an ounce of decency, you’d give up the farmhouse! It shoulda gone to Daddy and now me! But Daddy’s dead ‘cause of bein’ driven into the ground by you! Why don’t you just get the fuck outta town before you do more damage?” He shook his head. “You’re officially dead to me! And I hope I never have to see you again,” he finished as he marched out after his mother.

Sookie let out a sob at her brother’s words and then buried herself into Eric’s waiting arms. Sid Matt motioned for his secretary to pause the recording until Sookie was once more composed.

“Is there more to the letter?” Eric asked the lawyer after Sookie’s tears had stopped.

Sid Matt nodded and read.

To all my grandchildren, I pray that happiness finds you and sticks to you like glue. I love you all, and I’ll be waiting to see you again—but I hope that won’t be for a long while.”

Sid Matt sighed. “That’s all.”

Eric nodded and then rose with Sookie. “I’m going to take Sookie back to Gran’s house now.”

Sid Matt stood and handed Eric an envelope. “Here’s the key to Adele’s safety deposit box. In it, you’ll find all the possessions mentioned in the Will, as well as the deeds to various properties,” he said quietly. “The phone number on the envelope belongs to Janet Sinclair. She’s the bank manager and is expecting y’all to call. She said she’d help y’all out whenever you need—regardless of the holiday.”

Eric reached out to shake Sid Matt's hand, giving him a look of both gratefulness and respect as he did so.

Sid Matt caught Sookie's eye. "I'm sorry, Sookie. I didn't know what was happening to you when you were a kid; I didn't make the effort to find out." He sighed. "I should have. No one in this town knows what Michelle Stackhouse did—what she is," he said with regret.

Sookie sighed and gave him a little smile. "The important thing is that Michelle is no longer in my life." She reached out and took the attorney's hand. "I appreciate everything you did for Gran, Sid Matt." She smiled a little wider. "Gran mentioned to me that you'd been visiting her quite a bit lately. And I know that she enjoyed your company."

Sid Matt pulled on the collar of his suit shirt and checked to make sure that the recording had been stopped. Both Sookie and Eric chuckled when they noticed the elderly man blushing.

"Um—well," Sid Matt began. "Your grandmother and I . . ."

Sookie patted his hand comfortingly. "You were a good friend and companion to Gran, and she sounded happier over the phone during the last few months than she ever had as long as I knew her."

"She—uh—loved your grandfather very much," Sid Matt said.

"Of course she did," Sookie responded sincerely. "But Gran had a lot of love to give all the way around. I know that better than anyone."

Sid Matt nodded. "Miss Adele was a lovely woman—one of the finest I ever met," he said, his voice cracking with emotion.

Sookie nodded. "We'll see you at the funeral Sid Matt," she said, as she patted his arm one last time before taking Eric's hand and leading them out of the office.

Sookie sighed tiredly as she sank into the back seat of the car and then curled into Eric's side—at least as much as her seatbelt would allow.

“Thanks for waiting, Bobby,” she said to the man who had insisted upon driving them to Sid Matt's office. Sookie suspected that it was just so Eric would be able to keep ahold of her. And she appreciated Bobby's gesture more than she'd ever be able to express.

“Don't worry about it, Sookie,” he said kindly. “Did everything go okay?”

Eric gave Bobby a look that indicated that he shouldn't ask, but Sookie answered, “My mother and my brother were unimaginable assholes. But my mother won't be coming to Gran's funeral—not if she wants the bribe money Gran left her, so that's something at least.” Sookie smirked a little. “Gran really was a pistol, Bobby. She left Michelle \$1,000, but only on the condition that she not attend the funeral or burial.” She chuckled. “So Gran wins either way. If she doesn't show, then Gran doesn't have to deal with her—not even from heaven. And if she does show, Gran gets the satisfaction of knowing that she won't get that money.”

Bobby chuckled. “Your gran was my kind of lady!”

Sookie smiled and looked up at Eric. “Can we go by the bank on the way to Gran's and see if it's open?”

He quirked an eyebrow in question. “You want to do that now?”

“I want to go ahead and get a sense of the money situation and clean out the safety deposit box today. I know that the bank will be closed tomorrow since it's New Year's Day, and I want to make some decisions before the funeral.” She sighed. “I wanna get home—to Manhattan—just as soon as we can after the funeral.”

“Sure,” Eric said kissing her forehead. “And if it's not open, we'll call Miss Sinclair. Bobby, do you know where the bank in town is?”

Eric caught Bobby's eyes rolling in the rearview mirror. "Eric, Bon Temps has exactly two stop lights and two major streets. I think I can find it."

"I wouldn't want you to strain yourself," Eric deadpanned, eliciting a giggle and a kiss from Sookie.

Bobby grumbled something about successfully navigating one of the largest metropolises in the world on a daily basis, but gave Sookie a wink in the rearview as they traveled the two blocks that separated Sid Matt Lancaster's office from the bank.

Chapter 13: Unexpected Guest

Given the taxing nature of the Will reading, Eric didn't plan anything too elaborate for New Year's Eve—though it was the first New Year's he and Sookie would be spending together.

He had found some nice steaks at the supermarket the day before, and one thing that he had learned how to cook well was a steak. And given the relatively mild temperatures in Louisiana, even during winter, he didn't mind grilling outside either. Of course, Sookie had insisted that Bobby come for dinner. He'd been staying in the town's only motel since Sookie didn't feel right about anyone staying in Gran's room, and up until that afternoon, the guestroom had been cluttered with things that Sookie needed to go through.

Bobby flicked the ashes of his cigarette away from where the grill had been set up.

"You got a New Year's resolution?" Eric asked his friend as he flipped the steaks.

"Other than to stop smoking these?" Bobby asked with a chuckle.

Eric laughed a little. "It *would* be nice to have you around longer. And the thought of losing you to something like lung cancer does *not* make me feel all happy inside."

Bobby shrugged. "You know me. I'll probably become a vampire long before that happens."

Eric chuckled a little harder. "You are well on your way."

"What about you?" Bobby asked. "Resolutions?"

Eric exhaled deeply. "Just Sookie—keeping her as happy as I can."

Bobby nodded, knowing that would keep his friend happy too.

"Is everything arranged for Thursday?" Eric asked.

"Yeah," Bobby responded. "The funeral director here is a bit of a creep, but he seems competent enough now that he's back to work after his bout with the flu. He's going to make

sure Adele is at the church three hours before the funeral on Thursday, and I've already arranged with the preacher that you and Sookie can go in well before the rest of the congregation is allowed in."

Eric nodded. "And the other things?"

Bobby took a drag of his cigarette. "Adele had most everything arranged already. Casket, plot, service, songs, readings, contact list—everything."

"And the flowers? Have we been able to get Gran's favorites?"

Bobby sighed. "It was difficult, but I have some arrangements of white lilies coming in from Nashville. And—from New York—Pam's rustling up some more. Hell the whole church will probably be full of them by the time she's done."

Eric smiled a little. "I know Pam wants to be here for Gran."

"But she also understands that her leaving suddenly would make Appius even more suspicious. The flowers are her way of taking care of Gran—and you and Sookie—from New York."

"Yeah," Eric replied sadly. He sighed and continued angrily. "Fucking Appius! The fucking king of separations! Pam should be able to be here without him being an issue." He raked his hand through his hair. "Between Sweden and Thanksgiving, she spent a lot of time with Gran."

"She understands, Eric."

"She shouldn't have to."

Bobby nodded and the two were silent for a few minutes.

“Quite a few flower arrangements have been brought by townspeople too,” Bobby reported as he lit another cigarette. “Mike Spenser’s assistant told me that the viewing area was quite full today—of both well-wishers and flowers.”

Eric nodded in acknowledgment. “And the guard? He was there during the entire viewing?”

“Yes. But neither Michelle nor Jason visited Adele’s body at the funeral home today, and there’s no viewing tomorrow because of the holiday.”

Eric nodded again. “They’ll probably try to steal the goddamned wedding band from her finger if they show up!” he vented as he poked the steak to check its doneness.

“Yeah. Those two are a fucking piece of work.” Bobby smirked. “Appius and Michelle would have been a match made in hell had they’d ever met.”

Eric cringed. “Let’s hope they never do.”

“Unless it’s in hell where they meet,” Bobby observed as he flicked his cigarette. They were silent for a few more minutes.

“What time should I make myself scarce tonight? I know you’ll want alone time with Sook,” Bobby said knowingly.

Eric chuckled. “Now?”

“Sookie would have your hide *and* my hide if I left without dinner.”

“She’ll want you to stay at least until midnight. And she cleared out the guestroom earlier, so she’s gonna ask you to stay the night too. Just get drunk enough to pass out so that I can convince her to have some fun with me later,” Eric said with a smirk.

“Well—I *did* buy a lot of liquor,” Bobby said.

“Sounds good,” Eric said with a laugh.

It was just after 7:00 p.m. The dinner dishes had been cleared away, and Bobby was explaining the rules of *Monopoly* to Eric and Sookie when there was a knock on the door. Eric and Bobby immediately looked at each other nervously. The guards that Eric had hired were at entrance of the driveway, and they hadn't called to inform them of any visitors.

Bobby was on his cellphone to the guards almost before the second knock was heard. And Eric was on his feet, instinctively putting Sookie behind his body as they both looked at the door.

"Did anyone pass you?" Bobby asked in a low tone once the guard had answered his call. He shook his head to indicate to Eric and Sookie that the knocker had not come past the guards.

"Get down here," Bobby said into the phone.

Tentatively, Bobby headed to the front door, just as there was another knock. Bobby looked out the peep hole and then asked in a loud voice. "Who's there?"

The visitor yelled out a name that caused Sookie to turn ghostly pale.

"Bill Compton."



Eric looked at Sookie, who was looking at the door in shock.

“Anything you want, min älskade,” he said to her in a loud whisper. “We’ll do anything you want.”

Sookie looked up at Eric and realized that he truly did mean *anything*. If she asked him and Bobby to kick Bill’s ass, they would do it. If she asked them to kill him, they would do it. Hell—if she asked them to try to rid Bill of his annoyingly old-fashioned Southern accent, they would likely provide the elocution lessons themselves.

She smiled and looked at Bobby, who also seemed ready to obey any order she gave. She couldn’t help but to relax—despite the unwelcome visitor.

“You know I love you—both of you—right?”

Eric was a bit taken aback.

“In *radically* different ways—of course,” Sookie corrected with a chuckle as she looked up at Eric once more.

Bobby smiled a lopsided grin. “Thank God for that. I don’t need the Viking after me.”

“The Viking?” Sookie asked.

Eric rolled his eyes. “It’s what he used to call me when we were younger.”

“It fits,” Bobby returned, shrugging his shoulders. “By the time he was twelve, he was taller than me.”

“Susanna?” called Bill from outside the door, breaking the exchange between the three friends.

“What do you want?” Eric asked Sookie.

Sookie took a deep breath. “I’ll talk to him. I want to know why he’s here.”

“Alone?” Eric asked with some trepidation.

“Hell no!” Sookie exclaimed. “I mean—if you’ll stay with me. . . .”

Eric cut her off by taking her into his arms. “Hell yes!” he smiled.

Ten minutes earlier

As Bill Compton traipsed over the rough terrain between the house he’d rented and the newly-deceased Adele Stackhouse’s residence, he regretted wearing his newly-shined shoes.

However, he’d wanted to look his best when he talked to Susanna and tried to convince her that none of what had happened between them in the past had been his fault. It had all been the fault of his boss and then Lorena.

Susanna would just have to understand that!

Truly, two years earlier, Bill had been ready to make Susanna’s life better—*a lot* better than it had been. Moreover, if his plan hadn’t been sabotaged by Lorena, Susanna would have ended up as an indispensable asset to the U.S. government: a patriot.

And—most importantly—she would have already been *his*: his asset, his wife.

Susanna Stackhouse had started off as an assignment—pure and simple. She’d been an assignment in what Bill did best: the recruitment of potentially “difficult” assets. And the scope of that assignment had come with the potential of a huge promotion for the ambitious agent.

The government was always looking for people with “gifts” that went beyond the norm, and the FBI in particular had been actively seeking out people like Susanna post-9/11.

Discovering a useable lip reader with the accuracy and subtlety of Susanna Stackhouse was harder than it might seem. Oh—adults could be trained to read lips, and many even became

quite proficient, just as an adult might learn any new language. However, it was often the nuances of language—the whispers or the asides or the mumbles—that held the greatest secrets.

Many deaf people were also skilled at reading lips, but they didn't function in the same way as the hearing did, and once their disability was found out, then the possibility of their being able to read lips was recognized. Strangely enough, "hearing" people weren't suspected of having the skill.

No. Someone like Susanna didn't come around often. And she could read anything—including foreign languages she didn't know—with almost 100% accuracy. And—even when she didn't understand a word—she could produce it phonetically. Bill knew that firsthand from the various "tests" he'd conducted when they were together.

The Bureau had found out about Susanna from her mother, Michelle Stackhouse. Apparently, Susanna's mother had read an article about a lip-reader bringing down a huge terrorist cell in the Middle East, and she'd seen the opportunity to serve her country and to make a little cash for her family at the same time.

Sadly, Susanna—like many teens—had rebelled against her mother's influence.

Susanna Stackhouse's preliminary evaluation had labeled her as "a promising prospect," though "potential recruitment difficulties" were also noted. That's why someone with Bill's skills was called in. Bill had initially traveled to Bon Temps to meet with Michelle and to further assess Susanna's skill-set. And, after meeting Michelle, Bill couldn't fault the woman's patriotism or her pragmatism.

Bill's assessment had led him to believe that Susanna was a rare talent indeed! But she would need to be handled with kid-gloves. In fact—after an especially fruitful conversation with

Michelle—he'd determined that seduction should be his chief strategy in Susanna's recruitment. And his superiors had green-lit his proposal.

Bill had hypothesized that since Susanna had been deaf for so long, she'd developed anti-social tendencies, which wouldn't do at all for the kind of work the Bureau wanted her to do. By observing Susanna from afar, Bill had confirmed his theory before he even approached her. She was excellent at almost "disappearing" and staying out of sight, but to be a good spy required fitting in as well. And she didn't fit in—not at all!

However, after their first encounter—Bill's first test of her skill—he became convinced that he could train her, given time. And—by playing the knight in shining armor and risking himself to "save" her from her "attackers," who were actually men on the Bureau's payroll—Bill had quickly found his way into her life.

Soon after that, Bill had become her boyfriend. At first, being an attentive paramour had been only a job to him. God knows, he'd done worse things to recruit people. Yes—he'd felt a little guilty about taking her virginity and getting her to fall in love with him. But—as he saw it—he had also been doing her a favor. After all, she'd been well into her 20s and had no other men looking to date her. He recognized almost immediately that he was the best prospect that she would likely ever have, and he was resolved to go through with an engagement and a marriage because of her potential value to the Bureau.

But somewhere along the line, he'd started to truly care for Susanna, and the day she'd claimed that she never wanted to see him again was the day that Bill realized that he just might love her. A few weeks after that, he became certain that he did.

Of course, Susanna's finding out the truth from Lorena, his on-and-off-again lover and fellow FBI agent, wasn't helpful to Bill's cause at all! He'd tried to talk to Susanna after that

horrible day when Lorena had “visited” her, but she wouldn’t listen to him! And then—quite suddenly—she’d moved.

As an FBI agent, it had been easy enough for Bill to track down Susanna in Brooklyn. But—truth be told—Bill had been rewrapped into Lorena’s web after Susanna left. He’d sought comfort after he’d realized that his caring for Susanna wasn’t all an act, and Lorena had been there. She’d “seemed” loving; she’d “seemed” contrite. However—like it always was between him and Lorena—their passion quickly flared into destructiveness.

Bill’s superior at the Bureau, Nan Flanagan, hadn’t been happy with his losing a promising asset, but—like any operation that involved personal entanglements—there was always a risk of failure. And, thankfully, Nan had recognized that the fault was mostly Lorena’s.

Yes—it had been Lorena who had ruined his long-term plans with Susanna. Bill sighed. Had Lorena just stayed away, he would be married to Susanna even now!

The plan had been simple—logical and beneficial to all. Bill needed to help Susanna reach the point that she was—for lack of a better word—“normal” enough to operate in social settings. After that, another agent would have approached Susanna, and Bill—as her husband—would have encouraged her to serve her country. Later, he would have “become” an agent too—“just so that he could be with her.” Indeed, it had been a perfect plan, and Susanna would have been kept in the dark about how she’d been recruited. She would have remained docile and complacent—agreeable.

However, a month before his Bureau-approved plan called for him to officially propose to Susanna, Lorena had come to town. And—being the seductress that she was—she’d quickly manipulated Bill into seeking out her bed.

It was after a week or two with Lorena that Bill had made an error. Agents were rarely able to confide in others about their assignments, but since Lorena had the same clearance level as he did, Bill had been able to vent about his assignment to procure Susanna Stackhouse. And Lorena, always the temptress, had compelled him to tell her about the whole ten-year plan that Bill had developed for Susanna: seduce, marry, procure, stabilize. And then, after those ten years—if he so chose—Bill could initiate a divorce from Susanna as long as the asset was deemed “sound” enough by Bureau psychiatrists to deal with the mental strain of the break-up as well as to continue her work.

It wasn't even that Bill had been unhappy about the arrangement. His cover—working on his doctorate degree in computer engineering—actually offered him a stimulating diversion from his usual research work. And Susanna—at least in the small doses that his plan required for him to be with her—had been perfectly tolerable, a nice change from the norm.

Plus, after being with Lorena, it had been nice to have an innocent in his bed. Someone like Susanna better-suited Bill's more conservative notions about sex, and after a little guidance and instruction from him, she'd been able to offer him a good release a few times a week and a relationship from which he knew exactly what to expect. Yes. In so many ways, Susanna had been—would be—the ideal woman for him.

On the other hand, Lorena was much more adventurous sexually—even dominant at times. And she'd tried to bring that dominance into all aspects of their previous relationship. Bill had found Lorena's aggressive tendencies to be both irresistible and off-putting, and he hated his own ambivalence toward her.

In fact, Bill had hoped that his assignment with Susanna—as well as his personal relationship with the young woman—would help him to resist the pull Lorena had on him.

Sadly, it had not.

That was how he'd come to find himself exhausted and in bed with his former lover exactly one month before he was to take Susanna to an expensive French restaurant and propose to her. The Bureau had even agreed to foot the bill so that the restaurant would be clear of people too; Bill had known that that gesture would have made all the difference in the world to the introvert. The plan was then to elope and honeymoon in Vermont where the Bureau had a nice cabin that had been used to hide assets in the past. There would be privacy and quiet—just the things that Susanna craved. And there, Bill had planned to get the ball rolling by introducing her to the notion that there were a lot of things that she might do with her unique skill.

But Bill had found himself once more entangled with Lorena—almost obsessively so. And—if anything—confiding in her about his assignment with Susanna seemed to make things better between Lorena and himself. Bill was able to vent his dissatisfactions with the assignment's duration. And Lorena had been quite understanding, having just finished a long-term assignment of her own. They had commiserated together, and Lorena had seemed to have calmed down a little during the year they'd been apart.

Oh—she was still quite adventurous sexually, but Bill actually found himself craving Lorena's appetites to offset the somewhat monotonous physical repertoire he'd established with Susanna. He found that the two women balanced each other out in a way that he liked. Indeed, for those few blissful weeks when he'd been seeing both women, his life had been perfect. He liked being able to keep the parts of his own personality separate from one another too. With Lorena he could be straightforward and let loose a little. With Susanna, he could be more serious and conservative.

And—given the fact that Lorena had six months of vacation, a reward after the project she'd just completed—Bill had looked forward to keeping things as they were for a while.

However, Lorena began to show signs of displeasure when Bill had to attend to his weekly visits with Susanna. She even convinced him to cancel a few—to tell Susanna that he had projects due in his courses and needed time to finish them.

But Bill couldn't cancel every meeting he had with Susanna; after all, being with her was his job. And he quickly realized that he missed the young woman's unquestioning devotion to him when he didn't see her. Susanna was steady and completely predictable, and—because of that—she was a balm to the erratic moodiness of Lorena.

Bill's fatal error had come when he'd confessed to Lorena that part of him cared for Susanna Stackhouse. Lorena had casually asked Bill what he would do if Susanna accidentally got pregnant. Bill had been doubling up on the birth control methods—using both condoms and asking Susanna to get on the pill before they had sex—but he found himself not completely opposed to the idea of having Susanna as the mother of his child. Even if they eventually divorced, he could continue to play a part in a child's life. Plus, being a “family man” was an excellent cover for any agent.

When he told Lorena his thoughts on the matter, she'd flown off the handle, yelling that they were destined to be with each other and that she wouldn't allow Susanna to get in their way. The encounter had had a little bit too much “crazy” in it for Bill's tastes, so he'd left Lorena to stew for a while—and to hopefully pull herself back together.

Only—she didn't just stew. She'd gone to visit Susanna.

Bill looked up at the old home of Adele Stackhouse as he approached. He'd rented the house across the way from the Stackhouse farm a few other times before. The first was when he came to Bon Temps to check out Michelle Stackhouse's story.

He smiled a little at the memory of that first visit. He'd found Michelle to be extremely accommodating to him, and she'd given him a lot of background on the development of Susanna's ability. He'd admired the mother's desire to make sure that Susanna "mainstreamed" with normal kids. Lip-reading had allowed her to do just that, and Michelle had apparently worked long hours with Susanna during her childhood in order to hone the skill.

Then—when Susanna was older and her grieving and newly-widowed grandmother had moved back to town—Michelle had sacrificed time with her own daughter so that the elderly Adele Stackhouse would not be alone. Adele, who apparently had quite a bit of money from the sale of a home in New Orleans and her husband's estate, had taken Susanna to a specialist, and—much to Michelle's surprise—a cure was found for her daughter's deafness. Michelle had been overjoyed.

Michelle had explained that Susanna was severely withdrawn—as was to be expected, given the situation. She'd also told Bill that the only reason why she hadn't broached the idea of joining the FBI with her daughter was that she knew Susanna wouldn't agree to it—at least not without a "tender" kind of persuasion. The twenty thousand dollars Michelle had settled for in exchange for all the information she'd given Bill had been quite modest compared to what the Bureau would have been willing to pay her; however, the money guaranteed Michelle Stackhouse's silence. She signed an agreement not to speak of her dealings with Bill or the FBI to anyone—especially Susanna.

Bill had returned to Bon Temps and the isolated old residence across the cemetery from Adele Stackhouse's home two other times in order to get more information on Susanna. Plus, he'd struck up a dalliance with Michelle, who—though fifteen years older than he—was a pleasant lover. Of course, once he'd begun sleeping with Susanna, he'd halted things with Michelle—for propriety's sake.

Bill sighed. He was extremely happy that Susanna had never found out about that affair. Susanna had been rather reticent about sharing personal information with him, though he'd discovered that her relationship with her mother was, indeed, somewhat strained. Bill figured that was because of the way Michelle had pushed her daughter to perfect her lip-reading skill so that she could function better in society. He knew that children often resented their parents for driving them to excel in some area—whether it be in academics or athletics. Bill had similar resentment toward his own father, whose expectations for his son had seemed insurmountable at times. Susanna's attitude toward her mother had simply been brought on by an unusual trigger.

Bill tripped over a loose piece of gravel and slowed his pace. Once again, he felt his bitterness toward Lorena rise.

In usual Lorena fashion, she'd left him to "pursue other opportunities" not long after Susanna had left Mississippi—not long *after* Bill had covered for her with the Bureau.

Bill had kept Lorena's name out of his official report explaining why the pursuit of Susanna as an asset should be terminated; he'd simply stated that Susanna was too anti-social to ever make a good agent. He'd also conveyed that Susanna had several "tells," which just wouldn't do for the kind of work they had in mind for her. It wasn't a total lie. After all, Susanna *did* tend to alert people to her "otherness" by her general demeanor and by staring a little too long for comfort. And though he'd tried to guide her in the art of subtlety after she'd

“told” him of her lip-reading, she hadn’t yet progressed to the point that she seemed “normal” yet.

After Nan Flanagan had accepted his recommendation that Susanna was not a viable candidate for recruitment after all, Bill had been given his next assignment: researching a young man named Barry in Dallas—another lip-reader. Lorena had followed him to Dallas for a time, but after she left, Bill had begun to realize that he’d had some genuine affection for Susanna, affection that still hadn’t gone away.

Unfortunately, the timing had never been right for Bill to try to make amends with Susanna. Though Barry had been a much easier target to acquire, he’d been less skilled than Susanna, so Bill had needed to oversee his training. And, given that and a few more visits from Lorena over the previous two years, Bill simply hadn’t had the opportunity to get from Dallas to New York for an adequate amount of time to woo Susanna properly. However, Bill was not one to lament the past. He figured that time was his ally. By now, Susanna would have had time to process what Lorena had told her, and he was confident that she’d already forgiven him. He smiled a little as he thought of Susanna pining away for him as she tried to maneuver through Manhattan like a scared mouse.

He would offer to save her from that life.

Yes. If she hadn’t done so already, Susanna would soon come to see that Bill had had no choice but to do what he’d been ordered to do by the Bureau. And once he explained that he really did care for her—that he had only been trying to do what was best for her—he was confident that she would accept him back into his life.

And Michelle Stackhouse had given him the perfect opportunity to reconnect with her! Despite what had happened with Lorena, Michelle had always been sympathetic to Bill’s cause

and had promised that she would do what she could to get her daughter to listen to reason about him—all the while pretending that she had no idea that Bill was with the FBI. Sadly, Michelle had been unsuccessful; however, when she'd called him earlier that day, Bill had definitely been given reason to hope.

After quickly securing his lodging, he'd cancelled his New Year's Eve date and had driven from Dallas to Bon Temps without any hesitation at all.

Susanna's grandmother's death was a tragedy, but it was a fortuitous one for Bill. And, according to Michelle, Susanna would be in Bon Temps until at least the weekend. Given the fact that it was only Monday night, that would give him several days to try to convince her to give him another chance. Michelle had warned Bill that Susanna had some boyfriend from New York with her. However, Michelle was concerned that this man, Eric Northman, was abusing her daughter, and she'd begged Bill to swoop in and save the day once again.

Bill intended to do just that!

After a little research, Bill couldn't help but to share Michelle's concern. He'd texted Michelle a picture of the man he feared would be the "Eric Northman" that Michelle had been referring to, and she'd confirmed his suspicions. Bill had known for a while that Susanna was working at Northman Publishing, and apparently, she'd fallen in with Eric Northman, the heir apparent to the publishing empire.

Bill's first feeling had been anger that Susanna had moved on to someone else.

However, once he'd thought through the matter rationally, Bill began to understand what must have happened. Northman was well-known for being a womanizer. And—in Bill's experience—it was not uncommon for powerful men to be abusive; after all, they figured that their power could shield them from any domestic crimes they committed. Susanna would have

been easily manipulated by such a man. And—even if Northman wasn't physically abusing Susanna—he was way out of her league! And he would break her heart.

Bill was determined to stop that from happening.

Armed with evidence proving Northman's man-whore ways, Bill planned to swoop in and help Susanna to see that Northman was all wrong for her—that he was just using her. He figured that flashing his badge and giving Northman some empty threats would be enough to make the wealthy prick run back to New York. His kind were always quick to cut their losses at the first sign of trouble. And that would leave Bill to help Susanna pick up the pieces of both a failed relationship and her grandmother's death.

Indeed, Bill was confident that it would be easy enough to convince Susanna that he was the best option available for her. And—even better—he would be able to be completely honest with her now. He smiled. If he was lucky, he'd be in Susanna's bed before the end of the night. And, if he was very lucky, he might even convince her that using her skill for the government was her civic duty. Then they could go on to do what they had been meant to do. He would be her handler and her husband. And she would be his asset and his wife.

He could already taste the promotion.

He climbed the steps of the front porch and knocked confidently, ready to project authority if Eric Northman answered. However, no one answered right away, so he knocked a bit louder.

When a man asked who it was, Bill made sure that he answered in a strong, deep voice. "Bill Compton," he said assertively.

Bill could hear muffled voices and light footsteps from inside the house.

“Susanna?” he called out after a few moments, making sure that his voice oozed with the kind of concern he wanted to project to her.

He heard more muffled voices, though he couldn’t make out what was being said.

A moment or two later, the door was opened by a dark-haired man who looked to be in his mid-thirties. It was *not* Eric Northman.

Chapter 14: The Best Medicine

Bobby POV

Bobby appraised Bill Compton in ten seconds flat. The man in front of him was full of hubris and projected confidence, but Bobby speculated that Bill's posturing was hiding weakness of character. He really didn't know much about Bill Compton; he'd heard the name only once before from Eric. Bill Compton was Sookie's ex, and Eric had told Bobby that something had happened between them which had rattled Sookie for a while. And that information alone was enough to make Bobby dislike the man before him.

"Come in, Mr. Compton," Bobby said, keeping his own expression blank and his tone even. "Sookie has decided to speak to you."

Bill POV

Bill was thrown off his game—to say the least—by the hawk-like eyes of the man who had opened the door to Adele Stackhouse's home. He knew that it wasn't Susanna's brother; he'd seen Jason Stackhouse before. No—if Bill hadn't known better, he would have pegged the man before him as a Bureau man. He had the look of someone who'd been an agent for years.

"And you are?" Bill asked as he walked over the threshold.

"A friend of Sookie's," the man stated, his voice remaining even and indifferent.

"You mean Susanna?" Bill asked, somewhat confused.

"Hello, Bill," Susanna said from the door leading toward the dining room. "I never thought I'd see you again."

Bill immediately turned his gaze from Bobby to Susanna.

“Susanna!” he said excitedly as he took a step toward the woman who’d invaded his thoughts so many times during the two years they’d been apart. She was even more beautiful than he remembered. The first thing that he noticed was that there was a light in her eyes that hadn’t been there before, and she was a little slimmer, though her curves were still apparent. He would have hardened at the anticipation of bedding her if a tower of a man wasn’t standing slightly in front of her: Eric Northman.

Immediately, Bill allowed concern to take over his features. “How are you, darling? When I heard about your grandmother, I came immediately to make sure that you were okay,” he emoted, making sure that his Southern accent was at its most prominent.

“How did you learn of Adele’s passing?” Northman spoke up, his eyes boring into Bill even more than the other man’s had.

Bill took another step forward and reached out his hand toward Eric Northman. “Hello,” he said, “I’m William Compton. I’m a friend of Susanna’s. And you are?”

Northman took a small step forward, though his left hand stayed locked with Susanna’s.

“Eric Northman,” he said, looking down at Bill’s proffered hand but not taking it. “And I’m someone who knows that *no* friend of Sookie’s calls her Susanna.”

Sookie POV

Hearing Bill’s voice outside of Gran’s door had startled Sookie and brought back a lot of unpleasant memories, especially of Lorena coming over to her house and telling her the truth about Bill and his job as a “talent scout” for the FBI.

Sookie had felt crushed at the time—betrayed and alone and empty. Hell! When Bill had rushed to her house after he’d learned of Lorena’s visit, she’d almost taken him back—

despite his deception. But she was a different woman now. And even if Eric hadn't been by her side, she knew that she would never fall for the likes of Bill again.

And that thought made her feel good about herself and the progress she'd made.

Still, Sookie had been afraid that she would feel vulnerable upon seeing Bill—that she'd feel sad or angry or hurt—but, in truth, she felt very little emotion. And it wasn't as if she was numb either. She knew the feeling of numbness well; it had been the emotion that had dominated her life—until she'd met Eric. No—she was not feeling that kind of empty blankness as she looked at Bill.

She wouldn't even use the term “ambivalent” to describe her feelings, for they were not mixed in any sense of the word. In fact, she felt indifferent towards Bill—curious about why he was there, but apathetic. After all the pain she'd gone through because of him in the past, she was pleased to find that she simply didn't care about him or their past anymore.

She'd moved on and was the better for that movement.

And that was when she knew for sure that she'd never really loved Bill Compton at all. Once upon a time, she'd truly believed that he was the best that the world would ever offer her, and that's why she'd been willing to settle for him. And the Bill Compton she'd been “presented with” hadn't been a horrible choice either. He'd offered her a sense of stability and some companionship, and she'd been so insecure—so isolated—that his paltry offerings had seemed sufficient. But they weren't.

The man staring at her with fake empathy—as if she were some kind of trophy to be won—hadn't even bothered to learn what she liked to be called. And he was supposed to be some kind of fucking spy! By contrast, Eric had discovered her name preference after just a few minutes. And that tiny detail told the whole story in Sookie's eyes. She tightened her grip on

Eric's hand—not because she was nervous or afraid to speak with Bill, but because she loved Eric and wanted to hold him just that much tighter.

He looked down at her and winked a little. Somehow he seemed to be able to read everything that was going through her head. He could read the “real” *her* because he too was so “real.”

On the other hand, the Bill she'd met three years before had been only a lie. And the one before her now seemed to be just as much of a lie. But—frankly—she didn't care. It didn't seem worth her time to even think about someone like Bill Compton. She smiled a little. She couldn't wait to tell Claudine of her revelations!

“Susanna,” Bill said, ignoring Eric's words about her preference of names. “I was hoping to be able to speak with you—in private. I'd like to convey my sympathies about your grandmother and to talk to you—about us,” he finished softly.

For perhaps the first time, Sookie studied Bill's eyes—instead of his lips—when he spoke to her. Before the night of her second Northman Publishing party—when Eric's eyes had drawn her in so fully—Sookie had generally focused on people's lips as they spoke. It was a habit from when she'd had to do so in order to know what they were saying. When she knew Bill, looking into the eyes of a speaker would have been secondary to her—distracting even—for Sookie had been programmed by Michelle to get every word exactly right. Thus, she'd not had the luxury of honing the skill of matching words to eyes.

Until Eric.

After Sookie's confidence had built up a little, she and Claudine had begun to work on Sookie's eye contact with others. And she'd learned that there was so much to pick up from people's eyes. Though things had always been different with Eric in that Sookie often couldn't

tear her gaze from his, she'd been slowly making progress in maintaining eye contact with others too.

She couldn't help but to wonder if what she now saw in Bill's eyes had always been there. His dark, dodgy orbs conveyed that he had a plan that he was following, a checklist ticking off in his head. They told her that he wanted to try to convince her to believe something—to believe a lie that he thought was the truth. They bespoke of false grief for Gran—false concern for her.

They were eyes that concealed as much as they revealed.

They were eyes that she didn't trust.

“There will be no private talks between you and Sookie, Mr. Compton,” Eric said with a tone that brooked no argument.

Sookie kept her eyes on Bill, who seemed momentarily taken aback and intimidated by what Sookie knew was “Eric's no-nonsense work tone.” She couldn't help but to chuckle a little, and she saw Eric's lip rise up into a smirk after she did.

Bill pretended to be unfazed. “Surely, Susanna can make up her *own* mind about whom she wants to see,” he said stiffly—defiantly.

“I already did,” Sookie spoke up, “*before* you were let in.”

Bill looked at her in question. “Susanna?”

Sookie sighed. “I go by Sookie, Bill. I've never liked Susan or Sue or Susanna. I like Sookie.”

“Sookeh?” Bill tried, his old-fashioned accent not quite handling the nickname.

Sookie sighed again, thinking that it might be better if he called her what he wanted if he was just going to butcher her name.

“Bill,” she said, “I have to admit that I’m curious about why you are here and how you knew about Gran, so I’m willing to talk to you, but Eric is *not* going anywhere.”

Sookie was able to catch both the uncertainty in Bill’s eye and the sneer of his lips.

“Can we get you a drink?” Bobby asked, walking around Bill and going toward the kitchen.

“Thanks, Bobby,” Sookie said. “I forgot my manners. Would you like a drink, Bill? We have beer and iced tea and, of course, water.”

Bill POV

“A beer would be great,” Bill said, keeping his eyes on Susanna—or Sookie if that’s what she wanted to be called now. Bill was excellent at adaptation. It was a part of his job, after all.

“Would you bring it to the living room?” Sookie asked the enigmatic man who had let him in. Bill was glad that he now had a name for him: Bobby.

Bobby patted Susanna’s shoulder as Eric gestured toward the living room. Bill turned and walked that way.

“The house looks different,” Bill commented, hoping to be able to throw Eric Northman off of his game by demonstrating his past knowledge of the dwelling—and, therefore, his history with Susanna. He also hoped to remind Susanna of the time they’d spent together in the house. They’d never made love there—for propriety’s sake—but they had shared a visit with her grandmother. Given the fact that the woman was now dead, that kind of memory wouldn’t be possible for Northman to make with Susanna.

“Yes,” Susanna answered in a low tone. “I’ve been going through everything, figuring out what to save and what to give away.”

Bill turned back toward Northman and Susanna, who had followed him into the room. “Of course,” he said sympathetically. “I’d be happy to help you with that—now that I’m here.”

“*Where* exactly are you staying?” Northman asked. “I didn’t hear a car pull up.”

“I’m staying right across the cemetery,” Bill said to Susanna, hoping that she would see just how much he wanted to be close to her—to help her.

“In that old mansion?” Susanna asked with interest. “Gran said that place was part of a time-share or something.”

“I’ve rented it so that I can be here—for *you*,” Bill emphasized.

Susanna smirked, an expression that Bill had never seen on her face before. In fact, she radiated a different kind of energy than he’d seen from her in the past. She was obviously more confident and sure of herself—perhaps because of the man who was taking a seat beside her on the couch.

Bill sighed. Part of him hated that he was going to have to crush Sookie’s new-found spirit by telling her the truth about Eric Northman, but he knew that he would be there for her throughout the fallout. And he’d help her to regain that confidence; only this time, *he’d* be its cause.

Bobby entered the living room and handed him an unopened bottle of beer. Bill noticed that it wasn’t a twist-off.

“Bobby,” Susanna said with a slight, chastising laugh.

Bobby raised his eyebrow innocently. “Yes?”

“Bobby,” Susanna said again, this time more firmly.

“Fine,” Bobby chuckled, grabbing the beer and quickly opening it before handing it back to Bill.

“Thank you,” Bill said formally, trying not to glare at the rude man.

Ignoring Bill, Bobby looked from Susanna and Northman. “I’ll be outside,” he said in a gentle tone before kissing Susanna on the cheek. “*Right* outside if you need me.”

“Thanks, Bobby,” Sookie responded. She shook her head a little as she watched the man leave. Northman leaned down and kissed her forehead lightly. Bill cringed slightly at the tenderness he saw between them, but then quickly restored his concerned countenance before Susanna and her current paramour turned to look at him.

“Why are you here, Bill? How did you learn about Gran’s death?” Susanna re-asked her earlier questions after the front door had closed behind the mysterious Bobby.

Bill had managed to avoid those questions twice, and he’d hoped that they wouldn’t be asked again. Looking at Susanna now, he determined that he wouldn’t be able to avoid them. He also decided that *partial* truth was best given the situation.

“I learned about your dear grandmother’s death only today,” Bill said. “Your mother phoned me. She is concerned about you. And so am I.”

Northman spoke gruffly, “Michelle Stackhouse contacted you?”

Bill looked at Northman. “She knows how much I still care for Sookeh,” he said with sincerity.

“How did she know where you were?” Susanna asked, her voice now a little shaky.

Bill celebrated inside. The emotion in Sookie’s tone indicated that she was beginning to understand just how much he still loved her—just how much he’d do in order to retain a connection to her.

Bill decided to take advantage of that opening. “We’ve kept in touch out of mutual concern for you,” he relayed.

She sighed. “And where does the FBI keep you these days?” Susanna asked.

Bill smiled as he saw that Eric flinched a little at the mention of the FBI. That likely meant that Susanna hadn’t told her current beau about their previous relationship. He enjoyed having the upper hand over the New York businessman.

“Dallas,” Bill responded.

“So you’ve found a new target to seduce?” Susanna asked, her tone suddenly cold.

It was Bill’s turn to flinch. His Susanna would have never been so astringent with her words. Immediately, he hated Northman for his bad influence. But—then again—her tone may also have indicated jealousy; Bill took that as a good sign.

“Susanna—I mean, Sookkeh—I swear that it’s not like that. I told my superiors that I would *never* again allow myself to be put into a situation like what happened to us. I know that what I did was wrong—*so* wrong—but I was following orders. I didn’t expect to fall in love with you. That’s what I came to tell you, Sookkeh. I love you. The two years we’ve spent apart has been torture for me. I want us to try again—to build a life together.”

On his drive from Dallas, Bill had planned for many possible reactions from Susanna once he declared his love for her.

Laughter had not been one of them.

Eric POV

Eric was—just barely—controlling his desire to beat the man sitting across from Sookie and him into the ground. When Bill had said that Michelle Stackhouse had been the one to tell him about Gran, Eric had wanted to send Bobby across town so that he could throttle Sookie’s DNA donor. And when Compton told Sookie that he loved her—with a cloying accent that

made her name sound like “Sookeh”—Eric started thinking of places where he could bury the asshole’s body.

Eric wasn’t—not in any way, shape, or form—jealous of the man before him. From what he knew about Sookie and Bill, which admittedly wasn’t much, their relationship had been based on deceit and manipulation. And Bill was obviously trying to manipulate Sookie’s feelings again. That fact alone was enough to make Eric want to snap Bill’s neck. What stopped him was Sookie’s laughter.

“Oh God!” Sookie laughed out, leaning against Eric’s side and squeezing his knee as if she could hardly contain herself. “Bill, you can’t be serious!”

“I assure you, Sookeh, I am,” came Bill’s somewhat affronted reply. Eric couldn’t blame him for being upset. It wasn’t every day that a declaration of love was met with laughter. Of course, Eric was also somewhat envious of Bill on that account. Bill seemed to have no problem proclaiming his love for Sookie, even though his pronouncement was clearly suspect. For his own part, Eric was still afraid to tell Sookie that he loved her out loud—afraid that it would somehow bring the wrath of Appius Northman onto them.

Beside him, Sookie finally got her laughter under control. “You know what? Since you can’t manage to say my name properly, why don’t you just call me Susanna?” she said with a snicker.

Eric could feel himself literally radiating with pride for Sookie. Not only was she standing up for herself, but she also seemed like she was ready to let Bill have it. And Eric was content to sit back and enjoy the “Sookie Show.”

Bill, however, seemed a bit clueless, and though his shoulders had slumped, he soldiered on. “Susanna, what we had—what we could have again—is too precious to waste.”

“Precious?” Sookie asked incredulously even as she shook her head. “Bill, let me remind you of some facts that you have obviously decided don’t matter. Our *whole* relationship was based on a lie. *Everything* you ever told me was a lie, and—worst of all—you never had any intention of telling me the truth! In fact, I would have never known anything if your unhinged lover, Lorena, hadn’t sought me out. But you know what? I’m extremely thankful that she did. If she hadn’t, I wouldn’t have the life I have right now.” She sat up a little straighter—a little prouder. “I wouldn’t be the person I am now.”

Eric smiled a little and bent over to brush a kiss onto Sookie’s forehead. She looked at him, and as soon as their eyes met, Eric could see the pride that Sookie now had in herself. She’d never been more beautiful to him. Unable to help himself, he kissed her forehead again.

Bill interrupted the tender moment between them with his truly hideous accent. “Sookeh—Susanna, I know that I hurt you in the past, and I’m willing to spend the rest of our lives making that up to you if I have to. I just want the chance to prove myself to you, sweetheart. But,” he glared at Eric, “even if you can’t forgive me, you need to know that the man you are with now is *not* who you think he is.”

Sookie suddenly radiated anger as she squeezed Eric’s hand. “And who is he, Bill?” she demanded, her tone now icy.

“When Michelle told me whom you were with, I looked into his background,” Bill said, his voice oozing concern that Eric could tell was fake. Again, Eric wanted to throttle Bill, but he knew that it would be more satisfying to watch him dig his own grave.

“Why would you do that?” Sookie asked.

“Because I still love you. Because I want to protect you from the likes of him. Because you deserve to know the truth about him.”

Chapter 15: Just

“And what truth did you discover about me?” Eric asked with mirth in his voice.

Bill leveled a glare at him. “That you are a womanizer of the worst variety! That you *never* stay with a woman long and that you will break Sookie’s heart.”

“Likely more than three hundred and fifty,” Sookie said, looking straight at Bill.

“Huh?” Bill grunted.

“Probably closer to three hundred,” Eric corrected, picking up on what she was referring to immediately.

“It’s still gross,” she said, looking up at him with a grin.

“Are you saying that I am lucky *it* didn’t fall off,” Eric smiled back at her.

“I’m saying that we’re *both* lucky it didn’t fall off.”

“What are you talking about?” Bill asked with frustration.

“The number of people I had sex with,” Eric responded, “*before* Sookie.” He leaned over and kissed her lightly on the lips. “She believes it is gross that I had sex with so many, and—in retrospect—I must admit that I agree with her. Oh—and we are both incredibly thankful that my cock didn’t fall off,” he smirked.

“Very thankful,” Sookie intoned under her breath.

“What about *after* Susanna?” Bill asked Eric, his eyes narrowing.

“There is no after Sookie,” Eric said to the woman next to him more than to Bill.

Sookie smiled at him before turning a frown toward Bill. “Why would you come here when I’m grieving for Gran and then tell me things that you thought would cause a rift between Eric and me?”

Obviously uncomfortable, Bill shifted a little in his seat.

“Oh,” Sookie said, as realization flooded her features, “you believed that Eric had what? Traveled with me all the way to Bon Temps just so that he could seduce me into his bed? Trust me—if he’d wanted a casual tryst with me, it would have ended months ago.” She shook her head disapprovingly. “Shame on you, Bill Compton. Shame on you for everything you’re ever done in my regard. Shame on you for coming here and trying to use my grief in order to manipulate me into letting you back into my life.”

“Susanna, I would never . . . ,” Bill started.

“Yes. Yes—you would,” Sookie interrupted. “You just did!” She sighed. “You know—the sad thing is that I think that you really do believe that you love me, but I’m not the person you knew, Bill. I’m not afraid to live anymore.” She sighed again. “Looking back, I realize that you wanted me to stay afraid of everyone else but you; that way, I would be dependent upon you. And for that alone, I *should* despise you, Bill. But I don’t have the desire to feel anything for you. The truth is that you are a stranger to me, just as I’m a stranger to you now. And—you know what? I think things should stay that way.”

“Susanna,” Bill said in a strangled tone, “you can’t mean this. You need to stop listening to Northman. I’ve seen his kind before; he will do anything to get what he wants.”

“You’re right about that,” Eric seethed. “But that doesn’t even compare to what I would do to *keep* what I want, and I intend to keep Sookie, Mr. Compton. I intend to keep her safe from the likes of you.”

Bill grunted angrily. “You think that you are so much better than I am? I could use my influence to chew you up and spit you out,” he threatened, leaning forward aggressively.

From Bill’s posturing, Eric recognized immediately that the other man wanted a fight; moreover, he wanted Eric to start that fight—probably so that Sookie’s pity would be with him.

However, Bill was wrong about that hypothesis. Eric knew that he could beat Bill to a bloody pulp and then have Sookie in his arms in the next second, but he also knew that Bill wasn't worth the effort.

"Your mother was right to be concerned about you, darling," Bill said, trying another tactic with Sookie.

It was *not* an effective one.

Sookie shook her head. "You seem awfully chummy with my mother, Bill."

For a moment, Bill looked uncomfortable in his seat—though he quickly schooled his features. It wasn't quick enough, however. Eric had seen the guilt in his eyes.

"You've slept with Michelle Stackhouse," Eric stated with a mixture of certainty and incredulity.

The almost constipated look on Bill's face confirmed Eric's suspicion.

"When?" Sookie demanded. "Was it while we were together?"

"No," Bill said in an agonized and pleading tone. "It was before I'd even met you. I stopped things as soon as you and I began getting serious."

Sookie cringed a little. "Ew!" she said with a shiver before leveling an arctic stare at Bill. "You and I were *never* serious. I was an assignment to you."

"Not in the end," Bill vowed. "I grew to love you—deeply."

"What *you* felt in the end doesn't matter," Sookie said evenly.

"How did you know Michelle Stackhouse *before* you met Sookie?" Eric asked tensely, even as pieces began clicking together in his mind.

"That's classified," Bill spat out, his jaw sticking out stubbornly.

Eric was on his feet and had Bill firmly in his grasp within seconds. The shorter man was on his toes as Eric pushed him roughly into the wall with his forearm under his throat.

Eric had moved so quickly and purposefully that Sookie gasped in his wake.

“Un-classify it! Now!” Eric ordered.

Hearing the commotion, Bobby was in the room in the next second. “Should I start digging the grave?” he intoned when he saw that Eric already had Bill well in hand.

“You’ll go down for this,” Bill choked out. “Assaulting a federal officer will land you in prison for years.”

“Bill, *you* are the one assaulting Eric,” Sookie said, rising to her feet. “Bobby and I can both see that. You came over here without an invitation. And *you* are the trained FBI agent in this scenario. You came after me when I turned down your proposal that we reunite, and when Eric tried to stop you, you attacked him.”

“No you don’t, Bill,” Eric said as the man he was holding tried to reach into his jacket pocket. “And—just so you know—it’s not there anymore,” he mocked, even as he showed Bill that he had already taken his revolver from his pocket. Bobby approached and took the weapon from Eric.

“Standard issue,” Bobby assessed.

“Tell me about Michelle Stackhouse,” Eric ordered as he pushed his forearm into Bill’s chest a little harder.

“She contacted the Bureau about Susanna’s ability,” Bill relayed, finally realizing that his life might depend upon him providing answers.

“Goddammit!” Sookie exclaimed. “*She*’s the reason you came for me?”

Immediately, Eric let Bill down and went over to embrace Sookie. Bobby still held the gun, though wasn't pointing it at Bill.

"You're under arrest," Bill said as he tried to regain his composure.

Eric rolled his eyes at the clueless man. "If I had been planning to hurt you, you would be feeling a lot more than a sore throat. I was just looking for the truth. Sookie deserves that, you son of a bitch, and I knew that you wouldn't offer it unless you felt threatened."

Bill looked confused.

Eric filled in the gaps for him. "Michelle Stackhouse is and always has been an abusive parent. In fact, she's a sadistic bitch! This morning—when she learned that Adele had barred her from the funeral and made Sookie executrix of her Will—Michelle was so angry that she decided to call in someone she thought would hurt Sookie. That someone is you!" He shook his head. "She figured that your showing up would remind Sookie of all the pain you'd caused her."

"What?" Bill asked, still obviously oblivious.

"Did Michelle get a finder's fee for telling the FBI about a valuable potential asset? Other than your *personal* attentions—that is?" Eric scoffed. "I'll bet every single cent I have that she was paid for her information about Sookie, even as she tried to convince you that she just wanted what was best for her daughter. And you fell for her story hook, line, and sinker—I'd imagine. And then you slept with her!" Eric said with disgust.

"Not very ethical," Bobby observed with a chuckle. "Or sanitary—I'd imagine. Though the 'talent scouts' of the FBI aren't known for their ethics—or hygiene."

Sookie sat back on the couch with Eric right next to her. She looked up at Bill. "You came to me the first time armed with all kinds of information about me. You manipulated me in order to try to get ahold of a skill that I would have never developed had my mother taken me to

any doctor worth his salt. But she didn't, so I lived a life of both physical and mental pain—a life in which I had no hope or happiness until Gran saved me. I even confided some things to you—told you that Michelle had mistreated me. But you *never* believed me—did you?”

Bill looked taken aback. “I thought you were referring to how she pushed you to improve your lip-reading skills so that you could fit in.”

“Bill,” Sookie said, sitting up a little straighter, “my mother called you here for one of two reasons. Either she just wanted to hurt me, or she hoped that you would succeed in drawing me to you so that she could manipulate me through you. But neither one of those things is going to happen. Your presence hasn't hurt me because you aren't the person whom I thought I loved so long ago. That person never existed. And there's no way in hell that I'd ever let you into my life again!”

Eric looked at Bill with sharp eyes. “I take it that you came here tonight with the purpose of trying to get Sookie back by telling her all about your undying love for her and about my whorish ways. I take it that you also hoped to convince Sookie that your vision of her future—the Bureau's vision—was best. I'm sure that you expected to find a *Susanna* Stackhouse here—a woman who was grieving and broken and aching for anything you chose to give.” His voice was angry. “And I suspect that you hoped to convince her that she could do no better than you.”

Bill looked down at his feet, clearly discomfited by Eric's spot-on assessment.

“If *that* was your only business here, then you should go,” Sookie said in a quiet, though firm voice. “And if you ever really cared anything about me, you will never listen to another word my mother says and you won't try to contact me again—whether it be for professional or personal matters.”

The room was silent for a moment. Bill, who was still standing by the wall that Eric had held him against, looked defeated.

“I just want to love you, Susanna,” he said in an agonized tone.

Sookie shook her head. “You might not be a bad person, Bill. Heck—I imagine in your line of work, you have to justify things to yourself so that you can live with yourself. But even if you did love me, there is no ‘just’ about what you want. You *just* want a woman who is meek and grateful for the *just* meager things you give. You *just* want a woman willing to look the other way while you sleep with someone else. And you *just* want a trophy to present to your superiors. I may have been ‘stunted’ or ‘unfinished’—as you once labeled me in your reports—but I’m not *just* the girl who left Mississippi two years ago.” She took a deep breath. “The Susanna Stackhouse you wanted to find here just doesn’t exist anymore. And I—for one—am glad about that!”

“Amen,” Bobby said under his breath, even as Eric squeezed her hand.

“You’ll just have to look elsewhere for what you want, Bill,” Sookie finished.

Eric smiled. He was proud of the woman next to him—so damned proud it ached! He was proud that she’d chosen him. He couldn’t imagine loving her more, but then she added words that sent his heart soaring into the stratosphere. “I could never be yours, Bill. I could never be yours because I was born to be Eric’s.”

Eric turned to look into Sookie’s eyes, which were already looking back at him.

“And I’m yours,” he vowed.

Bill sighed loudly. “So I’m too late,” he said with a mixture of sadness and—*finally*—realization.

Sookie shook her head; she couldn't help but to be angry at Bill's words. She turned a scathing glare toward him. "Yes. You are too late to find the shell of a human being you knew before. Yes. You are too late to find the unhappy woman who was afraid of the world. Yes. You are too late to find the girl who would settle for so little because she thought that she was worth nothing more. You are too late for any of that."

Bill nodded sadly and walked slowly toward the coffee table; he put his business card on it.

Sookie and Eric both looked at the object as if it were a snake.

Bill looked at the couple guiltily. "I didn't know about your mother, Susanna." He sighed. "And you were right about why I came here tonight. But I hope that you believe that I *thought* it was for the best."

Sookie nodded. "I believe you." She did believe that he thought he would be the best option for her. But he was 100% wrong.

Bill inhaled loudly. "There may be a day when things change between the two of you."

"It wouldn't matter," Sookie said.

Bill let out his breath. "Be that as it may, if you ever need anything of me—if there is *anything* that I can do to make up for what I did in the past—I hope you will contact me."

Sookie looked down at the card.

"No strings? No expectations?" she asked him.

"None," Bill said.

Sookie sighed. "Then I won't burn it. That's the best I can offer. Bobby?" she said, looking from Bill to her friend.

"I'm on it," Bobby said as he reached for the card and put it in his pocket.

Bill sighed resignedly and then looked at Eric. “Do you know what you have?” he asked a little enviously.

“I know,” Eric said immediately. “I knew the moment I laid eyes on her.”

Bill sighed. “Then you’re the better man.” He looked at Bobby, who still held Bill’s gun.

Bobby gestured toward the door.

“Goodbye, Bill,” Sookie said in a neutral tone.

“Goodbye, Susanna,” Bill responded before following Bobby out.

Bobby POV

“Walking me all the way to the home where I’m staying isn’t necessary,” Bill growled.

“When it comes to protecting those two, there isn’t a limit to *necessity*,” Bobby stated evenly.

“What are you? Northman’s watchdog?” Bill asked crossly—obviously bitter that his plans hadn’t worked out.

Bobby laughed. “When I need to be.”

“Are you good at it?” Bill asked.

Bobby only nodded in affirmation, but Bill caught the movement despite the dark.

“Is he,” Bill paused, “good for *her*?”

“They’re good for each other,” Bobby said without hesitation.

“I thought I was good for her,” Bill mumbled. “I thought I would be good for her again.”

“Sookie and Eric are,” Bobby paused, “different—special. And they deserve their happiness after a lifetime without it.”

Bill sighed as they came up to the house.

“Don’t crash the funeral,” Bobby warned.

Bill rolled his eyes. “I could charge Northman *and* you for assaulting a federal agent.”

“And I’m sure your superiors would love to hear how you slept with the mother of a potential asset. Or maybe the press would enjoy hearing how the FBI recruits unsuspecting young women with seduction.”

Bill glared at Bobby. “You have no proof.”

“No. You don’t have proof—not of assault,” Bobby said. “Plus, he grinned and held up his phone, “these things record—you know. And they also email those recordings to my emergency account which gets released to the public if I am prematurely eliminated.” He handed Bill his gun.

“Who the fuck are you?” Bill asked, not for the first time that night.

“I’m their friend,” Bobby said as he received a text. He grinned. It was from Eric—telling him to take his time coming back.

Bill scoffed and dragged his feet up toward the front door.

Bobby followed the retreating man with his eyes. Bill was a chicken-shit coward with a martyr complex, but that didn’t mean he couldn’t cause harm. Bobby lit a cigarette and dialed his phone as he headed toward the old cemetery between Adele’s home and the one Compton was renting.

“Agent Fletcher,” a gruff voice answered.

“This is Bobby Burnham.”

“Yeah—I remember,” Travis Fletcher said, his voice more relaxed. “Dan Groves put you in touch with me. You called a few days ago—asking for some advice on good private security firms in the area. You get all set up?”

“Yes. Thanks,” Bobby said. “But I may need your help again.”

“Well—Dan vouched for you, and I owe him more than one, so anything you need,” the FBI agent paused, “within reason. What *exactly* do you need?”

“Maybe nothing. But, then again, there might be a potential problem with someone in your line of work.”

“Really—a fed? Who?”

“Bill Compton, though I think his full name is William.”

“Ah—Billy boy,” Agent Fletcher said with a chuckle. “What’d that paper-pusher do this time? Trip over his own goddamned ego and tell you it was his dick?”

“So you know him,” Bobby deadpanned.

“Sadly,” Agent Fletcher returned. “He once worked out of the Shreveport office for about a month. What was it? Two or three years back? He rubbed everyone here the wrong way. Thought he was better than us field agents ‘cause he was a recruiter.”

“Yeah—well his project back then was to recruit a friend of mine—a friend whom he tried to recruit via seduction from what I’ve gathered.”

“Fuckin’ Bureau,” Agent Fletcher cursed with disgust. “It’s like my goddamned mother-in-law!”

“Huh?” Bobby asked, stumped by Agent Fletcher’s comparison.

“Oh—I love the bitch,” the agent continued as if he’d not heard Bobby’s sound of confusion. “And don’t get me wrong. I know people who have much worse in-laws than I have.”

But every once in a while, the woman does something that makes me wonder why I ever *voluntarily* joined the family!”

Catching onto the comparison, Bobby chuckled. “Yeah. I imagine that lines get blurred in your line of work.”

“Yeah. I pretty much live in the grey zone, but there are some things that shouldn’t be done—though I’m not surprised that Billy boy’s up to his tight ass in questionable shit. I’m sorry your friend was his target.” He paused. “So—what do you need from me?”

“A safety net,” Bobby said. “Tonight Bill tried to worm his way back into my friend’s life through manipulation and lies. Her fiancé put him into his place by throwing him against a wall.”

Agent Fletcher laughed out loud. “And Billy boy’s just the kind of pussy who might try to use that incident to make trouble for your friends.”

“Yeah. It’s possible that Bill might do himself damage—try to make it look like my friend and I roughed him up. And there are other types of damage he could do too.”

“Tell me what else we might be dealing with,” Agent Fletcher requested.

Bobby lit another cigarette and did just that.

Fifteen Minutes Earlier

“Are you okay?” Eric asked as soon as Bill and Bobby were out the door?

“Yeah,” Sookie responded, her voice conveying a little surprise. “I am—actually.” She looked at Eric seriously. “I should have told you everything about Bill. I don’t know why I didn’t.”

“I know why,” Eric said quietly, taking Sookie’s hand in order to show her that he wasn’t upset in any way.

“Why?” she asked curiously.

“At first, it probably seemed like it was too soon to tell me, and then it probably seemed like it didn’t matter.”

Sookie nodded. “Yeah.”

“He was what drove you to New York—right?” Eric asked.

“Yeah. But not for the reason you might think. What he did hurt me, and all the progress I’d made in college seemed like it was gone in an instant. But what scared me the most was that I almost took him back—even after learning that he’d been sent by the FBI to procure me for my lip-reading ability through any means he felt necessary.”

“Through seduction,” Eric ascertained.

Sookie nodded. “I was easy pickings then. I wouldn’t be now, but I was then.”

“Would you ever consider that? Using your ability to help the government or something like that?”

Sookie shook her head. “I wouldn’t want others’ fates lying in my hands—not like that.”

“But you told me about de Castro and Madden.”

“It’s different with you,” she whispered. “It always has been. I’d do anything to protect you, and I felt that way from the start.”

“Thank you,” Eric said running the backs of his fingers along her cheekbones. “And I’m honored.”

They were quiet for a few moments.

“I would never want to be exploited like Bill and the FBI planned to use me,” Sookie sighed. “And I’m definitely not cut out to be some kind of spy or something. After the thing with Bill, I read all I could about how lip readers have been useful to the government, but—in every one of those cases—they *chose* that work. It’s not something I would choose.”

He pulled her into his embrace. “Are you okay—after tonight? After everything?”

“Surprisingly, Bill’s being here didn’t bother me. And learning that my mother was the reason the FBI knew about me shouldn’t have surprised me—or hurt me.”

“But it did?”

She sighed. “Yes. A little. I just wish that I could feel as indifferent toward her as I do toward Bill.”

Eric kissed her forehead, and neither of them spoke for a while, content just to sway gently in each other’s arms. Both of them understood just how difficult it was to feel indifference for an abusive parent.

“They asked me—you know,” she finally said.

“Who asked? What?”

“I got a visit from someone named Nan Flanagan during my senior year at Ole Miss. She said that she was recruiting for the FBI; she said that she’d found out about my lip-reading ability from one of my classmates, but I’d never told any of them, so that didn’t make any sense. But I figured that someone had figured it out.”

“You turned her down,” Eric stated.

Sookie nodded. “I told her the same thing I told you: that I didn’t want to be responsible for anyone else’s fate.” Sookie laughed ruefully. “At the time, I wasn’t even sure I could be responsible for my own fate. I think that’s one of the things that bothered me so much after I

found out about Bill. I turned them down, but they still tried to manipulate me. After that, I wasn't sure I'd ever be able to trust anyone who came into my life." She looked up at him. "But I was wrong about that."

"Your trust means everything to me, Sookie," Eric said.

"And your love means everything to me."

"I wish I weren't afraid to tell you out loud," he said in an agonized voice. "You deserve to hear it."

"Maybe. But I don't *need* to hear it, Eric," she said, even as she pulled him to her and kissed him gently. "Besides, *feeling* is so much more important than hearing," she added, speaking in a whisper against his lips. "Take it from me. I know both ways."

Eric took her chin in his hands and kissed her again—passionately. They were both breathless when he pulled away.

Immediately, he took out his phone and sent a text.

"What are you doing?" Sookie asked once she'd caught her breath.

"Telling Bobby to take his time coming back," he said, looking at her with lust in his eyes.

She giggled. "Tell him I want an hour."

He chuckled. "Just an hour?"

"Okay—tell him ninety minutes."

Chapter 16: More Visitors

Bobby groaned. “Fucking Boardwalk? Again? Geez, Northman. Remind me to never play *Monopoly* with you again.”

“Hey—I like this game,” Eric pronounced as Bobby handed him the remainder of his money and determined that he didn’t have enough properties to mortgage in order to pay the rest of his “rent.”

Sookie giggled. She’d been put out of the game by Eric fifteen minutes before. She kissed Bobby’s cheek and then walked over to Eric to give him a peck on the lips. “My business mogul strikes again.”

Eric chuckled and pulled her onto his lap. “Yep.”

Bobby shook his head and took a drink of his beer. He glanced at the clock and saw that it was about half an hour until midnight. His phone beeped with a text.

“There are two people wanting to visit you, Sookie,” Bobby said after reading the text. “The guard stopped them up by the road.”

Following the Bill situation, Bobby had assigned one of the guards to stay close to the house, while the other was sent back to keep watch at the end of Sookie’s long driveway.

“Who is it?” Sookie asked, praying that it wasn’t her brother and mother.

“The names given were Lafayette Reynolds and Tara Thornton,” Bobby said reading his phone.

“Really? I didn’t think they were coming until Thursday—for the funeral,” Sookie said, sitting up excitedly on Eric’s lap.

Bobby smiled. “I assume that your expression indicates that they’re welcome.”

Sookie nodded enthusiastically as Bobby stood up and called the guard.

Eric smiled at Sookie. She had told him quite a bit about Lafayette. Though Lafayette was a few years older than Sookie, they had become friends during her senior year of high school. And—because of encouragement from Claudine—Sookie had been keeping in more constant contact with her old friend. Eric had heard Sookie’s end of several phone calls to Lafayette during their time living together. Sookie was often left giggling by whatever Lafayette said, and she was always happier after the calls.



Therefore, Eric was already predisposed to like Lafayette.

Tara, however, was different story altogether. Sookie had told Eric about her first “friend” one evening not long after they’d moved in together. To Eric, Tara had behaved selfishly when she and Sookie were children. By contrast, Sookie had stood up for the girl, even though it meant more ridicule for herself. But Tara had never really “owned” her friendship with Sookie—at least, not until Sookie’s hearing problem had been surgically corrected so that Sookie could be a “normal” friend. But—worst of all—Tara had cut ties with Sookie when she tried to warn her about something disturbing she’d “heard” from the lips of the guy Tara had been dating.

However—despite their problematic history—Sookie had wanted to try to reestablish contact with Tara, and she’d exchanged a couple of phone calls with her since the summer. Those calls usually elicited nervousness from Sookie.

And—*that*—Eric didn’t like.

Nonetheless, Eric knew that Sookie valued her earliest friends, and—to their credit—they’d both contacted her when they’d learned of Gran’s death. And, though Tara now lived in New Orleans and Lafayette lived in Los Angeles, they’d both wanted to be there for Gran’s funeral—and for Sookie.

A loud knock interrupted Eric’s musing as Sookie jumped off of his lap and ran to the door. Bobby and Eric followed her at a distance so that she could greet her friends. Almost as soon as Sookie had opened the door, a stocky and flamboyantly dressed African American man had her wrapped up in his arms.

“Baby girl!” Lafayette cried out as he spun her around. “You is a sight for sore eyes!”

“So are you!” Sookie said with a big smile on her face. “Hey, Tara,” she said to the attractive African American woman who trailed Lafayette into the house.

“Hey, Sook,” Tara responded, somewhat timidly before stepping forward to give her a hug too. As soon as the hug started, Tara began sniffing. “I’m so sorry about Gran. And I’m so sorry about the way I treated you the last time we were together. I’m sorry about a lot of things, Sook,” she said sadly.

“It’s okay,” Sookie said, patting her friend’s back a little awkwardly. “I’m just glad you’re here now.” She broke the hug and smiled at Tara.

“Oh my dear Lord in Heaven, Sook!” Lafayette exclaimed, breaking up the women’s emotional reunion. “Tell me that the blond God in the dining room is a late Christmas present for yours truly!”

“Sorry, Lala,” Sookie giggled, “that’s Eric, the guy I told you about. *My* guy,” she smiled at Eric.

“This is the man you’s shackin’ up with?” he asked. “Missy, you’s didn’t tell me he was the reincarnation of Thor!”

Eric approached the group and held out his hand to Lafayette. The leather and lace clad man placed his hand daintily into Eric’s.

“Nice to finally meet you, Lafayette,” Eric said with a grin on his face. “But try to keep it under wraps that I’m Thor—okay? Secret identity and all.”

Lafayette raked his eyes up and down Eric, who had put on only flannel sleep pants and a gray tank-top after he and Sookie had made love.

“You’s can call me Lala.”

“Thanks Lala. Call me Eric.”

“You’s one lucky son of a bitch to gets Sookie here, but if she ever leaves yo’ pretty ass and you’s needs a little comfortin’, you come and finds me, sweetheart.”

Eric chuckled and winked at Lafayette, who quickly turned his attention to Bobby. “Is this one yours too, hooker?” Lafayette asked even as he appraised Bobby.

“Nope,” Sookie giggled.

“I guess he’ll have to do for my New Year’s kiss then,” Lafayette leered.

Bobby smirked. “The person I kissed last year was wearing a bustier and bright red lipstick too,” he deadpanned.

Lafayette laughed. “Oh we’s gonna get along just fine!”

“Sookie’s different,” a much more serious Lafayette said as he flipped a pancake. Along with Tara, he had spent the night in the guest room after the New Year had been greeted with much liquor, laughter, and tears as stories about Gran had been remembered. Bobby was snoring away on the couch.

“I could tell from the moment she answered the door,” Lafayette went on. “Hell—I could tell when we talked on the phone these last several months.”

“Yes, she is different,” Eric agreed as he took a cup down from the cabinet and poured himself some coffee. He’d left Sookie still asleep when he’d risen early. He’d been surprised to find that Lafayette was not only awake, but also functional. Bobby and Lafayette had found and polished off a bottle of Kentucky bourbon the night before—a big bottle.

Lafayette added two newly-cooked pancakes to a plate that already held quite a few before turning to look at Eric. The only evidence that he had a hangover was the sunglasses he wore.

“Did Sookie ever tell you how she and I met?” Lafayette asked Eric.

Eric shook his head. “No.”

“As you know, Tara’s my cousin, but we weren’t particularly close as kids since I was five years older than her. But once Tara was in junior high and I got my own place, she’d come crash with me when things got particularly bad with her mother. Ya see, Tara’s mom liked to drink—a lot—and when she did, she got meaner than a hornet.”

Eric nodded. “Sookie told me that.”

“My own mom is in the loony bin, though they call it an assisted living facility,” Lafayette shared. “Ya see—she’s bipolar, and she’s never been particularly fond of taking her meds. Sookie saw my mom talkin’ to herself outside of the grocery store one day. Most people didn’t pay her no mind since she was always mumblin’ away when she was off of her meds. But Sookie figured out that she was plannin’ to burn down her house that night. Instead of ignorin’ my mom’s bat-shit craziness—like everyone else did—Sookie told Tara, who called me. When I got to my mom’s house, I found mason jars full of gasoline and kerosene everywhere.” He shook his head. “She’d apparently been plannin’ it for a while. ‘Cause of Sook, my mom’s still alive, and even though she’s in a mental institute, she’s probably happier there than she’s ever been before—since they keep her on the meds fulltime.” Lafayette sighed. “She even has a job through the internet now, and she’s got friends where she lives.”

Eric smiled and spoke with obvious pride. “So Sookie saved your mom’s life.”

Lafayette nodded. “Yeah. That’s how I met her. It always broke my heart to see how closed off Sook was from the world. She hardly smiled and never laughed. Hell—she didn’t really even talk much—not even after she could hear. She would just listen as Tara and me squabbled or went on ‘bout somethin’ dumb.” He smiled. “But now she’s,” he paused, “like a flower—a goddamned bloomin’ flower. I ‘spected to come here and find her in pieces because of Gran, but she’s not in pieces. And that’s ‘cause of you.”

Eric shook his head. “No. It’s mostly because of *her*—her strength. When we got together, I was the one in pieces; she was already starting to put herself together.”

“Tell me there’s coffee,” Bobby interrupted, as he dragged himself into the kitchen. He was only in boxers and scratched himself all the way to the coffee maker.

“Need help with that?” Lafayette leered as Eric poured Bobby a cup of coffee—mostly because he didn’t want Bobby touching the pot.

Bobby looked down at himself and realized that he was still scratching his balls—through the thin cloth of his boxers. “Oh,” he said, shaking his head a bit. “Sorry. I think I’m still asleep or drunk or both.”

Eric chuckled. “Just put on some clothes before Sookie gets up—okay?”

“From where I’m standin’, he’s still wearin’ one thing too many,” Lafayette said. “And I never did get my New Year’s kiss.”

“Not from lack of trying,” Bobby intoned.

“I had to try,” Lafayette winked. “Lots of *supposedly* straight boys change their tune once they’ve had an adequate amount of liquor.” He sighed. “It’s a shame you weren’t one of ‘em.”

Bobby chuckled and then went to put on some more clothes.

Lafayette’s eyes trailed him. “A damn shame!”

Eric just laughed and then took a sip of coffee. He liked Lafayette very much, but he still wasn’t certain about Tara. As Lafayette and Bobby had been polishing off the bourbon, Sookie and Tara had talked. Eric had given the women some privacy for their conversation, but he couldn’t keep himself from glancing over at Sookie every once in a while. And he couldn’t help

but to notice that she was nervous around Tara—just as she was nervous around people that she didn't really know or trust.

Bobby walked back into the room—pants and shirt on, but not buttoned. He was holding his phone in his hand.

“Jason and Michelle Stackhouse have been detained by the guard at the end of the road. They won't leave. Do you want me to call Sheriff Bellefleur?”

“No,” Sookie's voice came from behind Bobby. “I want to talk to them.”

Everyone in the room looked at Sookie in surprise.

“Sookie?” Eric asked.

“I *need* to talk to them,” she amended her previous statement. “I need to do it for *me*. Then—if they don't go away—we can call Andy.”

Eric set his coffee down on the counter and went over to her.

“You're sure?”

“Yes. But that doesn't mean that I need to do it alone,” she said, looking up at him.

Eric looked immediately relieved. “No—you don't.” He glanced at Bobby. “Tell the guard to let them come up.”

Bobby sent a text and then finished buttoning his shirt. “Mind if I stick around too?” he asked.

“And I ain't goin' nowhere either, baby doll,” Lafayette piped in.

“Thanks,” Sookie said looking around at the men in the room with tears in her eyes.

“Where's Tara?”

“Still sleepin',” Lafayette reported. “If I knows her, she won't be up till at least noon.”

Sookie let out a deep breath as a car was heard pulling up.

“If it becomes too much and you want them gone, all you have to do is tell me,” Eric said.

Sookie gave him a little smile and then looked at Bobby. “Bring them into the living room when they get here?” she asked.

“No problem,” Bobby responded.

“And let’s *not* offer them drinks,” Sookie said with a hint of a smirk.

Chapter 17: Nature/Nurture

Michelle POV

Michelle Stackhouse had set out to be a much better mother than her own had been to her.

Bonnie Turner had been a cruel woman—but not without reason. Brought up by extremely strict and harsh parents, Bonnie had rebelled and fallen in love with a man who had drifted through Bon Temps the summer that she'd turned seventeen. Michelle had been given the surname of her mother's parents—Turner—because Bonnie hadn't even known the last name of the drifter to whom she gave her virginity, her reputation, and most of her dignity.

All that Michelle knew about the drifter—her father—was his first name: Tom.

When she was eight, she'd learned—the hard way—not to ask anything else about him. Her mother had taken a switch to Michelle for asking about him when a teacher had assigned her class to construct a family tree.

Michelle had grown up under the iron and unloving fist of her mother, who'd been pretty much disowned by her own parents. However, unlike her mother, Michelle had never rebelled. No—she'd tried to be perfect in order to escape her mother's wrath.

Not that her strategy had been very effective.

Michelle had attended church every Sunday of her life—without fail. As a child, she'd listened to the minister as if her very life depended on it, and she'd prayed that she could avoid displeasing her mother. She'd also prayed that she could find a man who would help her to escape from her life with her mother.

She'd thought that she'd found that man in Corbett Stackhouse. The Stackhouses—Earl and Adele—had been pretty well-off, at least by Bon Temps standards. Earl had done something

in the oil industry; Michelle had never been exactly sure what that was, however. It had something to do with minerals, but she'd never listened much beyond "oil industry." Those two words had sounded important and "rich" to Michelle, so she'd happily accepted when Corbett asked her to be his date for the Homecoming dance. And she'd done her best to "hook" him and to "keep" him after that.

Michelle had imagined him going into the oil business too, but Corbett had wanted to be a farmer. She'd managed to talk him out of that ridiculous notion, and he'd even gone to college for a while, though he didn't really want to. But Michelle had continued to push Corbett. She'd married him and had borne his son. She'd even made sure that they'd gotten a home they could call their own—from his stingy parents.

Jason had been a godsend to Michelle—her beautiful blond prince of a son. Even her own mother's frozen heart had melted when Bonnie saw Jason for the first time. And Corbett had been proud of the child—a boy to carry on his name. And—for a while—things had gone along as Michelle planned. Corbett had finally agreed to get a business degree. And he'd found a good-paying job with a roofing company that would keep them living comfortably until he could start his career.

But then Michelle had gotten pregnant again—this time by accident. She and Corbett had wanted to wait until he finished his schooling before having another child. But that plan had gone up in smoke. Michelle had thought about getting an abortion. However, after driving to a clinic in Shreveport one Monday morning, she'd parked and had spent hours weeping in her car. She'd never gone in. She'd told Corbett that she was pregnant that night, and he'd been ecstatic.

Despite the change of plans, however, Michelle had managed to reconcile herself to the fact that there was a second child coming. And she'd even talked herself into being excited about her and Corbett's "blessing"—or, at least, she'd tried.

Yes. She had *wanted* to love the daughter that she'd given birth to just as much as her son.

However, something had snagged inside of her the moment she saw Corbett looking at their newborn daughter with intense adoration. Michelle had known in that moment that the love her husband had for their daughter was more profound than the love he had for her. Corbett had certainly loved Jason, but his son's birth had brought on increased love for Michelle as well. However, with Susanna, things were different. As Corbett had cooed at the swaddled baby girl, calling her his princess, Michelle had recognized that she'd lost a part of her husband forever.

Michelle had felt betrayed by Corbett and by her own body, which had—after all—nurtured the girl for nine months.

Michelle couldn't help but to wonder if that was the feeling her own mother had experienced after giving birth to her. Of course, Michelle's father had abandoned her mother before she was born. However, Michelle understood well that Bonne blamed her pregnancy—and Michelle herself—for her lover bolting. As a consequence, Michelle had *always* felt her mother's resentment.

Yes—as if it were an unstoppable tidal wave—Michelle had felt immediate bitterness toward her own daughter, who had stolen away a piece of her husband's love. And—after that first moment of realization—Michelle had been determined not to let Susanna take anything more from her. But Michelle had failed in that goal. It had been Corbett's exhaustion and stress

that had led to his fatal heart attack, and Susanna's medical bills for her fucking earaches had been the cause of his tension, as well as his need to work so much!

Michelle took a deep breath.

If she resented Susanna for taking her husband's love and attention, then she hated her for making her become more like her own mother. Michelle had wanted to avoid that fate, but her daughter's mere existence had transformed her into a copy of Bonnie Turner.

"You alright, Momma?" Jason asked, breaking Michelle from her thoughts.

"Just fine," she said with a smile in her son's direction. "I'll just be glad when she's gone for good."

"Me too," Jason said bitterly. "I still can't believe the old bat left so much to such a freak. I mean—what's Susanna gonna do with that house? She don't even live in Louisiana!"

Michelle sighed. "I know. I'm afraid that Adele Stackhouse always had it in for me. She *never* thought I was good enough for Corbett."

Jason scoffed. "Well—at least I got our house."

"I made sure of that," Michelle said. "When I let your grandmother take in Susanna, I made her agree to give you what was *rightfully* yours."

Jason smiled at her. "And that's what makes you the best mom in the whole world."

Michelle smiled back at him. "And you're the best son."

As Jason turned the truck onto Hummingbird Lane, Michelle crossed her fingers and prayed that Bill Compton had convinced Susanna to dump the handsome blonde that was so clearly out of her league. If Bill managed to get his hooks into Susanna again, Michelle knew that he could be used to control her, and she wanted the farmhouse and—even more so—the property it sat on. Michelle had already done some research and knew that the land could be

sold for a pretty penny; it hadn't been farmed for years, so it would be extremely fertile. And a big sugarcane producer had already started buying up many of the old farms in the area. Thus, Michelle knew that she could get top-dollar for the land.

"What the fuck is this?" Jason complained as he stopped his truck in front of a vehicle that was blocking the driveway which led to the old Stackhouse farm.

A beefy-looking man approached Jason's window. He didn't offer his name.

"Can I help you?" he asked gruffly.

Michelle huffed. "My *daughter* is staying up there," she motioned in the direction of the house, though the dwelling couldn't be seen from the road.

"And my sister," Jason added.

"I'll call it in," the man said, backing away from the truck. For at least a minute, there was no movement from the man as he waited for an answer.

"I could just drive around his car," Jason whispered to his mother. "Hell—this truck could drive *over* that car if I wanted."

Michelle sighed. "Susanna's bigwig boyfriend has probably already paid the police in this town to turn on us, and I don't wanna rock the boat anymore. I was hoping that Bill Compton would do the trick and help Susanna to see her place."

The stocky man received a call back and then walked over to Jason's truck again. "I'll move the car. Then you can go on up," he said tersely.

Michelle smiled. "Maybe Bill did succeed, after all," she whispered once the guard was out of earshot.

Jason drove the short distance to the house and parked his truck with a slam of the brakes, making sure to disturb some of the gravel in the driveway. He smiled in satisfaction.

Michelle's eyes were on the front porch of the house where two men stood. One looked vaguely familiar to her. He was a black man with a shaved head, though he was wearing some kind of head-scarf. She'd met the other man several nights before—when she'd been denied entry into Adele's home. Michelle hadn't taken the time to find out his name, however.

“Geez, I thought that faggot had moved away from here,” Jason muttered under his breath as he turned the engine off.

Michelle followed her son's eyes back to the black man on the porch. “Who is that?” she asked. “He looks familiar.”

“Lafayette Reynolds,” Jason said with distaste. “He graduated a couple of years before me. He was on the football team and everything. But we found out he was gay a few years after that. I'd heard that he was in California now. It figures that he'd be friends with the freak,” Jason finished with a vindictive chuckle.

“Keep your temper,” Michelle said through clenched teeth as she went to get out of the truck. “Homosexual or not—that Lafayette looks tough. And the other one—well we saw what he could do the other night.”

In fact, when Jason had tried to push past the stranger in order to get into Adele's house, the man hadn't budged—not an inch. At that point, Michelle had actually been glad that Sid Matt and Andy had also been there.

Jason sighed but nodded. “I won't start nothin', Momma, but I won't turn down a fight that's started against me neither.”

Michelle patted her son's arm and looked up at him proudly. “I know, honey. I just wanna make sure you're not hurt.”

“I can handle myself,” Jason said cockily.

Michelle smiled at her pride and joy and then opened the truck door.

“For some reason I can’t fucking fathom, Sookie wants to see you,” the stranger stated as Michelle and Jason approached the porch. “But if you do *anything* to upset her, I’m going to” He paused and looked at Lafayette. “What was that expression you used a few seconds ago?”

“We’s *both* gonna open up a giant can of whoop-ass on you’s,” Lafayette completed.

Michelle scoffed. “I’m not surprised to find no better manners from Susanna’s friends.” She continued snidely. “I *am*, however, surprised to see that Susanna has friends at all.”

The brunette man glared at Michelle. “She will talk to you in the living room. And we’ll be right out here,” he said with warning in his tone.

“*And* we’ll be ready with those cans,” Lafayette added.

Michelle scowled at the two men as she walked into the house as if she owned it. She was disappointed to see that Susanna was standing in the living room with Eric Northman, instead of with Bill Compton.

“Would you like to have a seat, Jason? Michelle?” Susanna asked, motioning toward the couch.

Michelle sneered a little. “So you’re suddenly being polite to me now?”

Susanna sighed. “No. You can stand if you want to.” She suddenly sounded a little weary, and Michelle couldn’t help but to notice Eric Northman’s arm going around Susanna in order to give her a solid “wall” to lean against.

“Where’s Bill?” Michelle asked with a little grin.

“He came by last night,” Northman said stiffly. “He didn’t stay long.”

“Susanna, Bill Compton is the best man you could ever hope for,” Michelle said biting. “Surely you can see that *this* one’s out of your league.”

Susanna ignored her words. “Why are you here?”

“The funeral,” Michelle said. “I *need* to be seen there, and as executrix, you could give me the money Adele set aside for me whether I go or not.”

“Why do you want to go?” Susanna asked.

“For Jason,” Michelle responded. “To support him in his grief. And because it’s expected of me.”

“*Are* you grieving for Gran?” Susanna asked in Jason’s direction.

Jason seemed a little taken aback. “Course I am!”

Susanna shook her head a little. “What else do you want?” she asked.

“What’s comin’ to me as Corbett’s wife,” Michelle said. “This house *and* the land. Just sign it all over to me, Susanna, and then you and I won’t ever have to see each other again.”

“How much did Gran have to pay you in order to ‘convince’ you to let me move in with her when I was sixteen? How much more did she have to give you in order to ‘convince’ you to sign the consent forms for me to get my ear surgery? And how much more did you extort from her so that I could stay here during my senior year of high school?”

“I don’t know what you’re talkin’ about,” Michelle said venomously.

Susanna seemed to stand up a little straighter. “Then *you* are the one who needs to get your hearing checked, *Mother*.”

“Don’t you get uppity with me, girl!” Michelle ordered as she pointed to Susanna.

“What will you do to me if I do get uppity?” Susanna asked, her expression truly curious. “You can’t hit me anymore. You can’t put me into a corner. You can’t make me feel defective because of a hearing problem I couldn’t control. You can’t leave me alone with a pedophile. You can’t make me feel guilty for daddy dying. And you *certainly* can’t sleep with *another* one

of my boyfriends—though you’re welcome to go for Bill again.” The girl sighed deeply, and a look of something close to serenity swept over her face. She even smiled a little. “You can’t do *anything* at all to me anymore,” she added as if coming to a realization.

“Listen, freak . . .” Jason started.

“No!” Susanna said forcefully. “You two listen! The *only* reason I invited you in here today was to say goodbye to you,” she said, looking directly at Michelle. “I wanted you to know that if your goal when I was a little girl was to somehow crush me, then you succeeded, *Mother*. My life *was* miserable with you—and because of you. I *was* scared of life and scared of ‘living.’ You *did* succeed in *every* single way that you could have to make my *every* minute a living hell. You allowed Bartlett to molest me. You trained my brother to despise me. And you made me too frightened to enjoy my own father’s love—or anything else.”

“What in the hell are you goin’ on about?” Michelle asked bitinglly.

“I wanted you to know that you did succeed in killing Susanna Stackhouse,” Susanna continued quietly. “I *was* a shell—and a broken one at that. And—if breaking your own child was what you needed to do in order to find your own sense of self-worth in life, then you can leave this place knowing that you did succeed.” Susanna took a deep breath. “I pity you. And I despise you. You’re a pathetic excuse for a mother—and an even worse excuse for a human being.”

“Don’t you talk to me like that! Don’t you talk to me like you’re so goddamned innocent!” Michelle yelled. She felt her fists balling up and wanted nothing more than to hit the bane of her existence.

Immediately, Eric Northman moved to stand slightly in front of Susanna as if to block her from Michelle. Susanna’s hand was on his arm in the next second, and she was looking up at

him and shaking her head. Eric nodded almost imperceptively and backed off a little, though he turned a steely gaze toward Michelle.

Sensing that Jason would be no match for the taller man and the two outside, the older woman relaxed her hands.

“Goodbye, *Michelle*,” Susanna said, emphasizing her mother’s name. “After today, I want you to know that I will never think of you as my mother again—because you were *never* a mother to me.”

“Now you wait a minute, you little bitch!” Jason yelled at Susanna. “I’m not gonna just stand here and let you insult my momma!”

“You *will* shut your mouth,” Eric said, through clenched teeth. “Or I will break your goddamned jaw so that you can’t open it!”

Jason made a move toward Eric, but Michelle put her hand on his arm. “Jason! Not now,” she said.

Obedying his mother’s words, Jason backed down a little.

“Go ahead and say whatever else you need to say,” Eric said as he glanced down at Susanna.

She smiled up at him and took a deep breath before looking back at Michelle. “You may have stifled the child who I was, but the woman I am now is someone that you will not touch.” She shook her head. “Against all odds, I’m happy. I have love in my life. I have friends and a man by my side that would go to hell and back for me. *You* are the past I am working to overcome, Michelle Stackhouse. And—I *will* overcome you.”

Michelle snarled. “Look at you! Such the fucking actress with this woe is me routine! *I* am the one who had to suffer because of *you*. *I* lost my husband because of *you*!”

Susanna closed her eyes tightly and then opened them slowly. “In Greek mythology, there is a woman named Electra. Clytemnestra, Electra’s mother, killed Agamemnon, Electra’s father.” Susanna shrugged. “It’s a ridiculous story in a lot of ways. Clytemnestra killed Agamemnon because he’d killed Electra’s sister to appease the gods. In my opinion, Electra should have been pissed about *that*. But instead Electra plots revenge against her mother.”

“What the fuck are you talking about?” Michelle and Jason asked at the same time.

“Revenge,” Susanna sighed. “You wanted power because you always felt powerless against your own mother. I can see that now. I know that she was a horrible person. I know that she used to hit you like you hit me. I know that you made me your target because you couldn’t take revenge against her.”

Michelle gasped at both the truth of Susanna’s words and the shock of hearing them out loud.

“You shut the fuck up about Grandmamma!” Jason yelled, stepping forward as if he were going to push Susanna.

Eric growled like a feral animal, and before Jason could take another step, Eric pushed him halfway across the room. Hearing the thud of Jason landing on the floor, the brunette stranger and Lafayette rushed into the house.

“Jason!” Michelle yelled as Lafayette helped Jason stand up only to hold him tightly in his grip.

“Let me the fuck go!” Jason yelled.

“You’s needs to calm the fuck down and behave yo’self,” Lafayette warned, “before Mr. Viking badass puts his foot up you’s ass good and proper!”

“Me?” Jason yelled incredulously. “That mother fucker’s the one that started shit!”

Eric shook his head and looked at Jason with loathing.

“The way I saw it, you were getting ready to strike Sookie,” the brunette man said.

As Jason continued to try to struggle away from Lafayette, Susanna took a step toward Michelle. Every other noise in the room stopped as Susanna began to speak again.

“You know, Michelle, I could make *you* my target—just like Electra did with Clytemnestra. I could hate you all my life—or even seek some kind of revenge—but I’m not going to do that. However, I don’t have to love you either.” She took a deep breath. “In fact, I’m going to do my best not to think about you at all after today. You’re not worth my time. And—if thinking about me happy makes you miserable—then that will be revenge enough for me.”

“You don’t deserve happiness—not after all I’ve been through because of *you*,” Michelle spit out.

Susanna looked up at Eric. “I don’t have to deserve it to have it.”

“But you *do* deserve it,” he returned in almost a whisper.

Michelle cringed with jealousy as she took in the intimate moment between her daughter and Eric Northman.

“What about the funeral?” Michelle asked acerbically. “Will you block me from going?”

“Gran didn’t want you there, so there’s nothing more to say about that,” Susanna responded.

Michelle’s fists balled up in anger. “You little bitch!”

Susanna sighed loudly. “You and I are out of things to say to one another. I’m going to be selling this house and property, and I’m splitting the profits with Hunter, Hadley’s son.”

“Now just a goddamned minute! Half should be mine!” Jason said gruffly as he finally managed to shake himself from Lafayette’s grip.

Eric once more stepped forward a little, making sure his body was between Jason and Susanna.

Susanna ignored Jason. “I talked to Sid Matt, and he’s setting things in motion as soon as possible.”

“This property has belonged to Stackhouses for almost two hundred years,” Michelle said insistently. “You can’t just piss it away!”

Susanna shrugged. “Gran knew I wouldn’t want it, but she gave it to me anyway. I already offered it to Remy and Hadley, but they don’t want to move to Bon Temps, so I’m selling. You’re welcome to put in an offer.”

“You cunt!” Jason exclaimed.

Eric glared at Jason, but Susanna seemed to be holding him back.

Susanna sighed. “There will be an estate sale here on Friday morning—starting at 9:00 a.m. I’m letting Remy and Hadley take any furniture and other stuff they want first, but most everything will be sold. Jason, you’re welcome to come an hour before it starts—at 8:00 a.m.—to buy anything you want, but you’ll be escorted by Andy Bellefleur every minute you’re here.”

“You’d make him pay for what should have been his all along?” Michelle asked incredulously.

“Yes,” Susanna nodded. “And if *you* show your face here that day, you will be arrested on sight. And—trust me when I tell you that if you come to the church or the graveyard on Thursday, you will *not* see a penny more of Gran’s money.” She sighed. “After Friday, there

will be no reason for either of you to come here—and nothing else here for you to steal.” She paused. “You’ve stolen enough already.”

Michelle scoffed and gestured toward Eric. “If you think you’re gonna live happily ever after with *him*, you’ve got another thing coming,” she said cruelly. “A man like that would *never* love a woman like you. He’s just playing you in some way—probably just to piss off his daddy while he takes out the trash.”

“Yeah,” Jason said spitefully.

Susanna was quiet for a moment, and Northman seemed poised to attack again.

Finally, after what seemed like a full minute of silence, Susanna spoke. “Your words don’t hurt me anymore. I’m finally free,” she said, her voice sounding a little awestruck.

Eric looked down at her. Michelle saw many emotions in the man’s eyes, some of which confused her. His eyes held pride for Susanna—and love—but they also held envy. Michelle couldn’t help but to wonder why that was.

Michelle sighed loudly, wondering for what seemed like the millionth time why the Lord had given her a daughter who continued to plague her. She’d talked to her attorney the evening before, and there was no way around Adele’s Will. And—clearly—Susanna wasn’t going to cooperate.

“Goodbye,” Susanna said—without even doing Michelle the courtesy of looking at her.

Michelle went to speak, but the look now coming from Northman’s eyes stopped her. He seemed ready to remove her and Jason forcibly, and given his size, Michelle didn’t doubt that he could—especially since he had two helpers, not to mention the guards outside.

“Remember what I said about *him*,” Michelle said to Susanna as a parting shot.

“I remember everything you’ve ever said to me,” Susanna responded. “And nothing you have ever told me was true—other than in your own miserable mind.” She shook her head.

“You really are a sadistic bitch,” she said evenly.

“Now wait a fuckin’ minute!” Jason exclaimed. “Don’t you go insultin’ Momma like that!”

“Out!” Eric said sternly. “You’re done here—both of you!”

Michelle tugged at Jason’s arm. “Come on, honey. We’re wasting our time here anyway.”

With one more glare at the couple, Michelle and Jason left the house.

They were quiet until they were back in the truck and on the main road.

“Why didn’t you tell her ‘bout the man that came to visit us last night?” Jason asked.

“*That* would’ve shown her,” he added maliciously.

“Remember,” Michelle warned, “we’re bein’ paid *not* to say anything about that. But don’t worry. Susanna won’t get away with what she’s done for long. She thinks that she’s so much better than us just ‘cause she’s got a rich man, but she won’t have him for long either. We’ll make sure of that! And after he leaves her, she’ll be left with nothin’.”

“So you’re gonna do what that man was talkin’ about?” Jason asked.

“Oh yes,” Michelle said as a cruel smile curved onto her lips. “After the things that little bitch said to me today, she deserves some comeuppance.”

Chapter 18: Love and Loss

“Grief can be the garden of compassion. If you keep your heart open through everything, your pain can become your greatest ally in your life's search for love and wisdom.”—Rumi

[Thursday, January 3, 2013]

It was cold and windy, but the sun was bright on the morning that Adele Stackhouse's body was laid to rest right next to her husband, Earl. Her daughter, Linda, was on the other side of her, and her son, Corbett was next to his father. Eric couldn't help but to feel the tragedy of the fact that Adele had lost both of her children and her husband before she'd died.

He held Sookie a little tighter to his side, wondering if he'd be strong enough to go on if he lost her and the children he hoped to one day have with her. As if reading his mind, Sookie tightened her hold on him as well.

Eric looked at the three newest headstones in the Stackhouse family burial plot: Sookie's father, grandfather, and aunt. Adele's grave marker wouldn't be added until later, but Sookie and he had already learned what Adele had arranged to be on her headstone. The inscription would include her full name as well as the years of her life. And it would have a simple epitaph: “Resting with those she loved.”

Eric sighed. The funeral service had certainly honored Adele's life, but it had been difficult for him in ways he couldn't have foreseen. Being with Sookie had opened him up—and, for months, he'd been experiencing a myriad of emotions for the first time. Thus, at the funeral, he'd found himself feeling—*facing*—loss fully. He'd lost several people during his life: his mother, his grandfathers, and Godric. But—even during Godric's funeral—he'd managed to keep his emotions at bay. Before Sookie, he'd kept himself detached from the people in his life; thus, he'd been able to stay detached when he lost them.

But he was learning that his detachment had been a myth. Just because he'd not let himself experience his grief in the past didn't mean that it hadn't stayed with him. He'd felt it flowing through him as the minister and Adele's friends had shared stories about her life. Now that *he* felt alive—because of Sookie, he grasped the meaning of “life” in a way he hadn't before. He felt loss as he hadn't been capable of before.

Eric found himself wondering about the lives of those who had already been lost to him. Had they been happy? Had they slipped into their deaths with peaceful looks on their faces as Gran had? He hoped so. He also hoped that they, too, *rested* with those they loved.

He thought about how Adele's epitaph also applied to the life he had left to live. Eric had learned—quite recently—that it was so much better to allow himself to “rest” in love, as opposed to avoiding it at all costs.

Eric looked again at the headstones already in place. He'd always equated love with loss; after all, he'd felt loss again and again every time he'd yearned for his father's love and not gotten it. Maybe loss and love were, indeed, inseparable companions—no matter the situation. Adele had lost so many people she loved, yet she'd—bravely—continued to “rest” in her love. Moreover, she'd fought to keep that love “living”—even through her loss of it.

In fact, the last job that she'd given him—to take care of Sookie—had been an act of love on her part.

An act of mitigating loss with love.

But he realized that her act hadn't been just for Sookie. In giving him his task, Adele had made sure that he wouldn't be able to “detach”—not from Sookie and not from himself. Gran had somehow intuited that his reaction to loss in the past had been disconnection—separation.

But she'd made him promise to take care of Sookie, and—in so doing—she'd required that he *stay* “resting” in his love, rather than isolating himself from it.

Even through her death, Adele had taught him that love and loss would always exist together; it was his reaction to the two that could vary. Detachment or feeling? Numbness or pain? Isolation or love?

He sighed as Sookie leaned her head against his upper arm. He'd made his choice. He was willing to face the truth that he might lose the woman next to him one day, though he couldn't help but to hope that death would take them both at the same moment. But nothing—not even death itself—would stop the love he felt for her. He vowed never to numb himself to the feelings that he and Sookie had created together—to the life they were building. The feelings he had for her would “rest” inside of his body even when he was resting in the ground.

He looked at the casket that held Adele's body and silently thanked the woman who had helped him to love Sookie just a little more—just a little better. He promised that he would continue to do the “job” Gran had given him: he would take care of Sookie to the best of his ability—*always*.

His beloved had had her own “job” to perform at the funeral, and Eric couldn't help but to be proud of the way she was holding up. Even amidst her grief, she'd had to greet and accept condolences from the many residents of Bon Temps and New Orleans who had come to pay their respects to Adele. There had been a church full of people, and Eric had been grateful that most of them had appeared sincere in their grief. However, a few people obviously came to the funeral only to gossip. Eric had tried to keep his body between Sookie and the disingenuous—so that she wouldn't have to read any hurtful words emanating from their lips.

Mercifully, Michelle Stackhouse had proven her greed by not showing up—either to the funeral or to the burial service. Jason had, however, come to both.

Though also sitting in the front row, Jason was across from Eric and Sookie—on the other side of Gran’s grave. Similarly, he’d been on the other side of the aisle from them at the church. Thankfully, Sookie had been too caught up in her grief to notice the nasty looks that he continuously leveled at her; otherwise, Eric would have been tempted to beat the malevolent expressions off of his face.

Eric looked around at the little crowd which had gathered at the graveside and was glad to see many of Sookie and his closest friends and allies. Amelia had flown in the night before, as had Henry, who certainly acted more like Sookie’s brother than her real one. In fact, on the rare occasions when Eric had needed to leave Sookie’s side, Henry always seemed at the ready to be her leaning post if need be.

Mormor had surprised them by arriving the previous morning, and she’d been a godsend. Initially, she’d been concerned that her presence might remind Sookie too much of Gran, but a little “mothering” had been exactly what both Sookie and he had needed—as it turned out. Mormor had immediately started cooking, and Eric was pretty certain that no more food could be fit into the refrigerator or onto the counters. In fact, there was so much bounty that Sookie had decided to invite a few of Gran’s closest friends to the house for a small get-together after the graveside service.

As the minister continued reciting the biblical passages that Adele had prearranged to be read at her burial, Sookie leaned away from him to embrace her cousin Hadley, who sat at her other side and who was openly crying. Eric kept his hand locked with Sookie’s, however—

where it had been for most of the day. Eric was pretty sure that he needed to maintain that connection just as much as she did.

Hadley had spent a little time at Gran's house the day before, though she'd gotten tired quickly. Eric had been able to tell that Hadley was quite ill, and she'd shared privately with Sookie that her doctors were worried because she was not responding as expected to her new drug regimen. Thus, her immune system was faltering. Still—Hadley was trying to keep up her spirits and to make the most of whatever time she had left with her husband and son. Remy Savoy, Hunter's father, was clearly worn down from taking care of an infant and his ill wife, but—thankfully—his own prognosis was good, and his doctors were hopeful that his HIV would not develop into AIDs.

When Eric had suggested that he and Sookie babysit little Hunter for the night, Remy had jumped at the chance for a quiet night with his wife. Eric smiled a little at the memory of caring for Hunter with the woman he loved. He'd always been good with kids, though he didn't exactly know why. He suspected it was because he'd learned how to be quiet and patient, and kids seemed to respond to that. And little Hunter had been the perfect distraction for Sookie, who seemed to be a natural at parenting as well.

Eric had never been more proud of a human being than he was of Sookie. However, a part of him also envied her greatly. He had witnessed the exact moment when Michelle Stackhouse had lost the ability to hurt Sookie. Oh—Eric had no illusions that Michelle would continue to try to injure her daughter if she got the chance, and Sookie still had a long way to go before her mother's negative voice was out of her head for good, but something had shifted in Sookie.

It had been a moment of grace—beautiful to witness. Eric just hoped that he would have the opportunity to get to the same place with his own father someday.

Sookie had been a sight to behold during the previous week. Despite her grief, she'd confronted her past with a calm strength that Eric had been seeing more and more from her during the last months. She'd made her peace with so many specters: Bill Compton, her mother, her brother, her whole unhappy childhood.

Sookie had also made the difficult decision to sell Gran's home and most of the things inside of it. In a lot of ways, Sookie hated the thought of doing that, but she knew that she'd never return to Bon Temps to live; plus, she didn't like the thought of Gran's house being empty. She'd offered the farmhouse to Remy and Hadley first, but Remy had a good job, and he'd inherited his own grandparents' home in Monroe, where he and Hadley had a support system. However, he and Hadley did want some of Gran's furniture and dishes, so Remy had arranged to have a moving truck at the house at 6:00 a.m. the following morning—well before the estate sale was due to begin.

Sookie was taking a few keepsakes and family items with her to New York—a small box of pictures and a few little things that she associated with Gran. The Stackhouse family had a nice set of silver, and that had been packed up and set aside for Hunter. Sookie and Hadley had split up Gran's homemade quilts and jewelry, but most of the things in the house were being sold at the estate sale.

Sookie had talked to a local real estate agent referred by Sid Matt Lancaster the day before, and a young couple, Hoyt and Jessica Fortenberry were extremely interested in the house already. Having grown up in the area, Hoyt was familiar with the property, and he and his new bride were looking to move out of his mother's house and start a family of their own. They

would be coming to take a look at the property on Saturday morning—right before Eric and Sookie were due to leave for the airport.

Truth be told, Sookie was anxious to settle Gran’s estate so that she wouldn’t have to think about Bon Temps anymore. She had told Eric that she would always be grateful to Gran and would always love the old farmhouse in a lot of ways, but—without Gran there—the dwelling just seemed hollow. And—given Michelle and Jason’s proximity—it could never be a *home* for her.

Sookie planned to add half of the profits from the sale of the house to the trust that Eric was helping her to set up for Hunter. Luckily, most of Remy’s and Hadley’s medical expenses were being covered since they were participating in the testing of a new drug cocktail for HIV and AIDS patients. And Remy had a good job at a roofing company; however, Sookie made clear to them that if money ever became an issue that they just needed to call her, and she’d release part of the trust.

The money and items promised to Jason had already been given—as had the initial inheritance set aside for Remy and Hadley. And Sid Matt was ready to release Michelle’s “bribe” at the end of the day.

Indeed, Eric marveled at how efficiently Sookie was handling things. He could see that she was incredibly upset by Gran’s death, but she wasn’t losing herself in her grief, nor was she allowing herself to become numb to it.

Yes. He was proud of her—damned proud.

Out of the corner of his eye, Eric saw that Jason was nodding off as the minister continued to speak words from the Old Testament of the bible. Eric couldn’t help but to think of the word, “testament.” It was a *testament* to Sookie’s innate goodness that she was whole and

generous of spirit—despite all she'd gone through already in her life. On the other hand, it was a testament to Michelle's manipulative skills and Jason's weak-mindedness that Sookie's brother had turned out so shallow. Eric couldn't imagine siblings being more different.

He sighed and moved his eyes to Bobby, standing sentry at the back of the crowd. Next to him were Henry and Travis Fletcher, an FBI agent from Shreveport who had come to the funeral in order to deal with the situation if Bill Compton showed up. Thankfully, he hadn't. In fact, Bill had seemingly left Bon Temps on the morning after he'd visited the farmhouse. Eric just hoped that Bill had gotten the message that his presence in Sookie's life was unwelcome.

Eric was broken out of his thoughts as the minister completed his reading of Psalms 23 and said a benediction. Then Sid Matt stood and read a poem with which Eric was unfamiliar, "Turn Again to Life" by Mary Lee Hall. Sid Matt's voice cracked and broke several times as he read:

*If I should die and leave you here a while,
be not like others sore undone,
who keep long vigil by the silent dust.
For my sake turn again to life and smile,
nerving thy heart and trembling hand to do
something to comfort other hearts than thine.
Complete these dear unfinished tasks of mine
and I perchance may therein comfort you.*

After reciting the poem, Sid Matt walked to Adele's casket and laid a white lily upon it. He looked fondly at the box that held Adele's body and then smiled sadly at Sookie, who rose to her feet—with Eric by her side. Together, they walked to the casket and laid down their own

lilies before moving to the side as a line of well-wishers placed other flowers on top of the casket.

One of the last people to approach the casket looked at Sookie a little bit too long for Eric's comfort; in fact, once Eric noticed the man, he realized that he seemed to be studying *everything* too much, and his expression didn't look like it belonged at a funeral. Eric's neck hairs immediately stood on end, and every instinct he had told him to get Sookie away from the man.

Eric caught Bobby's eye; then he subtly gestured toward the stranger. Understanding immediately what Eric wanted, Bobby nodded and subtly pulled his phone out of his pocket. He turned on the video and held his phone so that no one would be able to tell he was filming. It wasn't long before he captured the mystery man's image.

Chapter 19: Performing Brave

“We become just by performing just action, temperate by performing temperate actions, brave by performing brave action.”—Aristotle

[Friday, January 11, 2013 (one week and one day after the previous chapter)]

Bobby had to hand it to Eric. His friend’s hunch about the bad intentions of the mystery man at the funeral had been right—though Bobby wished the situation had proven otherwise.

While Bobby had been carefully making sure that the more obvious threats to the secrecy of Eric and Sookie’s relationship—Bill, Michelle, and Jason—remained silent, the real threat had slipped in right under his nose, with only Eric catching a whiff of him.

“Son of a bitch,” Bobby cursed to himself as he disposed of his cigarette. Needless to say, his New Year’s resolution to stop smoking wasn’t going well.

It had taken him a little more than a week to discover the identity of the mystery man at the funeral, and that right there had been enough to tell Bobby how cunning the man was. He ran his hand through his hair nervously as he walked into Carmichael Tower.

He had bad news to give, and he didn’t want to give it.

Eric could tell that there was something wrong with Bobby as soon as he saw him.

“What is it?” he asked.

“Where’s Sookie?” Bobby responded, answering Eric’s question with one of his own.

“She, Pam, and Amelia are looking through Sookie’s wardrobe to decide what she’s going to wear to the MET tomorrow night.”

“For the Northman Publishing party,” Bobby said, closing his eyes as if in a little pain.

“What’s wrong?” Eric asked again—this time more forcefully.

Bobby sighed. “Get Sookie. I’ll tell you both at once.”

Eric narrowed his eyes, but did as Bobby asked. He found a smiling Sookie sitting on the little ottoman in their closet. Her profile was to him. She was watching Pam and Amelia with great amusement. Ned was lying on her lap and watching the two women as well. From what Eric could tell, Pam and Amelia were quarreling passionately over what shoes Sookie should wear the next night. Pam was arguing that Sookie should borrow her black Louboutins. But Amelia countered that such expensive shoes would surely attract questions.

Eric leaned against the closet door and enjoyed the show for a moment. Despite his worry over Bobby’s behavior—or maybe because of it—he stayed quiet and focused on Sookie. It was Ned who gave away his presence with a loud meow.

Sookie turned to him, and her smile immediately fell as she recognized his concern.

“What’s wrong?” she asked.

Eric sighed. “I don’t know. But Bobby’s here, and he’s not,” he paused, “*Bobby-like*. He looks like he’s about to get a root canal.”

Pam looked at Eric with immediate concern in her eyes as well. “Is he okay?”

Still holding Ned, Sookie got up, even as Eric shrugged in answer to Pam’s question. He took Sookie’s free hand and led her toward the kitchen, where he’d seen Bobby going. Bobby was downing a shot of tequila as they walked in.

“Bobby?” Eric asked.

“Let’s go to the lounge,” Bobby requested.

“You know I hate that room,” Eric said quietly.

“I do too,” Bobby replied, his voice also low. He poured and quickly drank another shot before leading Eric and Sookie to the gray lounge. By then Amelia and Pam had caught up with them.

“Can we stay?” Pam asked, taking in Bobby’s look and immediately knowing something was wrong.

Bobby nodded and sank heavily onto the couch.

“What the fuck is going on?” Eric asked impatiently as he and Sookie sat on the opposite side of the room.

Bobby sighed. “Franklin Mott.”

“Who’s Franklin Mott?” Sookie asked.

Bobby ran his hand through his hair, and Sookie suddenly realized that he had some gray in it. The thought that it might be new worried her.

“He’s a private detective by trade—a good one, though unscrupulous.” He looked at Eric. “He was the man you noticed at the funeral.”

“Hired by my father?” Eric asked with barely controlled rage and a hint of fear.

“Yes,” Bobby answered. “I found a trail between Mott and Andre.”

Eric sighed deeply even as he placed an arm protectively around Sookie. It was an unconscious motion for him—an automatic response to danger.

“What now?” Pam asked.

“We have to assume that Appius knows about Sookie and Eric’s relationship,” Bobby answered regretfully. “Mott was at Adele’s funeral and saw Eric and Sookie together; he could have no doubts about their closeness,”

“I’m so sorry,” Sookie said in a small voice.

Eric pulled her even closer. “No, Sookie. There is nothing for you to be sorry about. *Nothing.*”

Her eyes brightened by unshed tears, Sookie looked up at him. Her eyes told him of all kinds of things that she was thinking—all of them negative things about herself. He could see that she blamed herself for their being caught by Appius. He could tell that she felt that her weakness—her need to have him near—was what had led to their being discovered. He knew that self-blame was always her kneejerk reaction to issues where she *should* feel little or no guilt—just as his first reaction to such situations was trying to stifle and evade his feelings. They had both been working to “change the narrative,” as Claudine liked to say.

Eric leaned toward her and gently kissed her forehead. “No, Sookie,” he repeated gently. “Change the narrative,” he whispered so that only she could hear. “None of this is your fault. Even if you hadn’t needed me there, I would have needed to be there with you.”

Sookie stifled a sob but nodded in acceptance. He watched as she took several deep breaths; he knew that she was thinking about her counseling sessions with Claudine. He kept looking at her and recognized the moment when she banished her guilt as the expression in her eyes changed from regret to resolution. He kissed her forehead again, feeling his pride and awe and love for her grow even more.

She gave him a little smile and a nod, signaling that she had—indeed—“changed the narrative.”

Eric squeezed her hand. “What’s your assessment of the situation?” he asked, changing his focus to Bobby.

Bobby shook his head. "I don't know how Franklin found you in Bon Temps, given the fact that you and Sookie took the private plane, but we have to operate under the assumption that Appius knows you were deceiving him at least part of last week when you were pretending to be sick in Manhattan."

"So he knows I helped," Pam observed, sitting down heavily next to Bobby.

Bobby nodded. "Even if he's not certain, Appius will be greatly suspicious of your actions from now on. He might believe that Eric was deceiving you as well, but it's more likely that he will hypothesize that you and Amelia are both complicit in the situation."

"He'll also suspect that we are aware of his bug then," Eric said.

Bobby nodded again. "Maybe. The last time that we staged something for him to hear, however, was on December 30. Mott would have seen you at the funeral on January 3, so it is possible that Appius won't know that we are aware of the bug and have been using it all along to feed him false information. It is also possible that Appius will think that you are in relationships with Amelia, Isabel, *and* Sookie, but" His voice trailed off.

"But if Mott is any good at his job," Eric continued and then stopped suddenly. He looked at Bobby with concern. "Appius *already* knows!"

"Knows what?" Sookie asked both Eric and Bobby.

"Likely, Mott will have already told Appius how much Eric loves you," Bobby supplied simply.

"So that means that Appius will already be working on ways to hurt Eric by using me," Sookie stated matter-of-factly, leaning her head against Eric's shoulder.

"Yes," Bobby said softly. "That's what we have to assume."

Everyone was silent for several moments.

“I got a call from Bill Compton late last night,” Bobby said.

“Bill?” Sookie stammered.

Bobby nodded.

“What did he want?” Eric asked.

“Surprisingly enough—to help. He gave me the heads-up that someone had asked him about Sookie. When I texted him the footage of Mott from the funeral, he confirmed that it was the same man who had paid him a visit. He also ran Mott’s prints—from a glass Mott used at the bar where he approached Bill. That was how I confirmed who Mott was. Compton said that he didn’t say much in answer to Mott’s questions—though he did indicate that he’d been involved with Sookie in the past. However, Compton told me that Mott seemed to know quite a bit about Sookie already.”

Sookie sighed deeply. “So he likely talked to my mother. She would have been the one to tell him about Bill.”

Bobby nodded. “I think we have to assume that.”

Sookie gasped. “Oh no!”

“What?” Eric asked, his concern growing.

“Tara! When I talked to her a couple of days ago, she told me that she’d met a man in Bon Temps—a man named *Franklin*. She said that he’d sort of swept her off of her feet,” Sookie reported. She sighed loudly. “She also said that he was great because he was so easy to talk to.”

Eric frowned. “Would this Mott hurt Tara?”

Bobby shrugged. “I doubt it. I’d imagine that he’s done with her by now.”

“Make sure,” Eric said stiffly.

Bobby nodded.

Eric threaded his fingers with Sookie's as everyone looked at him—looked *to* him for what to do next.

He closed his eyes for a moment, and when he opened them, he was looking right at Sookie. “We knew Appius would find out about us eventually,” Eric said softly. “And this changes nothing in regards to what I want. Does it change things for you?” he asked nervously.

“No,” she responded immediately.

“Good,” he sighed with relief. “He’ll try to break us up—to break *us*—once he learns that I’m going to break the contract on my thirty-fifth birthday.”

“He won’t succeed,” Sookie vowed.

“If Mott has talked to your mother, Appius may know all about you—your past.”

“He won’t know the important things,” Sookie said squeezing his hand.

“Still—Appius will try to use your mother to hurt you,” Eric said.

Sookie sighed. “Yes. But I’m not going to let her maliciousness and spite injure me anymore.”

The couple shared a brief kiss and looked at each other—Eric gauging whether Sookie was as resolved as she seemed to be and Sookie letting Eric know that she was going to stand by his side through anything that came their way.

Bobby cleared his throat. “If my hunch is correct, Appius may be planning to do something tomorrow—at the party.”

Eric nodded. “Agreed. He will have found out that Sookie works at Northman Publishing.”

“You were planning to take Isabel to the party?” Bobby asked.

Eric nodded. “I was. But not anymore.” He was still looking at Sookie. “It’s time I stopped being afraid of my father. So I’ll be taking the woman I’m going to marry—if she’ll go with me.”

“She’ll go with you,” Sookie nodded, even though her voice quivered a little.

“Good! Then she borrows my shoes!” Pam announced triumphantly.

Chapter 20: Past, Future, Now

“Learn from the past, set vivid, detailed goals for the future, and live in the only moment of time over which you have any control: now.”—Denis Waitley

Pam and Amelia had insisted upon taking Sookie shopping on Saturday morning, and Eric had insisted that Sookie take his credit card. He’d argued that the only reason why Sookie would be under intense scrutiny that night was because she would be arriving on Eric’s arm.

Sookie hadn’t argued. After all, they were now “together,” and that meant that all of their possessions—or lack thereof—were shared. Plus, Sookie knew that Eric would feel better if he could buy her dress, and he was already tense enough.

The dress that Sookie had ended up with was what Pam had called “couture chic.” Horizontal strips of black prints and nude fabric the exact color of Sookie’s skin created the shell of the dress. A few curved vertical lines crossed those strips on the bodice to create a slimming effect.



When Sookie had seen the dress on the stick-thin mannequin, she'd thought that there was no way in hell the garment would look good on her, but both Pam and Amelia had insisted that she try it on.

Judging from the dropped jaw of her normally composed man, she'd made the right choice.

Sookie grinned and stepped toward Eric to straighten his tie. "Don't drool, Mr. Northman. You don't have time to change your shirt."

Of course, she had to remind herself not to drool too; after all, he looked mouth-wateringly good in his tux.

"You're so beautiful," he said softly, as the backs of his fingers grazed lightly over her bare shoulders. "And so tall," he added with a little smirk as he looked down at the 4-inch heels she was wearing.

She giggled. "Even in these, you have more than half a foot on me."

He kissed her forehead and then his expression sobered. "Are you ready?"

She nodded in affirmation and hooked her arm around his.

While Sookie had been shopping with Pam and Amelia, Eric had "chaired" a meeting with Bobby, Henry, Blake, and Thalia. After he and Bobby had gotten the others caught up on Franklin Mott, Eric asked them what they thought about his idea of hiring a guard to stay with Sookie when she wasn't at home.

Sookie hadn't liked the idea, nor had she felt that a guard was needed. However, Eric had convinced her that if an ex-Navy SEAL, a current NYPD detective, an ex-Navy surveillance specialist, *and* Bobby agreed with him, she'd accept the guard—at least for the short-term.

In truth, Eric didn't even know if a guard was needed. Appius had never been violent before—as far as Eric knew. No—Appius had only ever hurt Eric using emotional and mental cruelty. However, Appius's goal always seemed to be the removal of those things that Eric cared about the most from his life. And Eric knew that Appius would try to do just that; he just didn't know how far Appius would go to accomplish his goal.

The thought of Sookie getting hurt was physically painful to Eric.

In the end, the group decided that Appius likely wouldn't harm Sookie physically, but that it would be best if she didn't go out alone for the time being—at least not until Appius's next moves could be anticipated. Both Henry and Bobby figured that Appius might try to approach Sookie if she were on her own—and there could be no good outcome from that. Unfortunately, there was nothing that they could do if Appius tried to approach her at work, but Pam had promised to keep an eye out for her father in order to make sure that Sookie wasn't left alone with him.

As it turned out, Alcide Herveaux, one of Henry's part-time guards and the man whom Bobby had initially hired to surveil Sookie the year before, was available to act as a part-time guard for Sookie. He'd be escorting her to and from work and to her counselling sessions with Claudine. Sookie was normally with Eric at other times.



Bobby had called Alcide to set things up for him to guard Sookie, while Eric had called Sookie to let her know about it. Luckily, she'd accepted the arrangement without further argument, but had insisted that the topic be revisited in two weeks' time. Eric could live with that.

"Nervous?" Sookie asked as the car he'd hired for the night turned south onto 5th Avenue.

"Yes," Eric said honestly.

He sighed as he felt her squeeze his hand comfortingly.

"You know I couldn't do this without you," he said, looking at her sincerely.

"I think you could," she responded quietly. "I know you're a better man than Appius is, Eric. And I know you're stronger. You'll know that too one day."

He didn't say anything as he leaned over and kissed her forehead before resting his head on her shoulder. As the car moved closer and closer to the MET, he let himself relax a little as her hand stroked his hair.

After the others had left the night before, Sookie and he had decided that now that Appius knew about them, they would no longer hide the fact that they were together and planning to marry as soon as Eric was out from under the yoke of the contract.

And having made that resolution, Eric and Sookie had decided that they were done with secrets. Eric had resolved to make the first move by speaking with Appius at the Northman party. He planned to inform his father that he intended to break the contract on his thirty-fifth birthday. He was going to tell him that he intended to marry Sookie and that he would be leaving Northman Publishing on his thirty-fifth birthday as well—unless, of course, Appius wanted to renegotiate the contract in order to get rid of him sooner.

Eric had made this decision partially because he wanted to live with Sookie openly and partially because he was done being Appius's whipping boy. Moreover, he wanted to gauge Appius's reaction to the news.

Eric prayed that his father would be satisfied with what he was going to be getting when Eric broke the contract. Appius would get all of Eric's remaining stock. And he would get Eric's trust fund as well.

Part of him prayed that Appius would be happy that he had decided to leave the company. After all, it was clear that Appius didn't like having Eric around. And surely he could find another "place-holder" for Appius, Jr. Maybe Appius could even convince Nora to step in. With help, she might even do a respectable job. However, the largest part of Eric worried that his father would have his own tricks up his sleeve. Keeping Eric at Northman Publishing and under his thumb—and thereby keeping him unhappy—seemed to have been Appius's main motivation for the contract in the first place.

But Eric was done being made unhappy by his father. Eric had already liquidized many of his investments and had moved that money into an account in his mormor's name—thus making sure she would be taken care of no matter what happened. And Eric knew that he and Sookie could be happy living a much simpler lifestyle than they were now.

For the present, however, Eric's contract with Appius would stay in effect *unless* Appius decided to break it or renegotiate. That meant that Appius couldn't take action against the International Division for several years. Eric hoped that would be enough time for him to slowly transition all of his employees to other jobs—if, indeed, Appius seemed bent on going through with his threat to eliminate the International Division as soon as Eric broke the contract.

After much thought, Eric had decided that going public about the potential elimination was the best thing he could do for his team of employees. He would no longer have to be secretive about warning them to seek out other jobs in preparation for the fact that the international division would likely be dismantled by Appius. In fact, Eric was beginning to wonder if he couldn't simply "take" the division with him when he left. If he got the right backer—maybe someone like Russell Edgington—he could start up his own publishing house and just work with international clients. He could keep his team intact and keep them employed. *And* he would be his own man. He couldn't help but to like that idea!

Of course, Eric would have to get through the next three years—until he could legally break the contract. And he knew that Appius wouldn't make those years easy on him. However, with Sookie by his side, Eric knew that he could get through anything.

Perhaps he was naïve.

But Eric also had some ammunition of his own—some things he planned to use to incentivize Appius to renegotiate the contract. Eric had a preliminary contract in his pocket that would null his previous one with Appius. He would offer Appius the 7% of NP stock that was held between Mormor and Bobby, his own NP stock, and his trust fund; in exchange, Eric hoped to "buy" the international division of NP right away and extract himself from Appius and NP

sooner rather than later. Since Appius clearly wanted to reclaim as much NP stock as possible, he might just be tempted to take Eric up on his offer.

Eric sighed. He had called Mormor earlier that day and had told her all about Appius's past and current behavior—as well as his threats to her income. As expected, Eric's grandmother had chastised him for not telling her that Appius had been using threats against her to keep Eric in line; she'd also assured him that she had enough money in savings to live quite comfortably since the expenses on her land were few, and she still had a little inheritance from her own family that she'd not dipped into yet. She'd also told Eric that his mother wouldn't want for him to be miserable and that any scandal Appius stirred up about Stella would be something that they would all be able to get through.

Still—Eric couldn't foresee that things would go smoothly with Appius; in fact, he was shaking a little—just at the thought of confronting his father.

“I'll be with you the whole time,” Sookie assured as if she could read his thoughts. Eric nodded. In fact, she would be. The plan was for Eric to go in first so that he could talk to his father.

Eric would ask to speak with Appius in private and then would lead him to Gallery 826, which was one of the Northman Galleries, but was not being used for the party. Another reason for the choice of this gallery was that the camera equipment had recently been updated, as the museum was slowly swapping its older surveillance cameras for newer items which were of the motion detection variety and which left very few blank spots in a room.

There was no audio, but that wouldn't matter. Video would be enough.

While Appius spoke to Eric, Sookie would be with Ben in the control room. She would be able to “overhear” their conversation by reading their lips. But—more importantly—she

would be able to “follow” Appius after their talk. Eric was pretty sure that Appius would speak to one of his confidants—Andre or Stan or Nora—after their discussion ended, and he and Sookie were hoping that Appius might give away his real reaction to Eric’s words, as well as any plans Eric’s words had set into motion.

After the talk, Eric would wait for Sookie to text him, which she would do after she felt she’d gotten a good read on Appius’s reaction. Then he would go to the front entrance where Sookie would “arrive.” After that, they would make their public debut as a couple.

As previously instructed, the driver pulled over at the far north side of the MET, well before they got to the main entrance of the museum, where a group from the Press would certainly be waiting to snap pictures of important party guests for the society pages. Eric leaned in and kissed Sookie lightly on the lips.

“Good luck,” she whispered, even as her car door was opened by a smiling Milos. He had come to lead Sookie in through one of the employee only entrances and then would take her to the control room where Ben and Tony would be waiting. Tony would be helping Sookie to keep Appius in her sights until it was time for Eric to take her into the party. After that, Tony would be recording Appius—as much as possible—for the rest of the night so that Sookie could “read” more from him later.





“Hiya, Sookie,” Milos said.

“Hey, Milos,” Sookie returned warmly.

She looked back at Eric. “I love you.”

He closed his eyes and gave her a gentle kiss. “Thank you.”

Sookie accepted Milos’s help out of the car, and then they hurried toward an entrance at the northeast corner of the MET. Along with Ben and Tony, Milos was a frequent guest in her and Eric’s home for the weekly poker game, and over the last months, Sookie had certainly come to think of many of Ben’s Sunday crew as her “family.” Luckily, Ben had overseen the Northman party for the past nine years, and he had been more than willing to help her and Eric.

Sookie noticed as soon as she entered the control room that the usual Sunday crew was all there. She looked around and then smiled at Ben.

“I like my crew,” Ben said, answering her unspoken question.

“And *we* like the double overtime,” Doris deadpanned.

Sookie smiled at them all. “Thanks for helping us.”

Ben POV

“Anything for you and Eric,” Ben said sincerely. And he meant it too. Ben was good at figuring people out, which was just one of the reasons he was so good at his job. His gut was rarely wrong, and his gut had always told him to look after Eric and Sookie. Even the betting about Sookie’s museum choice each week had begun with Ben’s desire to watch over the lonely-seeming woman. That desire had only grown since he’d met Eric, who had been just as lost and lonely as Sookie—probably even more so.

However—since they’d been together—the two had opened up in a way that made Ben feel something akin to pride for them both.

Ben and his wife had tried for children when they were younger, but his wife had suffered a late-term miscarriage, and the trauma of that—both physical and mental—had left her unable to carry other children. However, Ben felt quite paternal when it came to the woman in front of him and Eric Northman. Those feelings had increased since the couple had begun inviting him into their home once a week for a poker night. And there, Ben had been able to pick up a bit of information about why the two had started off so forlorn. There had never been any question in his mind that he would help Sookie and Eric when Eric had called him that morning.

“Hi, Tony,” Sookie smiled at the young computer whiz who was already punching in orders to his computer.

“Hiya, Sook,” Tony returned with a smile as he looked over his shoulder at her. Sookie could see that he was already tracking Appius on the computer monitor in front of him. On a second monitor, she saw Eric enter the building. He nodded to Jack, who was one of the guards at the entrance and glanced up at the camera and gave it—her—a little smile.

She prayed that he could feel her love and support in that moment.

“I gotta get back out front,” Milos said. “I can check your coat and bag for you—if you want,” he said to Sookie.

She smiled at Milos. “Thanks, but remember that I’m going to go back the way I came and then enter through the front once I’m done here.”

“That’s right,” Milos said, remembering the plan. “Alright then. Good luck, Sookie.”

She smiled at him and turned back to follow Eric’s movements as Tony switched from one camera to another.

“I’ve been taping the miser for you since he got here,” Tony reported, gesturing toward the monitor in front of him.

“The miser?” Sookie asked.

“It’s the codename I came up with for Appius Northman,” Tony said conspiratorially.

“Yeah, *that* one thinks he’s some kind of spy tonight,” Doris remarked sarcastically.

“He’s been calling Eric—Thor.”

Ben and Sookie exchanged a smile. “Well, you’re all spies *all* the time—sort of,” Sookie remarked.

“Yeah, yeah,” Doris remarked good-naturedly as she turned her eyes back to the bank of monitors showing the rooms of the party.

Ben looked at Sookie meaningfully. “I’ve told Tony to try to keep the cameras on Appius’s face and to record the faces of people he talks to as well so that we can see their,” he paused, “expressions.”

Sookie nodded and bit her lip a little as Ben patted her hand. Eric had told Ben about Sookie’s ability to read lips that morning when he’d spoken to him about the plan. According to

Eric, Ben had taken in the information without question or comment. And clearly he'd not told the others.

“Thank you,” she said to Ben, hoping that he knew that she was thanking him for everything he had done for the last year as well as for everything that he was doing that evening.

Eric stood as tall as he could. However, in truth, he had a knot in his stomach the size of a bowling ball. Confronting Appius was not something he'd ever done before—at least not in the way he intended to do it now.

His therapy with Claudine and his many talks with Sookie had helped him to understand just how afraid he was of his father—just how cowed he'd always been around him. He'd also come to realize that the thing he'd always craved the most in his life was affection from his father, and he'd judged himself a failure when he hadn't gotten it.

Eight months with Sookie and five months of therapy had helped him to understand that he shouldn't measure his self-worth by Appius's love for him—or lack thereof. At least, he could intellectualize that fact. But every time he saw Appius or talked to him or even thought of him, Eric's first impulses were longing and defensiveness. Claudine had assured him many times that it was okay to feel that way—natural even. After all, thirty-one years of abuse couldn't be erased in a week, or a month, or a year, or even a decade. Maybe not ever. But that didn't mean that Eric couldn't be strong in the face of his abuser. *That*—he could do.

And *that* he intended to do.

Two weeks shy of his thirty-second birthday, Eric Northman was going to take hold of his own life.

Chapter 21: The Face of Hate, Part 1

“It is easy to hate and it is difficult to love. This is how the whole scheme of things works. All good things are difficult to achieve; and bad things are very easy to get.”—Confucius

Eric steadied himself as he walked into Gallery 800 where he figured his father would likely be. Especially during the first hours of one of his parties, Appius liked to be the center of attention, so he held “court” in the largest of the galleries in the Northman Wing—just so that others could approach and pay “proper homage” to him. Eric ought to know. In the years before this one, he had been among the homage-payers, though his respect for his father had certainly never been accepted or reciprocated—not in any way.



As Eric approached Appius, he tried not to be intimidated by the larger-than-life man. Despite being several inches taller than Appius and having about the same width of shoulder, Eric had always felt small next to him—slight. Appius was built sturdier, while Eric was more like his mother—slender and lithe. Plus, no matter what Eric’s size or age, Appius had always

had the ability to make Eric feel as if he were five years old—sitting in one of Appius’s large office chairs, his feet dangling over the edge.

His heart dangling over the edge.

Sophie-Anne was adorning one of Appius’s arms, looking as if she’d just walked off of a runway in Milan. And Andre was standing on the other side of Appius. Andre’s beady eyes had been following Eric across the room. Eric saw Nora and Pam standing off a bit to the side. Pam’s dress made her look part socialite and part dominatrix—the perfect combination for her. Eric was certain that the garment had cost tens of thousands of dollars and had been designed just for her.

Nora looked almost demure next to Pam—though no less fashionable. Eric could tell that her dress had likely cost just as much as Pam’s. But what caught Eric’s eye was the look Nora gave him before she schooled her features. Her eyes had flashed pity and that unsettled him.

Despite Nora’s disconcerting look and Andre’s snake-like gaze and Appius’s disdain-filled expression, Eric didn’t allow for his step to falter. In his mind, he was walking toward his future with Sookie.

“Father,” Eric said evenly with a nod of his head. “As always—you have outdone yourself with the party.”

“Sophie-Anne’s doing—I assure you,” Appius returned as he leveled his heaviest glare at Eric.

Sophie-Anne immediately began rattling off some useless information regarding the night’s signature cocktail. But neither Eric nor Appius was listening; they were sizing each other up.

When Sophie-Anne paused to take a breath, Eric gathered his wits. “Father, may I speak to you in private for a few minutes?”

Appius didn’t look surprised in the least. In fact, he seemed to be oozing with anticipation. Eric’s stomach flipped and then dropped, even as he tried not to let Appius’s eagerness frighten him.

“Certainly, Eric. Lead the way,” Appius said in his gravelly voice. There was a note of amusement in it, and Eric had to actively refrain from looking up at the cameras in the room, just so that he could “feel” Sookie looking back at him through the machine.

“I’ll be with you the whole time,” she had said in the limo. That thought helped Eric to steel himself again, and he led his father out of the room and through several of the smaller Northman galleries until they reached Gallery 826.



“Say what you need to say,” Appius said quickly once they were in the gallery and he had motioned for the guard stationed there to give them some privacy.

Eric closed his eyes for a moment and then began. “I will not be going through with our contract.”

“You cannot break it,” Appius said evenly, “unless we *both* mutually agree to do that. And I don’t intend to agree.”

“I can break it in three years,” Eric responded, trying to stop his voice from shaking.

“Ah,” Appius said, his voice a paradoxical mixture of anger and indifference, “on your thirty-fifth birthday.”

“Yes,” Eric said.

“And may I ask *why* you intend to break the contract and *why* you are willing to give up so much in order to do it?”

“I won’t be marrying according to your rules,” Eric said simply.

Appius looked momentarily surprised, but almost immediately regained his cold countenance. “Ah—Miss Stackhouse. I must say that I thought your taste in women was of a,” he paused, “higher quality.”

Eric refrained from taking his father’s bait. “Unless you want to renegotiate or nullify the contract now, which I would be open to doing, then I will be at Northman’s Publishing until my thirty-fifth birthday. After that, I’ll be out of your hair. I would, however, prefer to renegotiate.”

“You believe it will be that easy?” Appius commented, his voice thick and patronizing. “You always were naïve, Eric.”

“Only when it came to trying to earn your affection,” Eric said bitingly.

“And here I thought you were going to be *civil*,” Appius responded sarcastically. “I should have known better.”

Eric sighed. “After I break the contract, you will have my stock in NP and you will have the trust fund.” He paused. “You could have all of that—and more—now if we nullified the contract.”

“More?” Appius asked with interest.

Eric pulled a document out of his pocket and handed it to Appius.

“What’s this?” Appius asked.

“A new contract. It would nullify our other one. I’m prepared to sign it tonight.”

“And what would I get out of it?” Appius asked, opening the document.

“An additional seven percent of NP,” Eric stated.

Appius looked at the piece of paper and frowned. “So—between your beloved Mormor,” he sneered, “and your little friend, Bobby Burnham, you have acquired an additional seven percent of *my* company.”

“Which they will sign over to you right away if you sign that document.”

“I cannot own anymore stock if the company is to remain public,” Appius said.

“They are prepared to sign the stock over to Appius, Jr. or Nora or anyone you choose,” Eric said.

“And—in exchange—you want the international division?”

“Yes. You intended to dismantle it anyway if I broke the contract.”

“You intend to start up your own company from the division?”

“Yes,” Eric answered.

Appius took his time perusing the document in his hands. Seemingly, his smirk grew with every word he read. “You are offering me 30% of any profits made from your new company?”

“Yes,” Eric answered. “For the next two decades.”

“So the additional stock and the twenty years of profits in exchange for my giving you your freedom now?”

“Yes—and the right to break off the international division from the rest of NP and have complete ownership over it,” Eric said, praying to God that Appius would take the deal.

Appius’s smirk transformed into a sinister smile. “You would give up your stock and your trust fund. You would give up the chance to run *all* of NP. You would do this for your Miss Stackhouse? Tell me, Eric,” he said cuttingly, “is *she* what you want most in life?”

“Keep Sookie out of this,” Eric said forcefully.

“*You* put her into this—boy. Now—answer my questions and do *not* lie, or I will tear up this document right now.” Appius sneered. “Is Miss Stackhouse what you love the most in this world? What you want the most?”

“Yes,” Eric answered at a low volume. “I want her. And I want freedom from you and this,” he motioned between them.

Appius nodded soberly. For a moment he looked very old. “If *only* it were that easy.”

“It could be,” Eric responded, his voice pleading with his father for the first time in his life. “The international division is almost independent from the rest of NP already. It would be easy to break it off. I could be gone before the first of February. You would never have to see me again. Please—just let me go.”

“No,” Appius said simply. “There will be no renegotiation—no new contract.”

“Why not?” Eric asked.

“Because it would please you too much,” Appius answered venomously.

“You despise me—despise my very existence,” Eric whispered, almost as if he’d been dazed.

“True,” Appius said shamelessly. “And making you suffer is one of my favorite pastimes. And do you know *why* that is?” he asked malevolently.

Eric sighed. “Because my mother cheated on you.”

“No,” Appius responded. “Because I hate *you*. Because I wish *you* had never been born.”

Eric inhaled loudly as if he’d been punched in the stomach. After more than twenty-five years of more subtle abuses, he’d finally heard *exactly* what his father thought about him.

“*Why* do you hate me so goddamned much?” Eric asked, his voice sounding like that of a little boy, despite the curse word. “I was told once that you celebrated when I was born—that you loved me.”

Appius looked suddenly older again. “Perhaps that is why I *have to* hate you,” he said in a moment of raw honesty and intensity that made him seem almost vulnerable. That expression was quickly replaced by an icy glare.

“Once you break the contract and leave NP, do you plan to cut ties with the family?” Appius asked, slightly changing the subject.

“As I said, *you* would never have to see me again,” Eric returned.

“Ah—but you would want to see Appius, Jr. and Gracie and Alexei. And Pamela,” Appius said, his voice growing impossibly harder. “You have been trying to turn Pamela against me—haven’t you!” he demanded rather than asked. “You will try to do the same with the others too!”

“I told Pam some truths,” Eric responded, trying to steady his voice. “But that doesn’t mean she’s stopped loving you.”

“I don’t suppose so,” Appius said with an arrogant smirk. “But she *did* lie for you when you went to Louisiana to see your little tart through the funeral of her grandmother.” He paused dramatically. “What? Were you so ashamed of your little trollop that you had to hide her?”

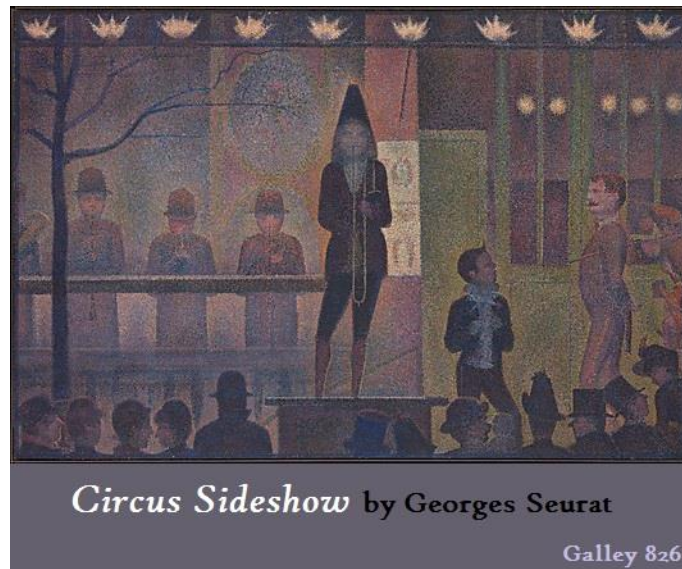
“I’m not ashamed of Sookie!” Eric proclaimed passionately.

Appius scoffed. “Ah—it seems that you are in *love*,” he spat out the last word. “I should have known that you would choose someone just as defective as you.”

Eric shook his head. “She’s not defective.”

Appius chuckled. “I know all about Susanna Stackhouse’s *defects*. And may I just say that her mother is quite the sadistic bitch—though I can certainly empathize with the idea of despising a *disappointing* child. Imagine my surprise at discovering what a little freak you chose—so much so that her own *mother* loathes her. But such a useful skill your Sookie has!”

Appius smirked. “That’s how you knew about de Castro and Madden last year— isn’t it? Your useful little secret finder read their lips for you—didn’t she? I must say that I was impressed that you’d found such an *asset*. Of course, leave it to you to screw things up and to become attached to the poor little circus freak.” He chuckled as he gestured toward a painting by Georges Seurat called *Circus Sideshow*.



Circus Sideshow by Georges Seurat

Galley 826

“Shut the fuck up!” Eric growled, quickly losing his composure.

“Or what?” Appius grinned.

Eric took a deep breath. “You can’t bait me.”

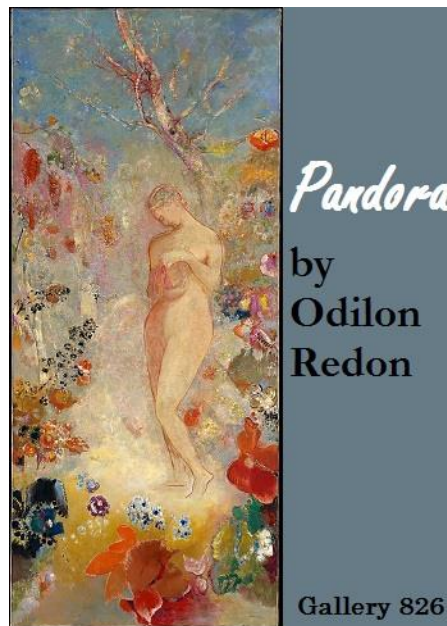
Appius grinned. “That remains to be seen.”

Eric shook his head. “You can’t do a damned thing to Sookie and me. We are *together*, and together we’re going to stay. And—even if I have to stay at NP until I turn thirty-five—you will no longer be a part of my life come three years from now.”

Appius laughed. “You are a boy playing among men,” he said cruelly. “Do you think that you will take one breath on this planet that I don’t control?”

“You are *done* controlling me!” Eric said with a raised voice.

Appius’s lips twitched upward into a triumphant smile. However, instead of responding to Eric’s words, he walked over toward another painting in the room. “*My* money bought you an excellent education, so I am certain that you know the story of Pandora,” Appius said as he looked at the painting of the mythic beauty by Odilon Redon.



Eric didn’t answer.

“Do you know it?” Appius asked, leveling a dreadful stare at Eric.

“Yes,” Eric said in almost a whimper.

“Do you know *why* Zeus decided to create the first woman—why he decided to create Pandora?” Appius asked.

“To punish Prometheus for stealing fire from the gods,” Eric responded.

“Yes,” Appius replied in a low tone. “I have always enjoyed ancient Greek poetry. Hesiod is especially instructive about Pandora:

*From her is the race of women and female kind:
of her is the deadly race and tribe of women who
live amongst mortal men to their great trouble,
no helpmates in hateful poverty, but only in wealth.”*

Appius stopped reciting and seemed to get lost in the painting for a moment. “Your mother was *so* beautiful. And there was a time when I thought that she was perfect—perfect for me. Women were not even my preference, yet I loved her more than anyone—even Peder.”

The room was silent for a moment, and that silence carried with it a heavy weight.

“Stella,” Appius said, his voice catching on the name of his one-time beloved. “My Stella. My star.”

Eric sighed. “Please, Father. Sookie is my star—my sun. Please. Let me go. Let it all go. Let us *both* be free.”

Appius looked at Eric with narrowed eyes. “If your Sookie is anything like Stella, she *will* betray you.”

Eric shook his head. “She won’t.”

Appius smiled sinisterly. “Maybe not in the way Stella betrayed me, but it is inevitable that she will rip out your heart.” He laughed bitterly. “And I will enjoy that day because it

would have hurt Stella,” he said, looking back at the painting. “Pandora unleashed evil onto this world, and she *certainly* passed along that trait to your mother.” He looked back at Eric and shrugged. “How can you blame me for hating you? You were born with *her* eyes and *her* smile—her deceit-filled smile.” He looked back at the painting. “Is it any wonder that I want to snuff that smile from the world?”

Again, Eric felt as if he’d been punched.

“Just cut me loose. You will never have to see me again,” Eric begged.

Appius pinched the bridge of his nose. His eyes were shut tightly. “After Pandora opened her box, she tried to close it, but it was too late, Eric. *Too late.*”

Eric closed his own eyes. “Too late,” he repeated.

The two men were quiet for a moment. However, there was anything but peace in the room.

Finally, Appius spoke. When he did his tone was even and emotionless—eerie. “In three years’ time, you will not break the contract; you will see it through. And you will marry according to the stipulations in the contract, and—just to be clear—your choices will not include Miss Stackhouse.”

Eric was already shaking his head. “No.”

Appius gave Eric an icy look that shut him up. “You will listen to *me* now—boy!” Appius’s voice boomed. “And then you can decide if you will be obedient. *Then*—you can decide if *your* Pandora is worth the price I *will* make you pay for her.”

Chapter 22: The Face of Hate, Part 2

Eric's instinct was to run from the room, but his feet felt stuck to the floor, and his life—once more—seemed out of his hands.

“The property upon which Elsa Larsson—your *mormor*,” Appius sneered, “lives was part of the estate that your *morfar* included in the trust fund.” He grinned. “You didn't know that—did you?”

Eric felt himself go pale.

“It's amazing what is *actually* in that trust fund for you, Eric. Of course, I couldn't sale off anything since I don't officially own it *yet*, but I want you to be aware that the *first* thing I will do if the content of that trust fund really does become mine is to evict your *dear* mormor from her beloved home. Oh—I'm sure that she will accept it—giving up the place where her husband spent his final days—because of *you*.”

Appius grinned evilly, “I believe that I shall enjoyed razing that little lake house to the ground as well. Pamela once told me that your morfar built it,” he laughed, “with your help—correct?” He paused dramatically. “Yes—I seem to remember you coming to me once while you were in college and asking to get a useless minor in architecture.”

Appius shrugged. “I'm sure that it will hurt you and your mormor very badly when I level the culmination of your morfar's pipedreams.”

“No,” Eric whispered. “Please. Don't.”

“But the trust fund would give me that land,” Appius continued with a cruel laugh, “and I have no need for a lake house. And—trust me—that is merely the tip of the iceberg of what I could do, *Son*,” he sneered, his last word laced with sarcasm. “How will dear Mormor react

when she learns that her husband was guilty of stealing from his employees to line his own pockets?”

“He didn’t,” Eric managed to say even as he started to shake.

“His signature appears on *several* incriminating documents that indicate that he did just that.” Appius smirked. “Am I to blame that Johan didn’t read the fine print when he gave me stewardship over his company? Am I to blame that Johan’s last act at Larsson Publishing was to take care of *himself* and add to *your* trust fund at the expense of his employees?”

There was a pause as Eric tried to figure out what to say.

“And—of course—there is the Pamela situation,” he said. “In helping you, she has betrayed me. I would have no compunction in firing her tonight, and she doesn’t have anywhere near your talent.” He glared at Eric. “And, once I blackball her from the industry, no one will give her a job—unless he or she is prepared to make me an enemy.”

“You’d hurt Pam like that?” Eric asked, his throat cracking and dry.

Appius shrugged. “Don’t get me wrong. It *would* pain me to do anything that hurt Pamela. I decided long ago to love her, *despite* who her mother was. But—now there is the question of her loyalty. And—when it all comes down to brass tax—I hate you a lot more than I love her.”

“You’re a monster,” Eric managed.

“And can you imagine my horror when I discovered that Pamela has been stealing from the coffers of her own family’s company?” Appius shook his head in false sorrow. “She will not—I think—enjoy a prison jumpsuit as much as her designer clothing, but I’m sure she’ll learn an important lesson regarding where her loyalty *should* lie.”

“Bastard,” Eric whispered. “Pam would never steal from NP.”

“But I have proof,” Appius said with false horror. “I had, of course, planned to take care of the matter internally—to protect my daughter from herself—but now I feel that I *should* do my civic duty and turn her in.” He sighed. “Even if she manages to avoid prison time, I doubt if anyone would be willing to hire her for *any* employment beyond a grocery bagger once the scandal hits the news.”

Appius laughed. “Of course, *you* won’t fare any better when you try to get employment after leaving NP. No one will take you on after I prove that you’ve extorted money from your own family’s company as well.”

Eric took a step back, but found he could move no further. “What? But I didn’t!”

Appius smiled. “*Proof* of such things was not that difficult to find. Of course, your friends from China will be implicated too; I imagine that shame and scandal is much more difficult to overcome there than it is in the U.S.”

“But there isn’t a goddamned thing wrong with the China deal,” Eric said, now shaking with anger as well as despair.

Appius smiled a little wider. “Your problem has always been a lack of vision, Eric. Guo Li answers to someone, and *that* was the someone whom I contacted—on your behalf, of course. Mr. Li, I’m afraid, will feel a bit betrayed that you went around him to add certain elements to the contract, but that will be nothing compared to the shame he will feel when he’s accused of fraud.”

Eric shook his head in denial.

“You amuse me, Eric,” Appius said cruelly. “You had *truly* thought that I had exhausted the ways I could hurt you—but I have *so many things* that I could do to you. I’ve hardly gotten started.”

Appius grinned. “The reputations of your colleagues. Your mormor’s home. Your morfar’s reputation. Your treasured lake house. Your sister’s job—and freedom. Your job and freedom. And I just *can’t* have you seeing Gracie and Appius, Jr. anymore. You would—I think—be a *horrible* influence to them.”

He shook his head and continued, “*And* your little friendship with Alexei will be over too once certain critics I know ruin his shot in the London theatre scene. It’s a crying shame that he didn’t come to *me* for guidance. Perhaps I could have helped him to get on the good side of the London Press.” He sighed loudly—exaggeratedly. “I don’t see a fledgling acting career surviving the London Press if it’s hell-bent on destroying it—do you? So—you see—*your* actions will harm two of your siblings.”

Appius laughed spitefully. “Of course, all of this would be easy to accomplish with you in prison,” he continued with a self-satisfied smirk on his face. He shrugged. “And without you around and with the scandal of your nefarious deeds all over the news, I would simply *have* to unload the international division of the company. It would lose NP some money in the short-term, and, of course, it would put your whole team out of work.” He sighed. “I just hope your people will be able to find new jobs—given the fact that they are tied to such an unpleasant scandal,” he said with mock sincerity. “But—of course—your recommendation wouldn’t help them, and I could not—in good conscience—recommend anyone on your team. After all, I have no idea how far your treachery has gone!”

He winked at Eric. “Luckily, I won’t be personally damaged, so NP will survive this scandal. Everyone will believe that *you* are the ultimate villain in the story.” His smile showed all his teeth. “You know—I generally hate scandal, but I’m willing to ride this one out. And all just for *you*.”

“Why not just kill me?” Eric asked, his shoulders slumping. “Why must you take *everything* and leave me alive?”

“All business is give and take, Eric. You just have to learn that you are mine to take from when and as I please.”

Appius looked at the painting of Pandora again. “And the best part is that it would all be *your* doing—*your* choice. So much evil unleashed upon the world because of your *supposed* love. And—make no mistake—Susanna Stackhouse, *your* Sookie, will be the one to suffer most for it, Eric.”

“What do you mean?” Eric asked, newfound fear replacing the defeat in his eyes.

“The enchanting Mrs. Michelle Stackhouse is currently working with a very talented ghost-writer. Tell me—have you heard of Jade Flower?”

Eric cringed as he recalled the reputation of the unscrupulous ghostwriter.

“Do you know whom her next book will be about?” Appius continued relentlessly. “I’m sure you can guess that the work will find an eager publisher.”

Eric took another step back.

“*Michelle* Stackhouse has such a tragic story—really. I’m sure it will be riveting to read about all she did for her daughter—only to be rejected by her. I believe the working title is *A Mother’s Pain*.” He shook his head. “And it really *is* too bad that Adele Stackhouse was suffering from dementia when she wrote her Will, wasn’t it? And, even if that can’t be proven to help out *poor* Michelle, I’m sure that Neave and Lochlan could entangle Adele’s estate for many years to come. Of course, I’ll do all I can to help Michelle get what is owed to her. It’s tragic really. And that’s not even the worst of the family saga,” Appius said, shaking his head again.

“An infant whose mother is dying. And a father newly out of work. What is the cousin’s name again? Hadley? And poor little Hunter.”

Eric gasped.

“It’s too bad that things may soon become difficult for Mr. Savoy. After all, he’s hidden his police record and past drug usage from his current employer. He’s also hidden his HIV status. Of course, it *could* all stay hidden. It really is *your* choice.”

Eric shook his head in horror.

“And, unfortunately, I may have to fire Miss Stackhouse from NP,” Appius continued with mock regret. “There are certainly enough complaints about her. How was it that Ms. Fowler put it? Oh yes—‘Susanna’s *peculiar* behavior makes working with her uncomfortable for the rest of the editing department.’ But that’s your Sookie—right? Peculiar. And—you know—when I read the multiple complaints about Susanna, I just *had* to investigate the matter more thoroughly.”

Appius sighed heavily, though his eyes twinkled in merriment. “Care to guess what I found?”

Eric could merely shake his head.

“*Sadly*, it turns out that Miss Stackhouse is as corrupt as you and Pamela. You can’t imagine my heartache when I discovered that she’s been selling information about NP to de Castro since she’s been with us,” he said dramatically.

“That’s not true,” Eric managed.

“The *truth* is in the evidence,” Appius shrugged. “And the *evidence* will show that Miss Stackhouse was the one responsible for all the nefarious deeds that we once thought Quinn and Sandy Seacrest were guilty of,” he sneered. “Imagine how disappointed I was to learn that my

own son has been seeing this spy *behind my back* for months!” He sighed dramatically. “I’m sure that Felipe will corroborate the evidence, given the fact that Miss Stackhouse was the reason why you broke his daughter Freyda’s heart,” he added theatrically.



“No,” Eric said, his voice barely audible and his body shaking even more now.

“After speaking with the enchanting Michelle Stackhouse, I would have to deduce that your Sookie wouldn’t much care for *confined* spaces—like jail cells, for instance. It’s a pity that you will also be in one of your own so you will be unable to offer her comfort.”

“No,” Eric repeated.

“Even if you are eventually exonerated and help your own little Pandora avoid prison, all your money will be tied up in your legal battles, so I don’t expect you could support Elsa *and* Pamela *and* Miss Stackhouse *and* her dying cousin *and* her cousin’s child for long. And—of course—your Sookie might truly become insane after being locked up—thus, there would be extensive doctor’s bills too.” He frowned, though it was obviously feigned. “Jail can be *so* dangerous—you know. I’ve even heard of inmates being sexually abused by their own guards!”

Eric looked at his father in horror. “No!”

“Not that I’d *want* that to happen to your Sookie,” Appius said, unblinkingly.

The two Northman men looked intently at each other for a moment. From Appius's piercing, evil eyes, Eric had no doubt that his father wouldn't think twice about bribing guards to abuse Sookie. Meanwhile, Appius could see the exact moment of Eric's defeat—the moment when he'd broken his son into complete submission.

Eric looked away.

"It's such a waste really," Appius said. "All those lives fucked up—just so that you can be with your *true love*," he added sarcastically. "I imagine that someone of Miss Stackhouse's ilk is the only kind of woman you could find to accept you," he chuckled, "*just the way you are*." His chuckle turned to derisive laughter.

Eric backed up a step.

"You are damaged goods, Eric—tainted by the evil of my own Pandora, your mother. And you have *already* failed *everyone* you care for—especially the person you care for most. That is your mother's legacy to you; you see—that was *her* special talent too. To fail the one she *supposedly* loved the most."

Eric closed his eyes as his world collapsed in on him. Twenty minutes before, he'd been sure of himself—hopeful that he could disentangle himself from Appius. Thirty minutes before, his head had been resting against Sookie's shoulder.

"What do you want from me?" Eric asked, his voice now emotionless—his shoulders slumped.

"I want everything your bitch of a mother stole from me," Appius said biting. "But that Pandora's Box will *not* close. So I must settle for your obedience and for your suffering."

"What do you want?" Eric asked again.

“As I said—I want your obedience and your suffering. You will keep to the terms of the contract we agreed upon, or I will bring a plague upon everything you hold dear.” He chuckled. “As a sign of my benevolence, I will even allow you to keep your Miss Stackhouse. In fact,” Appius paused, “I *insist* upon it. We will *use* her to get the secrets that our competitors want to hide from us. She will come in quite handy—I think.” He waved his hand dismissively. “Give her a place as your mistress. She is not fit to be of more consequence in our world. Her family is a bunch of hicks, and she is the worst of the lot.” He sneered. “Set her up in a nice little apartment if you must. Hell—even have little defective, freakish bastards with her if that keeps her compliant.” Appius smiled. “She can be your mistress, and you will be miserable because you will *never* be able to give her anything but second best.”

Appius sneered. “And do *not* come to me with your delusions of grandeur again, boy. You will always be second best too—second best to me. You will marry the Edgington girl or even the Carmichael girl before you turn 35, or you will marry Freyda de Castro on the day of your birthday. You will oversee *my* empire until my *rightful* heir is of age, and you will do it well, or I will take everything from you and hurt your little Pandora in every way that I can.” He chuckled. “If your little freak proves her worth, she will make NP even more valuable for Appius Jr.”

“I won’t use her like that,” Eric said timidly even as a thick tear fell down his cheek. “I’ll give you all that I have—all my stock in the company. I’ll sign the trust fund over to you right now. Just leave Sookie out of it.”

Appius smiled and shook his head. “No.”

“Why not?” Eric asked in a strangled voice.

“Because of *her*,” Appius said, pointing to Pandora in the painting. “Pandora was so beautiful and so seductive that she couldn’t help but to be the world’s downfall. And—now—Sookie will be *yours*. You will hate yourself for using her. You will suffer because you’ve been forced to make her your *whore*. She will be out of your reach—even when she is in your arms.” He laughed maliciously. “Once our contract is fulfilled, perhaps you can marry the defect. Of course, in having to wait more than twenty years to be your wife, she will very likely come to resent you—to hate you.” He laughed. “And I *will* make myself stay alive to see it all.” He sighed as he looked at the painting. “Beautiful—beautiful agony.”

“I hate you,” Eric whimpered.

Appius laughed. “The true joy of my life is that I know that you *don’t* really hate me.” He looked at Eric—looking right into his heart. “You never have hated me,” he said in almost awe. He shook his head as if in disbelief. “Your eyes have always held something other than hate for me. Even now, it’s the same. They hold desperation—desperation for my love.”

Another tear fell from Eric’s eye.

“And now I have earned your tears again,” Appius said with a self-satisfied smirk. He turned to go, but then turned back. “I want it done *tonight*—where I can see it. Explain to your Miss Stackhouse the way of the world. I know that she has been living with you, and I also know that she used to maintain a residence with Miss Broadway.”

Eric looked at Appius in surprise.

“Mr. Mott truly is one of the most resourceful men I have ever met.” Appius smiled. “It was your precious mormor who gave it away—you know. An unexpected trip to Louisiana of all places. And then the tale fell into Mott’s lap like a house of cards, thanks to Sookie’s very forthcoming mother. And I believe that Sookie should tell her friend, Miss Thornton, to keep

quiet about her personal life as well. Miss Thornton was quite talkative, though she had no idea why Mr. Mott was so interested in hearing about all her problems.”

Appius glanced one last time at Pandora. “You have a job to do, Eric. It wouldn’t do if the press learned that you were shacking up with some commoner. So you *will* have her out of your home and into a little love nest by the end of this month. And make sure that you secure her as an asset, or I will. And—trust me—you will *not* like my methods.” Appius grinned again. “And—you will *not* tell her about this conversation. I want Miss Stackhouse to like me—to trust me. Understood?” his voice boomed.

Eric cringed and nodded. “What if she doesn’t agree to be my mistress—to use her ability how you want her to?”

“You just have to be convincing,” Appius sneered. “If you aren’t, she will find herself in a prison jumpsuit and inside four barren walls, and who knows what might happen to her there?” He looked at Eric. “I want *our* Sookie out of your home and ready for her new role in the company by your birthday.” He smiled. “And—remember—you are *not* to tell her that you are doing all this because you are being forced to.” He smirked. “I want her to believe that *you* are choosing to make her move out—that *you* want her to use her little skill for us.” His voice turned harsh. “If I get even a hint that she knows that it wasn’t your idea or that I could put her into prison with one phone call, I *will* make that call! Understand?” he yelled again.

“You could go to jail—for blackmailing me,” Eric said, making one last-ditch effort to maintain a little control.

“But I’m not blackmailing you,” Appius said with false innocence. “Everything I’ve accused can be backed up with evidence—irrefutable evidence. Bringing it all to light would

simply be my duty. However, as CEO of NP, I'm giving you the opportunity to set things to rights." He glared at Eric. "You won't tell your Sookie about this conversation!" he boomed.

"No. I won't tell her," Eric whispered, closing his eyes.

Appius sneered. "Remember to have her out by February 1. Consider these next two weeks to get your shit together to be my birthday gift to you."

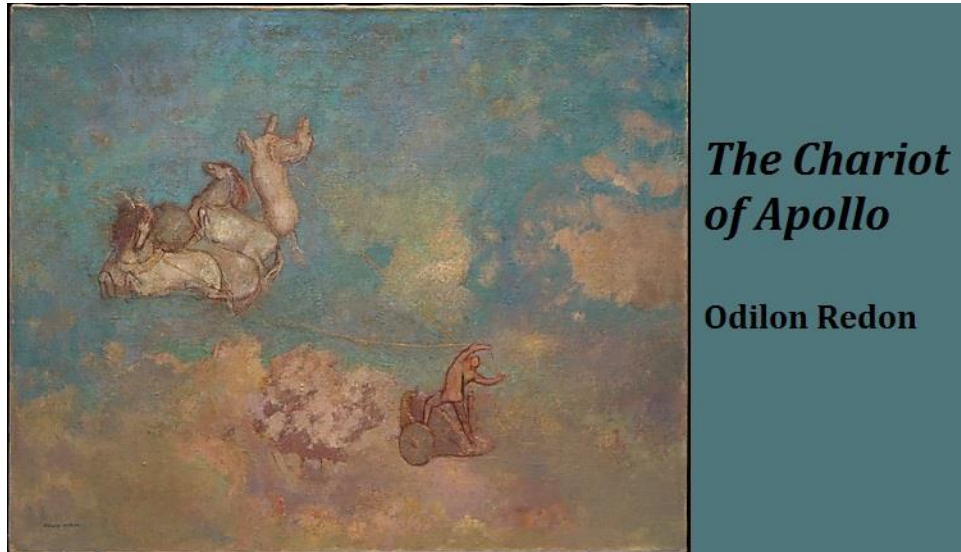
With those words, Appius left the gallery, and Eric sank to his knees. His eyes traveled to the camera that he knew was trailing him, and he uttered words that he knew Sookie would read from his lips: "I'm sorry."

The "child" he had been—so beaten by his circumstances but still hanging on by a thread of hope—was finally grown up and was now completely gone. And all the dreams and hopes that Eric had recently allowed himself to imagine were gone along with that "child."

All that remained was a simple truth. His father was right; he had now failed every single person that he had ever dared to love, especially the one he loved the most.

Chapter 23: The Flame

From his knees, Eric looked from the painting of Pandora, which had been done by Odilon Redon, to *The Chariot of Apollo*, which had been crafted by the same artist.



Sookie had had a cold one Sunday in late August, and she'd insisted that he go to the MET on his own—since their museum visits had, by then, become just as healing for him as for her. While Sookie always took a notebook and wrote down descriptions of and ideas about her favorite pieces, Eric had begun taking a small sketchbook. He had gotten to the point—several years before—that he'd fully embraced what he did for a living, but Sookie had encouraged him to begin drawing again, and Eric was often inspired by the art.

That Sunday in August, Sookie had suggested that he begin where she had begun. Her very first Sunday visit to the MET had—coincidentally enough—been to Gallery 826. But it had not been the painting of Pandora that had struck Eric during his visit, nor had it been any of the several famous Van Goghs in the room. It had been *The Chariot of Apollo*.

Eric had been fascinated by that fucking chariot and had stared at the painting for a long time, trying to figure out if the one driving it in the painting was Apollo or Phaëton.

Apollo was the Greco-Roman god of the sun. According to myth, every day, Apollo would drive his chariot across the sky to give the world light. In one story about the god, Apollo had a son with a human woman. That son, Phaëton, asked to drive Apollo's chariot as proof that Apollo was indeed his father. Apollo allowed it, but Phaëton lost control of the horses and the earth was soon in danger of being burned by the sun.

One of the passages of poetry that Eric had memorized when he was younger was from Ovid; however, even as a young boy, Eric had understood its meaning more than most people ever could. He'd lived it.

Of Phaëton's "adventure," Ovid had written:

*The youth was light, nor cou'd he fill the seat,
Or poise the chariot with its wonted weight:
But as at sea th' unballass'd vessel rides,
Cast to and fro, the sport of winds and tides;
So in the bounding chariot toss'd on high,
The youth is hurry'd headlong through the sky.
Soon as the steeds perceive it, they forsake
Their stated course, and leave the beaten track.
The youth was in a maze, nor did he know
Which way to turn the reins, or where to go;
Nor wou'd the horses, had he known, obey.*

*So fares the pilot, when his ship is tost
In troubled seas, and all its steerage lost,*

*He gives her to the winds, and in despair
Seeks his last refuge in the Gods and pray'r.*

*What cou'd he do? his eyes, if backward cast,
Find a long path he had already past;
If forward, still a longer path they find:
Both he compares, and measures in his mind;
And sometimes casts an eye upon the east,
And sometimes looks on the forbidden west,
The horses' names he knew not in the fright,
Nor wou'd he loose the reins, nor cou'd he hold 'em right.*

After a valiant, though fruitless attempt to maneuver the chariot, Phaëton had lost control of the reigns completely, and the horses had run through the sky erratically, sometimes too far from the earth so that it became as ice and sometimes too close so that it was scalded. Finally, Zeus—having no other choice if the earth was to be spared—had to destroy the chariot, which killed the boy, his grandson, as well.

Eric recited out loud the last two lines that he'd memorized as he looked up at the painting.

*At once from life and from the chariot driv'n,
Th' ambitious boy fell thunder-struck from Heav'n.*

The story had always struck Eric for a variety of reasons. The first was because Appius had seemed as a god to Eric when he'd first read Ovid—which was when Eric was eleven years old. Phaëton had sought out his father, and Apollo—trying to prove his affection for his son—

had promised him anything. The son, arrogant and unwise, asked to drive the chariot—to control the sun.

As a young child who knew only his father’s dismissal and distaste, Eric had imagined that he was Phaëton and that his father would offer him the sun one day. But he’d vowed that he would never overreach and never allow himself to get arrogant if he was ever given such a gift by his father.

After reading Ovid—no, after *understanding* it—Eric began to imagine his life as a kind of perpetual test that he had to pass in humility and silence, lest he be struck down by the gods. Or the “god” in his case.

Eric sighed deeply as he looked at the painting. He remembered spending hours and hours memorizing the Ovid passages. He’d found the book that contained the myth of the overreaching Phaëton in his school’s library—his sanctuary at the time. Certainly, Ovid wasn’t the usual fare for an eleven-year-old, but Eric was not the usual preteen. *Metamorphoses* had been one of the books he’d had with him during his hellish winter break stay at Appius’s home that year.

That year would always stand out to Eric, for his “greeting” with Appius had been particularly bad. Eric had left his father’s office feeling as if it would be best if he’d never been born to burden Appius. Until the very moment he was currently experiencing in Gallery 826, that day had been the lowest point of his life.

After that meeting, Eric had carefully packed his lone suitcase even though he’d just unpacked his meagre belongings earlier that day. He was determined, however, not to leave a mess. Not a trace.

He thought about his room at school and the almost-empty drawers in his dresser there. He thought about his desk. The top drawer contained five pencils; he'd used up the other five that he'd been allotted at the beginning of the school year on drawing. He thought about the old shoebox under his bed at school, which was filled with drawings he'd done on any scrap piece of paper he could find since he dared not to use the few school notebooks he was given for drawing. He thought about everything he had left behind in that room, everything that would have to be removed. Those items would not even fill another suitcase the size of the small one he'd brought with him to his father's house. He imagined his father ordering that all of his belongings be burned so that nothing was left. Not a trace. Not even a memory.

He would simply disappear.

Eric had spent the hours between his meeting with his father and the dead of night thinking of the best way to end his own life. At eleven years old, however, his options were limited. Going outside and waiting for the cold to consume him would have taken too long, and he would have likely been found before dying. He considered stabbing himself, but the thought of ruining one of Margaret's kitchen knives and creating a huge mess with his blood hindered that plan. In the end, drowning himself seemed to be the best option, but the bathroom in his room had only a little shower. So he'd quietly gone to the pool room at 3:00 a.m. Eric was an excellent swimmer, but he also knew how to sink, and even at eleven years old, the weight on his shoulders was crushing. Plus, Phaëthon's fate had been to plunge lifelessly into the Eridanos River. Yes—drowning had seemed like a fitting end to Eric.

Eric had walked slowly into the water—until the depth was too high for him to touch bottom. Then, he had tried to let the water take him to his mother. But his legs kicked and he came to the surface.

He tried again, but—again—his legs kicked.

He tried for hours, his salty tears mixing with the pool water and his quiet sobs the only sound in the room. He tried until his little body was exhausted, but—still—he couldn't stop his legs from kicking before the water filled his lungs.

Finally—when he heard Margaret in the kitchen, he climbed out of the pool and retreated to the room he'd been assigned for his stay. That had been the only time that Eric had ever attempted to take his own life, though he'd thought about it other times—*before* that day when he was eleven.

After his failure that day, he'd realized that there was something inside of him that wouldn't allow him to take his own life. But he wasn't thankful for it.

He reread the story of Apollo's chariot, and he vowed *never* to try to drive the sun as the foolish boy Phaëton had done. He vowed that if Apollo had been his father, he would have asked for nothing more than what the god had already freely given to Phaëton: acceptance. Phaëton had been selfish to ask for more than that.

So Eric lived and he memorized the passage from Ovid about the foolish Phaëton. And he tried to be as obedient as he could to the god who had the power to smite him.

Eric laughed ruefully as he rose from his knees. It turned out that he was just as foolish as Phaëton, after all. He'd attempted to best Appius, but he'd never been in control of the fucking chariot. He was always destined to be struck down low by Appius. However, Appius was not content to kill him; he wanted him to live in perpetual flame.

Oh—Eric knew that he could give the tape of the gallery confrontation to the Press. Hell—Sookie could even transcribe it! But what would it prove other than the fact that Appius was a bastard. Eric also knew that trying to get Appius arrested for blackmail was a fool's

errand. Blake had told him as much. And, if Appius had the evidence he said he did, it would be those whom Eric loved that would ultimately pay.

After all, the god of the sun didn't get burned—just the foolish child.

Eric fixed his suit and straightened his tie—the very same tie that Sookie had straightened for him earlier. He closed his eyes and thought about how she'd been biting her lower lip a little with the effort; she couldn't tie a tie, but he always enjoyed it when she would determine that he'd left it crooked. Her brow would wrinkle a little and she'd crook her finger to get him to come to her. She'd make him bend down a bit as she “fixed him” to her satisfaction. Eric loved it and sometimes left his tie a bit askew just so that she would go through the process. It was such a small thing—that fussing that she did over his tie—but each time she did something like that, a little more of his darkness had gone away.

With her in his life, he hadn't needed to worry about the chariot and the wild horses. He didn't have to worry about being too close to or too far from the sun. No. She lit his world and kept him safe from the flame at the same time.

However, despite the way she had invigorated his heart, he knew now that he would have to let her go. In the blink of an eye after Appius had left the room, Eric had known what he had to do. He *wouldn't* allow Sookie's light to be controlled by Appius; he *couldn't* allow it to be snuffed out—not after she had so recently found the strength in herself to turn that light on.

As selfish as he was and as much he wanted to have her in any capacity he could, he wouldn't hurt her like that.

“No,” he said out loud to the empty room.

Sookie would be no one's mistress. And she would not be used like a commodity—not by Appius or Bill or Michelle or anyone else. Certainly not by him.

And even if Eric had to die to see it happen, he was determined that she would live on and shine on.

It would only be he who burned up in the dark.

Sookie had “read” the whole conversation from Eric’s and Appius’s lips. Tony’s expert guidance of the new cameras had allowed her to see almost every word spoken. And she’d watched powerlessly—helplessly—as the man she loved went from strength and hope to defeat and defenselessness. Watching him sink to his knees after Appius’s parting words had almost brought her to her own.

But she stayed upright even as the others in the control room gasped at the sight of Eric crumbling. They had awkwardly gone about their work, while Sookie’s eyes followed the video feeds which followed Appius—even though her heart stayed with Eric. Soon enough, Appius had found Andre and Sophie-Anne. The fact that the three of them had a little laugh about what Appius called Eric’s “pathetic attempt to best him” was enough to make Sookie’s blood boil; however, it soon became apparent that Appius had played his entire hand. Of course, with a royal flush, there was no need to be shy about winning.

“Can you keep watching Appius? Recording him?” Sookie asked.

Tony nodded, but said nothing. The whole room had fallen silent after watching the confrontation between Appius and Eric. And though the others had not been able to “listen” in as Sookie had, it was not difficult to discern that Eric Northman had been chopped down—a piece at a time—by his father.

Sookie looked at the monitor which still showed Eric. He was rising to his feet.

“What should we do?” Ben asked in a quiet voice. His eyes showed concern—protectiveness.

“Just keep recording Appius,” Sookie answered in a shaky voice. She watched Eric as he straightened his suit and his tie. She saw his despair and his resolution mixing in his eyes. She realized in that moment that he wasn’t even going to ask her to stay to become a puppet in whatever game Appius wanted her to play.

He was going to let her go—force her to go if necessary.

And she was going to let him. She *had* to let him—for both of their sakes.

“I need to get up there,” she said.

Ben nodded and began to lead Sookie down the hall towards the main entrance.

“No,” Sookie said. “I still need to go back the way I came in and then go in the main entrance in case Appius’s people are monitoring.”

Ben nodded and turned back toward the northeast entrance.

“What’s happened, Sookie?” Ben asked, his voice laced with concern. “Is he okay? Are you okay?”

Sookie looked at Ben and shook her head. “No.”

“I wish we could hear what they’re saying,” Sophie-Anne said as if she were watching a suspenseful movie.

Appius chuckled. “Too bad we don’t have another lip-reader who can tell us.” He was already thinking of all the scenarios where Sookie would come in handy.

“Oh—she’ll *have* to come with me to Maryann’s party,” Sophie-Anne said gleefully. “She will be able to tell me all the juicy gossip!”

“Now, dearest,” Appius said, “we must use her sparingly in order to keep others from knowing about the wonderful talent she possesses.”

Sophie-Anne pouted. “Will I not get to play with her at all?” She tilted her head and looked at the woman in question. Actually, she was not the frumpy girl that Nora had described her as at all. In fact, her curves made her designer dress come to life in a delicious way that made Sophie-Anne salivate a little. She was *always* looking for a new toy to play with. “Please, Darling. You really must share her.”

Appius chuckled. “Fine. You may take her with you the Maryann’s party, but you’ll have to keep her little quirk a secret, so you will have to be discreet.”

Sophie-Anne immediately brightened. “You know that I’m the *queen* of discretion.”

Appius turned slightly to smile down at his petite wife. She looked perfect, and her ambition and natural grace made her the perfect public partner for him. “You are the queen of all of New York.”

Sophie-Anne smiled. “That is because I married the king,” she said with sincerity as she looked up at him.

Appius’s chest puffed out a bit as he looked back at his son, who was talking to an obviously upset Sookie Stackhouse. Indeed—Appius did think of himself as the fucking king, and Eric was just a jester in the court. Unfortunately, that jester had too much potential power, and Appius needed to stamp that out.

Thankfully, Eric had no idea that he had any power in the equation. In truth, Eric could affect Appius greatly—injure him—even more than he did by his very existence. If Eric didn’t take the role of CEO, Appius would lose his stock in NP on his sixtieth birthday.

He’d lose his goddamned company to the court jester!

But—thankfully—Eric didn't know about the terms of John Northman's Will. Once more, Appius lamented the fact that he was too weak to just have the boy killed. Appius had contemplated killing Eric so many times over the years; he knew of people—like Franklin Mott—who would do it without blinking, who could make it seem like an accident. Then again, his father's goddamned Will probably had a secret “fuck you” provision if Eric didn't survive to take on the role of CEO, so Appius would have to content himself with his eldest son's suffering.

Appius smiled at Eric's slumped shoulders. Sadly, he couldn't see his son's face as he told his woman the way that the world was going to be from then on. Appius couldn't help but to wonder how resistant Sookie Stackhouse would be to her new job as lip-reader and her new position as mistress. Obviously, Eric had been planning to make her his wife. Mott had gotten confirmation of that from both Michelle Stackhouse and Tara Thornton. And Eric had said as much earlier.

The Northman patriarch shook his head. He didn't understand Eric. How could he pick someone like Sookie Stackhouse as his bride? She was a redneck—a hick. And she was peculiar—completely anti-social, according to Nora. Moreover, her quirk was not the kind of thing that would be seen as “quaint” by New York society. In fact, Appius hoped that her quirk stayed a secret so that he could use the girl for his benefit.

Sookie looked at him over Eric's shoulder. Appius could clearly see the look of heartbreak in her eyes, and he triumphed. His son was—he hoped—sharing in that look.

Appius could admit—after seeing Sookie—that she came in a decent-looking package, but a person so clearly inferior to the Northmans was good for a fuck—not the fucking Northman name! Of course, Eric was inferior as well, his genes seemingly more Larsson than Northman. He sighed. He still had hope for Pamela, though her siding with Eric had depleted his trust in

her. He hadn't been deceiving Eric when he threatened Pam's job at NP. He would have cut her loose without a second thought. Yes—she had a lot to atone for.

Appius's focus was drawn back to Sookie when he noticed tears on the woman's cheeks. He savored them almost as much as he'd savored the tears on Eric's face, a face that reminded him so much of Stella's. Appius knew his son; Sookie's tears would hurt him much more than anything Appius could do.

Appius had already decided that he would make sure Michelle Stackhouse finished the book about her daughter. He'd talked to the woman only once on the phone, but he'd already been impressed by the vehement hatred she had for her daughter. And she was greedy. It was a wonderful combination.

Appius smirked. He'd already sent Jade Flower to compose Michelle's story. Jade was particularly good at twisting the truth in a way that skirted the "ethics" line without totally crossing it. Indeed, by the end of it all, Michelle would look like a victim of a cruel and ungrateful daughter. Appius looked forward to Jade's first report as he saw another tear travel down Miss Stackhouse's pretty cheek.

Again, he celebrated inwardly. His son that broken down at just the thought of having to hurt the woman that he was now *so obviously* wounding!

For more than two decades, Appius had looked for that thing which would finally take the last part of Eric's spirit from him—the thing which would make the light in his eyes disappear forever. Appius wanted that light gone—desired it gone more than anything. It was Stella's light, the power of a star able to shine brightly in the sky despite being billions of miles from the earth. He needed it to die so that he could have his revenge—finally.

And now he knew how to rid his son of that light forever. All he had to do was to cause Sookie Stackhouse pain and make sure that Eric was right there to see it.

Chapter 24: The Beginning

“What we call the beginning is often the end. And to make an end is to make a beginning. The end is where we start from.”—T. S. Eliot

“I can’t stay in New York,” she whispered, her eyes pleading for him to understand. He did. “I can’t stay with you,” she added. He’d known that already. He would have insisted upon her leaving anyway.

“I know,” he responding, praying that she would understand that he didn’t blame her for leaving—or for anything. He blamed his own powerlessness.

“I love you,” she said.

“I know,” he repeated, though—in that moment—he didn’t feel as if he deserved her love.

“I don’t blame you for any of this, Eric. I’m a freak, just like your father said. I don’t deserve you.”

Eric saw Sookie’s self-doubt cloud her features and knew that it was Michelle Stackhouse’s voice in her head—trying to weasel her way back into Sookie’s psyche. He shook his head at her words. “Sookie,” he tried to interrupt.

“No. It’s true.” She gestured down at her dress. “And even in this two thousand dollar dress, I’m plain compared to most of the women in here. Your father is right. I’m defective.”

“No,” he whispered, though he wanted to scream out the word. He was the defective one! He was the powerless one.

She continued to berate herself relentlessly. “You and I come from two different worlds. Appius is,” she paused, “right; my only place in your world would be as your mistress—your kept woman.”

“Sookie, I don’t think that way,” Eric insisted. He had to make her understand that she would always have the most important place in his world and in his heart; it was just that he couldn’t have her.

“I know,” she said. “But it’s still the truth.” She sighed. “You are so many things I could never be. You are going to be the head of Northman Publishing one day, and you . . . ,” her voice trailed off before regaining a little strength. “And you need someone who can be what you need when you get there. We’ve been living in a bubble for these last months—a beautiful bubble, but a bubble nonetheless. We both knew going in that this wasn’t going to last.” She sighed resignedly. “It’s time to stop pretending.”

“Sookie,” he said desperately, “I’m not pretending. Not with you. *Never.*” She had to see that their bubble was the only thing that had ever been real to him. It was the only thing that had ever mattered. It was the only thing that would ever matter.

She shook her head, and the sadness in her eyes almost drove him to his knees again. “I know that what we had—what we *have*—is real, Eric. But it’s still all just make-believe. It’s a fairy tale.” She looked down at the floor. “Maybe I don’t deserve to be happy; maybe my mother was right.”

“Sookie,” he said, almost choking, even as he tried to compel her to look up at him again. “Don’t you fucking say that! You don’t deserve any of this.”

“I don’t think that I would be hurting this much if I didn’t somehow deserve it. My mother always told me that you reap what you sow. She warned me that I was defective—broken. But I couldn’t help myself. I just—I just wanted to be with you.”

“I want to be with you too,” Eric returned, wishing he could convey how wrong she was about the idea that she somehow “deserved” the suffering she was now feeling. She deserved

love and happiness. Once more, he blamed himself for being selfish enough to bask in her presence for as long as he had—to make her promises that he couldn't keep.

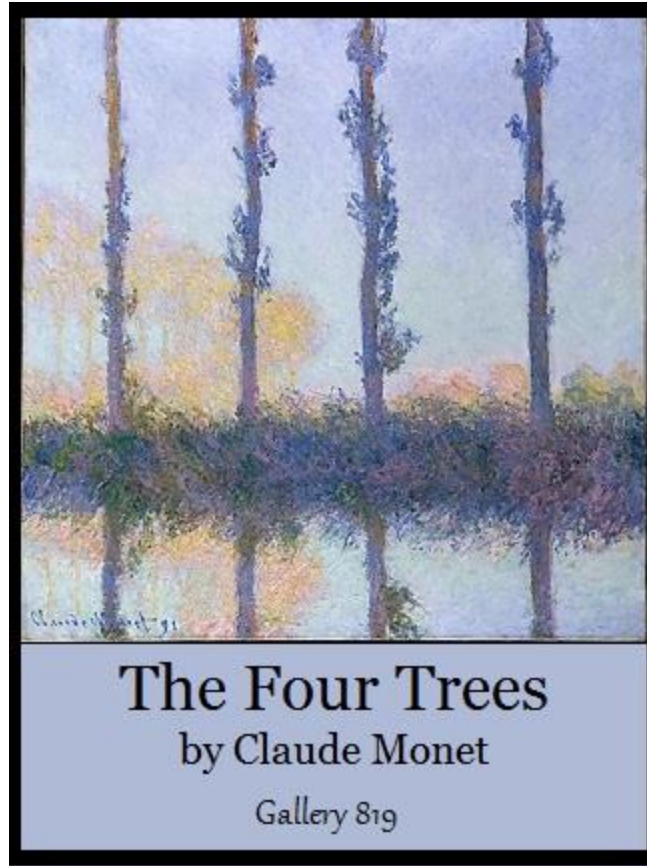
“As Appius just made clear,” Sookie said, looking over Eric's shoulder, presumably at Appius, who was celebrating in Eric and Sookie's pain, “what you or I want is immaterial.”

Sookie could tell that Eric wanted to speak—but he seemed stifled in that moment. She had clearly seen all the self-blame filling his beautiful eyes. And she found that—for the first time—so couldn't bear to look into them. Her eyes stayed glued to the floor in front of her. She so desperately wanted to take all the blame for the situation onto her own shoulders—to protect the man that she loved.

She wanted for him to understand that it was Appius who was doing this to him and that she knew there was nothing Eric could do to stop it. She wanted to tell him that she was proud of him—and so very grateful—that he was prepared to accept a life of servitude to his father, just so that the people he loved would be safe.

Eric could tell that tears were threatening to stream down Sookie's face, and her bottom lip was quivering. He knew that she was trying to hold her tears in—to prevent herself from falling apart in public.

It hadn't escaped his notice that they were standing in front of Monet's *Four Trees* where he had first spoken to Sookie—exactly one year earlier. Like a magnet, he had felt himself compelled to her as if she were the true North Magnetic Pole. Her pull on him was even stronger now. He wanted to reach out to her—to fall into her arms, into his home. But he held himself back, just as she was holding her tears back.



He saw her chin lift a little, and he realized that she was—even then—working to stifle her self-doubts, as well as the memories of her mother which were causing those doubts. He marveled at her strength. In so many way, she had conquered her demons; she had survived. He knew that even the threat of the tell-all book that Michelle might produce would not have the power to hurt her. He had seen her beat back the specter of her mother after Gran’s death. In fact, if that book had been the biggest of his father’s threats, then Eric would have gone forward with his plans to break the contract. He knew that Sookie would survive such a thing, but he couldn’t allow her to be vulnerable to Appius’s other threats. There were some things that he wouldn’t let her face; he loved her too much.

He sighed. Sookie was strong. She would survive without him—just as he would compel himself to live on without her. What he couldn't live with, however, was witnessing Appius hurting her. He couldn't stand the thought of her being used or manipulated.

Yes—he thought—Sookie was so much stronger than he was. She had survived and broken free. But he could not pry himself from his father's grip—no matter how hard he tried.

To Appius, more than a quarter century was not enough for Eric's suffering. Obviously, he required more from Eric, and he would have it. As soon as Sookie was gone, Eric's suffering would increase exponentially. All of his hope for the future would be gone. All of the happiness Sookie brought to him would be gone.

And Appius would see it all; Eric would hide nothing. He just prayed that it would be enough to satisfy his father.

Eric closed her eyes, determined not to fall apart—at least not yet.

He allowed resignation to fill him; it was safer than despair. In truth—though he'd tried to allow himself to hope for much more—he had been expecting this moment ever since he had stood in front of Sookie in this very spot the year before.

Even then—when Appius had asked him who Sookie was and he had said “nobody”—he knew that he was lying. Sookie was everything to him—“everybody.” He was used to losing things—and people—that he loved, so it made sense that he would lose her too. He had been naïve to think otherwise.

He'd been a fool.

Sookie kept her eyes on the floor and tried to control her breathing and her tears. She wanted to sink right into the polished wood—to disappear. But she didn't. Against all odds, she

felt some strength rising inside of her, and she pushed away her mother's voice and remembered the woman she'd become. She had faced mental torture for much of her life, but she refused to give up the greatest gift that Eric Northman had ever given to her: hope.

Happiness might escape her, but she was determined to root herself in that hope.

She loved Eric—loved him way too much to let him stay trapped in his fucked up world where he would meet with only more pain. She was determined to help him, even if that meant her leaving him for a while. Eric thought of himself as weak compared to his father, but Sookie knew better. Ironically, it had taken her seeing Eric crumble to his knees for her to understand that she was the only thing that could truly break him.

Sookie realized that she *was* Eric's Pandora—just as Appius had said. She had allowed for the box of his emotions to be opened and to flow into the world. And seeing her hurt would make him crumble. She could *not* allow that to happen. She would not abandon him, but she couldn't stay with him either.

But—like Pandora—she was determined to leave hope in the goddamned box!

She was determined that she would find a way to save him, but she could do that only if she were not being scrutinized by the devil who had put all the sins of the world into the box to begin with.

Resolution flooded into Sookie, even as she felt all the self-doubt and all the negative messaging of her mother's "ghost" ebbing from her body. Appius—that fucker—would go down! And she and Eric would celebrate when he did, but—until she could ensure that Eric was free—she'd have to be careful.

Feeling stronger now, she raised her eyes to Eric's face, but he was not looking at her. His shoulders were slumped and his eyes were closed. Guilt seemed to be drowning him. He was not in chains, but she knew very well that he was imprisoned.

She saw his hands flex, and all she wanted to do was to reach out for him. But she couldn't. After all, she and Eric had a captive audience and a performance to finish.

But she promised herself that no matter what happened, she would never let him go. She was going to fight when he couldn't.

Yes. To save Eric from his father's plans for him and from his own guilt, she would have to let him go. But she was determined that their separation would be only temporary. She would be damned if she let Appius win. She would find a way to give Eric back his hopes and his dreams—their hopes and dreams. And—in so doing—she would reclaim her own heart.

She had to! Even if it took her decades, she had to.

She had been living in a fantasy with Eric Northman for the last eight months, a fantasy where Eric was the sun lighting her bleak existence. She needed that sun. She would not be complete without it.

She was ready to begin her fight, but she was afraid too, wondering if she could bear to leave the man in front of her. Every fiber of her being wanted to stay close to him. Thus, her first impulse had been to tell Eric that she would comply with any demand that Appius made, but she knew that would hurt Eric even more in the end. Plus, she knew that Appius would be on his guard around her if she stayed.

She needed the bastard to let his guard down.

“Should I go now?” she asked Eric. She wanted to leave. She needed to talk to the one person that she knew she could trust to help her—and Eric—Bobby. But seeing Eric’s slumped posture, she also needed to try to mitigate his immediate pain.

She spoke softly. “I understand why you made the choice you made. And I know that you didn’t intend to hurt me—that you are trying to protect me and Pam and your grandmother and everyone else. I also know that if it weren’t for my,” she paused, “*disability* and my past, then this wouldn’t even be happening. I wish I could be a normal girl, Eric. I wish I could be worthy of your world.”

“You *are* worth so much more than this world,” Eric said passionately. His tone brooked no argument, and any doubt that Sookie had in herself left her. Eric was her miracle.

Sookie motioned across the room, toward where Appius was standing. Eric didn’t dare to turn around, but he figured his father was looking at Sookie with judgment and mirth in his eyes.

His heart broke as her eyes went back to the floor—obviously a defensive move after she “overheard” what they were saying from their lips.

“I know *you* believe in my worth, Eric,” Sookie said. “But I can ‘hear’ what’s inside people—the things that they think no one else can hear.” He saw her inhale deeply. “The only worth a man like your father will ever see in me is in how he can use my ‘*disability*’ to find out other people’s secrets. And I’d comply too; I’d do whatever he said so that he wouldn’t hurt you. That’s why I *have* to go. I’m afraid that I would fall in line with his plans for me—and for us—if I stayed.”

“Sookie,” Eric whispered.

Their eyes finally met. For Eric, it was a sweet agony to see her love and her pain mixing in her blue orbs.

“Inside of you, I see so many things that I love, Eric. You’re kind; I knew that from your eyes since the first time we were standing together in this very spot.”

Eric followed her gaze to the painting on the wall. “*The Four Trees*,” he said.

“To answer your question, I *do* like this painting, even though I’m not generally much of a Monet fan,” she said, responding to the query he’d made the year before, a question she’d been too tongue-tied and nervous to answer at the time. “The trees are so straight and tall, but they still seem so,” her voice trailed off.

“Lonely,” he said, looking at the painting.

“I was going to say sad.”

He nodded. “Sad” was the right word. It was the *only* word for the moment.

“Your father thinks that you are ‘securing’ me as an asset even now,” she said. “What will you tell him when I leave here tonight?”

“That I *have* secured you—that you’ve complied,” he sighed. He hated the thought of her compromising herself like that, but he would lie to Appius in order to protect her.

“And when I leave New York?”

Eric couldn’t stop himself from moving closer to her. “That I don’t blame you for going.”

“He’ll suspect you of helping me.”

“But he’ll find no proof.”

“What if he threatens Pam and your grandmother and all the others again?”

“He *will* threaten them,” Eric said with certainty. “But I’ll claim ignorance about your disappearance nonetheless. And without proof of my involvement, I don’t think he’ll follow through with his threats as long as I do everything else he says.”

He could see Sookie shiver a little. “Do you think he’ll try to find me?”

He sighed and nodded in affirmation. “He’ll try. But I’ll make sure you get away without anyone knowing where you’ve gone—not even me. All my money can’t be for nothing. However, it might take a little while for Bobby to get things set up so that you can leave cleanly.”

“Cleanly,” she repeated.

Eric nodded. He knew that their separation would be anything but clean. It would leave a gaping wound in them both. However, he wanted her to be free. Needed her to be free. It would make his prison more bearable.

He took a deep breath. “Until Bobby has things ready, you’ll have to keep going into work; otherwise, Appius will suspect something is wrong. You’ll have to keep pretending for just a little while longer, Sookie.”

“He’ll never accept my disappearing like that. He’ll hurt you—punish you,” she said, her voice suddenly full of fear and her tears threatening once more to fall.

“No. He’ll see pain enough in me to satisfy even *his* voracious appetite for my suffering,” Eric assured, knowing that he wouldn’t be trying to hide his misery from his father. He wouldn’t have been able to anyway. He lifted up his hand and caressed a strand of her golden hair behind her ear.

Sookie looked up at him fearfully. “Eric, what about Hunter and Remy?”

“I’ll make sure that they’re okay,” he vowed. “But it’s probably best if you don’t contact them—or anyone else that you know.”

“Then—I truly will be alone,” she whispered.

“Not alone,” he promised, trying to make her understand that he would always be with her, even if they were forced apart. “*Never.*”

“Just *lonely*—like the trees?” she asked, looking back at the painting.

“Yes,” Eric said, suddenly overcome by his own sadness. “Lonely.”

They stood silent for a moment.

“I know you don’t think you have any power over your father, Eric,” Sookie said, still looking at the painting. “But I know you do. I think you have miles and miles of untapped power in you. You’re a good man, Eric Northman. And you’re nothing like Appius. *Nothing!* And no matter what life he traps you into, you will *stay* a good man.”

“What if I become just like him one day?” Eric asked, fearfully. “Right now, I feel powerless to stop *anything* that he wants from happening.”

For a moment, Sookie seemed to be scrutinizing him, peeling back every guise and disguise he had ever used to protect himself from the world. Only she had ever been able to see into every part of him.

“You won’t,” she said confidently.

“How do you know?” he asked, desperately wanting to believe that he wouldn’t turn out to be like Appius. Eric was terrified by the thought that he might hurt others out of bitterness and the need to flex what little power he had left.

“I have wanted power over my own fate all my life,” Sookie said in an almost other-worldly voice that was strangely soothing. “I would do *a lot* if I thought I could get it. And I know you feel the same way. But there are some things you wouldn’t do.”

“I’m not so sure.”

“I’m sure,” she said, looking at him lovingly. “You *could* have asked me to stay. You *could* have tried to convince me that using my little ‘gift’ for Appius’s benefit was a small price to pay for us being together. You *could* have asked me to be your mistress, as your father suggested. You *could* have offered to set me up in an apartment and even to father ‘little defective, freakish bastards’ with me. You *could* have assumed that I would have accepted those things.”

Eric felt like growling as he remembered Appius’s words. “I wanted to kill him, Sookie.”

“Me too,” she admitted. “But—like I said—there are some things that neither one of us would do to gain power over another. We both know—too well—what it feels like when it’s taken away.”

He nodded. He’d had a gut-wrenching reminder that night of just how powerless Appius could make him. Eric took in Sookie’s face as she glanced at their audience. From the look in her eyes, it was clear that she “overheard” more malicious words from Appius, Andre, and Sophie-Anne.

“I need to go,” she said as she looked back at him. The slight quivering of her lips told her that she wouldn’t be able to hold it together for much longer. Already, her eyes were burning from the tears that she had been holding back, and her throat felt raw.

However, even though she needed to go, she didn't want to. She knew that leaving the party would be her first step toward leaving New York and Eric, and she wasn't sure if her feet could move.

Sookie had left Bon Temps in order to escape from her mother. She had left Mississippi after finding out about Bill's duplicity. But the last thing she wanted to do was to leave New York, where she'd found a true home for the first time. However, for the first time, leaving didn't feel like running away. She would leave to keep her freedom and her new-found dignity intact. And she would also be leaving in order to fight for Eric's.

In her too-short time with him, Sookie had come to understand something very important about Eric Northman: He was a survivor, but she had only ever seen him fight for *others*. Even earlier that night, he'd been trying to fight for others more than for himself. He'd spent hours the night before trying to figure out how to protect her and his team at NP and his mormor.

Eric had willingly cradled the fates of everyone he cared for in his strong arms, yet he thought of himself as weak when he couldn't protect them all. However, despite his self-doubts, Eric was the strongest person that Sookie had ever known. So much stronger than he gave himself credit for. But *he* needed to be the one to believe that—to know, in his bones, that it was true.

“One day, Sookie Stackhouse,” he said with an intensity that made her shiver and lower her eyes to the floor again, “you'll know that getting away from this place—from *me*—was the best thing that has ever happened to you. You'll be happy, Sookie,” he said firmly.

Once more, Sookie had to blink back tears. She hated his pain, and she knew that they would both be facing more of it in the weeks, months, and maybe even years ahead. But she also knew that there would be no happiness for her without him—no contentment.

The best thing that had ever happened to her was seeing Eric standing in a corner—standing as if ready to erase all the pain she'd ever felt when she'd looked into corners before. But now it was time to give him a way out of that corner.

“Is there anything I need to do now?” she asked, wondering what Appius and his little cohort was expecting next. “Should I cry? Should I yell at you and make a scene? Do we need to put on a show for our,” she paused, “*audience?*” She glanced over Eric’s shoulder; that audience was still studying her and Eric intently. “Appius told you to set me straight about my place, but I don’t know exactly what that looks like.”

Eric inhaled as if he were going to speak but then couldn’t.

“Do they need to see me hurting? Do they need to see me destroyed? Will that make them happy?” she asked, feeling her bitterness intensely.

“I don’t know,” he admitted, his voice sounding defeated. Sookie hated Appius more than she’d ever hated anyone—even her mother—in that moment.

“I don’t want to have to pretend—not even for a moment,” he added.

She looked up at him and tried to smile. “I’ll pretend because I *love* you, Eric. I’ll pretend because I *trust* you.”

“I don’t know how you can trust me,” he responded, closing his eyes. “Because of my selfishness to have you, Appius found out about your ability. Because of me, you have to leave New York. Because of me” His voice trailed off.

“Because of you, I felt acceptance for the first time,” she said softly, praying that he could feel her sincerity.

“Sookie, I . . . ,” he started, but then stopped. She could see that his eyes were also burning with unshed tears when he reopened them.

“What do we do right now, Eric?” she asked softly, hoping to help them both along by focusing on the current “act” of the play. “Not tomorrow—but right now?”

“They will want confirmation that I’ve ‘handled’ you.”

“What does that mean?” she asked. “What does that look like?”

“There are two choices,” he said evenly, though his words obviously pained him. “Either you can look like you’re giving into Appius’s rules for our lives and leave here forlorn, or you can look like you’re resisting them and leave here angrily. Both scenarios would satisfy Appius’s thirst for my pain.”

“If I did the first?”

“You could go to our home, and I would follow in a couple of hours—*after* I have satisfied my father by fulfilling my duty here.”

“What would that duty include?”

Eric sighed. “Talking up clients. Acting like a spoiled millionaire. Flirting with women.”

“Including Nora?”

He shook his head and his eyes flashed angrily. “Not her. No matter what he fucking says.”

“Would you have to sleep with one of the women to satisfy him?” she asked, not able to stop her lower lip from quivering.

“No,” he said quickly, obviously tormented. “I swore to you that as long as we were together, I would *never* be with another. And I intend to keep that promise,” he vowed.

“And after I leave New York?”

“After you leave New York, I will try to make a deal with Isabel so that I can keep my promise to you, Sookie—for the rest of my life.”

“Would your father agree to that?”

“If it involved marriage and kids, then yes,” Eric said. “The contract I brokered with Appius allows for the children to be adopted.”

Sookie thought about the implications of Eric’s words. He was vowing to try to remain faithful to her even after she left. She knew that she would remain faithful to him. “And if I leave the museum angry?” she asked.

“You’d have to go to Brooklyn—to Amelia’s. I’m sure Appius will have you followed, but he won’t hurt you. He’ll just make sure you don’t try to leave town before I have a chance to manipulate you into complying,” he said bitterly.

“Eric, I want all the time I can have with you. So I’m gonna go home.”

“To our home?” he asked in such a tentative way that it almost broke her heart.

“Is that okay?”

“Yes,” he answered quickly.

She knew that every second with him would only add to their agony later on—once she had to leave him—but she didn’t care. She was selfish for as much time as possible.

“Okay—then I just need to act like what? Sad and then accepting? I can do that,” she said, forcing a little smile. “At least, that’s how I really feel.”

His voice cracked with his guilt, “I wish. . . .”

“No,” she interrupted him, “wishing isn’t a *real* thing. Don’t do it.”

Once more, he wanted to reach out for her. He just didn’t think he deserved to.

“Wishing isn’t a real thing,” she repeated more quietly, eerily. “Don’t do it.”

“What can I do?” The mixture of resignation and strength flowing from her broke his heart. He too felt resigned to the fate that had been dealt for them, but he couldn’t feel any strength.

Two large, hot tears flowed down her left cheek.

Despite her protestations, he couldn’t help but to wish—even though his wishes were no longer attached to hope. He wished that he were a better, stronger man who had found a way to earn Appius’s love. He wished that he could think of a way out of Appius’s grip. He wished he could give Sookie the life she deserved. He wished he could make all of her tears go away. Mostly—right then—he wished that they could be free.

Just Sookie. Just Eric. Just free. Free to love.

“I’ll love you my whole life,” she vowed. “I won’t be able to help myself.”

Eric’s face suddenly clouded with fear, and Sookie realized that he thought she was telling him goodbye. “You’ll be waiting for me when I get home? You won’t try to leave New York tonight?” he asked pleadingly.

“I’ll be waiting,” she said, trying to assure both him and herself. “But I *will* have to go soon. If I stay, then none of what we feel right now will survive.”

His relief was obvious, and he smiled a little. “I know. But tonight and tomorrow, Sookie. I’m living for those right now.”

Sookie closed her eyes and tried to remain strong for both him and herself. “So am I. But for the first time in my life, I want to fight for *me* too. I *need* to fight for me. You taught me that. You taught me that I deserve to be happy. That’s why I have to go,” she looked at him pleadingly, hoping that he would one day understand that fighting for herself meant fighting for him too. She *did* deserve happiness; so did he!

And she meant to deliver it to him.

“I know,” he said.

“How long will it take Bobby?” she asked, knowing that Eric would task his most trusted friend with figuring out a way for her escape from Appius’s clutches. She intended to ask Bobby for even more than Eric did.

“One week?” he requested with begging eyes.

“Okay,” she responded with resolution. “One week.”

His voice straining, he whispered, “I wish I could leave New York with you.”

“Me too,” she said, even though she knew that he couldn’t.

“But my father would hunt for us relentlessly if I did. And he’d destroy Pam and my grandmother and the others too—just to punish me.”

“I know.”

They stood there for a moment, both silent and trying not to wish for things that could never be. But Eric couldn’t help himself, just as he couldn’t help himself from finally saying the four words that had been on the tip of his tongue for almost a year.

“I love you, Sookie,” he whispered.

The words made him feel both lighter and heavier. From the time that Eric was five years old, Appius had striven to drive love from his life, taking away everything that meant something to him—to the point that Eric was afraid of love. But not saying the words out loud hadn’t prevented Appius from knowing how much he loved Sookie.

And she deserved to hear the words as many times as he could say them in the next week. He couldn’t help but to be struck—once more—by the fact that “love” was a synonym for “goodbye” in his world. But things with Sookie were going to be different from the norm. In

the past, Appius had taken what he loved. But now Eric was going to be giving Sookie up because he loved her so much.

And that thought offered him the comfort he needed to go on. Knowing that the woman he loved would be safe and free would be enough for him. She would be lost to him, and he would be lost without her. But Appius wouldn't have her. Eric would protect her; he had to.

"I love you so goddamned much," he reiterated.

She smiled a little. "That's a very good thing." Her lips dipped into a frown. "I just wish love were enough to beat back the devil."

"I know," he said. "But for just one more week, I want to pretend that it is. At least it will be a *real* pretense."

"One more week in our bubble?" she asked, her slight smile returning.

"One more," he said, glancing back at the painting next to them.

She too looked at it, and she felt the distance between the trees profoundly. Lonely, but not alone.

Two more thick tears fell from Sookie's eyes.

"I'll see you at home, Eric" she said as she turned and walked away. She was not bothering to hide her tears anymore.

Eric followed Sookie's departing figure with his eyes and then turned to look at *The Four Trees* again. His burning eyes swept over the landscape as he tried to get a handle on his emotions. Monet had painted his subject so that the tops of the trees were not visible; thus, there was no undisturbed sky. Eric noticed for the first time that the spindly trees and their reflections seemed to form bars on the canvas, a cage that couldn't be escaped from. He imagined diving

into Monet's painted water and disappearing, but he knew that his elimination from the prison his father had set for him would not stop Appius from hurting those he loved.

On the contrary, if Eric were gone, Appius would hurt them all the more.

Eric was trapped, but at least if he were in Appius's cage, he would provide a convenient target for Appius to maim. And the others would be protected.

He took a deep breath and turned to face his father, who was studying him carefully, even as Eric had been studying the painting. Eric could only imagine how crushed he looked, and for the first time in his life, he didn't keep his sorrow from displaying on his face.

He could see Appius's eyes light up in conquest.

Eric walked across the gallery and nodded at Sophie-Anne and Andre before speaking to Appius.

"You have won," Eric said simply.

"I always do," Appius returned coldly.

Chapter 25: My Island of Hope

From "I Love You" by Sarah McLachlan

*just you and me
on my island of hope
a breath between us could be miles*

*let me surround you
my sea to your shore
let me be the calm you seek*

*oh and every time I'm close to you
there's too much I can't say
and you just walk away*

*and I forgot
to tell you
I love you
and the night's
too long
and cold here
without you*

*I grieve in my condition
for I cannot find the words to say I need you so*

Sookie had gotten on the subway's green line at 86th Street, east of Central Park, and though her stop was at 96th Street—just on the other side of the park and up ten blocks—it took her almost forty minutes to complete her trek there via subway. She'd had to transfer to the blue line and then the red line, in order to travel around the park. And, shadowing her the whole time, was Sigebert.

As Sookie climbed the stairs that would take her to the street, she saw Bobby. He was just whom she'd wanted to see.

Knowing that Eric must have sent their friend to pick her up and knowing that Eric would have figured that she was being followed, Sookie walked straight toward Bobby and let him lead her to his waiting car.

“Is this a good idea?” she asked as soon as they were heading toward Carmichael Tower. “Sigebert was following me.”

Bobby sighed. “Eric didn’t want to think of your being cold, and when Ben told him that you hadn’t taken the car, he texted me.”

Bobby turned to look at her. “Eric also texted that we would talk more later, but if you are here, then I know something had to have gone very wrong tonight. Plus, you look like shit, Sook. And, when I called Ben, he told me that something bad had happened during Eric’s meeting with Appius. He wasn’t sure what.”

Sookie nodded and let the tears that she’d been holding in fall freely.

Bobby handed Sookie a handkerchief, but said nothing more as he drove the short distance to Eric and Sookie’s home.

It was only after he parked in Eric’s extra parking space that Sookie spoke.

“Appius was ready for Eric. The bastard listened as Eric told him about me and our plans. And then *he* talked.”

Bobby turned off the engine and listened in silence as Sookie recounted the exchange between Eric and Appius.

When she was done, the car had grown cold, but neither Sookie nor Bobby moved to get out of it.

Bobby sighed deeply. “Maybe I should just kill Appius—kill him and be done with it. I’ve thought about it so many times.”

Sookie sniffled and shook her head. “You know that would haunt Eric—slowly eat away at him.”

Bobby scoffed. “I could make it look like an accident.”

Sookie looked at him skeptically. “Eric would be able to tell you’d done it. Plus, he wouldn’t want it to be on your conscience.”

Bobby ran his hand through his hair. “I know. And he wouldn’t even blame me for it! He’d blame himself.”

Sookie gave Bobby a sad smile. “Eric’s too good for his own good sometimes.”

“Damned straight,” Bobby agreed. He sighed loudly. “Eric won’t let you stay; you know that—right?”

“I know,” Sookie said. “And even if he could, I couldn’t. After everything, it would,” she paused, “damage me to allow Appius to use me like that, and that would damage Eric more than anything else.”

Bobby sighed and nodded in agreement. “I know. You’re the best thing that’s ever happened to him. You’ve opened him up, but—in doing that—you’ve made him vulnerable,” he said, though his voice held no accusation. “If Appius hurt you, he would succeed in crushing Eric once and for all.”

“I know,” Sookie repeated, this time much more quietly. She looked down at her hands, which were covered by the mittens Gran had knitted for her. “Eric’s going to ask you to arrange something so that I can get away.”

“I can do that,” he said resignedly.

“He can’t know where I’m going—can he?” Sookie asked.

“No,” Bobby whispered. “Appius will be relentless in watching Eric once you are gone. Plus,” he paused, “Eric will insist that you have a clean start. He’ll think you’ll be better off.”

“Without him,” Sookie finished sadly.

“Yes,” Bobby confirmed. “He’ll think that it’s the only way you’ll be free to live your life.”

“I don’t think I could *live* without him,” Sookie said somberly. “I may breathe in and out. I may even smile and make new friends. But I don’t think I’ll be able to truly *live* if he’s not living next to me.”

“Sookie,” Bobby said, “I need to ask you a question.”

She looked up and locked her eyes with his. “You want to ask me how far I would be willing to go to hold onto Eric.”

“Yes,” Bobby confirmed.

“Bobby, can I ask *you* something?”

He nodded.

“Have you ever lied to Eric?”

“No,” he said quietly, “but I have kept a few things from him—to protect him. So I guess that’s lying by omission.”

“Would you be willing to do it again?”

Bobby took in a deep breath. “To help him—yes.”

Sookie realized that she’d been holding her own breath and let it out. The relief on her face was clear. “I need your help, Bobby.”

“You’re not leaving, are you?” he asked.

She shook her head. “It will have to look as if I am though. And,” she added with misery, “I think that Eric will have to believe that I have left.”

Bobby nodded in agreement, knowing that if Eric knew Sookie was nearby, he couldn’t stay away. Bobby had known for a while now that Sookie was the stronger of the two in that way.

“I refuse to abandon Eric to Appius’s clutches,” Sookie said with an almost violent intensity. “I *will* find a way to destroy Appius myself, but it would be easier and faster with your help.”

“You intend to use your lip-reading ability to do that?” Bobby asked.

“Yes. I intend to find information that can be used to buy Eric’s freedom—and, hopefully, bring Appius down in the process.”

Bobby took in the raw determination on Sookie’s face.

They both stayed silent for a moment.

“You didn’t need to ask me how far I would be willing to go to keep him, Bobby,” Sookie said quietly. “I will do anything I have to in order to protect Eric from the fate that Appius has for him, but Eric wouldn’t want me to use my ability like that. And—now that Appius knows about it—he would always be more on his guard if I stayed.”

“But he won’t keep his guard up if he thinks you’re really gone.”

Sookie closed her eyes. “And that means Eric will have to think I’m gone too.”

“Yes,” Bobby said sadly, but with certainty. “Appius can read Eric; he’s always been able to do that.” He sighed loudly. “Appius will only believe you are gone if Eric is broken.”

They were silent for another few minutes.

“Sookie,” Bobby said with resolution in his tone, “I will help you in any way I can. Eric is my family, and you are my family now too. And I love you like you are my sister.”

Sookie reached out and took his hand, her eyes brimming with grateful tears.

Bobby continued. “But you need to know that it might take years to bring down Appius—years to find out what *his* Achilles heel is. I’ve been looking for dirt that could send him to prison for years—ever since Eric and I negotiated their contract. I’ve gotten some things—but not enough to get him out of Eric’s life for good. Plus, now, we have to find ways to counter all of the threats that Appius made tonight. Are you prepared to do this for the long haul if necessary?”

Sookie nodded. “At least if I have to be away from him, I will know that I’m helping him. It will be something to live for.”

“But you might have to give up years for it.”

“As I said, I’d do anything for Eric,” Sookie stated matter-of-factly.

They were silent for a few minutes.

Bobby broke the silence again. “I’ll arrange for you to disappear, just as Eric will ask me to do. But you’ll stay in the area—though not in Manhattan or Brooklyn. There’s a place where I know you will be safe. There, you can stay completely off the grid. You can’t contact anyone you know here—not Amelia or Pam or Thalia or even Henry. And once I get you settled, you won’t be able to leave for a while.” He furrowed his brow. “After a period of time has passed, we’ll work on disguises that you can use and we’ll put you into places where you can observe Appius.”

Sookie shook her head. “There’s a better way; I don’t want to risk Appius or Eric seeing me.” She took a deep breath. “We need to tell Thalia. We should do what we did tonight at the

MET—record all we can of Appius. Thalia could help with that. Tonight, Appius was on the edge of saying that he was responsible for manufacturing false evidence. But, unfortunately, he didn't incriminate himself—beyond insinuating that there was evidence of theft in his possession that he might not turn over to authorities.”

Bobby sighed. “And we can't do anything official about the blackmail, or he'll make good on this threats to release the manufactured evidence.”

Sookie nodded in agreement. “We need to watch Appius and record him if we can. Maybe my lip-reading wouldn't be admissible evidence in court, but if we could add concrete evidence to that, I bet Blake could help us.” She paused for a moment. “I think we should tell him too; he'd be able to tell us as soon as we had enough evidence to take Appius down. But—I think you're right about Henry. If Henry knew, he might tell Eric; plus, Henry's not good at hiding what he's feeling.”

Bobby thought about what Sookie had said for a minute and then nodded. “Okay. Given Thalia's expertise, she can help us get video of Appius so that you can 'listen' to him. But I think we should hold off on telling Blake until we have something promising. We may be limited in what we can do if a cop is in the mix,” he added significantly.

“Okay.” Sookie nodded; she didn't question Bobby. If he thought that more could be done operating “outside the law,” then she was determined to be outside of it with him.

Bobby popped his knuckles as he always did when he was planning. “Thalia can help me to get cameras on Appius as much as possible, and she can be trusted not to tell anyone—not even Henry.”

Sookie nodded. “Or Eric.” Of all of her new circle of friends, Thalia was the one who would be most willing and able to keep her secret. She knew it would be more difficult for

Bobby, but she trusted him to help her get Eric his freedom, and she knew that he loved Eric as much as she did. “And it’ll be my job to study all that video.”

“Until you can catch Appius saying something that we can use to destroy him,” Bobby continued her thought.

“Yes,” Sookie said.

Bobby sighed. “I know you hate the idea of doing something like this. I know it’s why you didn’t want to join the FBI.”

“With Eric, there are different rules,” Sookie said with an edge to her voice. She looked at Bobby with cold, raging eyes. “After what I saw Appius do to Eric tonight, I want that bastard wrecked to the point that he can never hurt Eric again once we’re done with him. *Never.*”

Bobby nodded in agreement.

“I hate that we’re going to have to deceive Eric about all this,” she said in a quiet voice. “I just pray he’ll forgive us.”

“He will,” Bobby said.

She smiled a little. “It’ll be easier for him to do that if we hand him Appius’s head on a platter.”

“*Without* having to kill him to do it,” Bobby added somewhat regretfully.

Sookie looked down at her hands. “Appius went on and on about Pandora tonight.”

“Pandora?” Bobby asked.

“Yes. There was a painting of her in the gallery where he and Eric spoke. He said that Stella was his Pandora and that I was Eric’s.” She looked back up at Bobby. “But Appius was wrong. I intend unleash hell upon *him*. I’m going to make sure that the pain he’s caused Eric returns to him tenfold.”

Bobby smiled a little. “And I’ll help to make sure that you have a box brimming with potential ammunition.”

Sookie closed her eyes again. “Eric said that you would need a week to get things together for me to leave without a trace?” she questioned.

“I could have you out of here by tomorrow,” Bobby said. “But I’ll tell Eric that I need the *full* week.”

Sookie nodded. “Thanks. It’ll be difficult to keep this from him, but I want all the time I can get with Eric. He and I both need it,” she sighed.

“I know.”

“But it’ll be easy too,” Sookie laughed ruefully. “I won’t have to pretend that my heart is breaking. After all, I’ll be leaving him for God only knows how long—maybe forever if we don’t find what we need against Appius.”

Bobby nodded as the two fell into silence once more.

“Did you know that there was one thing left in Pandora’s Box when she supposedly released all evil onto mankind?” Sookie asked quietly.

“What was left?” Bobby asked.

“Hope.”

Eric tried to will the driver to move faster so that he could get home to Sookie. He’d stayed at the party exactly two hours after Sookie had left it. After a while, he’d somehow managed to affect his usual, seemingly carefree countenance as he’d feigned interest in what the people around him were doing and saying.

However, it had all been an act on his part—an act set on a stage made out of rotting wood that he was afraid he might fall through at any moment. At one point, Pam had tried to ask him what was wrong and why Sookie wasn't with him. But Eric—incapable of speaking about it for fear that he might not be able to “perform his role” if he did—had simply shaken his head.

The only useful thing he had accomplished during the two hours that he moved among the party guests was arranging for Bobby to pick up Sookie. He should have known that she wouldn't take the car, and she was rarely one to take a taxi even if she was carrying cash. When he'd imagined her walking in the cold of the New York night, he'd almost sprinted away from the party to go and pick her up himself.

But he couldn't. There were “rules” for him to follow at an NP party, and the last thing he could afford to do now was to break more of Appius's unspoken rules. No. He would need to seem to be the model of obedience—at least until Sookie was safely away.

He glanced down at his watch and cursed the Saturday night traffic. All that he wanted was to be home. He had only a week—only seven days—to store enough happiness to last him his whole life. And the clock was already ticking down the time.

Sookie lay in the bed that she'd been sharing with Eric for the previous eight months. Earlier, she'd had on some sexy lingerie under her dress, which she'd hoped Eric would discover for himself when they arrived home *together* after the party. But that wasn't to be.

So she had taken off the silky garments and lay naked under the covers. She was anxious to be next to Eric, and she didn't want anything to distract from that.

Ned was lying over the covers next to her, seemingly dead to the world in the way only kittens seemed to be able to achieve; however, his ears perked up as he heard the soft whoosh of the elevator doors.

Immediately, he jumped off the bed and trotted off to investigate.

“You’re here,” Eric said as he entered the bedroom a few seconds later. His voice had a faraway quality to it—almost as if he believed that she’d been a figment of his imagination from the start.

“I’m here,” Sookie said.

Eric hesitated at the doorway for a moment, seemingly taking her in. She watched his chest rise and fall as he took deep breaths.

“Come here,” she whispered, letting the covers slip from her body and sitting up in the bed.

Not even a second later, his lips were crashing into hers, their tongues desperate to taste. Both of them took their hands to various items of his clothing. His jacket was pushed off of his shoulders even as his belt was removed. His tie was loosened and discarded as his pants were unzipped and fell over his hips. Shoes were kicked off, and socks and trousers were removed in swift motions as the top buttons of his shirt were opened until impatient hands ripped the rest. The only care that was taken was with the amber cufflinks, holding his shirt on at the wrists, but those were deftly removed, even as his boxer-briefs were pulled down his body.

Once he was as bare as she, Sookie lay back onto the bed and welcomed his body as he lay over her, their flesh touching as much as possible.

They resumed their kissing as their hands replaced the task of clothing removal with the mission of touching each other everywhere.

“I love you,” he said against her lips as he entered her. “I love you,” he repeated as she felt warm tears trailing down her cheeks. She wasn’t sure if they were her tears or his. Or both.

It didn’t matter.

He thrust into her in long strokes as she wrapped her legs around his slender hips, urging him to go even deeper.

“I love you,” he repeating, again and again.

“I love you,” she responding with chants of her own.

With the way that their bodies knew each other and the desperation of their emotions, it didn’t take long for them to reach completion.

They fell asleep wrapped up in each other’s arms, the room still echoing with the sounds of their repeated vows of love amidst their tears.

Chapter 26: Etchings

Wrapped up in their afghan from Gran, Sookie and Eric watched the sunlight tease the Hudson River through the January clouds. The morning of Sunday, January 13 was crisp and cold, but the couple lounged together outside anyway—enjoying the warmth of each other, the blanket, and their coffee.

“Should we talk about it?” Sookie asked.

“Talk about when you’re leaving?” Eric asked in an almost strangled voice.

“Yes,” she confirmed.

“Just once. Just now,” he said. “Then,” he paused and choked back a sob, “I can’t anymore. I can’t.”

“Okay,” she said as she leaned more fully against him.

“We can’t tell anyone but Bobby,” Eric said with regret.

“I know,” Sookie responded, hating the fact that she wouldn’t be able to say goodbye to all of her friends—her family.

“Bobby called me this morning while you were in the bathroom. He’s already making the plans,” Eric said quietly as he caressed her hair. “We’ll need to do everything as we normally do this week,” he added, a relentless edge to his voice.

Sookie realized that Eric needed the “normal” just as much as they needed to project it for Appius.

He went on, “We’ll go to work and come home. We’ll live as if everything is the same. We’ll go out to our favorite sushi restaurant on Friday night. On Saturday, there is a brunch fundraiser for the children of the victims of 9-11. Appius and Sophie-Anne will be there, and I had already planned to go with Isabel. That morning at 11:30 a.m.—after I leave for the

brunch—Bobby will come to get you. You can take one suitcase and Ned’s travel carrier. But you’ll need to leave your driver’s license and passport here, along with your phone.”

“I can’t take Ned,” Sookie said immediately.

“Please,” Eric said. “Bobby said it would be okay. And I don’t want to imagine you,” he paused, “alone. Please.”

“What about you? You’ll be alone here.”

“Please, Sookie,” he said with a little sob. “Please.”

“Okay,” she relented.

“Thank you,” he responded with a sigh.

They were silent for a while.

“Will we go to the MET today—as usual?” he asked hopefully.

“Yes,” she answered. “I already drew a gallery number: 690.”

She could feel his lips turning up a bit into a smile as he pressed them against her neck.

“We’ll sneak out the back so the Berts don’t know we’ve left.”

“Good idea,” Sookie said, forcing herself to chuckle, though any kind of smiling or laughter was difficult. It would be her last time at the museum for the foreseeable future. It would be their last Sunday together until Appius could be defeated. But for Eric—and for herself too—she was determined make it a “normal” day.

To their great credit, Milos and Jack didn’t behave as if anything was wrong when Sookie and Eric entered the museum. The only thing different was that Ben was waiting at the front desk. He motioned for Eric and Sookie to come over to him, his eyes conveying his concern.



“Tony’s finishing up with the video records he captured of Appius last night,” he conveyed. “We’ll have a disc for you to take this afternoon.”

Eric nodded. “Thank you.”

“It’s no problem,” Ben said. He intuited that many things were very wrong with the couple in front of him, but he could also tell that they didn’t want to think about them. He wouldn’t make them. “Where to today?” Ben asked mustering up a little smile.

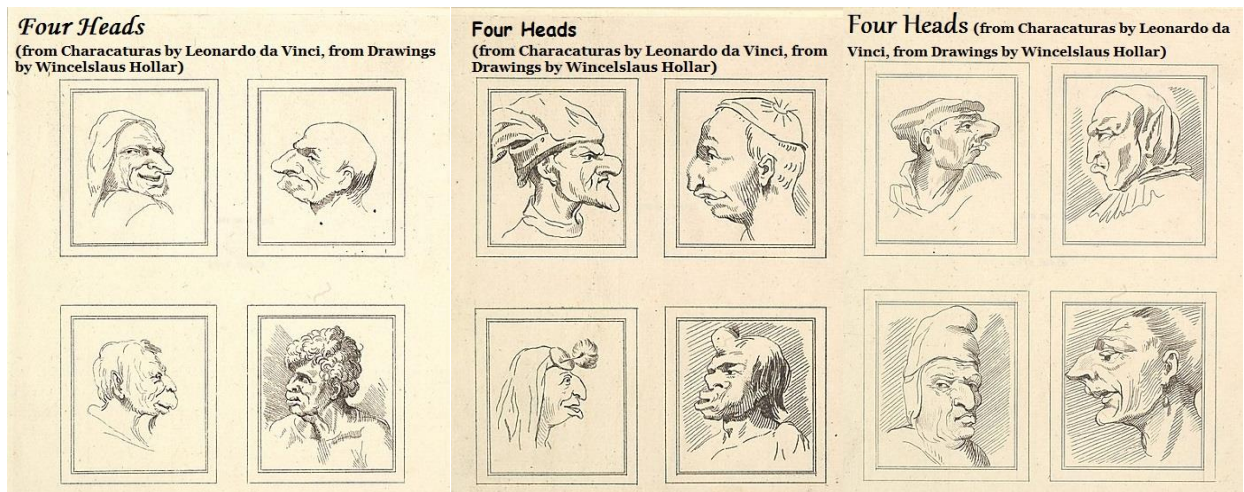
“Gallery 680,” Sookie said with a little smile of her own.

“Ah—I like that one,” Ben responded. “It’s full of drawings and prints from the museum’s permanent collection. That gallery is one of the ones that gets changed up quite a bit.”

“Oh?” Eric asked with interest.

“Yeah,” Ben informed. “There are over a million drawings and prints in the permanent collection, and new ones come in all the time. A new selection of them goes up in Gallery 680 every three months or so. Right now, there’s a whole bunch of stuff highlighting the Italian Renaissance in there.” He chuckled. “Just wait till you see the drawings based on Leonardo de

Vinci's stuff." Ben leaned in conspiratorially. "We've got Milos convinced that he looks just like one of them. Be sure to give him some funny looks when you come out for lunch."



Eric and Sookie both laughed at that, and Ben couldn't help but to notice that they looked surprised at their laughter. It was almost as if they had believed that they wouldn't be laughing again.

"Well—on your way," Ben said, shooing them off before the suddenly more jovial pair sobered up again. "There's a lot of stuff to see up there."

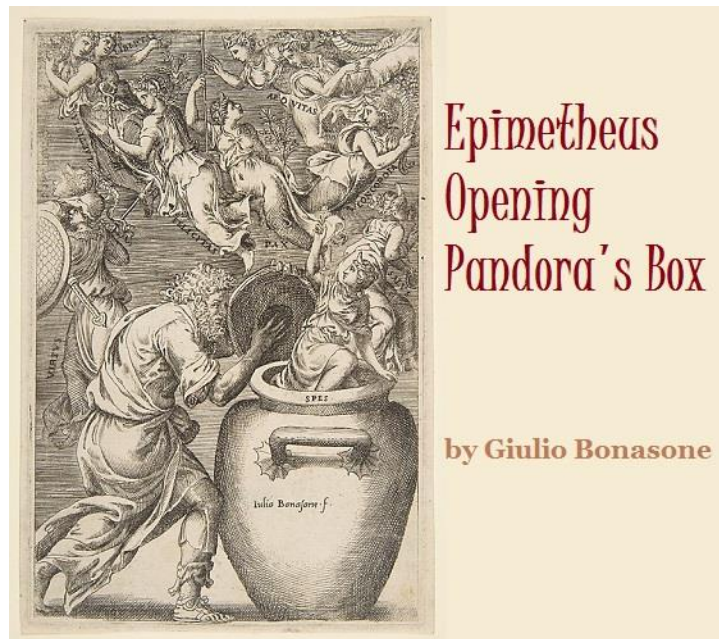
Eric and Sookie both smiled at Ben before they took the main stairs up to the second floor.

The irony of the situation was lost on neither Eric nor Sookie as they looked at the etching by Giulio Bonasone. They'd been in Gallery 690 for almost two hours and had walked it together, often hand in hand, though Sookie stopped them every once in a while so that she could take a few notes in her notebook.



They had laughed a little when they'd seen the grotesque faces that Ben had told them about; they had speculated about which one the others had teased Milos about. However, now they were not laughing at all.

The last engraving they looked at was called *Epimetheus Opening Pandora's Box*.



Eric chuckled ruefully. “I remember reading about this alternative to the Pandora myth. In it Pandora is not to blame for the world’s problems at all. She is given to Epimetheus by the gods as his bride. And her box—or jar in this case—is simply one of her possessions.”

“And *he* foolishly opened the jar containing all the world’s ills,” Sookie finished. She chuckled. “Sadly, it’s not the popular version of the myth.”

Eric smirked a little. “Women always end up getting blamed for all the shit that happens in the world.”

“Well—we *are* harpies,” Sookie deadpanned. “And men *are* powerless to resist our charms.”

Eric chuckled and bent down to kiss her forehead. “So true.”

“Do you want to go to our gallery?” she asked as they moved to leave the room.

“Of course,” he responded. “Why wouldn’t we?”

“It’s right next to where you were last night—with Appius.”

Eric sighed. “I know, but this is our . . .” He stopped midsentence as his voice thickened.

He didn’t need to complete his sentence. She knew what he meant. It was their last week coming to the museum like this, and Eric wasn’t even bolstered by the same possibility of hope for the future that Sookie was.

She wanted to tell him about her and Bobby’s plan. She ached to tell him, but she refrained. Eric would try to stop her if he knew. Or he would inadvertently give something away to Appius if his eyes held hope in them.

“Then let’s go,” she said, smiling at him.

Chapter 27: A Meeting with the Devil

“The devil can cite Scripture for his purpose.”—William Shakespeare

The week ran by more quickly than any Eric and Sookie had ever experienced. Sunday night, they’d invited Pam over so that they could tell her that Appius was aware of her lying and that he’d threatened her position at the company. Pam had gone ashen white before Eric had assured her that it would be fine. When she asked why Sookie had left the party at the museum so abruptly the night before, Eric claimed that Appius had said some cruel things, but that it wasn’t anything that he and Sookie couldn’t deal with. He’d claimed that he and Sookie were simply postponing their “official out” date until his birthday.

That done, Sookie and Eric tried to act as ‘normal’ as possible. Each day, they hurried through their work so that they could get home early. There, they cooked together and played with Ned. They talked a lot about work or art or what they were reading, but they didn’t talk about the future. And Appius’s name wasn’t spoken.

Unbeknownst to Eric, Sookie had called Sid Matt and had arranged for Eric to have power of attorney when it came to the remaining aspects of Gran’s estate. Sid Matt had sent the paperwork by courier on Wednesday, and Sookie had it signed, notarized, and in the mail back to Sid Matt by the next day. He’d also sent her all the necessary paperwork she needed to finalize the transfer of the Mulberry house to Jason. Hoyt and Jessica Fortenberry had made an offer on the farmhouse, and—though their offer was slightly under the market value for the property—Sookie accepted it, so Sid Matt was able to send that paperwork too. Once the sale went through, Sookie knew that Eric would make sure the money went to Hadley, Remy, and Hunter.

Of course—in addition to practical things—Eric and Sookie also made love during their last week together. *A lot.*

Sometimes it was slow and tender. At other times it was hard and fast. By Friday morning, they were sleep-deprived and red-eyed, but neither one of them cared. They were on borrowed time, and they both knew that they could sleep once they were no longer together.

Eric looked at the wall clock in his office. It read 11:00 a.m., which was the time he would be leaving to meet Isabel for the charity brunch the next day. Suddenly, the fact that he had only 24 hours left with Sookie hit him like a ton of bricks, and he ran into his private bathroom to empty his stomach.

“You okay?” Clancy asked when Eric came back into his office.

“Yeah. It’s probably just a touch of food poisoning,” Eric lied.

Andre picked that exact moment to come into Eric’s office. He had a sneer on his face. “You look unwell, Eric. I hope it’s not a recurrence of that bad *flu* you had a couple of weeks ago,” he said sarcastically.

Surprised by Andre’s disrespectful tone, Clancy looked at the man with confusion, but wisely left Eric’s office without a word after Eric gave him his next task to complete.

Andre closed the door after Clancy and then sat down in Eric’s chair as if it were his office.

“Your father wishes for an update on Miss Stackhouse,” Andre said as he brazenly thumbed through some documents on the top of Eric’s desk.

“Do you know what I look forward to, Andre?” Eric asked with spite in his tone.

“What?”

“The day I don’t have to work in the same building as you. When I take over as CEO, none of my father’s lapdogs will be welcome here anymore.”

Andre rolled his eyes. “Without Appius in charge, I wouldn’t want to work here anyway. You really *are* the lesser man,” he added malevolently. “Now—what should I tell Appius about Miss Stackhouse?”

“That he can fuck off,” Eric seethed as he crossed his arms over his chest.

“Now that’s not nice,” Andre said with a smirk. “It would be a pity if your father had to put himself out by going all the way *down* to the third floor to visit Miss Stackhouse himself, and that is Pamela’s floor too.” He grinned evilly. “Appius keeps on forgetting that he needs to punish her for helping you. Perhaps, going down there would be just the reminder he needs.”

Eric glared at Andre. “What does he want to know?” Eric choked out.

“Where are you in the process of arranging for *our* Miss Stackhouse to have *appropriate* living arrangements?” Andre asked, looking at his computer tablet as if he were checking a meeting agenda. Hell—he probably was.

Eric sighed. “I’ve been in touch with Paul Carmichael. He has a building with some newly renovated apartments in Gramercy Park. Sookie will be closer to work,” Eric said stiffly. “We’re meeting Paul on Monday evening to take a look at one of the apartments.”

“Does Miss Stackhouse know about this?” Andre asked with a sly smile.

“I plan to tell her at dinner tonight,” Eric said, his jaw clenched.

Andre typed a few notes into his tablet. “Gramercy Park will be acceptable. Just remember—nothing *too* nice. We don’t want Miss Stackhouse spoiled now.”

Eric growled when Andre showed no signs of getting up. “What else do you want?”

“Appius would like to meet with you and Sookie in his office after lunch today. He wants to make sure that your little floozy understands what will be expected of her.”

“No!” Eric said gruffly.

“*Your* presence at the meeting is not required. You have been invited only because Appius believes Miss Stackhouse will respond better with you there. But you would do well to remember that you do *not* play an integral role in your father’s plans for the girl.”

Eric closed his eyes tightly. When he opened them Andre was smiling widely and had stood up.

“Appius really despises you—you know,” Andre said.

“I am well aware,” Eric responded.

“I know only *some* of the reasons why he hates you. Something about your mother—correct?” he asked in his reptilian voice.

Eric nodded.

“I have been told that she and Appius used to share a lover and that the problem stems from him.”

Once more, Eric nodded.

“Appius is an excellent lover,” Andre commented.

Eric cringed.

“However, I do not delude myself that he loves me. I suit his needs; that is all.” Andre leered and took a step toward Eric. “Have you ever had a male lover, Eric? You *are* quite handsome, and I could make things easier between you and Appius. I might even be able to convince him not to use your Miss Stackhouse quite as often as he plans to. I believe you would find me an *excellent* ally and quite *discreet*. You could just close your eyes and fuck me. I wouldn’t even be offended if you yelled out your tart’s name when you did,” he chuckled.

“Go. To. Hell!” Eric said through tightened lips.

“Oh well,” Andre said with a shrug of his shoulders. “Perhaps you will change your mind someday. Who knows? You might find yourself in need of an ally. And I have no doubt—no doubt whatsoever—that you could learn to enjoy the *variety* that a male lover could bring.”

“Go. To. Hell!” Eric repeated, this time louder.

Andre chuckled. “Shall I tell Appius that he can expect you and Miss Stackhouse in his office at 1:00?”

Eric glared at the man, but nodded.

After Andre left, Eric ran back into his bathroom and vomited everything else that was left in his stomach.

“Miss Stackhouse,” Appius said as he extended his hand to shake hers. His voice was warm and friendly, the exact opposite of everything Sookie knew to be true about him.

“Mr. Northman,” she responded somewhat timidly. He took her hand, and she immediately wished she could wash it. It wasn’t that his touch was oily or his palm sweaty. No. The problem was that she knew what he was inside of the false package he was presenting. She couldn’t help but to wonder in that moment if Eric had ever received a congenial shake of his father’s hand—fake or otherwise. And that thought angered her.

“Have a seat, Miss Stackhouse, or may I call you Susanna?” he asked, his voice still warm.

Sookie glanced at Eric. His face was neutral, so unlike the man she knew when they were alone, and just as much of an act as the face that Appius was projecting.

“Um—Susanna’s my given name, but I like to go by Sookie,” she said, knowing that she needed to carefully keep up her act during the meeting. She wanted to come off as meek and easily influenced. She wanted to seem like she was dependent upon Eric. She wanted to seem just as introverted as Nora likely reported that she was. She needed for Appius to believe that she was naïve and that she didn’t know much about Eric and his father’s relationship at all.

“You must call me Appius,” the older man said with a sincere-looking smile. Sookie was sure in that moment that she was looking at the devil himself.

“Thanks,” she responded with a nervous smile of her own. Truth be told, under Appius’s scrutiny, pretending to be intimidated and a little frightened wasn’t difficult for Sookie.

“Have a seat,” Appius said, gesturing toward one of the two chairs facing his desk. Eric took the other one, and Sookie immediately reached out for his hand—just as they’d planned. Eric looked at his father nervously, but then took her hand—again, just as they’d planned.

“Can I get anyone a drink?” Andre asked, taking up a position to the side of Appius.

“I’ll take a scotch,” Appius said, “the St. Magdalene from 1982. Do you enjoy scotch, Miss Stackhouse?”

“I—uh—have to go back to work after this,” she said uncertainly.

“Not at all!” Appius said with a smile. “Why don’t you and Eric take the rest of the day off after this meeting? I have been told that you have dinner reservations this evening. In fact, I also hear that you will be doing some apartment shopping with my son this coming Monday. Why don’t you take that day off too?”

Eric shifted uncomfortably as Sookie looked at him. “Eric? Apartment shopping?”

Eric forced a smile. “I just made the arrangements this morning, dear. I was going to tell you about it at dinner tonight.”

“Oh,” Appius said with feigned apology, “I’m so sorry I let the cat out of the bag.” He lifted a brow in Eric’s direction.

In that moment, Sookie felt the full force of Appius’s manipulation. He was truly a master, and if things were as they *seemed* to be, Sookie would have just lost a little faith in Eric and developed a little trust in Appius.

She affected a hurt look and directed it at Eric. Though they both knew it was not real, Eric couldn’t help but to cringe a little.

“Already?” she asked Eric. “You didn’t tell me that I’d have to move out of your house so soon.”

“It would be best to get you settled into your own place,” Eric said with pleading eyes that conveyed his true pain. “Remember how I told you that you could decorate the place yourself? You are looking forward to that part—right? And you’ll be so much closer to work. It will be,” he paused, “much more convenient for both of us.”

Though still affecting a crestfallen look, Sookie nodded with resignation. “Okay.”

“Should you need any help with decorating, Sookie,” Appius valiantly offered, “I have a person on retainer. Sophie-Anne swears by her.”

Sookie offered Appius a timid smile and tried to bring it to her eyes. “Thank you. That’s very kind of you.”

Appius waved off her words as if the favor would be nothing.

“Now,” Appius said, “how about that scotch.”

Sookie looked nervously at the bottles. “I’m afraid that I don’t like hard liquor that much.”

Appius nodded. “Andre, bring Sookie a glass of white wine then. Actually no—bring us all glasses of champagne. There is *much* to celebrate. Sookie will soon be getting a new home, and she is getting a new job too!”

Andre quickly pulled a chilled bottle of bubbly from the mini-bar’s refrigerator and opened it with a practiced flourish. Soon there were four glasses poured and distributed.

“To you, Sookie,” Appius said, lifting his glass, “and to your *talent*.”

Sookie raised her glass to toast and then took a small sip. “I’m afraid I won’t be of much use to you,” Sookie said almost apologetically. “I’m sort of out of practice with my lip reading, but,” she paused and bit her bottom lip before glancing nervously at Eric, “if it helps protect the company from people like Felipe de Castro, then I’d be happy to do what I can.”

“That’s all that we can ask for, Sookie,” Appius said in a slithery voice. “And we really won’t be taking you away from your regular work that much—just a few company parties and board meetings and the like. And my wife, Sophie-Anne would like to get to know you as well—if you’d be amenable to that. She has need for more female friends near to her own age, and—as you might imagine—some members of our social circle lack sincerity.”

“Uh—Mrs. Northman wants to meet me—be friends with *me*?” Sookie asked, her voice sounding a little awestruck.

“Of course!” Appius assured. “She loves getting to know new people, especially intriguing ones.”

“Uh—I’m not really that intriguing,” Sookie said bashfully.

“My son seems to think you are,” Appius smiled, “and that is enough for me. Why—when Eric told me about your ability and suggested ways that you might be able to help the company—I simply *had* to meet you. And Sophie-Anne feels the same.”

“Thanks,” Sookie said. She even managed to look embarrassed and to blush as if she’d been complimented—though it was thinking about kicking Appius and Andre in the nuts that actually made her skin redden.

“There’s a party at the end of next week, my dear,” Appius said as he sipped his champagne. “It’s nothing major—just people from the publishing industry getting together to discuss new trends and such. I would love for you to attend.”

“Um—okay,” Sookie answered nervously. She squeezed Eric’s hand a little more. “Eric will be there too—right?”

Appius narrowed his eyes a little, though his critical look was aimed at his son as if Eric were to blame for Appius’s next statement. “Eric *did* explain that *he* didn’t want for you two to be known as a couple—correct?”

Sookie bit her lip and nodded. “Yes.” She felt her eyes brimming with tears; that part wasn’t an act as she watched Eric have to withstand his father’s cruelty.

Appius leaned forward and motioned to Andre, who seemed to magically produce a box of Kleenex for Sookie.

“This is a difficult world we live in, Sookie, and people of worth, such as yourself, are often discounted because of their backgrounds.” Appius spoke with regret as if he wasn’t one of the chief members of the very society that would judge her. “Take it from me: the truest loves must sometimes be hidden so that they are preserved. But those are also the most cherished.” He looked at Andre warmly. Sookie wondered if—for just a moment—she was witnessing something real, but then she remembered to whom she was speaking.

Appius sat forward a little. “I am going to share with you something that few people know. Is that okay, Sookie?”

She nodded her permission.

“I am in a relationship with Andre. He and I love each other—deeply—but society would not approve, so we must hide our feelings. Thankfully, Sophie-Anne understands and loves us both. That is the only reason why we can be together. But I cannot be open about my love for Andre—not in public.” He sighed.

“I’m sorry,” Sookie said, trying to act as if Appius was telling her a secret she didn’t already know. “I’m sorry you have to hide that way.”

Appius sighed. “We all have to hide sometimes—for the sake of others. Do you understand, Sookie?” Appius asked, giving her a penetrating look.

“I’m trying,” Sookie said in a stilted voice as she glanced at Eric. “And some things are worth sacrificing for,” she said, meaning every word of that sentence.

“Exactly,” Appius said with a benevolent smile. “Because I cannot escort Andre to the party and must stay by Sophie-Anne’s side, would it be okay with you if Andre escorted you to the party? I believe that Eric is planning to bring Isabel Edgington—are you not?” he asked his son.

Nobody missed the very real cringe from Eric.

“Yes,” Eric confirmed, his voice slightly shaky.

Sookie quickly wiped away a tear from her own eye, even as she was clearly holding others back.

“Do not despair, Sookie,” Appius said kindly. “It is not all bad. You will have a lovely apartment and the means to furnish it. And you will be receiving a raise, of course, for your,” he paused, “*consulting* work.”

“A raise?” she asked.

“Certainly,” Appius said. “Do you find twice your current salary adequate for a start?”

“Double what I make now?” Sookie asked incredulously.

Appius smiled. “Yes. And bonuses for when you provide information that helps the company. Just think of all the good you could do for your family. Eric told me you have a little nephew who will likely lose his mother to AIDS soon.” Appius shook his head as if regretful. “That’s a terrible situation, but imagine the *help* you could provide to the little child.”

Sookie nodded. “Thank you, but I still don’t know if I’m worth all this fuss or all the money you’re offering me.”

“I’m sure you are,” Appius said confidently—with something akin to paternal pride in his tone. “Now,” he added, finishing his champagne, “why don’t you kids get out of here and begin your weekend.” He winked at Sookie.

“Thank you,” Sookie said again even as she awkwardly looked for somewhere to put down her glass. Andre quickly swooped in and took it. She noticed that Eric’s glass of champagne had not been touched.

Eric stood and she stood with him, their hands still twined together. His hand managed to tell her everything that his face couldn’t in that moment. The rub of his thumb on her palm. The soft but firm pressure of his grasp. The electricity that flowed between them because of the shared touch. The way his hand engulfed hers as if longing to protect her.

“I will see you Tuesday, then, Father,” Eric said, almost choking out the last word, but keeping his countenance relatively calm.

“Yes. And do not worry. We will run the ship well enough without you. After all, your priority should be getting Sookie settled in,” Appius said with a smile. “And I will see you a week from today for the little party, my dear,” Appius said, turning his seemingly sincere smile

to Sookie. “I imagine that my daughter, Pamela, can help you select a dress. The one you had on the other night at the NP party was breathtaking.” His voice became tinged with regret. “I just wish you’d have been able to stay a bit longer that night so that we could have met then.”

“I—uh—wasn’t feeling that well,” she stammered by way of explanation as she glanced at Eric, whose eyes were lowered to the floor with guilt.

“Ah—then it was best that you didn’t stay too long, my dear,” Appius said, his voice seemingly full of concern. “We wouldn’t want you to be unwell.”

“You’re very kind,” Sookie said with a smile.

“Be sure to take good care of our Sookie,” Appius said in Eric’s direction. “She’s a wonderful asset to this company.”

“I will,” Eric said stiffly before leading her out of the office and to the elevator.

Sookie knew that there was surveillance equipment tracing their path through the building, and Eric had told her that some of the cameras—like the ones in the elevators—even had audio capabilities, so it was necessary to keep up their act.

“He was nicer than I thought he’d be,” Sookie said quietly, looking up at Eric and biting her lip a little, as if she was nervous about his reaction.

Eric’s body tensed up. “My father can be very engaging.” He forced a smile and brought her hand to his lips.

Sookie leaned into Eric a little as the elevator continued its descent to her floor. “He *did* make me feel better about all this,” she said quietly, “about the lip-reading thing.”

Eric closed his eyes, and pain was etched onto his beautiful face for a moment. “That’s good.” He kissed her forehead.

“Are you—uh—sure your father wouldn’t approve of us getting married? I mean—could you ask him?” Sookie asked.

“Things are complicated, Sookie,” Eric sighed. “I can’t ask him.”

“Oh,” Sookie said as she lowered her head and tried to hide her tears from Eric.

“Why don’t you go inform Sam that you will be taking the rest of today and Monday off?”

Sookie nodded but didn’t look up. “Do you think I’ll get into trouble for it?”

“Of course not,” Eric said with a forced smile. “If Sam says anything, have him talk to Andre. In fact, I imagine that Andre has already informed Sam of my father’s,” he paused, “generosity.”

Sookie’s eyes rose a little and she nodded. “Okay. Um—should we just meet at your house then?”

Eric nodded. “Yes. And take a taxi this time,” he indicated, pulling out his wallet and handing her some cash.

“The subway’s fine,” Sookie said, trying to give the money back.

“Will you humor me?” Eric asked. “It’s cold outside, and my father *did* ask that I take good care of you.”

Sookie brightened a little. “Okay. Just this once though. But—uh—can’t I ride with you this one time? Since we’re leaving at the same time and all?”

Eric smiled somewhat stiffly and gave her a quick kiss on the cheek. “I have a bit more work to finish up, so I’ll meet you at my house in an hour or so,” he said as the elevator got to her floor. It broke Eric’s spirit just a little more as he used the word “my” and not “our.”

“Oh—okay,” Sookie said timidly as she put the money into her jacket pocket and exited the elevator.

Though her and Eric’s encounter with Appius had been an act—and a successful one at that—she didn’t feel like celebrating. The very real look of desolation in her beloved’s eyes made her want to curl up in a corner and cry.

But she didn’t. She couldn’t.

Chapter 28: A Poem without Words

“A picture is a poem without words.”—Horace

As soon as Sookie and Eric left his office, Appius pulled up the program that gave him access to all the security feeds in the building. Quickly, he accessed the one for his private elevator and listened to the conversation between his son and Miss Stackhouse.

“She is a little dim,” Andre observed wryly. “And mousy,” he added with distaste.

“Her demeanor is understandable, given her family background,” Appius commented, even as he replayed the part of the video which showed his son’s discomfort.

“Why play nice with her at all?” Andre asked.

“If I can win Miss Stackhouse’s affections—make her count on me *more* than she counts on Eric—then he will lose her completely. I imagine that she’s the kind of woman who would have only one lover at a time.”

“You intend to sleep with her?” Andre asked incredulously.

“Perhaps,” Appius confirmed. “I cannot think of anything that would hurt Eric more, except—perhaps—if I produced a little bastard with her.” He smiled heartlessly.

Andre’s face betrayed his aversion to the idea. “I can’t imagine that being her lover would be pleasurable for you.”

Appius shrugged. “The pleasure would be in taking what Eric loves. You saw the way he looked at her.”

Andre nodded. “Yes. And you should have seen him in his office earlier. I thought he was going to actually strike me a few times.”

“I did see him,” Appius chuckled, pointing to the monitor. “Offering your help to Eric if he became your lover was an inspired idea.”

Andre smirked. “Yes—I knew *that* wouldn’t fly, but it was certainly fun to see his reaction.”

“Who know?” Appius mused. “Perhaps, you can work on him, even as I work on her.” He winked at Andre.

“You would allow me to fuck him?” Andre asked.

Appius shrugged. “More hurt for him and more pleasure for you? Of course, I would allow it—*if* you truly do find him attractive.”

Andre smiled sinisterly. “It would be fun to toy with him—even if I am not ultimately successful in seducing him.”

“My thoughts about Miss Stackhouse exactly,” Appius mused.

“Do you think that you will be able to win the Stackhouse girl?”

Appius shrugged. “Perhaps. She was obviously impressed by me, though it is clear that her first impression was soiled by information *he* has given her.”

“It is doubtful that he confides in her much,” Andre indicated with a sneer.

“Agreed,” Appius said, clicking on the feed to Eric’s office. Appius had long ago given himself complete access to Eric’s office. It had the normal video feeds that all the private offices in the building had; however, it was also bugged.

Appius contemplated the screen, which showed a very angry-looking Eric getting a glass of scotch and downing it quickly before pouring another and walking into his private bathroom. “Of course,” Appius said contemplatively, “in truth, I’d prefer not to take my seduction of Miss Stackhouse all the way. I find that I have been much less fond of sexual encounters with women in recent years.” He looked up at Andre. “No offense to Sophie-Anne, of course.”

Andre chuckled. "I'm sure she wouldn't take any offense considering her own preferences."

Appius nodded and continued, "But even if I decide not to sleep with Sookie, having her count on me and trust me so that I can undermine her relationship with Eric will be enough. After all, if I *were* to sleep with her, Eric might cut ties with her. And I don't want that. I want to be able to use her against him for at least a few years. Thus, I will have to play it by ear in regards to Miss Stackhouse," he added with a put-upon sigh.

Andre smiled and approached his lover; he unbuttoned Appius's suit jacket. "You need to relax, my love."

Appius smirked. "Do you have something in mind to relax me?"

Andre nodded and began to plant feather-light kisses onto Appius's neck. "I hope that my making you happy has contributed to your dissatisfaction with others," he cooed as he ran his fingers over Appius's broad chest.

Appius smiled a little. "Yes—you are a wonderful lover," he groaned as Andre leaned forward and began to place harder, open-mouthed kisses on his jaw line. "Lock the door," Appius ordered.

Andre gave Appius a nod and quickly complied. As he walked back toward his lover, he purred, "Would you like me bent over your desk or on my knees in front of it?"

"On your knees," Appius said with a smirk.

Eric had had very little time to get Sookie a warning after Andre's visit that morning. And there had been even less time to come up with a plan about how to choreograph the meeting

with Appius. It had needed to be perfect, lest Appius become suspicious at the worst possible time—the day before Sookie was scheduled to leave New York.

Eric could admit that a part of him—a small fraction—hoped for a screw-up, which would necessitate Sookie’s staying longer. But the biggest part of him wasn’t going to rest easily until he knew that she was away—safely free from Appius and his fucked up games.

In the end, it had been Bobby’s help that had saved the day—again. Eric had texted his friend with the information about the meeting Appius had called. And then Bobby had texted Sookie. Bobby had ditched his current tracker, the slippery Franklin Mott, who had begun shadowing him earlier that week. Luckily, as slick as Franklin was, Bobby was even more elusive.

For instance, Franklin was currently entrenched across the street from Bobby’s house even though Bobby had left it hours before via a little-known rooftop passage from his building to the next, which had been put in by one of Bobby’s less scrupulous neighbors.

Even as Bobby had eluded his shadow, Sookie had been overt about her movements, going to a nearby café with Holly for lunch. As Wybert had watched her from the front of the café, Bobby had slipped into the back and then into the women’s restroom, where he’d met up with Sookie to plan what to do during the meeting with Appius. Eric had been able to sneak several texts from his private bathroom, which—thanks to a bug detector from Thalia—he knew wasn’t monitored. His sickness earlier gave him a cover. And a plan had been formed.

Sookie would act appropriately reverent and ignorant around Appius. Eric would act frustrated—guilty even—certainly not a stretch for him, given the situation.

Eric knew that Appius would try to accomplish one of two things during the meeting. Either he would threaten and intimidate Sookie, or he would cajole and make her promises. Both

strategies would be designed to make Sookie doubt Eric—to begin driving a wedge between them. Appius had opted for the second strategy. He'd been nice to Sookie, charming even. He'd offered her paternal, caring words. And he'd done it all while trying to introduce a splinter of distrust between Sookie and Eric.

Appius had been the one to tell Sookie about the apartment hunting. *He* had been the one to offer her a raise in pay and remind her of the good she could do with it. *He* had been the one to alleviate her fears about her and Eric's changing situation. And Eric had been the one to receive the blame for that change. Yes—if the situation had been as Appius thought it was—his strategy would have been perfect.

Sookie had played her part flawlessly—from the moment that Eric had gone to her office to get her five minutes before their meeting time with Appius to the moment he'd left her—ostensibly to go back to work.

Eric had no doubt that Sookie had convinced Appius that she was naïve and meek—easy prey for a predator of Appius's ilk.

Appius couldn't have been more incorrect.

Eric had understood well that his father's invitation to leave work early was predicated upon Eric's finishing up a "list" of things to do that Appius had sent over that morning. Again, Appius had wanted it to be *Eric* who disappointed Sookie by not accompanying her home. Appius likely wanted Sookie to interpret the situation as Eric prioritizing work over her, even when the president of the company had told Eric he could have the afternoon off.

But Eric was even more efficient at his work when he was angry. And given the fact that this was to be his last night with Sookie anyway, Eric had cleared his schedule and pre-prepared a number of unnecessary reports that he'd anticipated his father might ask for. Thus, just forty-

five minutes after he'd said goodbye to Sookie, he was getting into a cab and changing their dinner reservation for earlier. They'd eaten from their customary hotdog stand the Sunday before, and he wanted very much to take her to the first restaurant he'd ever taken her to so that she could get her favorite dinner before she left town, but that was only the start of his plans for the night.

Sookie was sitting on the couch, petting a very happy Ned, when Eric texted her, saying that he was on his way home and that he'd changed their dinner reservation from 7:00 p.m. to 5:00 p.m. Sookie was glad about that, actually. She was anxious for more time alone with Eric; however, she couldn't help but to appreciate his gesture of wanting to take her to the site where they'd had their first official "date."

It was also her favorite restaurant, and she understood well that he had made the reservation so that she could enjoy it one last time. She glanced at the clock. It was just after 4:00 p.m. If traffic wasn't bad, Eric would be home in half an hour, and then they'd leave for the restaurant soon after that.

Sookie rubbed Ned's belly once more and then went to change clothes. She'd already decided that she would wear the dress Pam had bought her for Christmas, something she'd yet to have an occasion for. She took the time to curl her long blond hair into soft waves, choosing the style because Eric didn't seem to be able to keep his hands off of her hair when it was like that.

She smiled. "Like cat-nip—eh?" she asked a lounging Ned, who seemed to look up at her with great understanding.

As Sookie went to put on her shoes, she looked around her side of the closet. It was still much the same as it had been when she'd moved in, though she'd kept to her plan to add a few

work garments at a time. As of yet, she'd made no move to pack a stitch of clothing. She'd wait until Eric was gone the next day. And, given the fact that she wouldn't be able to fit everything into the one suitcase Bobby told her she could take, she planned to leave some things behind. She wouldn't leave Eric with an empty closet, not after what Bobby had said about the last time all of her things had been moved.

Plus—during the previous year—Sookie had learned that being a little selfish was okay. And she *wanted* her things to stay in Eric's home, which was—in truth—the only home she'd ever felt was *hers* too. And it wasn't the fancy things inside the place that really made it her home. After all, a bed was just a bed, and a couch was just a couch. The extras were nice, but the thing that made it her home was a 6'4" human being, with whom she would be happy even in a hovel.

"You look beautiful," came the voice of that human being.

She smiled and turned to face him.

"It's the dress Pam got me for Christmas." She looked down at the designer garment. The fabric's background was ombré, black fading into gray and then back again. What Sookie loved about the dress was the bright flowers scattered around the print. Of course, it didn't hurt that the garment was ruched and had a V-neck that emphasized her "girls" without being too revealing.

"It looks perfect on you," Eric said, his voice a little gruff. "We should get out of here before I rip it off of you though."

Sookie giggled and blushed a little. "Lead the way."

He crooked his elbow to her, and she thread her arm through his.

When they reached the lobby, Henry smiled at them.

“Alcide’s right outside,” he said.

Eric nodded. Though things had radically changed the previous Saturday, and having a guard for Sookie was no longer prudent, he’d already hired Alcide Herveaux and hadn’t wanted to leave the veteran without employment for the two-week period they’d already agreed upon—especially since Alcide still worked only part-time for Henry. Thus, Eric had asked Alcide to drive him and Sookie to the restaurant that night.

But before he led Sookie outside, Eric pulled out his phone and turned on the camera feature.

“Sookie looks beautiful tonight—doesn’t she?” he asked Henry.

Henry chuckled. “She’s even tempting to *me* tonight.” He winked at her.

Sookie grinned back. She hated not telling Henry of her plan to leave the next day, but it was better not to give him any advanced warning.

“Take our picture together?” Eric asked, trying not to let the emotion overcome his voice.

Immediately, tears rose into Sookie’s eyes, but she forced them away.

“Sure,” Henry said easily, taking the camera from Eric. He quickly snapped a few shots.

“With mine too?” Sookie asked, handing Henry her phone as well.

Chapter 29: Ever-Fixed Mark

from Sonnet 116—William Shakespeare

Let me not to the marriage of true minds

Admit impediments. Love is not love

Which alters when it alteration finds,

Or bends with the remover to remove:

O no; it is an ever-fixed mark,

That looks on tempests, and is never shaken.

As cliché as it might have sounded, the master bedroom was Eric and Sookie’s favorite room in their home.

Of course, a lot of their time in that room had been spent making love, but it was other things that truly set the room apart for both of them. Their bedroom was where they would read aloud together—almost every night after dinner—whether it was on their bed or on the large lounge chair in the room.

In addition, they often curled up in bed together in the half-hour before they went to sleep. Their customary spot was her lying on his chest as she read a book or her Kindle. In turn, he would prop up his book on her shoulder. The configuration, though perhaps odd to some, was comfortable to them—and comforting.

The bedroom was also their favorite place to talk, and when they did so, Ned would perch himself with them, take a very long bath, and then fall into his sleep with a flourish. Eric and Sookie had termed his “patented and perfected” move as “flopping.”

In their bedroom, they had discussed many things: the pain of their pasts, the happiness of their present, their plans—now seemingly lost—for the future. They had spoken of mundane

things: dinner plans, the weather, little Ned's antics, the grocery list, movies. They had spoken of serious things: the number of children they wanted to have and the kind of parents they wanted to be. They had spoken of places they wanted to visit together. They had talked about redecorating the "gray" area of the house in warm creams and browns and blues. They had talked about converting at least part of that space into a nursery when the time came for them to have children. There was not an important subject that they hadn't talked about in their bedroom.

Yes. The room had become their private sanctuary, and they had filled it with moans and laughter and cries and every noise in between.

"Will you wait for me in our room?" Eric asked when they got home from their dinner. Appius's unintentional gift of extra time had allowed them to take their time at the restaurant, and both were full.

Sookie nodded. "Should I get comfy?" she asked.

"Yes," he said, a twinkle in his eyes. He knew that Sookie's version of "comfy" was putting on her flannel sleeping pants and a camisole, and, though her dress was lovely, he wanted nothing more than to see her in her "favorite" outfit one last time.

A few minutes later, he joined her in their bedroom with a bottle of their favorite red wine just as she was climbing into bed, Ned jumping up right after her. Eric handed Sookie the bottle and two glasses.

"Pour us some?" he asked.

She smiled and nodded as he went into the closet to change into his own flannel sleep pants. As he hung up his suit jacket, he pulled a little black box from inside of it. He breathed a sigh of relief as he looked into the box. He'd feared that it wouldn't be ready in time, but—

thanks to Bobby's seemingly never-ending bag of tricks—it had been delivered to him in the restroom of the Japanese restaurant by the intrepid Mr. Burnham.

Bobby had informed Eric that if he had to have one more meeting in a public restroom that week, his retainer was going to have to go up. However, Bobby had looked almost as happy as Eric that he'd been able to complete the errand he'd been asked to attend to.

Eric hadn't asked Bobby about his plans for Sookie's exit from New York. He knew that Bobby would handle everything perfectly, and he trusted his friend, even more than he trusted himself at that moment. Eric was pretty positive that “badass motherfucker” had been retired from the dictionary the day that Bobby Burnham had been born, and he was more thankful than ever that Godric had introduced him to his son. Sookie's very life was now in Bobby's capable hands.

Eric placed the small box into the pocket of his flannel lounge pants and hurried to the bedroom, where Sookie was playing with Ned with an old shoelace.

Eric stopped and memorized the moment, but then he pushed aside the thought that this would likely be the last time that he would catch his two favorite beings in such a way.

“I love this wine,” Sookie said, taking a drink of the Malbec that Eric had introduced her to many months before.

He grinned. “I know.” He plopped down onto the bed and took his own glass as he rubbed Ned's round belly. “He's getting fat—you know.”

“*I* am not the one that gets the treats,” she said.

“I'm not either,” he grinned impishly.

“I'm not the one who puts the treats on the list of things for Thalia to get either,” she added.

He shrugged. "But he likes them."

"I know," Sookie said grinning at her two boys, even as she pushed back the thought that this would be their last night together for what would probably be a long time. "And you like spoiling him."

"Yep," Eric said, with just a touch of nostalgia in his tone.

They were silent for a few minutes as they petted their cat and sipped on their wine.

"We said we wouldn't talk about your leaving," he said after a while. His voice was barely audible.

"Do you need to?" she asked.

"No," he said firmly. "No goodbyes."

"Okay," she responded. "No goodbyes."

He breathed a sigh of relief. "But there is something I need to talk to you about—before you go—something Gran asked of me."

Sookie sat up a little straighter and put her wine glass onto her nightstand. "Okay," she said a little tentatively.

Eric set his glass next to hers. "Before she died, she wanted to speak with me," he began.

"I remember," Sookie said quietly. Gran's death had been less than a month before, but it already seemed like so long since she had been gone.

"She was the one who told me about the box that I found under the floorboard in her room," he said.

"The one with Gran's letters from Grandpa Earl?"

Eric nodded. "There was a ring in there too," he said.

"A ring?"

“Yes. Gran told me that it was last worn by Earl’s mother, but it actually goes farther back than that,” he said. “There was a letter with the ring that explained the ring’s history.”

He reached into his nightstand and then handed her an envelope, inside of which was the letter, penned by multiple generations of her family, each person recording the travels of the precious ring through time.

“Tell me?” she requested, even as she held the envelope tightly.

Eric nodded. “The story begins with your grandfather Earl’s grandfather around the turn of the twentieth century. He was from a wealthy family in Boston, and he fell in love with one of the maids in his home, a girl named Ruby. She was the daughter of poor Irish immigrants and was, therefore, deemed unsuitable by the young man’s parents. Ruby got pregnant and Earl’s grandfather was determined to elope with her. But his father found out, and the girl was sent away in the dead of the night. The young man was desperate to find her and begged his father to let them be together, but his father refused.”

Eric sighed and went on, “Two years went by before the young man was able to find Ruby. She’d been sent to Georgia by Earl’s great-grandfather; there, she was employed as a scullery maid. She’d had a son, and had been told that her child would be taken from her if she tried to contact her beloved. So—for the sake of her child—she worked hard and said nothing.

“It was actually the young man’s grandmother who told him where Ruby was. The grandmother saw the sadness that had settled into her grandson, and she knew that no amount of time would heal his wound. So she found out where Ruby was.”

“What happened next?” Sookie asked, captivated by the story of her ancestor.

“The young man bided his time and planned,” Eric reported. “Though his family was extremely wealthy, the young man’s father had punished him after the incident with Ruby by

taking away his access to that wealth and making him work in one of the family's textile mills—so that he would have to live as a *commoner* and so that he would come to *appreciate* the differences between the classes.” Eric scoffed, but then his tone gentled. “However, the young man managed to save some money, and his grandmother gave him some more; it was enough to buy him a new name and a fresh start. She also gave him a ring, a family heirloom that she had brought from Europe. She'd meant for her grandson to sell it to help with his new life, but he couldn't part with it.”

“He gave it to Ruby,” Sookie ascertained. “And that was the ring that was passed down?”

“Yes,” Eric nodded. “The ring has many small diamonds around its center, but at the heart of the ring, there is room for a larger stone. The ring originally had a ruby in it, but after his wife died during the birth of their third child, Earl's grandfather took that stone out of the ring and buried it with his Ruby.”

A tear fell from Sookie's eye. “That's an amazing story—and tragic. Is there more?”

Eric wiped away her tear with his thumb. “Yes. But I should go back a little.”

Sookie nodded in understanding.

Eric took a breath. “After Earl's grandfather—your great-great grandfather—found Ruby and his son in Georgia, they ran away together and got married. They ended up in New Orleans first and then Bon Temps a couple of years later.”

“How long did they have together?” Sookie asked quietly. “How long did they have before she died?”

“Around ten years,” Eric said just as quietly. “But—from what the letter says—they were happy ones.”

Sookie nodded, but didn't speak as she wiped another tear away.

Eric continued the story. "Using the money he'd saved and the money from his grandmother, your great-great grandfather bought the farmland Gran's house sits upon, and he and Ruby eventually made a successful life for themselves in Bon Temps. They became Stackhouses and never looked back to their old life."

"What were their names before?" she asked.

"The letter doesn't say," Eric responded. "It didn't give the first name of Earl's grandfather either. It just gave a letter, 'N.'" Eric shook his head with regret. "I'm sorry to say that I haven't been able to trace the Boston family that this 'N. Stackhouse' came from, though—honestly—there's not a lot to go on. Plus, a fire in the 1920's burned most of the public records from that time period."

Sookie smiled a little. "Thanks for trying."

Eric nodded and went on with the tale from the letter. "As I said, Ruby and her husband had two children who survived. The third was born alive, but died an hour after his mother. The other two children were the firstborn, whom his mother had named Fintan, and a daughter, named Katherine." He smiled. "Fintan, or Finn as he was called, was given the ring by his father, and he had a purple amethyst put into the center of the ring when he gave it to his bride, Iris."

"I've heard the names Fintan and Iris," Sookie said. "They were Grandpa Earl's parents." She looked regretful for a moment. "There was a picture with me—as a tiny baby—with Iris, but it was among the photos Michelle made me burn."

Eric squeezed her hand in comfort.

“At least Gran had some pictures of them,” Sookie said, thinking of the family albums she’d found among Gran’s possessions. Sookie had taken a small box of pictures with her from Gran’s and had left the others for Hunter. A picture of Iris and Fintan was among the ones she’d taken.

Eric leaned in and gave her a gentle kiss on the cheek.

“Is there more to the story?” Sookie asked.

He nodded. “A little. Since Iris was still alive when Earl and Gran married, Earl chose a new ring for Adele.” He chuckled a little.

“What is it?” Sookie asked.

“In the letter, Gran wrote about her experience with the family ring. After Iris passed away, the purple amethyst was removed and laid to rest with her. The ring was then passed to Earl, but Gran said in the letter that her fingers were too fat to risk resizing it for her; plus, she liked the plain wedding band she wore.”

Sookie smiled. “That sounds like something she’d say. I never saw her without that ring.”

Eric smiled back and lifted her free hand to kiss her palm. He took a breath and continued the story. “Gran and Earl considered giving the ring to your father, but—as you know—your parents were already married when Iris died, and Michelle had begun to show her true colors and her greed by then. And your aunt Linda was divorced by then. Gran wrote that she and Earl decided to hold onto the ring. They hoped to be able to pass it to Jason—eventually.”

“To keep up the tradition of Stackhouse men giving the ring to their brides,” Sookie said thoughtfully.

“Yes. That’s what the letter said, but Gran changed her mind, and last summer when she was in Sweden, she decided that she was going to give the ring to someone else.”

“To you,” Sookie stated. She didn’t need to ask.

Eric nodded. “At the hospital she told me a little about the ring and asked that I use it when I asked you to be my wife—when we got married.”

A tear fell from Sookie’s eye. “But we can’t do that now.”

Eric brushed the tear away. “No. Not like I want to.” He pulled the little box from his pocket.

Her eyes immediately went to the object as he opened the lid.

“Sookie,” he said, “the second I saw this ring, I knew exactly what I needed to do with it. The center was empty—just like my heart was empty before you filled my life. And I had to fill it for you—to put a stone in the heart of this ring that stood for what you had brought to my life. You brought me the sun, Sookie. You brought me light.”

Sookie gasped as she looked at the beautiful and intricately designed ring. In its center was a small, beautifully-cut yellow diamond.

“Eric?” she said his name like a question.

“Sookie, I love you, and I would like nothing more than to legally marry you, but that’s not possible any more. However, this ring is yours by right. And maybe—one day—you can find a man who will be able to offer you a home and a family.” His voice broke a little as he went on, “I can give you only my heart, and no matter what happens in the future, you will always own it.”

Sookie looked up at him, the tears now streaming down her cheeks. “I love you, Eric.” Her eyes stayed locked into his, even as she took the ring from the box. “My heart will always belong to you too.”

He shook his head. “No. You need to move on, Sookie. You need to find a man who deserves you. You need to be happy.”

She sighed. “I promise that I will do my best to fight for happiness. And I hope that you will too, Eric, but what we have isn’t something that could be lessened by distance or time.” She put the ring into his palm. “Ask me.”

“I can’t,” he said in an agonized voice. “It would be too selfish.”

“Then let’s be selfish together, Eric,” she said. “Let’s have what *we* want tonight. Ask me.”

A tear dripped from his eye as he nodded; he could not deny her or himself in that moment. “Will you marry me, Sookie Stackhouse? Now and in this place—our place. Will you marry me?”

She put the letter down and held out her left hand. “Yes.”

He slipped the ring onto her finger.

“Does it fit?” he asked. “I measured your finger with string, and the jeweler said it would fit.”

She raised her newly alit left hand to caress his cheek. “It fits perfectly, Eric. So—what now? How do we do this?”

He smiled a little nervously. “I’m not exactly sure how to go about getting married. I’ve never been to a wedding.”

“Me neither,” she said. “But I know that we should make promises to each other.”

“Love, cherish—obey?” he said the last item with a little smirk even as he wiped away another tear from his eye.

She chuckled. “Why don’t we make up our own promises?”

“Okay,” he said, sitting cross-legged on the bed and taking both of her hands into his.

Ned chose that moment to get up, to walk around in a tight circle, and then to flop down again.

They both chuckled at him.

“Our best man sucks,” Sookie said with a grin.

Eric nodded, but then bit his bottom lip nervously. “Do you want to go first? Or me?”

“I will,” she said. “If I don’t, I’ll be a blubbering mess.”

He chuckled and grasped her hands a little harder, though not uncomfortably so.

She took a deep breath. “I, Sookie Stackhouse, take you, Eric Northman, as my husband.

I promise that I will love you for the rest of my life, even as I love you in this moment. No matter what happens in the future, you will be the husband of my heart.”

Another tear fell from his eye as he began speaking. “I’ve always thought of my love as being unlucky. If I loved something, it went away or it died—like my mother died. Like my grandfathers died. Like Godric died. And like my father’s love just went away. And I was so afraid, Sookie. But I’m not scared to love any more, and that’s because of you. I’ve realized that I can never really lose you; you’ll always be part of me—the best part.” He took a deep breath. “No matter what happens, I will always belong to you. I love you, Sookie. I’m sorry that I didn’t say it before Appius took away our future together, but I promise that I will say it every day of my life from now on. I, Eric Northman, take you, Sookie Stackhouse. You are the wife of my heart, and I swear that nothing will ever change that.”

The two looked at each other silently for a moment, as tears continued to escape from their eyes.

“Kiss your bride,” Sookie said with a slight sob.

A ghost of a smile came to Eric’s lips as he leaned forward and sealed their promises to each other. Both of them understood that their words held no legal power. Their marriage wouldn’t be recognized by the government or the church—or anyone else, for that matter.

However, that didn’t make the “wedding” any less real to Eric and to Sookie, and it certainly didn’t lessen the sacredness of the moment for them.

Or the tragedy of it.

But they pushed back the sadness that would be coming to them both the next day, and they lost themselves in each other and their kiss. The clever Ned, as always, intuited that his humans needed alone-time, and he jumped off the bed to go and find somewhere more peaceful to lounge for a while.

Eric and Sookie kissed for a long while, their tongues caressing and tasting, their lips moving slowly and softly together. Eric had moved them so that Sookie was lying on her back and he was lying half next to and half on top of her, though he kept most of his weight off of her.

Her hands moved over his body, as if her fingers were recording everything: the broadness of his shoulders, the length of his neck, the ridges of his collar bones, the smoothness of his chest, the softness of his hair.

His hands were eager to chronicle her body as well, and he turned them over so that she was lying on top of him. He loved the feeling of her body on his as she moved her legs to straddle him without breaking their kiss. His hands, now more free to explore, touched every bit of her that he could reach before becoming greedy and slipping under her camisole; it didn’t take

them long to draw the garment up her body. Sookie broke their kiss so that she could remove the thin fabric that was separating their flesh, and Eric stared up at her, his eyes need-filled and raw with emotion.

“I love you, min fru,” he said.

Guessing that “fru” meant “wife” in Swedish Sookie smiled. “And I love you, my husband.”

His hands, having found purchase on the silky planes of her back, pulled her against his body. The flesh of their chests now touching, they both sighed into their renewed kisses.

They kissed and they shared sweet caresses for what seemed to be hours, content to enjoy each other’s bodies unhurriedly and to the fullest. Eventually, the rest of their clothing was discarded, and their hands and mouths explored further. They teased and tasted and then teased and tasted some more, giving pleasure as only two lovers very familiar with each other’s bodies could do. And both had already enjoyed sweet release from their partner’s ministrations when they finally joined their bodies together fully.

Making love to Sookie had always felt better to Eric than anything he’d ever experienced, but making love to his *wife* eclipsed all previous experiences. He poured all of the devotion he felt for her into every movement he made, and he celebrated each move that her body made in response. Having already had one release due to Sookie’s mouth and hands, Eric had more stamina as he thrust in and out of her body, bringing her to several releases. He would bring himself to the brink, but then would slow down and change their position so that he could give her more pleasure.

Finally, as the first rays of the morning sun crept into the room, Eric couldn't hold back anymore, and he came with the yelling of Sookie's name, even as his orgasm drew out one more from her.

Sweaty and exhausted, he fell to his side so that he wouldn't crush her and then pulled her to him. They both panted, looking to catch their breaths after the hours they'd spent making love.

Eventually, his arms tightened around her.

"Don't let me fall asleep," she said, even as she began to trace circles onto his chest.

"We should at least have a nap," he said.

"What time do you have to leave for the brunch?" she asked, looking at the clock, which read 5:30 a.m.

"I have to go at 11:00 a.m.," he said, his voice unsteady.

"Okay, we can sleep, but only for an hour," she said, reaching over to grab his phone from the nightstand so that she could set the alarm.

"Two?" he asked, wanting nothing more than to curl into her and rest. Something told him that his insomniac ways would come back with full force once she was not with him. Of course, he felt conflicted about sleeping too. He wanted to spend every remaining minute they had together awake, but there was truly nothing he gained more peace from than sleeping with her.

So they compromised and slept for 90 minutes, her head resting against his heart and their hands interlaced.

Chapter 30: A Sacredness in Tears

“There is a sacredness in tears. They are not the mark of weakness, but of power. They speak more eloquently than ten thousand tongues. They are the messengers of overwhelming grief, of deep contrition, and of unspeakable love.”—Washington Irving

The minutes ticked by quickly after the alarm clock went off. Eric and Sookie took a shower together, and their tears mixed with the warm water. They toweled each other off and made love—knowing that it might be for the last time.

At 9:30 a.m., they finally made their way to the kitchen and made coffee. Neither of them felt much like eating, but Sookie fixed a little toast with some of the preserves she’d brought back from Gran’s house.

They wrapped themselves into Eric’s afghan and sat on the balcony to eat their small breakfast. The morning was overcast and cold, the sky a misty gray that enveloped the city and them.

They drank their coffee slowly and snuggled together as the relentless clock continued to count down.

At 10:45 a.m., Eric rushed in to put on his gray suit. Sookie went in with him; they kept their eyes on each other as he dressed, soaking in every second that they could with each other.

She walked with him to the elevator, holding his hand and leaning against his side.

When they were in front of the elevator, neither of them moved for at least a minute. Sookie finally reached out to press the button that would call the conveyance to them.

They turned to face each other, and their lips met in a frenzy of need and longing and sorrow.

“I love you,” she whispered against his lips when they finally broke contact because of the elevator announcing its arrival with a ding.

“The ring is inscribed,” Eric said, his eyes intense with a stormy sea of blue.

He bent forward and kissed her again—this time softly.

The kiss was the goodbye that neither of them would—or could—verbalize. It was the goodbye that neither of them wanted.

With the last ounce of strength he possessed, Eric broke their embrace and entered the elevator. He looked at Sookie as if the weight of a thousand years were falling onto his shoulders. “I love you, Sookie. Find happiness for the both of us.”

The doors closed.

Unable to stay on her feet, Sookie sank onto the floor, looking at the steel elevator doors. Confused, Ned had come into the foyer and was looking at her curiously, though keeping his distance.

“Find happiness,” she whispered. She knew that there was only one way to do that, and it involved finding a way to defeat Appius so that she and Eric could be together.

Sookie stood up, determined. “For the *both* of us.” She took a deep breath. “We’ll be together again,” she vowed to the elevator doors. “I don’t care how long it takes. I won’t stop until you are free of him.”

She bent down to scoop up Ned and hugged him close. Bobby would be there in less than half an hour, and she had a lot to do. Her first order of business was packing. She quickly dressed in a pair of jeans and a long-sleeved T-shirt, putting her gray hoodie to the side for when she was ready to go. She laughed ruefully.

“Gray seems to be the order of the day,” she said to Ned, who was busy sniffing the suitcase she’d pulled down from the shelf. It didn’t take Sookie long to gather the clothing she wanted. She took mostly comfortable things—things that she figured someone might want when “on the lam.” She grabbed one of her work suits and one dress, just in case she needed something nicer, but she knew that she could always replace her clothing. There were more important things that she needed to save room for.

She opened the bottom drawer of her dresser and took out the box of pictures from Gran’s house. In the same drawer was the sweater that Eric had gotten her in Sweden. She quickly placed the garment and the pictures into her suitcase and then grabbed the other things she wanted from the dresser: the locket from Mormor, her scarves and earrings from Eric, and the hat and gloves Gran had knitted for her.

She next went into the bathroom and grabbed her toiletries before taking the two pictures and the letter about the ring from her nightstand. She walked back to the closet and added them to her suitcase. Next, she took her phone and went into Eric’s office. She glanced at the clock: 11:20 a.m.

She plugged her phone into the printer and put in a piece of photo paper before printing out the picture Henry had taken of her and Eric the night before. It had captured the moment perfectly: both the love and the tragedy of it.

That done, she left her phone on Eric’s desk and took the picture, tucking it into one of the notebooks in which she’d recorded her thoughts about the art in the MET. She added all those notebooks and her Kindle to her suitcase. Then she put in the data storage device which held all her pictures from the museum, as well as other pictures she’d taken during her time with Eric. Knowing she’d have to leave her phone behind, she’d uploaded the pictures she wanted to

keep earlier in the week. Finally, she stuffed her red coat into her suitcase. The garment stood out too much for her to wear it that day, but there was no way she could leave it behind.

She put on her hoodie and rolled her suitcase out to the foyer just as the elevator arrived. She closed her eyes for a moment, part of her hoping that Eric would step out of it, but she knew that wouldn't happen. No. Despite the fact that he'd called himself selfish, Sookie knew that Eric was prepared to consign himself to a life of loneliness and pain in order to protect those he cared about.

She sighed as she thought about the man she loved. He would be arriving at the brunch about then, and his would be the most difficult performance of the day. He would have to pretend that everything was okay so that she could make a clean break.

Bobby stepped out of the elevator with Henry and Thalia. Sookie shared a quick look and a nod with the other woman. To her great credit, Thalia had told no one when Sookie had explained what she needed. Henry, on the other hand, was clearly a little confused as he looked at the suitcase.

“Are you ready?” Bobby asked her.

“Almost,” Sookie said as she went to her messenger bag, which she tended to leave on the chair in the foyer; she took out her wallet. Then, she removed her ID and her lone credit card before putting her wallet into a pocket in her suitcase. She put the items with her name on them back into her messenger bag.

“Sookie?” Henry asked confused. “What’s going on?”

She looked at her friend and took a deep breath. “I’m going to disappear. Eric’s father found out about my lip-reading ability and is planning to use me to get a leg up on the

competition—so to speak. But mostly, he just wants to hurt me or exploit me so that Eric is hurt.”

“Sookie,” Henry said somewhat cautiously, “Eric would never allow that.”

Sookie sighed. “No—he wouldn’t. He knows I’m going, and Bobby is helping me get away without leaving a trace. But Eric is trapped here.”

“Trapped?” Henry asked.

Sookie nodded. “Appius has threatened to hurt Pam and Mormor and my family, as well as every person working in Eric’s department and people from the Chinese company he’s working with. Appius has manufactured evidence of wrongdoing in regards to the China deal. And if Eric doesn’t do exactly what Appius wants, he’ll likely be arrested. On the other hand, if he leaves with me, the others will be hurt.”

Henry was silent for a moment as he took in the information. “Sookie, Blake and I could help. I’m sure that Blake could help Eric prove that he’s done nothing wrong.”

Sookie sighed. “We thought about that, but even if Eric were able to keep himself out of prison, it wouldn’t stop Appius from hurting others and gutting Eric’s department at Northman Publishing.” She shook her head. “All those people losing their jobs in this economy would tear Eric apart. And Appius has threatened Pam’s place in the company too. He even controls the property that Mormor lives on!” she added desperately. “And Appius wouldn’t hesitate to kick her out of the home she shared with Johan.”

Sookie closed her eyes. “I’m scared that Appius will punish Eric when I go, but I can’t stay. I *won’t* be a means by which Appius hurts Eric even more!”

Henry ran his hand through his red hair. “How long have you known that you were leaving?” he asked, trying to keep his tone steady.

She sighed. "Since last Saturday."

In the next moment, Henry had engulfed her in a hug. "I don't want you to go, Sook. You've become one of my best friends: another sister to me. Don't go. We'll figure this out. I love you, Sook."

"I feel the same way about you, Henry," Sookie said as she sank into his embrace. "I know that I will never have a real relationship with Jason, and I used to feel really sad about that, but I don't have a reason to be sad anymore because I have you. And you're the best brother I can imagine."

"Then don't leave," Henry said, hugging her a little tighter.

"I have to go—both for Eric and for me," Sookie whispered. "And I need your help getting away. Will you help me?"

Henry pulled back from their hug and looked at her closely. He saw her resolution, and he nodded. "I'll always help you. What do you need?"

Sookie smiled. "Thank you, Henry. Will you promise to keep an eye on Eric too?"

The redhead nodded. "Yes. I swear. And—one day—you'll come back to all of us."

"I hope so," Sookie said in a whisper.

Henry looked at Bobby. "What do you need me to do?"

Bobby nodded to Henry gratefully and then responded, "Just in case Franklin Mott is better than I have given him credit for—Sookie and I will need a discreet ride to a car I have parked about ten blocks from here."

Henry was quiet for a moment and then reached up to brush a tear from his eye before going into what Sookie thought of as his "command mode."

“The building owns a couple of vans for deliveries and pick-ups,” Henry said. “The windows in the back of them are blacked out. They’re in a garage on the east side of the building that has a separate exit. We’ll take one of those. I’ll drive you and have Tray drive the other one in the opposite direction.”

“Perfect,” Bobby said.

“Thank you,” Sookie said, squeezing Henry’s hand. She looked at Thalia, “Are you ready?”

Thalia nodded. As planned, Sookie and Bobby had confided in Thalia about their strategy to find information that could be used against Appius, and they had asked for her help. She was the only one—other than Sookie and Bobby—who knew that Sookie was going to be “reading” Appius. And she had agreed to use her considerable skill in surveillance to help Bobby and Sookie make that happen. She’d also agreed not to tell anyone—not even her brother—that Sookie would still be in the area.

“Ready for what?” Henry asked.

“A parting shot at Appius,” Sookie responded.

“Are you sure you want to do that?” Bobby asked. “You don’t have to.”

“No—I want to. And I *need* to. Right now, Appius sees me as this weak little thing. And—if I leave without a word—he’s going to suspect that Eric made it possible for me to go—probably using you to do it,” Sookie said looking at Bobby. “And he’d be right, but we need for him to think that he’s wrong. I need to try to convince him that leaving is all my doing—*my* idea.”

Bobby sighed. “That’s probably smart, Sook. And, inadvertently, Appius has given me an alibi.”

“Because Mott has been tailing you?” Thalia asked.

“Yeah. And I have to hand it to him,” Bobby said. “When he *knows* that I’m out and about, I haven’t been able to ditch him without making it obvious that I know he’s there. Of course, he still hasn’t figured out that I can exit my building without his knowing it.”

“Why do you think Appius is having Mott follow you and not Eric or Sookie?” Henry asked.

Bobby looked at Sookie and then back at Henry. “Appius knows that Eric and I are close. When I helped Eric to compose his contract with Appius, the old man came to pay me a little visit. He asked that I alter the contract *without* Eric’s knowing.”

“He tried to bribe you,” Henry said angrily.

Bobby nodded. “Yes—Appius offered me a lot of money to change things so that he would have final say over *everything* that Eric did at NP.”

“Eric doesn’t know about that part, does he?” Sookie asked perceptively.

Bobby shook his head. “No. He was already too hurt by the whole paternity test thing. And he was already suspicious—rightfully so—that Appius would try to screw him over, so I didn’t need to warn him about the need to read the fine print.” He sighed. “That’s why Eric came to me for help in the first place. I think he knew that Appius could get to and influence most people.” Bobby smiled a little. “It was one of the first times that Eric really let himself trust someone, and he chose *me* to trust. I wasn’t going to repay that trust by reiterating that his father was a son of a bitch—not when Eric was already painfully aware of that fact already.”

“So Appius is having you followed so that you can’t help Eric again?” Henry asked.

“More likely to find something he can use *against* Bobby,” Thalia commented astutely. “Appius must figure that Bobby is Eric’s most loyal ally. It seems like the old bastard wants

either to drive a wedge between Eric and Bobby or to figure out how to blackmail Bobby so that he'll betray Eric. Either way, Eric loses his best friend."

Impressed by Thalia's analysis, Bobby looked over at her and nodded. "That's what I think too."

Sookie sighed and looked at Thalia. "It's time that we get this done. Eric plans to be back around 2:30 p.m., and it needs to look like I left at least an hour before that."

Thalia nodded. "It'll take me about five minutes to set up," she said, patting her laptop bag.

"I'll get Ned ready to go," Sookie said.

"You're taking him?" Henry asked.

"Eric insisted," Sookie said guiltily as Thalia went to set up her equipment.

"Do you know where you're going?" Henry asked her.

Sookie shook her head, and, in that moment, she was glad that she didn't yet know. She already hated holding things back from the man she'd come to think of as family. But, other than the fact that she was going to stay in the area somewhere, she had no idea where Bobby would settle her. She'd not asked, and Bobby hadn't offered up the information either.

"She'll be safe though?" Henry asked Bobby.

"As safe as I can make her," he replied.

"How safe is that?" Henry asked with narrowed eyes.

"Very," Bobby promised.

Sookie squeezed Henry's hand and then went to get Ned's little travel carrier and a Ziploc bag of his food—just in case. Bobby had indicated that everything would be arranged for Ned—including food and a litter box—when she got to her new home, but Sookie figured it was

better to be safe than sorry. After tucking the food and a few of Ned's favorite little toys into the carrier, she got Ned settled into it. The kitten, of course, wasn't very happy about the prospect of getting in—having already associated the carrier with travel to the veterinarian, whom he could live without. However, his discomfort couldn't be helped. Sookie was tempted to leave him to keep Eric company, but she knew that would upset Eric even more. More importantly, she'd promised Eric that she'd take him, and she didn't intend to break any promises she made to her "husband."

Not even the ones he didn't know about.

"I'm ready," Thalia said as Sookie brought the cat carrier—with a mewling Ned inside—into the foyer.

"Is Appius definitely at the brunch?" Sookie asked. If he wasn't, she wouldn't risk doing what she was planning to do.

"Yeah," Bobby said. "Pam texted and will text me again when he leaves."

"She doesn't know *why* she's keeping an eye on him—does she?"

"No," Bobby confirmed. "And, to her credit, she hasn't asked either."

Sookie nodded and thanked God that Pam—like Henry and Bobby—would be there to help to take care of Eric after she disappeared. She grabbed a sealed envelope and a folded piece of paper from her messenger bag before following Thalia into Eric's office.

Bobby and Henry waited in the foyer.

Thalia's computer was on the pool table. "You'll be live thirty seconds after you go in the room."

"And the bug?" Sookie asked.

“It’s already on the desk—along with a little gift for you and Eric,” Thalia said with a hint of a smirk.

Sookie nodded and entered the office, closing the door behind her. She felt like she had to do what she was about to do alone. In a lot of ways, it wasn’t just for Appius that she was going to be leaving the message. It was for the memory of her mom too.

Sookie gently placed the envelope onto the desk and looked at the bug that Thalia had put on top of it. Then she unfolded the piece of paper and read.

Appius,

I want you to know that I feel sorry for you. You have a son who is the best man that I have ever met—despite the fact that you have mistreated him in some screwed up attempt to get back at your first wife.

I know all about parents who commit crimes against their children. And make no mistake—you have committed a crime against Eric. But the real crime is that you don’t see the man I see—the one who is good in spite of you.

I’m talking to you now to tell you that I won’t let you use me against him. I won’t be a pawn to a parent bent upon hurting his child for no other reason than malice. And if there is any justice in this world, then Eric will get free of you one day. If you had a heart at all, you would let him go.

But I have no confidence in your heart being anything more than a hollow organ keeping you alive. So I’m leaving New York and breaking the heart of the man I love because I don’t want him to become heartless and jaded like you.

Eric is the better man, Appius. No matter how many petty battles you win or machinations you construct. Eric is—and always will be—the better man. And you are to be pitied for not understanding his worth. Pitied and despised.

But Eric doesn't despise you, and that shows the quality of his heart. But I'm not as good of a human being as he is, Appius. So—I'll hate you enough for the both of us. But I won't let you use me to hurt him.

Oh—and by the way—your days of listening to Eric in this home are over, you son of a bitch.

Sookie picked up the small hammer that Thalia had left for her. The listening device was on a white hand-towel on the desk.

“Good-bye, Appius, and fuck you!” Sookie cried out as she slammed the hammer down onto the bug, crushing it. She brought the hammer down a second time, enjoying the sight of the mangled electronic device. She put down the hammer and left the room.

“Did it feel good?” Thalia asked with a smirk.

“Only for a second,” Sookie answered honestly.

Thalia's smirk disappeared immediately. “We'll get the bastard,” she said quietly, “and we'll get you back to where you belong.”

Sookie just nodded and hurried to the foyer. She was leaving her home, but she prayed to whatever God that might be listening that she would return to that home—which was Eric himself—very soon.

Chapter 31: Dangerous Abuse

“The greater the power, the more dangerous the abuse.”—Edmund Burke

Eric glanced at his watch: 2:00 p.m.

Sookie would be safe by now—on her way to wherever Bobby was sending her.

Eric was exhausted, and the charity brunch had been a study in misery for him. Needing to keep Sookie from being at the forefront of his mind, and he had done his best to behave as he always did at such functions. However, it had been difficult for him to keep his emotions in check. Burying his grief so that he could appear to be functioning normally took up so much effort that he could not always completely cover up his disgust at the people around him.

Although the brunch was meant to raise money for the families of the victims of 9-11, a cause that Eric had always supported, most of the people at the event were there to see and be seen—not to help others.

At least they would write checks at the end of the day—as part of their “show” to others—but very few of those in attendance had paid any attention to the 17-year-old girl who had spoken so eloquently about her heroic mother, who had been a security guard at a building near the World Trade Center. The heroine hadn’t run away from the horrible spectacle. No. She had run *toward* the danger, and she had died even as she was trying to help people get to safety. Sadly, the girl barely remembered her mother, and Eric’s heart went out to her; he could empathize, after all. They’d both lost their mothers when they were only five years old.

The girl, whose name was Caitlyn, spoke about her dream to become a surgeon in the armed forces, and Eric couldn’t help but to see the heroine forming within the young woman; he could tell—almost immediately—that she would match her mother in that respect.

He had passed along Thalia's phone number to the girl since he knew that his friend could give the girl advice—or maybe even help—as she pursued her goals. In truth, Caitlyn had ended up being his own “saving grace” at the event. By forcing himself to focus on her and the cause that he was there to support, rather than thinking about the pieces that would be missing from his life when he went home, he had been able to hold himself together.

Several nights before, he had realized that for the last nine months he'd actually been constructing a *life* for himself—rather than a mere existence. It had been a first for him. However, Sookie was the cornerstone to that life, and he could already feel it crumbling without her.

But he couldn't let himself crumble—not yet. Sookie needed all the time she could get in order to be safe. So—no! He would not crumble. He would keep up the pretense.

“You okay?” Isabel asked, squeezing his arm a little.

Eric nodded and gave his date—his friend—a small, though sincere, smile. She had helped him to get through the event too. “Yeah. I'm fine.”

“You don't seem fine,” she whispered.

Eric shrugged off her concern. “You know how much I hate dealing with all these vapid people,” he said, lying about the root of his discomfort.

Isabel nodded. To her credit, she intuited that something else was wrong with Eric—a wound that went deep. But she played along and didn't question him further.

“Come on. Let's go say hello to my father. He's motioning for us,” she said instead.

Eric turned in the direction that Isabel was looking. Russell Edgington was indeed gesturing for them to come over, his ever-present smirk planted firmly onto his face.

“Eric,” Russell exclaimed, not bothering to speak quietly, though the event was rather subdued, “has that bastard of a father of yours let you incorporate those ideas about online book access we were speaking about last October? Or is he still living in the dark ages?”

Eric couldn’t help but to smile a little at the larger-than-life Russell Edgington. Eric had come to appreciate Russell’s unapologetic nature more and more over the years. It was well-known that Russell and Appius didn’t really like each other. They weren’t enemies—not exactly; however, they existed in a kind of *détente* state at all times—like two great superpowers who had their weapons pointed in each other’s direction, but kept them just out of sight.

“Did I hear my name?” Appius asked gruffly from behind Eric and Isabel.

Eric had to force himself not to cringe at the sound of his father’s voice.

“Ah—Appius,” Russell said, an amused smile tugging at his lips. “I was just asking Eric here if you had decided to join us in the current century.”

“And what did Eric have to say?” Appius asked, his expression untroubled.

“He’d not yet had a chance to answer,” Russell reported, his lingering Irish accent becoming more prominent as his eyes lit with curiosity—and mischief. He sat forward a little, his eyes studying his contemporary. “However, I would *very* much like to know if you have incorporated Eric’s ideas about NP developing its own version of the iPad for its catalogue of books. Given the size of your academic press alone, it would seem to be an ideal product to market to college students.”

Appius scoffed. “We will lose too much money if we implement the online programs Eric’s suggested. Moreover, things like online textbook renting and hyperlinks in books are going to ruin people’s ability to truly learn a goddamned thing!”

“The young are just different kinds of learners than we,” Russell shrugged, “and one must adapt with the times.”

“But one does *not* have to follow every goddamned trend,” Appius said, his sneer, which he aimed toward Eric, showing his distaste for both the idea and its originator.

Russell narrowed his eyes as he tried to interpret the look from father and son. Seeing the harshness of Appius’s stare, Russell decided to shift the topic a bit. “And that is why I like the magazine business.” He winked at his daughter. “At *Vibrant*, we make the trends.”

Appius schooled his own expression as he looked back at Russell. It was true that he didn’t care for Edgington that much, but there had always been a *kind* of respect flowing under their interactions. It was probably lucky for them both that the two Alpha-males had never been direct competitors in business. Moreover, Appius wasn’t about to have a major philosophical argument about technology at a charity function, especially not since Isabel would likely be his daughter-in-law soon, and Russell’s fortune would come with her.

Russell’s smirk grew a little as he saw Appius biting his tongue in order to avoid a confrontation. Normally, Russell would have antagonized the elder Northman a little, but as he glanced at Eric, he didn’t have the heart to do it. The young man looked stressed out enough as it was.

Russell contemplated the two Northman men. Appius’s son had qualities that went far above and beyond his father’s, for Eric had taken after his mother in both looks and demeanor. In fact, looking into Eric’s eyes was like seeing Stella looking back at him in some ways. However, Stella’s eyes had always been light and happy, even when she was so ill, while Eric’s were often guarded and sad—just as they were at that moment.

Russell's musings were interrupted by the sound of Appius's phone buzzing in his suit jacket.

"No rest for the wicked?" Russell joked as Appius pulled out his phone.

"I'll rest when I'm dead," Appius replied, exchanging a cliché with a cliché.

Appius answered the phone with a terse greeting and then listened for a moment. The elder Northman glanced at Eric and then back at Russell before speaking. "I have to listen to this. My apologies for running off in the middle of our *stimulating* conversation."

Russell dismissed Appius's apology with a slight wave. "No worry. We likely wouldn't have been able to solve the dilemma of print versus virtual media anyway—at least not today," he added with humor in his eyes.

Appius gave Eric one more brief—though pointed—glare before going over to the far corner of the room and putting his phone to his ear. Eric tried to keep an eye on his father without looking like he was doing so. Something about his wording—"I have to listen to this"—had made the hair on the back of Eric's neck stand up.

"So I take it that Appius *didn't* go for your ideas then?" Russell asked, gesturing for Eric and Isabel to sit down at the table with him. After pulling out a chair for Isabel, Eric sat in the chair that would help him to keep a better view of Appius.

"I've told you before that Appius doesn't listen to Eric," Isabel said quietly. "You're the one who said that it couldn't be true."

"Well, it *shouldn't* be," Russell said half-stubbornly and half-flippantly. "It's ridiculous if he doesn't," he continued, looking at Eric. "After all, most of the good things I hear that relate to NP these days turn out to be your doing. For instance, I've heard about your deal with the publisher in China. Hell! Felipe de Castro was practically crying about how he'd made the

Chinese a better offer, yet they'd dealt with NP. And the international division is *yours*, so I know that the deal had to be *your* doing."

Eric turned his main focus to Russell even as he watched Appius in his periphery. However, it was difficult for him to keep his cool as he watched his father's expression changing from annoyance to irritation to cold, hard rage. After hanging up the phone, Appius glanced Eric's way and then disappeared from his field of vision.

Eric tried to keep his countenance neutral as he responded to Russell. "My father and I have a complicated relationship," he said cautiously.

Russell contemplated for a moment. "I am beginning to see that. It is a shame though." He looked at Isabel with pride. "Isabel's influence has made *Vibrant* into a world-wide brand; I no longer know what I would do without her. In fact, I think that if I retired tomorrow, she'd be able to step in with no problems."

Isabel smiled and took her father's hand. "Better not. I'd miss you too much."

"I suppose there are a few more years in this old man," Russell said, winking at his daughter fondly.

Eric tried not to envy the obvious affection between the parent and child in front of him too much. After all, he'd learned a long time before that he'd only make himself miserable if he allowed himself to crave the kinds of interactions many children had with their parents.

"Excuse me," Appius said, coming suddenly upon the group again. "I need to have a word or two with Eric—if you can spare him for a moment. Business," he directed at Russell. "I'm sure you understand."

"Of course," Russell said with a nod.

"I'll be back soon," Eric said to Isabel.

“In case I forget to mention it later, you should join Izzy and me tomorrow night for dinner, Eric,” Russell said as Eric rose. “I’d like to pick your brain about how to increase sales of *Vibrant* in Asia.”

“Sure,” Eric responded evenly, making sure that he didn’t give away the fact that he was as nervous as hell about what his father wanted.

Silently, he followed Appius, who led them toward the side entryway of the venue. Eric could see Appius’s limo waiting.

“Are we going somewhere?” Eric asked. “If so, I’ll need to go back in and let Isabel know.”

Appius looked over his shoulder at Eric. His eyes held nothing but hate. “No—but you and I need to have a little chat—*without* an audience.”

“Fine,” Eric said following his father into the limo.

Immediately, Appius poured himself a scotch and then stared at Eric as he took a slow sip of it. Using every bit of strength and will he had left in his body, Eric stared back, trying to keep his expression questioning, but non-combative. He just hoped that he wasn’t failing under the weight of his father’s stare. After witnessing his father’s phone call, he feared that Sookie’s plan to leave the city had been thwarted by Appius. By this time, Sookie should have been safely away, but what if his father had found out? What if Franklin Mott had been cleverer at tracking Bobby than his friend thought? What if Sigebert or Wybert or Mott had taken Sookie? What if there had been a pursuit and an accident? What if Sookie was hurt? What if she was dead?

“What is all this about?” Eric finally asked once the silence became too much for him to bear.

“This is about Miss Stackhouse,” Appius answered enigmatically.

“What about her?” Eric asked, not able to stop his worry from filling his voice. “You haven’t hurt her—have you?”

Appius narrowed a stare at Eric. “Why would I hurt an asset?”

Eric ignored the irony of that statement. “I know you’ve been having her followed.” He took a deep breath and allowed his fear to quash his pride. “And if Sigebert or Wybert did anything to her, so help me God, I will not rest until you are in the ground!”

Appius had dropped his drink onto the limo floor and had Eric by the throat against the vehicle’s side window before Eric could discern that his father was moving.

“Did you just threaten me?” Appius asked with fury as Eric tried to struggle out of the tightening grip of his father’s hand around his neck. The older man had gained the upper hand through his sudden movements and had leverage over Eric.

“I said,” Appius snarled, still limiting his son’s oxygen flow, “did you threaten me?”

“Yes,” the younger Northman choked out stubbornly, even as he felt close to passing out.

Appius laughed bitterly and pushed Eric away before retaking his seat and fixing his suit jacket.

Eric’s hands rose to his throat as he tried to catch his breath. He looked at his father with shock in his eyes. Despite all the years of emotional abuse Appius had been guilty of, this was the first time that Eric had ever suffered physically at his father’s hands.

“I have to admit that you have balls,” Appius said, pouring himself another drink as if nothing had happened. “Clearly you managed to inherit a few of my genes, but you will *not* make threats against me, *boy!* Is that understood? I may be older than you are, but I could end you any time I wanted?”

Seeing his father's almost black eyes, Eric believed that Appius would do just that if he wanted. Once he caught his breath, Eric motioned toward one of the bottles of water in the limo's wet bar

"Help yourself," Appius said, almost congenially, as Eric quickly opened and took a drink of the water to soothe his aching throat.

Once it felt like his throat was no longer on fire, Eric spoke in a careful whisper. "What about Sookie?"

Appius's jaw tightened as he studied Eric carefully. "It appears that she has left you."

Eric allowed his true sorrow over Sookie's leaving to spill over, for once not trying to hide his emotions from his father. "Left me?" he asked as tears began to burn his eyes.

"Yes," Appius responded pitilessly, still staring his son down, no doubt trying to discern whether Eric had known about Sookie's plans to leave. "Miss Stackhouse seems to have some balls of her own. She left me a little message today—using my own listening device." Appius seemed almost impressed by Sookie's audacity for a moment. "I have to say that I was surprised that you'd not destroyed it after our talk last week."

Eric face held genuine shock. "Sookie left you a message?"

Appius nodded. "Would you like to know what she said?"

Eric couldn't stop himself from nodding. It hadn't been in the plan for Sookie to do that. In fact, Eric had hoped that it would be several days before Appius figured out that she was gone.

"She was *not* very flattering toward you—I'm afraid," Appius sneered. "She told me that she's been playing you all along, and now that it is clear that you can't be manipulated into marrying her—because of my interference, by the way—she is leaving you. Apparently, she plans to take her grifting skills elsewhere."

“You’re lying,” Eric said, his throat burning even more because of the rise of bile in it.

Appius shrugged nonchalantly. “You should probably check to make sure that she hasn’t stolen anything of value when you get home.”

Eric shook his head in pain. It wasn’t that he believed Appius’s words. On the contrary. However, he began to imagine that Sookie had actually said them as part of a plan cooked up by Bobby. He imagined how much pain it would have given Sookie to say words like the ones Appius was reporting—even though they were lies—and his heart ached a little more than it had already been aching.

“You shouldn’t feel too bad,” Appius said before swallowing the rest of his drink. “I was taken in by her innocent act too. She probably uses her lip-reading trick as a way to weave herself into the lives of gullible men, such as yourself.” He smiled. “Poor little Eric. It seems that even the circus sideshow acts cannot love you.”

Eric felt himself shaking with a mixture of sorrow and anger—and fear. “Fuck you,” he said.

Appius sat back in his seat and crossed his legs. “You really had no idea she was leaving you—did you?” he chuckled. “And you really *do* love her,” he added in almost disbelief. “But even *you* must see that I was right; people like your Miss Stackhouse have only one objective when they worm their way into our world: they want what we have.” He smiled sinisterly. “She wanted your money. She wanted the position that marrying you would have gotten her. She did not want *you*. Who would?”

“Shut the fuck up,” Eric said, each word painfully croaking through his swelling throat.

Appius let out a long-suffering sigh and continued as if speaking to a child. “People like us must stick to marriages with people of our *own* kind, and even though Russell Edgington is an

insufferable, arrogant ass, aligning the Northmans with the Edgingtons would be good for us and for them and for the whole goddamned society we live in.”

Appius looked almost tired for a moment as he ran his hand through his hair. “I’m growing weary of dealing with you, Eric. Why do you push me? You and I both know that I have you by the balls. Why can’t you just accept your role and complete it without complaint or drama?” He sighed. “God knows I wish that you would have been the bastard child of Peder so that I could have washed my hands of you and your mother forever, but I’ve accepted the fact that you are mine,” he added as if drinking castor oil. He poured himself another scotch and downed it all in a large gulp.

Methodically, he poured himself another. “I think it would behoove us both to coexist peacefully,” Appius said after a minute or so a silence.

“How?” Eric whispered.

Appius took a sip of his scotch and sat back in his seat. “I will stop asking that you report all of your operations at NP. And—hell—I may even entertain some of your idiotic notions as Russell seems to think I should.”

“And in return?” Eric asked, his voice still cracking.

Appius sat forward a little. “Get engaged to Isabel. Surely Miss Stackhouse’s leaving has taught you that love is an illusion.” He sighed. “I—more than anyone—had to learn that the hard way.”

“My mother *did* love you,” Eric said, his voice ragged and defeated.

“Do not speak of things you know nothing about, *boy*,” Appius warned, his voice once more taking on a dangerous edge.

The two stared at each other for a minute—until finally Eric looked away.

Appius chuckled.

“So—if I get engaged to Isabel, then what? You suddenly leave me alone?” Eric asked, disbelief clear in his tone.

Appius shrugged. “If you do as you *should*, I will leave you alone.”

“And what *should* I do?” Eric asked.

“Quit fucking around, and act like a Northman,” Appius growled. “Get married by the end of the year. Operate your division with NP’s profits in mind—rather than by trying to make all parties in a deal happy. And—in a few years—take over the company and run it in the same way. Keep building it up for Appius, Jr. And keep out of my way. I will inform Sophie-Anne that you are no longer to be invited to family functions.” Appius once again looked a little tired. “New York is a large city. And Northman Tower is a big building. Perhaps—if we are very lucky—Andre and Clancy can interact for us. Perhaps we could avoid seeing each other for months at a time.”

“What about my brothers and sisters?” Eric asked.

Appius sighed. “See them if you must. Just make sure I’m not around when you do.”

“Why are you being so *charitable*?” Eric spit out suspiciously.

Appius’s face slowly morphed into a look that held both sorrow and joy. It was an odd combination and made him look a little insane in that moment.

Appius sat forward as he responded to Eric’s question. “Now you are *exactly* like me. The look in your eyes right now—I have seen it in my own eyes before: right after I read Stella’s final letter to Peder.” Appius sat back and both men were silent for a moment.

“After hearing Miss Stackhouse’s message, I didn’t know if it was a part of a plan to deceive me or not,” Appius said honestly. “But,” he paused, still studying Eric, “I can tell that

your misery is real.” He closed his eyes as if both reveling in his son’s misery and reliving his own. Again, the expression on Appius’s face was so confused that he seemed almost otherworldly. After a moment, he continued, “Yes—I remember that look and that feeling well, and if I could pity you, I would do it now.”

“But you can’t,” Eric said sadly.

Appius opened his eyes and shook his head. “No. Pity has long since left me.”

Eric nodded in resignation.

“I cannot hurt you anymore than your Sookie has done by leaving you. And your misery is my satisfaction.” Appius closed his eyes once more, his expression becoming almost serene. “Now Stella’s child will be forced to live with the kind of pain that I have felt for the last quarter century.”

“That’s what you want? For me to live in a hell?”

“Yes—but not just any hell. A hell made by the women you love more than your own life,” Appius corrected.

“You’re the devil,” Eric squeaked out.

Appius chuckled. “Just yours.” His expression turned thoughtful. “I do not believe in heaven or hell in the traditional sense. However, if they do turn out to be real, I would gladly go to hell in exchange for two wishes.”

“Wishes?” Eric half-said and half-asked in barely a whisper. In that moment, Eric grieved that all of his own wishes had evaporated.

Appius nodded as he took a sip of his scotch.

“What do you wish?”

“If there is an afterlife, my first wish is that I will spend eternity in hell so that I never have to see Stella again—so that I never have to be where she is and know that she is not mine.”

There was a moment of silence between them.

“And the second?”

“That you suffer *more* than I have had to. That you live a longer life than I do so that you suffer longer. That a day does not go by that you fail to lament what you lost. That you die in misery and alone—even if you are surrounded by others.”

“God—you truly hate me,” Eric said with anguish in his voice, “and my mother.”

Appius got a faraway look in his eyes; it was almost gentle. “No—not Stella. No, Eric, I love your mother with everything I am.”

“Then why?” Eric faltered.

“I wept over Stella’s body when she finally was too weak to fight the cancer any longer. And before that, I stayed by her side for weeks and weeks. I would have done anything to save her. I would have given my own life,” Appius said quietly. “I chose her over Peder too—you know. I could have left her when I found them together. Peder, like me, preferred men, and I could have used that to manipulate him—no matter how much he loved her.” He sighed loudly. “But Stella was *different*. She was always so much more than my lover. There was something about her,” Appius added before clearing his throat and downing the rest of his drink.

After a moment, he continued, “I would have given her anything—given up anything for her. But she did not give up the one thing I asked her to give up. And—*that*—I cannot forget or forgive.”

“There was a time when I would have given up anything just for a kind word from you,” Eric said honestly.

Appius shook his head. “But you found something you would *not* give up for me.”

“Sookie,” Eric whispered.

Appius sighed. “You have always been so much like Stella. I could see that from the moment you were born. It was why I loved you so much. From the very first moment I saw you, my love for you matched my love for your mother. I was so proud of you—so proud to be your father.”

“Father,” Eric said, sitting forward a little, his eyes filling with tears, “I swear that I would never do anything to hurt you or the family. Please.” He begged, “Please. Can’t we just try to be something different than we’ve been?”

Appius shook his head, one side of his mouth edging up in disgust. “You would *really* forgive me—wouldn’t you? Even now? You would overlook the fact that I stole the Larsson fortune from you. You would overlook the fact that I have done *everything* I could to make your life as miserable as mine.”

“Yes,” Eric answered without hesitation, even as a sob escaped his sore throat. “Just stop hating me. Please. Father, I love you.”

Appius sighed. “I can’t stop hating you.”

Eric’s shoulders slumped.

Appius squeezed his eyes shut again, as if to try to expel his memories from his mind.

When he opened them, there was a tear falling down his cheek. “As much as I have tried, I cannot hate Stella. I can only love her,” Appius confessed.

“So you can only hate me,” Eric said quietly.

“Yes,” Appius answered quickly. “And now—at long last—my hatred has truly come to fruition. Miss Stackhouse’s leaving has broken you. I can see that as clearly as I once saw it in the mirror.”

Eric closed his own eyes and nodded in agreement.

“Just do as I say, Eric,” Appius sighed. “Marry the Edgington girl. Think of it as a merger—a business deal if you must. You and I will stay away from each other. Hell—after you take over—I will even wave the right to have yearly meetings with you as long as the profits stay up. We would never have to speak again.”

“I would think that you would want to witness my pain firsthand,” Eric said.

An almost haunted look clouded Appius’s face. “Yes—that is what I thought I wanted. But seeing it,” he shook his head a little bit, “is too familiar.”

They were silent for at least a minute.

Eric rubbed his palm along his forehead. “What if Isabel doesn’t agree to the engagement?”

“As progressive as he tries to be, I can tell that Russell would be just as pleased as I would be by the joining of our families. I have a feeling that Isabel would agree to an arrangement as long as certain conditions were met, ensuring her satisfaction in the match. She obviously wants to please her father, after all.”

“Like one of *your* marriages,” Eric observed.

“Yes,” Appius agreed. “My wives and I have always benefitted from the arrangements we made.”

“I love Sookie,” Eric said honestly, as tears fell from his eyes once more.

“Yes. And if you love her anything like I loved Stella, then you can count on a lifetime of pain,” Appius said with some of the light returning to his eyes, though they were still a darkened, unforgiving blue. His tone turned bitter. “And that pain will not lessen, nor can it be covered by drink or love from others.” He ran his hand through his hair and looked momentarily haggard. “*Nothing* will take the pain away, Eric. Your Pandora has opened her box of woe and left behind only misery. Your Sookie is gone.”

“Gone,” Eric repeated as he buried his face into his hands and wept.

“I was prepared to use her little parlor trick for years, making you both miserable in the process. Hell. I was even prepared to try to seduce her, but now I realize that this is so much better—her leaving you all on her own.” He sat forward a little. “Tell me—how long did you have with her? How long were you happy?”

“Almost nine months,” Eric said raggedly, his voice muffled by his hands.

“Ah—and having that bliss will make you even more miserable now. Just like me,” Appius said with satisfaction.

Eric could only nod in agreement.

“I will give you nine months to settle things with Isabel—to marry her,” Appius said. “You can have just as many months as you were happy in order to resign yourself to your new existence—just like I had to do.”

“And if I don’t?” Eric asked.

“I will do everything I can to make your existence miserable—even more so than I’ve done in the past,” Appius said. “Live in your suffering, Eric. Maybe knowing you are doing that will allow my own suffering to ebb a little.”

Eric could tell that his father was dismissing him.

“I will stay out of your way for nine months, Eric,” Appius said as his eldest son reached for the door handle. “I will seek no meetings. I will ask for no reports of your business dealings. There will be no interaction between us. And that is how it will stay *if* you do as I’ve said.”

With a nod of understanding and resignation, Eric left the limo.

Chapter 32: Arrangement

“Jesus Christ!” Isabel cried, rushing up to Eric, who was leaning against the door of his corvette.

He’d not dared to go back into the party—not with the ugly bruise that was making its presence known on his throat. He’d texted Isabel, asking her to meet him at the car and bring a couple of bottles of water. He’d also asked that she give his apologies to Russell for not being able to return. In truth, as soon as he’d seen the blackness forming where Appius had choked him, he’d wondered if he ought to go to the emergency room, especially given the burning he still felt, but he’d decided to wait a while to see if the swelling worsened.

“What happened?” Isabel asked, looking at the bruise with horror.

“Not here,” Eric said, even as he took a bottle of water from her. “I can take you home, or you can stay and get a ride from your father.”

Isabel shook her head. “No. You should go to the hospital.”

“I’m fine,” Eric croaked out.

“Bullshit. It looks like you’ve been mugged!”

“I haven’t been. And I’m okay.”

Isabel sighed. “Fine. But you’re going to take me home so that I can make sure you don’t get worse. And—on the way—you’re going to tell me what happened to you.”

Eric nodded in agreement and then moved to help Isabel into the car.

“Should you be driving?” she asked.

“I’m fine,” he repeated, his voice still cracking a bit.

She let him get a block before she spoke again. In that time, he drank the rest of the first bottle of water. Isabel handed him the second and relaxed a little seeing that he could swallow the liquid.

“Did Appius do that?” she asked.

Eric nodded in affirmation.

“Why?” she asked in shock.

“I suspect it was because I threatened his life,” Eric said evenly.

“Why?”

“I thought he might have harmed Sookie.”

Isabel tensed. “Did he?”

“No, but she’s gone.”

“Gone?”

Eric sighed deeply but kept his focus on the traffic. “Yes. Appius wanted to use her to hurt me, so she left.”

“Why the fuck didn’t you stop her or go with her, Eric?” Isabel demanded. “It is clear how much you love her!”

“Yes,” Eric agreed, his voice a little less ragged after having drunk the water. “I *do* love her. But Appius is blackmailing me, and Sookie left on her own without my knowing about it,” he added, lying about the last part. He knew that he could trust Isabel, but he’d decided that only three people could know the whole truth about how and why Sookie had left: Bobby, Sookie, and himself.

“So—she just left you?” Isabel asked in disbelief.

“That’s what Appius informed me,” Eric said. “Apparently, she left him a message using the bug in my office.”

Isabel had already been told about the listening device, so she didn’t ask about it. “When did she go?” she asked instead.

“Today,” Eric responded, “sometime during the brunch.”

Isabel reached out and patted his arm. “I’m so sorry,” she said sincerely.

“Me too,” Eric replied. “But I can’t blame her. Appius had found out about us, and he would have driven a wedge between us one way or another. She left to protect herself from him.”

“I’m sorry,” Isabel said again, this time more softly. “I know you loved her.”

“Love her,” Eric corrected. “And I always will.”

“As I will always love Hugo,” she said in a barely audible whisper. She’d not mentioned him in months, but her tone betrayed her continued sadness.

“You still love him?” Eric asked.

Isabel nodded. “Yes. Even after I found out that he had a wife and children he’d not told me about, I still loved him—even though I tried not to. Distance and time haven’t made a difference either.” She sighed. “It’s been more than a year since I saw him, yet I still cry for him—almost every single day.”

Eric sighed. “Have you spoken with him?”

Isabel nodded. “Yes. I’m ashamed to say that I took one of his calls about a month ago. He claims to still love me. He told me that he will leave his wife if I promise to marry him. But I have no heart to break up a family, and . . .” She stopped midsentence.

“And?” Eric asked.

“Hugo is ambitious. I’ve always known that. He might actually love me; I don’t know. But what I do know is that he thirsts for the power and the position—and the money—that being with me would entail.”

Eric frowned, thinking of Appius’s words earlier. He’d said that Sookie had wanted him only for his money, and even though Eric knew that wasn’t true about the woman he loved, it seemed as if it might be true about Hugo. And he hated that for Isabel’s sake. “What about the person you’ve been seeing?” Eric asked.

“I stopped seeing him months ago. He wanted more than something casual,” Isabel said. “He wanted my love. And I just don’t have it to give anymore.”

The two were silent for a while, both lost in their thoughts about the people they loved.

A few minutes later, Eric pulled up in front of Isabel’s home and parked the car. He turned in his seat to look at her. “Appius offered me a deal—a détente of sorts. If I marry you within the next nine months, then he will leave me alone. He won’t try to interfere in my running of my division, and I won’t have to see him or speak with him.”

Isabel was speechless for a moment.

“I’d like you to consider marrying me, Isabel—not just because of Appius’s offer, but because you and I are friends and could have a good partnership.”

“I know we spoke of marriage last year, Eric,” Isabel said tentatively. “And you know that I genuinely like you. But I don’t think I could marry you. You belong with Sookie.”

Eric closed his eyes. “That can’t happen.”

Isabel shook her head sadly. “Appius *knows* you don’t love me—doesn’t he?” she asked.

“Of course. He doesn’t want me to have love,” Eric grimaced.

“I don’t love you either, Eric,” Isabel said, “at least, not romantically. And I don’t think I ever could. You are my friend, but that’s it.”

“I know,” he said. “I feel the same way about you, but I would still like you to consider marrying me.”

“That’s not a very romantic proposal,” Isabel deadpanned, trying to add a touch of levity to a situation where there was none.

“I know, but—as you said—we have talked about making an arrangement before.”

She nodded. “Yes—but that was *before* Sookie was in the picture. Eric, Sookie might not be my biggest fan, and I understand that, but I very much like her. And I especially like her because she makes you happy.”

Eric took a deep breath. “No matter what—I have to marry before I’m thirty-five, and, if I don’t find someone who fits the requirements of the contract, Appius could force me to marry someone like Freyda de Castro.”

Isabel cringed a little at hearing Freyda’s name. Freyda’s sanity was shaky at best. Isabel took a moment to contemplate Eric’s words. She knew about some of the elements regarding the contract. Eric had told her about it when she’d agreed to continue going to public events with him. In truth, being on Eric’s arm at events and benefits like the charity brunch had been no hardship for her. Isabel sincerely enjoyed Eric’s company. He was intelligent and an interesting conversation partner. And she knew that a marriage to him would please her father. And—given the fact that being with the man she truly loved, Hugo, was impossible for a variety of reasons—a marriage to Eric seemed to be a good choice.

“If we made an arrangement, what could you offer?” Isabel asked.

“Not a lot,” Eric said honestly. “I will *not* cheat on Sookie. I cannot; she will always be the wife of my heart.”

Isabel took a long breath as she studied the pain and sorrow in Eric’s eyes. “I could accept that—as long as the marriage was open for me.”

Eric nodded. “Of course. However, children must be had.”

“Adopted?” Isabel asked.

“Or artificial insemination,” Eric responded.

“How romantic,” she intoned.

Eric spoke sadly, “I cannot offer romance or love. Those things are Sookie’s. I cannot even offer sex anymore. All I can offer is an alliance that includes steadiness, family, and friendship.”

Isabel sighed. “I couldn’t offer you romance either.”

Eric nodded. “I know. I wouldn’t ask for it, and you would always be free to have sexual relationships with others, Isabel.”

“But you wouldn’t let yourself be free to do the same?” she asked.

“As I said, I will be faithful to Sookie—until the day I die.”

“So you intend to live as a monk?” she asked, the surprise clear in her voice.

“I had many women before Sookie,” Eric said honestly. “Enough to know that no one could ever replace her or compare to her. And since my right hand can give me the same level of physical release that someone else could, I see no reason to betray the love I have for her.”

Isabel chuckled a little. “I won’t take offense that I was one of those other women.”

“You shouldn’t.”

Isabel nodded and contemplated for a moment. “I respect you, Eric. And I like you. I don’t know everything about what’s going on with you and Appius, but—if being engaged to me helps you—then I will agree to it, but”

“But?” Eric asked after a pause from Isabel.

Isabel took Eric’s hand in her own in a friendly manner. “I’m a pretty selfish person, Eric, and—frankly—being married to you would be ideal to me in almost every way. It would please my father. Plus, our personalities complement each other enough to ensure that we would make good partners. I’m not the kind of girl who ever wanted the fairy tale out of life, so I don’t really care about the fact that your bed and mine would never be the same. And—after Hugo—I doubt that I would ever be able to let myself trust enough to allow myself to fall in love again, so I can’t imagine ever needing out of a marriage if we formed one.” She paused again.

“Yet there was still a ‘but,’” Eric reminded.

Isabel nodded. “As good as an arranged marriage with you would be for me, I’m not quite selfish enough to be willing to take away the chance of a ‘real’ marriage from you—with Sookie.”

“But I already said that’s impossible,” Eric whispered.

“Maybe,” Isabel said, squeezing his hand. “But you’re my friend, so I’m going to pray for the impossible—for your sake.”

Eric looked a little confused. “So—where does that leave us?”

Isabel took a deep breath as resolution filled her eyes. “Get me a ring. I like emerald cuts.” She frowned. “But nothing too big or gaudy. One and a half carats would suffice. And a simple band.”

Eric still looked a little confused. “So you’re agreeing?”

Isabel nodded. “Yes. But I have conditions.”

“What?”

“You said that your father gave you nine months?”

Eric nodded.

“Okay. So we have until the third week of October to get married.”

Having done the math already, Eric nodded in confirmation.

“If we get to that point, and there’s still no way for you to be with Sookie, then we’ll get married by a justice of the peace—with just my father and Pam there. And I want a prenup that indicates that if anything ever changes regarding your situation and Sookie, we will equally share custody of any children following our divorce.”

“Isabel . . . ,” Eric started.

“No,” Isabel said firmly. “I *won’t* do this with you unless it’s clear from the beginning that I don’t want to try to hold onto you if circumstances change. I like you too much to do that. And it would be best if the groundwork was laid out in a prenup if you ever found a way out of your contract with your father. *And*—I think it’s about time you called me Izzy,” she added with a little smile. “You know I prefer that with my closest friends.”

Eric sighed. “You’re being too good to me, Izzy.”

She chuckled. “Not really. I stand to gain a lot from a marriage to you, and—as I said—I think we could make good partners in life. And I couldn’t think of a better father for my children—children that I *do* want.” She smiled. “In fact, if we don’t end up getting married, I think I’ll move forward with adopting on my own.” She squeezed his hand. “Will you promise me that—even if you are not their father—you will be their godfather?”

Eric nodded. “I promise.”

“Good,” Isabel said as she went to exit the car. She paused. “Get the ring from Tiffany & Co. on Fifth Avenue. There’s a salesman there named Randolph, and he sells information to the tabloids when high-profile people buy jewelry. Be sure to mention that the ring’s for me, and the news will leak by the next day. Then—we can make a formal announcement.”

Eric nodded numbly. “I cannot thank you enough, Izzy,” he said.

The brunette sighed. “I’m sorry that Sookie is gone, Eric. I hope you can work it out so that you can bring her back and be with her. You love her, and she loves you.”

Eric’s eyes dropped and he said nothing as Isabel exited the vehicle. He needed no one to tell him of Sookie’s love for him. She would always be the wife of his heart, and he felt like a shell without her.

The sad part was that he knew Appius was right about one thing: his misery at not having Sookie by his side would never recede. He would be cursed to live a half-life—just like his father before him.

Chapter 33: Face North

“Above the cloud with its shadow is the star with its light.”—Pythagoras

Eric felt numb as he drove into the parking garage of his building. He felt numb as he rode the elevator up to his floor. He felt numb as he stepped out of the elevator and didn't see Ned shooting into the foyer to greet him.

He didn't hear noises from the kitchen or the bedroom. No lights were on.

As he always did, he set his car keys and wallet down onto the little table in the foyer. Sookie's laptop bag was there as it always was, and he dragged his fingers across it. Suddenly needing to see every single trace she'd left behind, he hurried into their sitting room. A few library books were on the table—some of his and some of hers. The sight of them comforted him, but also broke him a little more.

He walked into their closet and saw some of Sookie's clothing still on her side.

“Not empty,” he said aloud.

Not being able to face their bedroom, the place where they had married each other the night before, he walked into his office. On the desk was a white hand towel with a small hammer and the broken listening device on top of it.

“Sookie,” he whispered, shaking his head a little.

Next to the towel was an envelope with his name on it. And on top of that was the compass Adele had left him in her Will.

His knees shaking a little, Eric sank down into his office chair and held the envelope and the compass for a while as he closed his eyes and prayed to God and to his grandfathers and to his mother and to Adele that Sookie was safe and that she would stay safe. He prayed that all of the pain of their parting could be somehow placed upon him so that she could go on and find the

happiness that she deserved. He prayed that she would remember him and the brief life that they had shared with fondness—and not come to hate him for the things that he could not give her. He prayed that one day, a worthier, braver man would walk into her life. He imagined her walking down an aisle in a flowing white wedding gown, looking radiant and content. He prayed that she would have children so that she could pass on her light to them. He prayed that she would find work she enjoyed and spend her days in peace and happiness.

And—finally, after he'd transferred all the wishes he'd had for himself and Sookie to her and this better man—he prayed one selfish prayer: that there was a heaven and that he would see her there one day, even if he could not have her there either.

He prayed until it was night and the room with lit up with only the city lights.

And then he turned on his lamp and read the letter from Sookie.

My Dearest Love,

I could spend pages writing "I love you," over and over again. Yet it would not be enough. There are not enough pages—not in all the world. There is not enough time.

When we were in Sweden, we would often sit out at night and look at the stars. My eyes were always drawn toward Polaris, the North Star. You told me its Old Norse name, leiðarstjarna. And—under that star—we talked and made love and were happy.

In Manhattan, the lights and the buildings can make it impossible to see any stars, even one so bright as leiðarstjarna. But that doesn't mean that you shouldn't try to see it, Eric. I promise you that—no matter where I am—I will

always face the north at night and remember better nights. Nights when we were together.

You are my North, Eric. You are the direction my heart will always point in. And you are the brightest and the strongest star in my sky. You always will be.

Promise me that you will remember your own strength, Eric. You are stronger than Appius—so much stronger. You have been dragged through hell by him, yet you have become such a good man. It takes so much more strength to be willing to stay there and protect those you love than to run away. And that strength makes me love you even more than I did before.

Remember, Appius is the weak one, Eric. Only the weak prey upon children. Only the weak make others suffer so that they will suffer less. You are nothing like him, and that makes you so much more.

You are the love of my life. And I will always be yours. Even if it takes decades, you and I will be together. Do not give up hope, Eric. And do not stop looking north.

Yours,

Sookie

Below Sookie's name was the passage from the *Faerie Queene* that had been written to him in the codicil that Adele had included with her Will.

What though the sea with waves continuall

Doe eate the earth? it is no more at all,

Ne is the earth the lesse, or loseth ought:

For whatsoever from one place doth fall

Is with the tide unto an other brought:

For there is nothing lost, that may be found, if sought.¹

Eric read the letter over and over again before he folded it carefully and placed it back into its envelope. He stood, compass and letter in hand, and walked into his and Sookie's bedroom. He put the letter into his nightstand and then walked out onto the balcony.

He held the compass in his hands and then turned due north. Sookie was right. Tall buildings and light pollution hid the North Star from him, but he closed his eyes and saw it all the same.

"I love you, Sookie," he choked out, his throat burning from both the trauma of the wound his father had given him and his tears.

The cold January night bit into him. But he stayed outside until his body was as numb as his heart.

¹ *The Faerie Queene* (Book V canto ii verse 39)

Epilogue: A Walking Shadow

This life, which had been the tomb of his virtue and of his honour, is but a walking shadow; a poor player, that struts and frets his hour upon the stage, and then is heard no more: it is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.—William Shakespeare

Appius Northman had asked his driver to take him home immediately and then return to collect Sophie-Anne, Andre, and Nora from the charity brunch later. His interaction with Eric had shaken him, and now he wanted only to sit in his office and get shit-faced until he felt nothing—until he was numb.

He was already well on his way.

He'd lost control that day, first while he was listening to Sookie Stackhouse's message and then while he was speaking to Eric.

But now he felt better—back in control of the situation and himself.

In contrast to what he'd told Eric, Sookie had not left because her greed had been thwarted.

Far from it.

She'd left so that she couldn't be used to hurt Eric.

Appius sighed heavily and took a gulp of his scotch. With no compunction, he would have used Sookie to hurt his eldest son. And he would have enjoyed it too, but Sookie had proven her love to a degree that Stella never had. She'd sacrificed everything—her own happiness—for Eric.

And that action had gutted Appius, for it was the one thing that Stella had been incapable of doing for him.

His only consolation had been the fact that Eric was destroyed anyway—despite Sookie’s sacrifice. His son’s eyes had told him the tale. Appius still saw similar eyes in his own mirror when he let himself truly think of Stella, which he refrained from doing as much as he was able. Still—he’d never been able to stop thinking about her completely.

Just as he’d never been able to stop himself from loving her—*completely*.

Appius poured himself another drink. It took a lot of alcohol to take him to oblivion these days, but—thankfully—between what he’d had in the limo and what he’d had since he’d gotten home, the warmth of the liquor was beginning to travel through his body.

He sat back into his chair and tried to focus on his victory. He had finally found and taken away the one thing his son treasured most. And he’d seen Eric’s eyes—the exact replica of Stella’s eyes—lose their gleam completely.

As soon as Eric had left the limo, Appius had called Franklin Mott and had been assured that Bobby Burnham had been in his home all day and was now, it seemed, “entertaining” a woman. Appius had ordered Mott, who had turned out to be much craftier than Wybert or Sigebert, to transfer his surveillance to Eric for the time being in order to make sure that Sookie was indeed gone and that his son had no contact with her. After seeing Eric’s reaction to the news that Sookie had left, Appius didn’t think it was probable, but he had to grant the possibility that Sookie and Eric were pulling the wool over his eyes. However, he knew that Mott would find out if there was any contact between them.

Appius lamented the fact that the listening device was no longer in Eric’s home and couldn’t help but to wonder how long his son had known about it, but Appius was not one to cry over spilled milk, and he was—even then—arranging to get some next-generation surveillance equipment that would help them to tap into Eric’s cell phone. Moreover, Appius had already set

the groundwork for getting someone on his payroll onto the security crew at Eric's building. So he would soon have both eyes and ears on Eric.

With that in mind, he called his newest employee.

"Miss Pelt," he said as she answered her phone.

"Mr. Northman," the female voice responded.

"How is our project going?" he asked.

"I have an interview on Tuesday," she shared. "And I don't foresee any difficulties getting employment since my 'boyfriend' will no longer be working in the building, and Jiles will need a replacement for him."

"Don't get cocky," Appius warned. "Henry Jiles is an ex-SEAL, and according to my people, he's very good at his job as head of security at Carmichael Tower."

"SEALs are pussies," the woman said with derision.

Even Appius was patriotic enough to want to correct her, but Debbie Pelt had been in Black Ops for the last five years. And as a woman functioning in that capacity in the Middle East, she was obviously one tough bitch. He felt it best to keep her placated.

"Just don't say that during your interview," Appius finally said.

Debbie chuckled. "Don't worry. By the end of next week, I'll be where you need me to be."



Appius hung up the phone and took another drink. He closed his eyes. It had been Mott who had researched the guards of Carmichael Tower and then suggested that they employ Debbie Pelt. She had an “in” to Henry Jiles’s crew—after all—since she’d been engaged to one of his employees, Alcide Herveaux, a decade before. It had been easy to convince Pelt to seduce her former fiancé and to influence him to pursue more private security jobs. From there, Herveaux had put in a good word for her with Jiles.

Appius sighed. He hoped that Eric would follow his directives regarding Isabel Edgington, for he was truly tired of interacting with his son in any way. But that didn’t mean that he wasn’t going to be monitoring his every move—even more closely than before.

Debbie Pelt would make sure of that.

And it certainly didn’t mean that he was done constructing scenarios that would hurt Eric. In fact, now that he thought about it, a future with Isabel Edgington seemed too good for Stella’s son—*much* too good. With that thought in mind, he scrolled through his phone again until he came to the name he was looking for.

“Appius!” the woman who answered said excitedly. “Are you calling about Eric? Have you finally gotten him to come to his senses?”

“Not yet, my dear. But I have a plan of how you two can be together.”

“You do?” she asked with hope.

“Indeed,” Appius said. “But I will need your help.”

The woman’s voice grew pouty. “But I can’t leave here right now. Daddy says I need to stay until the doctors feel I’m well.” She scoffed. “They just don’t understand that Eric and I are meant to be. They don’t realize that that’s why I was following him like I was. I never intended to use the gun I had,” she added with a flippant, though slightly nervous laugh.

“Of course not, dear,” Appius said soothingly. “But now you must pretend that you are over Eric.”

“I won’t lie about our love!” she said fervently.

Appius sat forward in his chair a little. “You will only have to lie to your doctors and your father. You and I will still know the truth about your feelings. And—soon—Eric will recognize that truth, too, and all will be well,” he coaxed.

“Do you promise?” Freyda de Castro asked hopefully.

“Yes. Just do everything that I ask, and Eric will be yours before you know it. You simply must be patient.”

Freyda sighed. “Do you really think Eric will accept me? He was so cruel before.”

“He has been misguided, dear,” Appius soothed.

There was a pause.

“If you will help me to get Eric, I will do whatever you say,” she relented.

“Good. It must be nighttime in Switzerland, my dear,” Appius said paternally. “Get your rest, and—in the morning—you can begin working to convince the others that you are over Eric. It might take a little time, but I know you can do it.”

“I will! And,” Freyda paused, “thank you, Appius.”

“You and my son belong together,” Appius said, placating the woman. “I will call again soon.”

“Good bye,” Freyda said.

“Good night, dear,” Appius responded before hanging up.

He smiled with satisfaction and filled his glass again. Eric might get his shit together and marry Isabel. But Freyda—in all of her obsession—would be an amusing wild card to add into the mix. The fact that she’d been found with a gun when she’d been caught stalking Eric had been kept quiet by the authorities—due in part to a large bribe by Felipe de Castro and a favor called in to the chief of police by Appius.

The elder Northman smiled, thinking about how de Castro now owed him. Sadly, Felipe hadn’t been able to convince the Chinese to deal with Vegas Publishing even after Appius had given Felipe information so that he could offer Guangzhou Press a better deal than Eric. But Appius was certain that he could still find a way to use Felipe and his daughter.

Part of Appius hoped that Freyda might just kill Eric if she got another chance. Or she might kill Isabel. Either way, her presence would certainly be amusing—for Appius.

And hurtful for Eric.

Or—perhaps—Appius could still manufacture the situation so that Eric would marry the delusional Freyda de Castro. As the night went on, Appius’s alcohol-addled mind zipped through any number of outcomes—each one potentially more harmful for his eldest son.

Long after the others in the household were asleep, Appius finally passed out on the sofa in his office. He dreamed of Stella, her beautiful blue eyes dripping with tears. He reached out to her, knowing that if he could just touch her, all of her pain—and his pain—would be burned away.

But he could not reach her.

THE END OF **TOUCH THE FLAME.**

BURN OUT THE PAIN, Part III of the *Comfortably Numb* trilogy to follow.

CAST



Eric Northman



played by **Alexander Skarsgård**

Sookie Stackhouse



played by **Anna Paquin**

