



LIFE FROM DEATH

“The boundaries which divide life from death are at best shadowy and vague. Who shall say where one ends, and where the other begins?”

—Edgar Allan Poe

by California Kat

SUMMARY

This story picks up in the middle of Season 7, Episode 9. What if the Viking decided that being Bill's messenger wasn't going to work for him? It is high time for Sookie to hear some hard truths. What she chooses to do with those truths will determine whether Eric cuts ties with her.

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).

NOTE

This story contains a little dialogue from Season 7, Episode 9 of *True Blood* (specifically, the scene where Eric asks to speak to Sookie as she leaves Bellefleur's). It also has echoes from Bill and Eric's conversation in 7.9, but then it goes in a different direction after that. Also, I have to give credit for the Billism, "humanitah," to maithanroisin. And, most importantly, I have to dedicate this story to jc52185. Initially, I was going to have Eric interrupt Bill's little "speech" and read him the riot act, but jc said this on my blog: "Also, though it would have been great for him [Eric] to jump up and say Bill's

nonsense about the light was not why he loved Sookie, he didn't have to explain his feelings to Bill. He [Bill] doesn't need the explanation." She was right, so I changed directions. Thanks, jc52185!

Now – to the story!

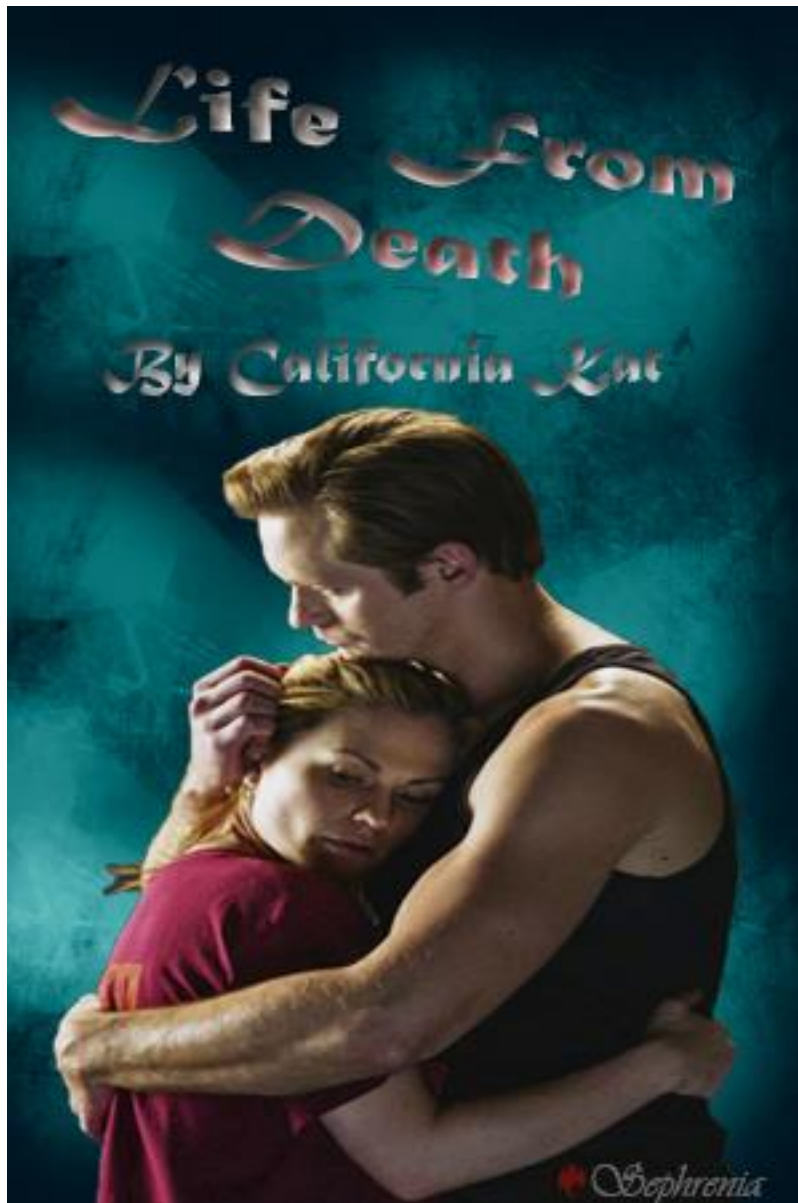


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Chapter 01: The Sighs Have It

Though I kept my countenance neutral, I listened to Bill with a mixture of amazement and disgust.

Why had I come to see him again? Oh yes – to tell him that he was being unfair to Sookie.

To inform him – in case he was wondering – that he was being an asshole again.

I sighed, and that pissed me off! I'd never been a "sigher" before Sookie Stackhouse entered my life. But now I sighed more than one of those sparkly, animal-eating vampires Pamela insisted upon telling me all about. I held back another sigh; I hardly fucking recognized myself these days.

Now barely listening as Bill droned on, I retreated to my familiar game of comparing the younger vampire to Shaggy on *Scooby-Doo*. The bad hair, the high level of cluelessness, the dumb luck in staying alive as long as he had, the *anti*-poker face. Yes – Bill was definitely Shaggy in my mental cataloguing of people. I took a moment to cast the other characters: Jessica as Daphne; Willa as Velma; Jason as Fred; and, of course, Merlotte as the dog. I held in a laugh – and then another goddamned sigh! I was tempted to interrupt Bill and ask him to get his whole “mystery-solving crew” together to figure out what the fuck was up with me!

The biggest mystery of all? Why the fuck did I still give a shit about Sookie Stackhouse? She gave the expression “hot and cold” a new fucking meaning! When it came to me, she was more like “lukewarm or frigid.” In fact, sometimes I thought I was stuck in the film *Brokeback Mountain*, yelling out the line, “I wish I knew how to quit you!” again and again. Less than a week before, I’d appeared at Bill’s door after being gone for six months, and Sookie had thrown herself into my arms. The looks she’d given me that night had told me that she still had love for me – love that echoed in our fledgling bond.

Oh – my blood had faded from her system, but the bond was still in me and in her. Of course, she couldn’t fucking feel it – and would never be able to feel it if we didn’t exchange two more times. However, I could still feel her emotions when I was close to her – though not as distinctly as I would have with my blood inside of her. No – feeling her now was like hearing the echo of a voice in a canyon.

It was frustrating and wonderful – like the woman herself.

She'd been relieved to see me alive and heartbroken to see me dying. Her emotions for me had been – for lack of a better phrase – “quietly intense.” As always, there had been a kind of understanding between us that had transcended the need for unneeded words.

Without her asking, I willingly put off my revenge against Sarah Newlin to help Sookie save her friends. How could I do otherwise? She cared for them. She feared for them.

And I loved her still.

And always.

Of course, less than a week later – when I'd followed the bond to her, hoping she'd spring into my arms again – she'd opened the door in one of Bill's horrid robes, reeking of his cum and sporting a new bite mark he'd not made the effort to heal. She'd spared 2.5 seconds to be grateful for my continued undead life before she'd begun begging for his.

It had been a humbling moment.

And, had I not smelled his blood in her body again, I would have hated her even more for it.

However, even if she'd not had his blood again, I wouldn't have stopped loving her. I wondered if anything would ever kill that emotion. Being with Nora hadn't; getting high on Lilith's blood hadn't; almost burning up hadn't; fucking my way across several continents hadn't; getting Hep-V hadn't.

But maybe – if I'd not smelled the new infusion *and intrusion* of Bill's blood inside of Sookie – I could have turned around and walked away from her the night before. Instead, I found myself risking Pam's and my existences to give Bill Compton the Sarah-serum.

And – of course – Sookie couldn't find it within herself to wait twelve fucking hours for me to do things my way! The careful way. No! She'd had to come to Fangtasia, where she'd proceeded to come inside – *despite* the fact that several *heavily* armed men stood between her and me. Come to think of it – I wasn't surprised; it was typical Sookie Stackhouse behavior.

It was why I loved her and wanted to kill her at the same time.

Maybe Bill was right about one thing: Sookie Stackhouse seemed drawn to him like a moth to a fucking flame! But that didn't seem to be true when his blood wasn't newly inside of her body. It was *that* blood which seemed to lobotomize her.

Another sigh.

Gods! Sookie's blood had fought mine tooth and nail; if anything, my blood inside of her had brought out more of her fire! Of course, I had only myself to blame for that. I loved Sookie's spirit most of all, so my blood likely amped up "fairy Sookie." I wondered what it was about Bill's blood that seemed to take away all of Sookie's fight – well, except when it came to fighting for him.

The vampire who'd given up fighting!

Sigh.

I'd not been lying when I told Bill that Hep-V's most insidious symptom was that it caused depression. For an immortal to face mortality all of a sudden was unsettling at best. Of course, I didn't tell Bill that I was already fucking depressed when I'd caught the disease. But I'd been working my way out of that depression. Travel always helped. I'd visited most of the corners of the world during my thousand years, but I enjoyed visiting them again – to catalogue the changes, to see the evolution.

Yes – I'd been working my way out of the doldrums I'd been in – until I made the mistake of celebrating my newly returned good mood with a couple dozen women in Morocco. And – just like that – my depression had come back in full force, along with the tell-tale spidery veins showing through my skin.

That depression had been why I'd returned to France – to the vineyard I'd bought in remembrance of Sylvie and of my own hubris. I'd wanted to wallow in my misery and recall each of my mistakes in the place of one of my biggest ones.

Sylvie. Part of me still regretted her. And I continued to think of her with a sense of longing, even though I now knew that I'd been enamored with her, rather than in love with her. But I *had* loved the idea of her – a human who accepted me. I'd been cavalier, to say the least, when I'd told her about the existence of vampires. Would Sylvie have betrayed me by telling others about vampires' existence? No. But should I have told her? No. I had killed vampires under my own dominion in Area 5 for doing the same. And I'd been given a chance by Nan – a chance to straighten up and fly right. But, stupidly, I'd not taken that chance. I *should* have glamoured Sylvie and moved

on – or, at least, glamoured her to forget that vampires were real. But I’d been a fool – arrogant and careless.

Just as I’d been when I’d contracted Hep-V.

Now I could look back at both of those situations with some perspective. In the first case, Godric had just distanced himself from me – already feeling the life burdens that would eventually lead him to meet the sun. In the second case, I was trying to “forget” Nora, my only remaining touchstone to my maker. In one case, I’d sought a human to use to ignore the pain – Sylvie. In the other case, I’d been rejected by the human who might have helped me to overcome the pain – Sookie.

I kept myself from chuckling. Sylvie and Sookie – each name six letters long, each name beginning and ending with the same letters. It was as if the cosmos was screaming at me to compare them.

But I couldn’t – not really.

Not if I were being honest.

Sylvie had fallen for me within five minutes of my knowing her. She’d been captivated, enamored. I’d never glamoured her, but her “worship” had existed nonetheless. I was mysterious and dangerous. And she’d wanted to be wild and rebellious, though her most rebellious act was sneaking outside at night. Our relationship was uncomplicated – to say the least.

Sookie had *not* fallen for me quickly. Hell – had she actually fallen for “me” at all? She’d been interested and intrigued, but definitely not enamored or captivated. Nothing had ever been uncomplicated between Sookie and me. And, because she liked

being a paradox, she actively rebelled against her own nature, professing the desire to live a “normal” life, when she was anything but normal or dull.

Hell – maybe she liked Compton so much because he was the most boring vampire in fucking existence!

But – then again – blood was *always* the ultimate truth-teller when it came to vampires. Perhaps Sookie had become obsessed because Bill was obsessed – with her and with his quest to hold onto a flake of his “humanitah.” Or maybe he was just obsessed with being a savior; hell, he’d taken to being a “god” quickly enough.

Even now, he was spouting some shit about *needing* to die in order to “save” Sookie from herself – to keep her from coming back to him again and again.

I could tell him why she kept coming back! *It was his fucking blood calling her to him!* Every false prophet, every chicken-shit martyr, and every self-proclaimed savior I’d ever heard of in history *needed* a worshipper – a witness. Inadvertently or not, Bill had made Sookie into that worshipper because – inadvertently or not – his blood *compelled* her to be just that.

But Bill was taking things too far this time. And that’s why I’d come to see him. He was ready to die so that he could end his fucked-up martyr story with a bang. I didn’t really care about that. However, Sookie would have to bear the guilt of his death. And I *did* care about that. She deserved better.

Bill proclaimed that she’d never be able to move on without him, but I could see the truth – even if Bill had on blinders. What Sookie could never move on from would be the guilt of sentencing Bill to his true death.

And – suddenly – I realized that was why Sookie had gone back to Bill: guilt + blood made for one hell of a fucked up cocktail.

Speaking of fucked up, Bill's diatribe had finally made me reach my limit as he reiterated that Sookie was attracted to the darkness in us, even as he implied that we were attracted only to the light – the Fae – in her.

I wanted to stand up and tell him to shut the fuck up. It wasn't Sookie's "light" that had attracted me. It had been her spirit – her fire – and I didn't care if that came from her Fae or human DNA. And I'd certainly never wanted to steal her fucking *light*!

I'd wanted Sookie well before I'd tasted her blood. And – even as a fucking amnesiac – I'd taken that blood only when it was offered to me. Oh – I'd wanted it – wanted to drain her dry. I was a fucking vampire, after all! But I'd wanted *Sookie* more than her blood.

I sighed – yet again. Maybe I had become a sighing sap. But at least I had one thing going for me.

I wasn't self-delusional; I wasn't Bill.

I kept my face set at practiced indifference, not quite believing that Bill was trying to convince me to convince Sookie to let him "call upon her."

Gods! Bill obviously would never – *ever* – lose his antiquated accent or phraseology.

And – obviously – he thought we were in fucking junior high. *And* he wanted me to do what? Pass a fucking note in study hall?

Bill said that this would be the last favor he ever asked of me, even as I tried to recall when Bill and I had become buddies who did favors for each other. Oh wait! I remember. *NEVER*.

And – the way I figured it – I owed Bill nothing. He'd spared me when I had amnesia, so I'd returned to try to save him from his obsession with Lilith's blood. He'd staked a vampire when I'd had Hep-V, and I'd offered him the fucking cure!

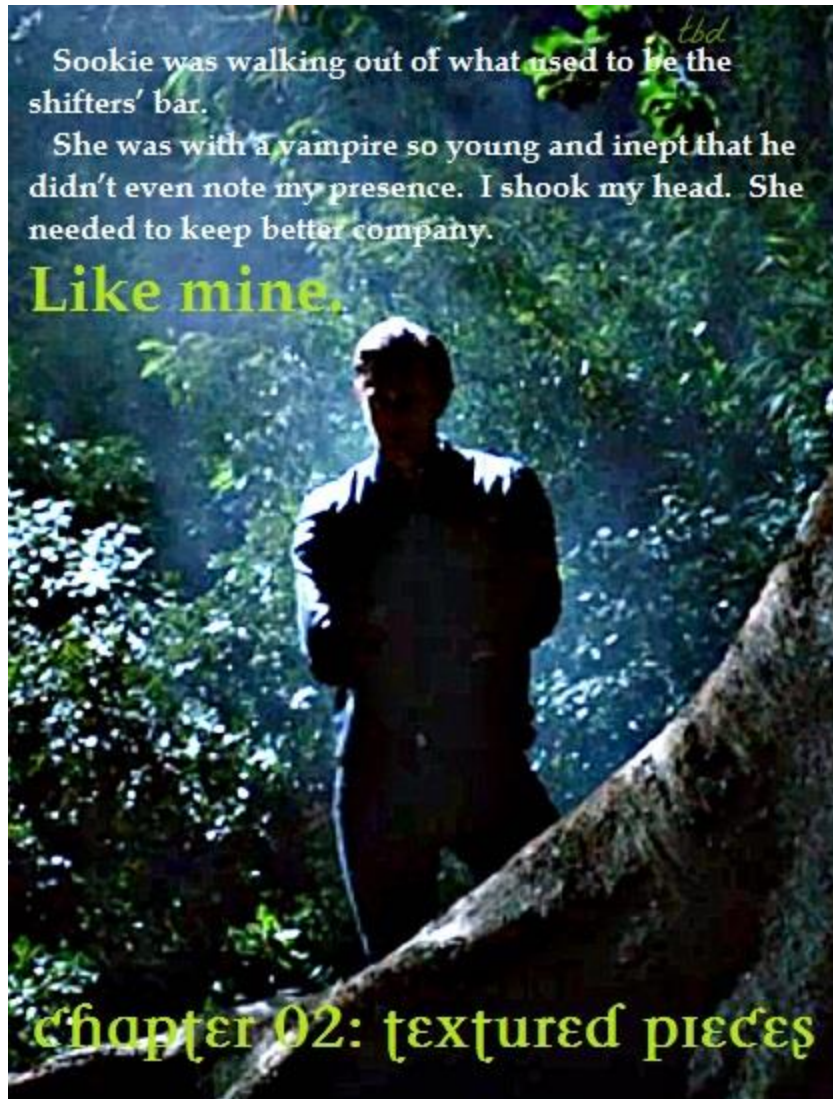
Yes – most of my motivation in doing those altruistic things had been Sookie, but Bill's motivation had been the same as mine: *her*. So in my estimation we were square – even-fucking-STEVEN. More than fucking square – given the fact that he truly was an asshole 99 percent of the fucking time!

Despite his protests that he wasn't.

Still, I gave him every indication that he would receive his asked-for favor from me. And he would – *if* Sookie Stackhouse didn't live up to what I knew she could be.

But I prayed that she would.

And I didn't fucking pray.



Chapter 02: Textured Pieces

Sookie was walking out of what used to be the shifters' bar.

She was with a vampire so young and inept that he didn't even note my presence. I shook my head. She needed to keep better company.

Like mine.

"Sookie," I said, stepping out from behind the tree I'd been waiting behind.

She turned toward me. She was still wearing the same clothing she'd been wearing earlier – a curve-complementing pair of jeans and a T-shirt. Much better than Bill's fucking robe! However, her eyes were still sad – though a little less so than they'd been earlier.

“Eric?” she responded.

“Can we talk?” I asked.

The people with her seemed hesitant.

“It's okay. You guys can go,” Sookie said to Lafayette and the now-posturing vampire. James – I thought, now remembering his name. He'd been involved in the attack against the Hep-V horde at Fangtasia, and I'd watched him in action. While I'd been addled by Hep-V, he'd been stronger than I was – a humbling idea, given the fact that he was probably less than twenty years a vampire. He smelled strongly of Lafayette, and I couldn't help but to feel happy for my old drug pusher.

I'd always liked Lafayette, which was – ironically – why I'd kept him chained up in my dungeon. Given that he was a seller of V and involved in a vampire's disappearance, I should have just killed him.

Sookie walked over to me a bit tentatively. It was clear that she didn't want to deal with “vampire shit” right now. And – after Bill's bullshit – I couldn't really say that I blamed her.

We were both silent until the taillights of Lafayette's car disappeared down the country road.

“You wanted to talk?” she asked, her tone a mixture of curiosity and weariness.

“Yes,” I responded. “But not here. Can I take you somewhere?”

“Where?” she asked.

“Would you let it be a surprise?” I asked with a smirk.

“I’m tired of surprises,” she said tiredly. “But – okay,” she relented as she looked around. “But I don’t see your car.”

“That’s because I didn’t drive,” I said, stepping toward her.

Her lips ticked upward. “You flew?”

I nodded.

Her lips rose a little more. “From the moment I knew you could do this, I wanted a ride – even though I’m sure I’ll be scared shitless.”

I chuckled. “I won’t drop you.”

She stepped back a step. “I know you won’t,” she said after a moment. “I’ve always known that.”

As if she’d flown with me a million times, she jumped up into my arms and held on tightly as I rose into the air and then zipped away from the neon lights below.

I touched down fourteen minutes later. A smile had stayed on her face, and – at least for the duration of our flight – her sadness had abated.

“A cul-de-sac?” Sookie asked playfully as she took in the cookie-cutter neighborhood in the outskirts of Shreveport that I’d taken her to. My house was at the end of it – set back from the road a bit.

I smiled at her. "I've been sheriff of Area 5 for decades. This house – I bought in 1982. No one knows of its existence – not even Pam. Before I released her, I would stifle our bond and come here when I needed to get away from things."

Sookie looked around. "The yard's – nice," she said cautiously. I could feel she was lying.

I chuckled. "No it's not," I smiled. "In fact, I glamoured a gardener to make sure that it looked just as boring as the other yards in the neighborhood."

She looked at me like she was getting ready to scold me.

"Don't worry, Miss Stackhouse. I pay him for his boring work."

She nodded in acceptance. It was so like her to believe that I'd exploit a human, but it was high time for her to learn that – while I could be a cruel bastard – I was an inherently fair one.

I walked to the front door and then flew upward to reach above the gutter. From a hiding place I had there, I retrieved the key to the house.

"Nice hiding place," Sookie chuckled.

I nodded as I landed. "I have several homes, and carrying tons of keys was never appealing to me."

"And you don't do that James Bond fingerprint stuff?" she asked with a raised eyebrow.

I winked. "I leave that shit to Bill. The trick to security is making sure your enemies can't find you – because, if they do, no amount of technology can stop them. Well – except for an impenetrable coffin."

Her brow quirked in question.

“It’s what I have at Fangtasia. When I rest somewhere ‘public,’ I make sure a nuke couldn’t get through my coffin.”

She chuckled. “So you and roaches would survive?”

I chuckled as well. “And Pam. Her coffin is made from the same material as mine.”

“Oh—I think she’d survive regardless,” she intoned.

I laughed even louder. “You’re probably right.”

I unlocked the door and gestured for her to enter before me. The house hadn’t been opened for over six months, so the scent was musty, and—as I flipped on the lights—I could see dust in the air, which was to be expected since I’d not been there to clean.

And—yes—I cleaned. As a vampire, it didn’t take me long at all, and the mundane action was good for thinking.

Despite the dust, Sookie gasped as she walked in. In truth, the house didn’t look like a house as much as it looked like a museum inside. It contained many of the things I’d collected over the years, almost all of them protected by shatter-proof and fire-proof glass. Moreover, I had a state-of-the-art sprinkler system—just in case.

“Is that a Picasso?” Sookie asked.

I nodded. “Yeah. But I have another of his pieces I like better.”

She huffed as she looked at another wall. “Rembrandt,” she stated with awe.

I was impressed that she recognized the artists since the pieces I had weren't known. But – then again – I shouldn't have been surprised. Every time I was at Sookie's home, I noticed different library books scattered about, and they weren't just romance novels either, though she always had one or two of those on hand. But far from faulting her for that particular reading choice, it had helped me to see just how eclectic her tastes were, and – given what I knew about her lonely “romantic” existence before vampires came into her life – I was even less apt to judge her.

But, along with those romance novels, I'd seen biographies of people as diverse as Joan of Arc, John Lennon, and John McEnroe. I'd seen histories of the Qing Dynasty, the Napoleonic Wars, and the California Gold Rush – not to mention one about the Viking culture. I'd seen books on Frank Lloyd Wright's architecture and Andrew Lloyd Webber's music.

So it wasn't a stretch to imagine her studying books that contained art. In fact, now that I thought about it, I figured she'd probably studied quite a few.

After all, what was a piece of art, but an artist's thought captured on canvas? And Sookie – who was forever being slammed by many thoughts all at once – would appreciate it when she could study a single one. She would also appreciate the fact that – while looking – other people would get a tiny glimpse of what she had to go through.

I smiled at her, loving that I'd found yet another piece in the Sookie Stackhouse puzzle. However, instead of telling her what I'd learned about her, I kept things light for the moment.

“What can I say?” I chuckled as I looked at the Rembrandt with her. “I was always good at spotting talent.”

However, her interest didn’t stay on the Rembrandt for long.

“Van Gogh,” she whispered reverently, walking over to and then softly touching the one piece of art I’d left uncovered by glass. I’d mourn if I lost it, but I couldn’t bring myself to cover it.

I lifted my fingers up to the painting too, and – for a moment – we both simply enjoyed the texture of the paint, which lifted off of the canvas as if it were trying to escape its confines. I smiled; maybe Van Gogh’s own thoughts would have mirrored the paint. If so, Sookie would have hated being around the man.

Proving that she inherently knew me as well as I knew her, Sookie turned to smile at me. “The rain lifts right off the canvas – as if to defy the sun.”

I chuckled and nodded. “Fuck the sun!”

She chuckled too as I moved my fingers down to touch the sea.

“‘And all I ask is a tall ship and a star to steer her by,’” I sighed, quoting a line from John Masefield’s “Sea Fever.”

A frown clouded her face as she surprised the hell out of me by quoting the next two lines of the poem, “‘And the wheel’s kick and the wind’s song and the white sail’s shaking, / And a grey mist on the sea’s face, and a grey dawn breaking.’ I’ve always loved that poem.”

I shouldn’t have been surprised that she knew it. I wasn’t surprised to feel her sorrow that I couldn’t enjoy the dawn – not even a grey one.

“I was never one to look forward to the dawn when I was at sea as a human,” I said. “I steered by the stars. I still do.”

Her frown at the thought that the dawn was no longer mine shifted into a contemplative look – as if she too had found a new piece to the puzzle that made me.

She had.

I reached out my hand to her, hoping she’d take mine without hesitation.

She did.

“Come,” I said, leading her toward the basement steps. As much as I would have liked to have told her every story behind every piece of art in the house, that would have to wait.

I’d chosen the house for two reasons. First, it was innocuous; no vampire would ever suspect that a powerful sheriff would choose it, and no human would suspect that anyone other than a human would live there. It was – in a word – “ordinary”: not too nice, but nice enough. Second, the neighborhood was on a small elevated patch of land – a rolling “hill” just high enough to be above the water table. Thus, a few of the homes in the neighborhood had full basements – mine included.

Despite having a basement to rest in, I kept the windows in the rest of the house covered with thick drapes – the kind popular in the 60s and 70s. That was mainly to protect my artwork, though I could venture into the main part of the house a few minutes before sunset without causing myself harm. The people on the street had been glamoured to think that an elderly couple lived in the home, and they’d also been glamoured *not* to try to visit the couple. But there was still the possibility that someone

would try to peek into the windows. The heavy drapes prevented them from seeing the priceless things inside.

Once in the basement, I switched on the lights and led Sookie toward a leather couch.

“I just need to check on something,” I said.

Sookie nodded as I went to the corner of the room and powered up the computer there. I then clicked on the large flat screen television mounted onto the wall, and—almost immediately—four camera angles, showing the exterior of the house we were in, filled the screen.

“Paranoid much?” she asked.

I smirked at her. “Practical. I like to see what I might have to deal with.” I clicked a few buttons on the computer, and the picture shifted to show a rotation of the cameras hidden around Fangtasia. To anyone looking, there were more obvious cameras on a close-circuit system— one that Mr. Gus had taken control of the moment he arrived at *my* club. Of course, the obvious system hid the less obvious one.

“What is Pam doing?” Sookie asked.

I looked at the screen and chuckled. “Mr. Gus wants Sarah to go back to blonde.”

“But why would that matter?” Sookie asked.

“Beats the hell out of me,” I admitted. “But we got a text from him when he was getting ready to leave for Dallas. And it’s best not to rock the boat with Mr. Gus,” I added, imitating his Texas accent.

“Why are you even working with those people?” Sookie asked. “Who are they anyway?”

“The Yakuza. They are the group that protects the interests of the company that originated TrueBlood. The vampire Authority invested heavily in that company – and in the Yakuza,” I explained.

She nodded.

I clicked through the other camera angles. “I don’t want to work with them, but Mr. Gus has the resources to replicate the cure from Sarah Newlin’s blood. He also has the facilities to mass produce that cure in a product called New Blood. When I was ill, he made Pam and me an offer we couldn’t refuse – or at least Pam couldn’t.”

“What was that?” Sookie asked.

“Basically, to become his pet vampires,” I scoffed. “Of course, the offer came when the sun was rising, Pam and I were silvered, and a wide window facing east was in front of us.” I shook my head. “I will admit that I was ready to die instead of working with the Yakuza. They and I have a bit of a,” I paused, “troubled history.”

“But Pam stopped you,” Sookie said with relief.

I nodded. “That was before we knew Sarah was a cure. And I figured Mr. Gus and his people would just kill us eventually, *after* they got what they wanted from us. I’m sure that they still plan to do just that – but, hopefully, not right away,” I added, studying the screen.

“Then why continue to work with them now that you’re cured?” Sookie asked.

I shrugged. “Bill Compton is not the only vampire I want to see cured. I loathe to think of others meeting the true death as Nora did – though her case was many times worse considering the high dosage of Hep-V she’d been given. But – now things have changed.”

“What do you mean?” she asked.

I shrugged. “I’m not completely altruistic. I was as ready as Mr. Gus to make millions off of NewBlood. You see – I am to be its poster boy. However, Mr. Gus told Pam and me that he doesn’t really intend for NewBlood to be a cure at all. He intends for it to be only a band aid, designed to keep the symptoms of the disease at bay.” I paused as I scanned through the camera feeds again. “Tests on my blood show that I no longer have any traces of the virus, and I’m also apparently immune to it now. But Mr. Gus doesn’t want that for other vampires. He wants them to become dependent on NewBlood in a way that they didn’t have to with TrueBlood. In effect – he’s shifting his family’s interests from providing an alternative for human blood to providing a drug that all infected vampires will need to take once a night – *if* they don’t want their Hep-V symptoms to flare up.”

Sookie looked up at me with wide eyes. “What are you gonna do?”

“Bide my time. A partial cure is better than none. However, Mr. Gus seems to wish to keep Pam and myself on very short leashes, so – if I see an opening – I’ll take it to get out from under his thumb.”

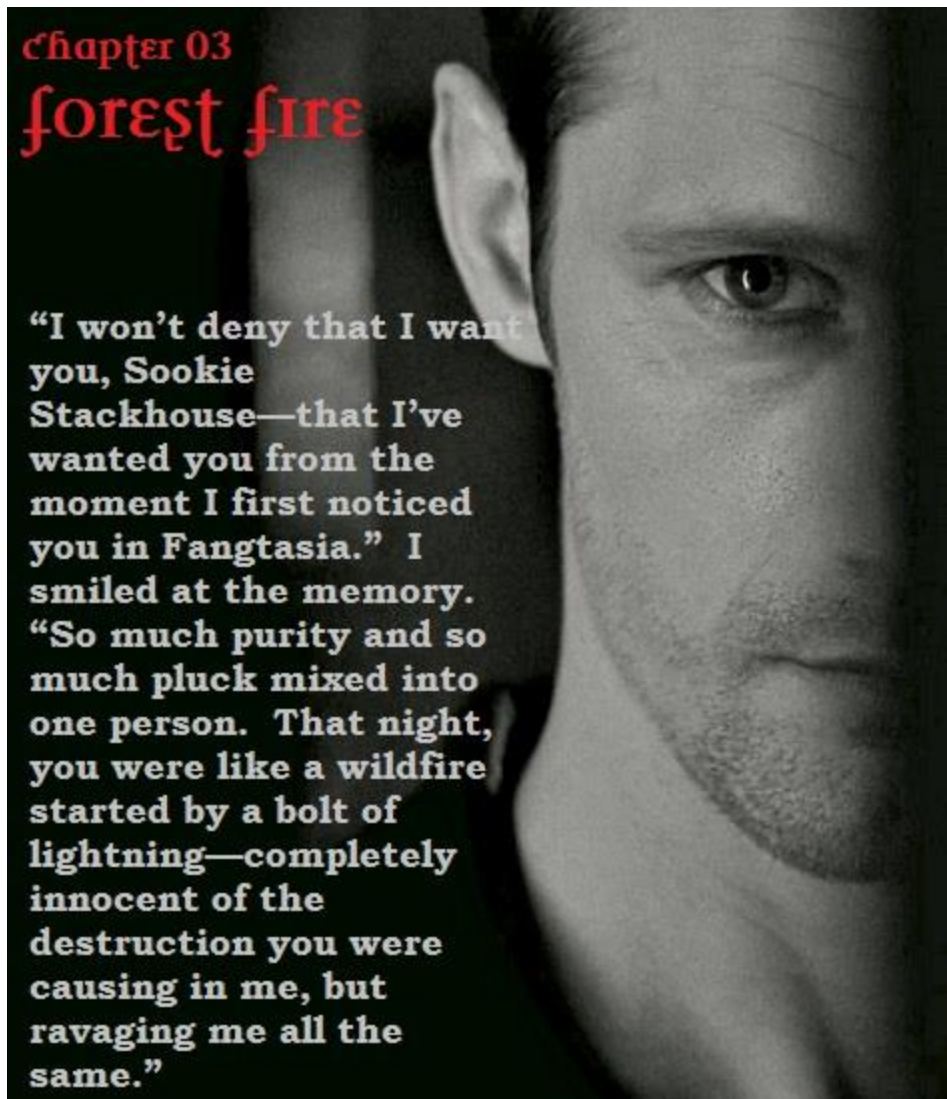
“If you did that, what would happen with the cure?” she asked.

“I have already sent vials of my blood and Sarah Newlin’s blood to Dr. Ludwig. I am waiting for word to see if she can come up with a way to mass produce the cure. If she can, then my deal with Mr. Gus will no longer be,” I paused, “practical.”

Sookie sighed. “All this is really interesting, but why do I think you had another reason for wanting to talk to me?”

“Because you know me,” I said, smirking at her.

Just as I knew her.



Chapter 03: Forest Fire

I looked at the camera feeds once again. Satisfied that things were going as well as could be expected at Fangtasia, I sat next to Sookie on the couch.

“I went to see Bill earlier,” I informed her. “That visit is what I want to talk to you about.”

“Bill is the last person I want to talk about right now,” Sookie said, her chin jutting out stubbornly.

“Which is why I brought you here – so that you’d be forced to listen and couldn’t run away or rescind my invitation.”

I could feel her anger rising.

“I know it was high-handed of me,” I admitted before she could accuse. “But there are things you need to hear – truths that you have put off dealing with for too long already. And – frankly – I’m fucking tired of seeing Bill Compton yank your chain in the name of love.”

“You’d rather do the same?” she asked bitterly.

“Yes,” I confessed with a chuckle. “But my yanking of your chain wouldn’t be of the same variety as his,” I added suggestively, causing that wonderful blush that I loved so much to rise into her cheeks.

“I won’t deny that I want you, Sookie Stackhouse – that I’ve wanted you from the moment I first noticed you in Fangtasia.” I smiled at the memory. “So much purity and so much pluck mixed into one person. That night, you were like a wildfire started by a bolt of lightning – completely innocent of the destruction you were causing in me, but ravaging me all the same.”

“Destruction?” Sookie scoffed. “That’s not a very romantic word, Eric.”

“It wasn’t a very romantic feeling, Sookie,” I responded with a smirk. “I’d managed to distance myself from my emotions for a thousand years until you came into my life.”

“I don’t believe that. I’ve seen you with Pam, with Nora, and,” she paused, “with Godric.”

“I won’t deny that I have deep feelings for all of them. But—even with them—I didn’t show the,” I paused, “more sentimental ones.” I looked at her pointedly. “At least—not until *you’d* begun to melt the ice I’d placed around my heart.”

Sookie shook her head as if in denial.

I chuckled. “You can shake your head all you want, Miss Stackhouse. The irony is that I know you began to look at me differently because you saw me express my sorrow when Godric planned to meet the sun. *Yes*—my blood made you feel more physically drawn to me, but I didn’t use it to compel you to care about me. Still, I felt growing affection from you after that moment on the rooftop.”

“How is that ironic?” she asked quietly.

“Because that moment would have never happened had it not been for you coming into my life, Sookie. Oh—I would have still felt misery when I realized my maker’s plan to leave the world and me. But the frigidity around my heart would have caused me to face my sorrow with stoicism—not drop down to my knees and weep.”

“How do you know that?” she asked.

“A thousand years is a long time to get to know oneself,” I returned. “So—you see—the irony is that the moment that softened your own heart toward me would not have occurred as it did if my own heart had not *already* been softened—by you.”

She sighed loudly, clearly uncomfortable with my confession. “So—uh—why did you go see Bill?” she asked, obviously trying to change the subject.

“Because I love you,” I answered simply.

She looked even more uncomfortable than she had before.

I chuckled. "Surely, you aren't surprised by that."

"But I . . .," she started, but then stopped.

"Rejected me?" I finished for her. "Yes—I was bitter about that for a long time. Actually, I still am bitter, especially considering the fact that you retook Bill into your bed."

"I . . .," she started.

This time I interrupted her. "I don't want you to tell me why you went back to him," I said, hearing the weariness in my own tone.

She bit her lower lip as if she wanted to try to explain, but then nodded. "Okay," she said a little meekly.

I hated that tone coming from her, so I moved the conversation along. "I went to see Bill because I thought he was being an unfair bastard. Don't get me wrong. I don't care to help him to live if he's so anxious to die. In fact, I've considered staking him myself over the years—both when he was behaving like an asshole *and* when he wasn't," I smirked. "However, in this situation, I want him to take the goddamned cure—*for you.*"

"For me?"

I nodded. "I know you, Sookie Stackhouse—a lot better than Bill Compton ever has—though you might not believe that. I know that Bill believes that his death will set you free. But I know that it will actually enslave you to his memory for as long as you live."

“What do you mean?” she asked, though I could already see understanding coming into her eyes.

“Part of Bill’s reasoning for letting the Hep-V finish its work in him is that – if he’s not gone – you will keep coming back to him and will never be able to lead your own life.”

She scoffed. “Arrogant ass,” she muttered under her breath.

I smiled sincerely. “There it is,” I observed.

She looked at me in question. “There *what* is?”

“That fire I love in you – ready to tear through another unsuspecting forest.”

“Well – I’m tired of destroying things,” she said wearily.

I sighed. “I know. Bill sees things only from his own point of view. I am arrogant, but even I am not *that* myopic. He has failed to understand that if he dies from Hep-V, your guilt will only increase. If he were truly altruistic, he’d take the fucking cure and then meet the sun the next day. Or – better yet – he’d hand me a stake and let me put him out of his misery right after he swallowed Sarah’s blood. Either way, you wouldn’t have a reason to feel like you were guilty of his demise.”

Sookie looked down at her lap as she took in my words. “You’re right; you *do* know me.”

“Yes,” I said quietly. “You know – Bill’s not entirely wrong about you either. You *do* continue orbiting him like a moth circles a flame.”

“I love him,” she confessed.

“I know,” I responded with yet another sigh.

“I don’t know how to stop,” Sookie admitted. “I’ve tried – time and time again. And I’ll think that I’m over him. And – then – all of a sudden, it’s like the love gets turned on again.”

I smiled and took her hand. “I know what you mean. It’s how I feel about you.”

“Eric,” she whispered, even as she wiped away a tear with her free hand. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be,” I said. “My choice to love is my own, but I’m not sure yours is anymore.”

“What do you mean?”

“Blood,” I responded. “After the Festival of Tolerance – you weren’t totally wrong when you said that you worried that vampire blood was causing your feelings. Vampire blood *can* make humans behave as they normally wouldn’t. Sometimes, that’s because the vampire wills it to be so – controls his blood. Other times, the elicited feelings are unintentional on the vampire’s part,” I informed.

“What do you mean?” she asked.

“I believe that Bill loves you – as much as he can, at least. But – after I spoke to him tonight – I also believe that he’s under the misperception that you are naturally attracted to what he calls the ‘darkness’ in vampires.”

“The darkness?” she asked.

I scoffed. “Yes. It sounded ridiculous to me too – as if our *not* being able to exist in the sun makes us fundamentally evil or something.”

She lifted a brow. “Well – y’all *do* drink blood.”

I smiled. "Point taken. But we quickly learn not to kill if we have adept makers."

Sookie smiled a little. "I know. I've never thought that being a vampire made someone inherently bad, just as I have never thought being human – or fairy – made someone automatically good. I know better," she added, pointing to her head.

Knowing she'd learned that lesson the hard way, I nodded. "The thing is – if Bill *believes* that his so-called darkness draws you to him, then it *does*."

Realization hit her like the proverbial ton of bricks. "Because of his blood inside of me."

I nodded. "Bill was sent to ensnare you for Sophie-Anne, but he really did become ensnared by you in a way. In you, he saw beauty and purity – a person who could accept him as he was. That kind of person is rare; *trust me*. I think that Bill initially fed you his blood to make you attracted to him – and to elicit your affection – as part of his job."

"But you don't think he's *intentionally* trying to influence me with his blood anymore – do you?"

I shook my head. "No, I don't – but that influence is happening all the same. He's convinced himself that he's powerless to stop you from being drawn to him, so every time you have his blood, you get convinced of the same thing – because Bill's not self-aware or in control of his blood enough to know what the fuck he's doing to you!" I added with frustration.

We were silent for a few moments, and I could almost see the thoughts forming together in her brain. I knew she was recalling all the times she'd had Bill's blood – as well as her immediate reactions to it.

"He would tell me that he was no good for me," Sookie whispered, "but that never stopped me from wanting him – even when I," she paused, "*didn't* want him."

I sighed. "He was convinced that you *craved* the 'dark' because you were the 'light.' So that's just what his blood inadvertently made you do – to crave him because you are Fae."

She closed her eyes tightly. "The other day, a part of me *already* knew that Bill wanted to die – before we – uh – reconnected."

"And you thought you could somehow save him," I commented.

She nodded. "I thought I *needed* to. It's my fault he's sick."

"Not anymore," I said, sitting forward a little. "Now it is *his* fault. You made sure he had the option to live, Sookie. You've done all you could – essentially handing him the cure. The fact that he didn't choose to take it doesn't mean anything – except that he's a selfish asshole." I paused. "And more so than I've even told you."

"What do you mean?" she asked.

"When I spoke to him, he asked me to convince you to let him 'call on you' so that he could explain his reasoning for not taking the cure."

She scoffed. "What are we – in junior high? He has my phone number and lives right across the cemetery from me. He could put a note on my door. Or he could've

just skulked around waiting for me to come home; Lord knows he's done that plenty of times before!"

I couldn't help but to laugh. Her words told me how much we were actually alike – given the fact that I'd thought most of the things she had. "I imagine that he thought you'd refuse to speak to him."

"But he knew that – if you wanted to – you could convince me to hear him out," she commented.

I nodded. "In his mind, both of us fell in love with you because of your 'light,' and you are attracted to the 'darkness' in us. Thus, he seemed *certain* that I would be ready, willing, and able to punt you to him – so to speak."

She looked at me almost guiltily. "What an ass," she said.

"Yes," I agreed. "However, I would have agreed to do just as he'd asked – if I would have thought it was the best thing for you. But I didn't."

"Well," she smirked, "then you're an ass too – just a high-handed one."

"I can't argue with that," I chuckled, but then my smile faded. "If you want to give Bill the opportunity to call on you, then I will take you home now, Sookie."

She let out a long exhalation. "I don't want that."

Though mine was unneeded, I let out my own breath – a sigh of relief.

"So – I'm guessin' you let Bill believe you were gonna talk to me – *for him?*"

I nodded. "Yes."

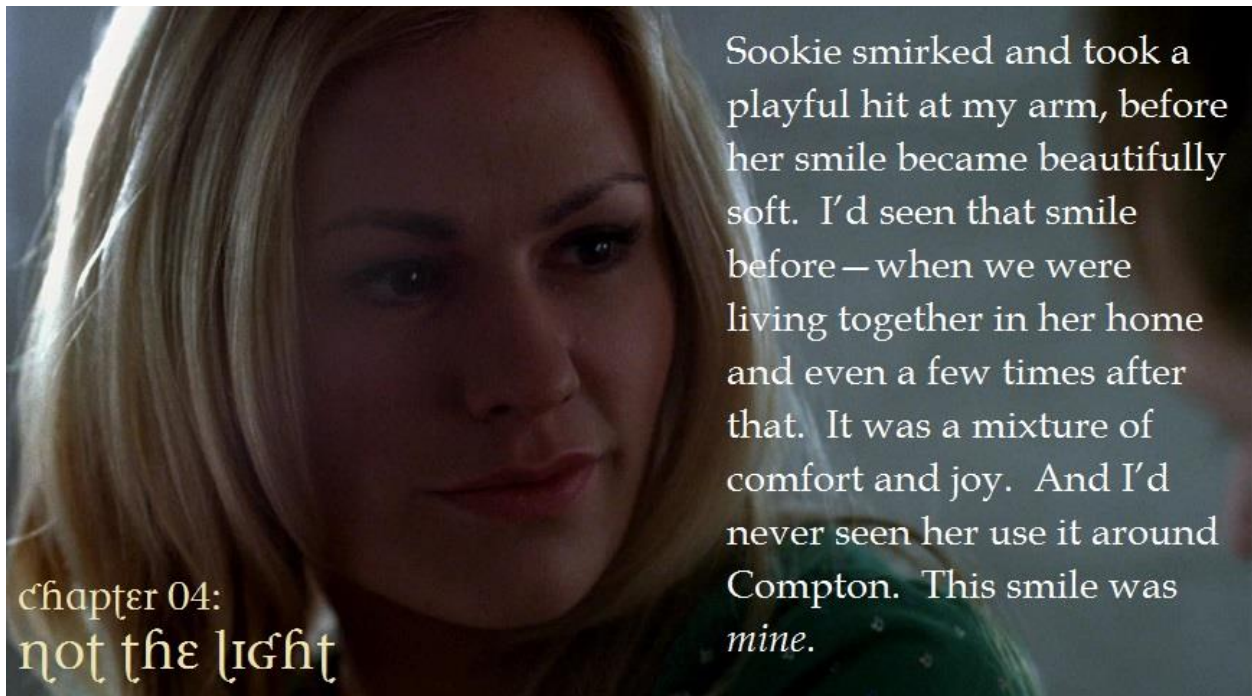
"But you decided to talk to me – *for you,*" she commented perceptively.

I nodded. "Yes. This is the moment, Sookie," I whispered.

“What moment?” she asked, her expression suddenly afraid.

“The one that could very well signal the last we ever share together,” I sighed.

I hated to fucking sigh – *yet again* – but no other sound was more appropriate as I thought of the possibility of never seeing her again.



chapter 04:
not the light

Sookie smirked and took a playful hit at my arm, before her smile became beautifully soft. I'd seen that smile before – when we were living together in her home and even a few times after that. It was a mixture of comfort and joy. And I'd never seen her use it around Compton. This smile was *mine*.

Chapter 04: Not the Light

“What do you mean?” Sookie asked.

I let my own weariness show. “You and I have danced around our attraction for each other for a long time. And then – finally – when I didn't have my memories, we were together.”

“When you weren't yourself,” she added in a whisper.

“You think I wasn't myself?” I asked, definitely surprised by her words.

“You weren't,” she responded, almost defensively.

“But I *was*!” I returned insistently. “Memories or not – the things that make me *myself* were present when we were together. Never doubt that!”

It was her turn to sigh. “How can I know that – or anything?”

“Use your beautiful head!” I said passionately. “Use it to compare what my blood inside of you has done with what Bill’s has done. Bill draws you to himself. He thinks of himself as the tormented hero – a fucking victim to his vampirism. And you are compelled to try to do what? Save him? Confirm that he still has his humanity?” I scoffed. “I have seen you be hurt by Bill time and again. Yet the next time he feeds you his blood, you feel compelled to go back for more hurt! Meanwhile, he *seems* to bemoan that fact, yet his blood is the fucking flame that draws you in! And he uses it to turn you into a fucking moth!”

“But I asked for his blood the last time I took it,” she said defiantly. “I wanted him to be able to track me.”

I shook my head. “Vampires can’t control how humans dream of us, but we sure as hell have a say in whether or not our blood influences their emotions when they’re awake.”

“But you said Bill’s influence was probably unconscious on his part,” Sookie reminded.

“Yes, but if he *truly* believed he was bad for you, he would have damned sure compelled his blood to *stop* its influence over you – period. End of fucking sentence! End of fucking influence!”

We were both quiet for a moment as my words sank into her beautiful – and, indeed, sometimes thick skull.

Sookie closed her eyes. “Having your blood made me drawn to you too,” she whispered.

“Did it?” I questioned. “Did it really? I’m sure it caused you to dream of me. And I *did* want you to be as drawn to me as I was to you. But did you ever feel like you’d lost yourself when you were with me?” I shook my head. “I enjoyed the hell out of feeling my blood in you! I loved knowing you were alive – still in this world with me. I celebrated experiencing your fiery nature firsthand. And I wasn’t about to let my blood fuck with that!” I paused for a moment. “Sookie, I was attracted to you from the beginning. And it’s goddamned time you admitted the same. It’s also time that you recognized that – though I *did* trick my blood into you the first time – I did it after *saving* your life, not after almost *taking* it as Bill did! I also think it’s about time that you ask me ‘why’ I tricked those few drops of blood into you in the first place!”

“Fine!” she yelled, her own emotions flaring. “Why?”

“Thanks for asking,” I said with a smirk.

“Asshole,” she muttered.

“Well – you *do* seem to like those. Maybe I’ve decided to be more like Bill – since it seems to work out so well for him,” I added sarcastically.

She rolled her eyes. “You’re the one who insisted I ask you the question. What? Are you avoiding it now?”

“No,” I said. “The truth is that I had come to care about you very much before we went to Dallas. And I care for very few beings in this world: only a handful of vampires and you. The truth is that you intrigued me, and I wanted you to be mine. However, none of those things was the reason I tricked you into taking my blood. I had two reasons actually. First, I wanted to gauge the level to which Bill had been honest

with you. He was so keen to profess his love for and possession of you, but I already suspected there was something he was hiding. Had he truly wanted to protect you – had he truly been honest with you – you would have known *exactly* what my blood could do in you. And you would have known that I didn't need it to heal from silver. Bill *should* have taught you those basics – at the very least. When you took my blood, I knew he had been keeping you in the dark. So I started to investigate 'why' that was. And that path led to the queen."

Sookie sighed deeply. "Bill was irate after I'd had your blood, and it was only a couple of drops. He implied that you could control me – that it would be impossible for me not to succumb to your charms." She rolled her eyes. "It was only later – much later, I'm ashamed to admit – that I actually thought about *why* Bill hadn't given me the same warnings after I'd had his blood."

I gave her a moment of silence as her emotions slingshotted through her.

"What was the other reason you wanted me to have your blood in Dallas?" she asked.

"The teachings of my father – my human father."

She looked at me in question.

"In my culture – if someone saved the life of another – he or she was responsible for that life from then on. You warned us of the bomb in Godric's home not even a second before it went off, but that's a long time for a vampire as old as I am. I *needed* to protect you; I didn't know why at the time, but I needed you to live as much as I

wanted to stay undead – maybe more. And – after that – I wanted you to have my blood so that I could feel when you were in danger.”

She scoffed. “Are you sure it wasn’t my so-called ‘light’ that made you want to save me?”

“Don’t sell yourself *or* me that short, Sookie Stackhouse,” I admonished.

She lifted her chin stubbornly. “Don’t even try to deny that it’s not my scent and my blood that made you want me so much.”

“Oh – your scent is divine, and your blood is the best I’ve ever tasted – including that of the full-blooded fairy I drained. However, it is ‘*this*’ that I love most,” I said, reaching out to caress that stubborn little chin of hers. “This challenge that you offer me at every fucking turn. I used to resent that you didn’t fight others as you fought me, but then I realized that it was a fucking compliment – and a gift! And it proved that you were a woman – maybe the only woman – with whom I could spend centuries and never know exactly what to expect.” I shrugged. “Who knows and who fucking cares if part of that fire in you comes from your Fae blood! What is important is that I would protect that fire with my undead life! And I cherish it.”

“Bill thinks that vampires will squelch the light in you somehow.” I shook my head. “And I have no fucking doubt that he would – *unintentionally*, of course,” I added with sarcasm. “But I want to encourage that light and make it grow into something unfucking-extinguishable! I once told you that there were two Sookie Stackhouses – the human and the fairy. I love them *both*! I want them *both*! I’d fucking love to see them merge into one; at that moment, you’d be even more beautiful than you are right now,

and your beauty already makes my heart want to beat – just so that it can stop every time I see you!”

Sookie sniffled. “Eric, I just want to be a normal human.”

All the hope in me exited like the air from a popped balloon. “You’ve said that to me before,” I sighed. “That’s why I walked away from you and stayed away. I wanted you to have the chance to have what you seemed to want so badly. I loved you enough to exit your life. But – please for the love of your God – stop fucking lying to yourself! You say that you want a normal life, but you shack up with a Were! Then you run back to Bill! I’m pretty sure that neither one of those choices would put you into the category of ‘normal human.’”

Frustration filling me, I stood up and walked across the room, keeping my back to her. “That’s why – as of tonight – I’m done accepting your claims that you want ‘normal,’” I said wearily. “I can no longer be your *friend*. I can no longer be the one you accept only when you need help.” I chuckled, though I felt no mirth. “I’m afraid that even *my* ego isn’t large enough to withstand another blow at your hands, Miss Stackhouse.”

I turned around to see a tear falling down her cheek.

“I have always hated your tears. It was imagining them that compelled me to buy your home when your idiot brother gave up on your being alive. It was fearing them that made me help you save your friend, even though I knew I could easily be killed, given my illness.” I shook my head. “I am not one to beg, Sookie, and even my love for you won’t compel me to give you a speech pleading for you to choose me for

once. But I *want* a real fucking chance! I *want* you to look at me and see the man who would love you without apology or reservations. I *want* you to recognize the man who knows you. I *want* you to acknowledge that I'm the best fucking choice you could make – because of the simple fact that *I am!* That's why I wanted to talk to you tonight, Sookie. And it's time you made your final choice about what you want. If that's Bill, then have at him! There's a car in the garage with the fucking keys inside! You can still be home in plenty of time to let him call upon you."

She scoffed, but I went on. "If you choose neither of us – *again* – then take the car and drive away from Bon Temps. And stay away for a while so that Bill can play his final role as martyr and exit stage left for good! And don't feel guilty when he dies, Sookie! Don't feel like you are to blame for any of it! You might have infected him, but you aren't the reason why he's not right as rain – even now! And don't you dare feel guilt over hurting me either!" I demanded. "As soon as I realized I cared about you, I could have killed you or stayed away from you. No fucking mystical light compelled me to fall in love with you! And it wasn't your fairy nature that compelled me to want to be near you. That was *my* choice! If I'm not your choice too, then that sucks for me, but it's the way things are. I will be sad, but I will go on. And so should you! No guilt and no regrets!"

"But I *do* have regrets," she said, her voice steady and her eyes gazing into my very soul. "And I've just realized what my biggest one *ought* to have been all along." She stood and came over to me. "I'm sorry, Eric."

“I don’t want you sorry, Sookie,” I returned. “I want you to be *mine*. I want you to be happy. I want those two things to coincide. But I *don’t* want you sorry! Not ever.”

She lifted her hand up to cup my cheek. “Okay – then. I won’t be sorry. I’ll be yours, and we’ll have a go at being happy together.”

Her words surprised me – astounded me. The sincerity behind them made my heart constrict – not a beat, but as close as I would ever get.

It hurt like hell, and it was the best feeling I’d ever experienced.

I could feel the weight of months of hopeless longing for the woman I loved melting away. And my spirits soared higher than I’d ever flown.

I smiled down at Sookie and then covered her answering smile with a kiss. It was a light kiss – a kiss to seal a promise.

A kiss to signal that Sookie and I would be trying out that “other life” after all.

“Can I ask you a favor though?” she inquired, as we broke the kiss.

I chuckled. “Sookie Stackhouse, if you haven’t yet learned that you can ask anything of me, then your skull is thicker than I thought it was.”

Sookie smirked and took a playful hit at my arm, before her smile became beautifully soft. I’d seen that smile before – when we were living together in her home and even a few times after that. It was a mixture of comfort and joy. And I’d never seen her use it around Compton. This smile was *mine*.

“I know I can ask anything of you, Eric,” she said with something akin to awe in her voice. “But what I need to ask is probably unreasonable.”

“You want to take things slowly,” I speculated. “You need a little time to grieve for the wolf and even the asshole. That is fine. I have plenty of time now. ”

She looked up at me with wonder. “I shouldn’t be surprised that you know what I need so well.”

“No – you shouldn’t,” I commented. “And – soon – you won’t be. Meanwhile, however, I wish to ask something of you in return.”

“What is it?”

“I will be patient when it comes to reestablishing our sexual relationship, but *not* our intimacy. I find that I,” I paused, “crave closeness with you. I wish to spend what time I can get away from the Yakuza with you. I wish to sleep with you in my arms – whether it be here or in your home. I wish to claim you and have you claim me. I will not settle for a half-relationship. And I will *never* share you again, Sookie. If we are to be together, then we must be *together*.”

She took a deep breath. “Okay. I can agree to that.”

“Just like that?” I asked.

“Yeah – just like that. Thank you for giving me another chance. Thank you for helping me see the things that have been hurting me – and the things that could make me whole. Thank you, Eric.”

She rose onto her toes and initiated our kiss this time. And – when her tongue requested that the kiss be deepened – I welcomed it into my mouth.

However, before we could get too lost in our kiss, my phone vibrated in my pocket.

“Fuck,” we both muttered at the same time.



"Part of me will always remember you with fondness, Bill," Sookie said, opening her eyes and sitting up straight, but keeping ahold of my hand. "But you are toxic to me. And I'm not the woman you really love. That's Caroline, and I can't be her – even if that's what your blood wants from me."
"Sookeh . . .," Bill started.
"Goodbye, Bill," she interrupted, before handing the phone back to me.
"Bill," I said into the receiver.
"You have finally turned her against me," Bill accused.
"You'll get over it," I said. "And the sooner you die, the sooner that will happen," I added before hanging up.



Chapter 05: Changing Horses

"Hold that thought, Lover," I said with a quick peck to her lips as I answered the call.

"Vampire!" came the gruff voice on the other end of the phone.

"Troll," I drawled in return.

Ludwig scoffed. I knew she was no more troll than I, but I still enjoyed her reaction when I called her that. I'd learned that it was the simple things that gave me the most pleasure.

"The samples you sent made my job easy, Northman," she said curtly. "The cure is just a form of the virus itself – one that does away with its brother, so to speak. It was easy to replicate. And your blood has given me a sample of the antibodies which will prevent its taking hold in you again. I've already been able to produce enough anti-virus for ten or so vampires. How do you want to proceed?"

I smiled. “Immediately, but carefully. I’ll arrange for infected stage one and stage two vampires to come to your clinic – a few at a time. They will be sworn to secrecy about the cure and where it’s from.”

“That’s all well and good, but I don’t want to be overrun by infected vampires here – and I *definitely* don’t need the Yakuza to come sniffing around. Even if you ask the ones I treat for secrecy, you’re an idiot if you don’t think word will spread. Others will see that vampires who once had Hep-V have been cured.”

I thought for a moment. “There’s an abandoned warehouse near Minden that you can operate out of so that your clinic isn’t compromised. And you can train a glamoured human to administer the cure so that your involvement remains unknown. I’ll get some Weres to guard the warehouse, but we’ll still switch locations regularly. And part of the price for treatment will be that the vampires move away from the kingdom they currently reside in. Any found not complying will be dealt with – *harshly*. In addition, I have a few trustworthy allies in other places that could also arrange for the cure to be administered – covertly, of course.”

“I have some colleagues we could involve as well,” Ludwig said, agreeing to my plan. “What of the Stage 3’s?”

I thought for a moment. “Most of them are too volatile and rabid to treat like the others, but they tend to cluster together in groups. Once enough of the cure is available, you can train Thalia on how to administer it. She can track down the hordes one at a time and offer the cure to any who are still reasonable enough to take it.”

“Many will be lost in the meantime,” the doctor pointed out.

“Yes – but that cannot be helped,” I said. “Meanwhile, I need you to work on creating a paper trail that explains the origin of the cure as coming from something other than Sarah Newlin or myself. The Yakuza will, inevitably, figure out that their plans to corner the market in this matter have been subverted. And it would be best to have a scapegoat.”

Ludwig chuckled. “A mysterious doctor in Bulgaria came up with the cure after accidentally stumbling upon a vampire who was immune. Blame him. Yada, yada, yada.”

“Perfect,” I said. “As long as the Yakuza don’t know the origin of the alternative cure, they will be chasing their tails trying to figure things out. But – by then – it will be too late.”

“Alright – so now the big question: profit or nonprofit?” the doctor asked. “Mind you – either way, you’re paying for *all* my materials and the usual fee for my time.”

“Profit, of course,” I smirked at Sookie. “How much money and time does it take to produce a dosage?” I asked.

“About seventeen dollars and ninety or so minutes to produce the batch I did earlier,” Ludwig informed. “Next time, I’ll be able to do it faster.”

“How about five thousand for each dose of the cure, shared fifty-fifty?” I suggested. “We can sell the dosages for the same price to our allies, and they can charge whatever they want from there.”

“Agreed. What about the vampires who can’t afford to pay?” she asked.

“Unless they are newly turned, most will not blink at five thousand. However, I will make sure all have the payment *before* they come to you. However, for any in this area who cannot pay, I will do so for them – *if* they agree to pay off the debt with service to me. Regardless – all whom I send to you will have the fee.”

Having gotten the gist of the call, Sookie asked, “What about the infected humans?”

“I see Miss Stackhouse has changed horses,” the doctor said crassly, having overheard Sookie’s question. “I can’t say I blame her, though you ought to show great care, Northman. She is related to a very powerful fairy, whom you’d better not piss off.”

“I have no intention of pissing off any of the fairies I might encounter – at least not too much,” I said with a wink at Sookie. “But as to Sookie’s question – can the serum cure infected humans?”

“No – but after I give infected vamps the cure, I will work on cooking up an inoculation so that other vampires cannot become infected. It’ll work like a vaccine. The best news is that the Hep-V virus has been engineered *not* to mutate, which is – quite frankly – the most interesting thing about it as far as I’m concerned. The humans that devised it didn’t want to risk other humans being harmed by it, nor did they want the virus to evolve into something that would be harmless to vampires. Truly ingenious. I plan to use it as a prototype for other things.”

“I don’t suppose you’d be willing to share the profits on *those* inventions – would you?” I asked, already knowing her answer.

“Not even in your most feverish dreams, vampire,” Ludwig intoned before hanging up.

“So – what about them?” Sookie asked as she pointed to the screen, where Pam could be seen rinsing Sarah’s hair. I knew that Sookie was asking about the Yakuza, three of whom were currently watching my progeny like a hawk.

“They have outlived their usefulness to me, but it’s best not to show them our hand. I have a feeling that Mr. Gus has been keeping the origins of the cure and his own plans for NewBlood close to the vest – even from the others in his organization. Regardless, as soon as I find out who all knows about my and Pam’s involvement, Mr. Gus and his minions will be meeting their maker – and I don’t mean that I intend to turn them.”

Sookie inhaled quickly, most likely startled by my murderous tone.

“The Yakuza are my enemy. They have been for decades.” I paused. “I have never and will never hide my nature from you, Sookie. I have always slain my enemies as soon as the opportunity presented itself – with one exception.”

“Russell,” she whispered.

“Yes – but I learned my lesson in that case. I will not let live people who will eventually try to kill me – once they are done using me. And I won’t apologize for keeping me and mine safe, especially since that ‘mine’ now includes you.” I let that information sink in for a moment before I added, “If you cannot handle all that I am, you will need to rethink your choice of me.”

Sookie took a deep breath. "I know who you are, Eric," she whispered. "And I don't need to rethink anything."

With those words, I pulled her back into my arms, attacking her with a kiss that conveyed all of my passion with her. Sadly, my phone rang – interrupting us.

AGAIN.

"What?" I answered with frustration.

"Eric," Bill said, "have you spoken with Sookeh?" I cringed at his mispronouncing of Sookie's name. "I have been calling her home for hours," he added.

I sighed loudly. "Can you not feel that she isn't at home?" I asked.

Bill let out a rattling sigh of his own. "My illness is now affecting my senses – and my ability to feel those who are tied to me by blood," he added with a slightly haughty twinge to his tone. I knew his aim was to rattle me by reminding me that Sookie and he had exchanged blood recently. However, he'd never formed a bond with her – no matter how many exchanges they'd made. That privilege was mine alone, though I wasn't the kind who needed to use that fact to "one-up" a rival.

"Is that Bill?" Sookie asked aloud. Both she and I knew that Bill would hear her if it was.

"Yes," I responded.

"Can I talk to him?" she asked.

I nodded and handed over the phone. Truth be told, I had nothing left to say to my once and future *former* king.

"Bill," Sookie greeted, "how are you feeling?"

“Sookeh?” Bill asked, clearly surprised to hear her voice. Maybe his senses *had* gone to shit.

“Yes – it’s me. Eric and I were just having a little talk.”

“That’s good,” Bill said, sounding relieved. “Has he conveyed how much I wish to call upon you – to explain my course of action to you?”

“Yes – he has,” Sookie responded. “He told me that you are determined to die in order to save me from your darkness,” she stated flatly.

“Yes,” Bill said. “That’s right – though I had *hoped* to explain things myself,” he said with a hint of frustration, “so that you could better understand.”

“Oh – I think I’m understanding just fine,” she commented. “So your motivation to die is *for me?*” she asked incredulously.

“I really think it would be best if we discussed this in person, Sookeh,” he said, again saying her name in a way that made me want to rip his infected balls off. How he could get ‘Sookeh’ out of ‘Sookie’ was beyond me.

“I don’t agree,” Sookie said, sitting down onto the couch heavily. “Why don’t you say anything you need to say to me right now?”

“I need you to realize that I am trying to protect you, darling.”

There was a pause, and Bill went on only after he realized Sookie wasn’t going to comment.

“I had a fever dream,” he explained, “and – after that – I knew my dying would be best for you.”

“What dream?” she asked.

I turned my back to give her the illusion of privacy, but she snapped her fingers to get my attention and then motioned for me to sit next to her.

I smirked at being 'called like a dog,' but I went to her and sat down anyway. Immediately, she leaned against me and closed her eyes, expelling a sigh as she did.

"I really think this would be best done in person," Bill tried again.

"It'll be done now – *this way* – or not at all," she said firmly. "Now – what was the dream?"

Bill sighed. "You were rocking a child – our child. I felt a rush of pride, but then I looked over your shoulder and saw that you were cradling not a child, but death itself."

"Are you intending to make me feel like shit, Bill?" she asked, obviously pissed off. Her hand took mine possessively and squeezed. "Because calling me the mother of death isn't helpful to me, nor is it helping me to understand why you insist upon dyin'."

"I – I am the one who brought death to you," Bill stammered.

"Well – that's true," she muttered.

Sookie took a deep breath, one so deep that she almost looked to be in pain as she drew it in.

"Bill – what have your other fever-dreams been about?" she asked.

"Why does that matter?" he returned.

"It matters to me," she said. "I want to know if you'll tell me the truth."

"Sookeh, I . . .," Bill began but then stopped.

“You what?” she asked.

“I don’t want to hurt you,” he responded.

She sighed, and I felt her sink deeper into my side, seeking comfort from me.

“You already have. Now – will you tell me?”

“I’ve been dreaming of my wife – of Caroline,” Bill said. “In my dreams, I’ve relived our life together.”

Sookie took another deep breath. “I asked Niall to come,” Sookie said, her eyes still closed. “I begged him to cure you. But he said he couldn’t. And he showed me what you were dreaming. I saw the dream where you remembered your first child being born. I felt your love for your family.”

“Yes – I loved them,” Bill said at such a low volume that I could hardly hear him.

“I was mad at Niall for showing me that. I was jealous,” Sookie admitted. “I was jealous that you’d already gotten to live the life I’d always dreamed about – marriage, children, and a home full of people who loved you.” She sighed. “I was wrong to think you wanted those things with me – that I could actually have those things with you,” she said. “I was wrong about you.”

“Sookeh, I *did* want those things with you. I love you,” Bill said in an agonized tone.

“Part of me will always remember you with fondness, Bill,” Sookie said, opening her eyes and sitting up straight, but keeping ahold of my hand. “But you are toxic to me. And I’m not the woman you *really* love. That’s Caroline, and I can’t be her – even if that’s what your blood wants from me.”

“Sookeh . . .,” Bill started.

“Goodbye, Bill,” she interrupted, before handing the phone back to me.

“Bill,” I said into the receiver.

“You have finally turned her against me,” Bill accused.

“You’ll get over it,” I said. “And the sooner you die, the sooner that will happen,” I added before hanging up.

Not two seconds later, I heard a pop in the room. Great – there went the fucking neighborhood.

“Please,” Sookie panted, now moving her body so it would rhythmically stroke my confined cock. “Bite,” she whispered as she nipped at my wound again.

Greed—that’s what I felt from her. Greed for pleasure. Greed for blood. Greed for me.

I loved the feeling. Loved my blood moving inside of her once more. Loved the way her emotions sharpened inside of me again.

Loved her.

I bit.

Chapter 06: Bite

Knowing that Sookie had once disappeared from my world for a year, I immediately took up a defensive stance in front of her.

“Niall!” Sookie yelled out.

“Hello, Sookie,” the fairy said casually, seemingly ignoring the fact that there was a vampire poised for attack in front of him.

“Your fairy kin?” I asked, my fangs clanging down because of the *amazing* scent that attacked me.

“Yeah,” Sookie said from behind me, placing her hand on my elbow. Her touch was steady—almost calming. “Please don’t eat him. I like this one.”

I started to like Niall as well when he and I both chuckled at Sookie’s words.

I liked him even more when the scent that had threatened to make me lose control disappeared. Thank fuck! Otherwise, I might very well have eaten him.

“You covered your scent,” I said, stating the obvious for Sookie’s benefit. “Nice trick.”

He smiled at me. “It comes in handy on occasion.”

“How are you here?” I asked, not liking the thought that my best sanctuary had been found.

“I can go anywhere that my blood is,” Niall explained. “And Sookie is of my blood. But don’t worry. I mean you no harm.”

“What are you doing here?” Sookie asked.

“Do you have anything to eat?” he asked, instead of responding to her question.

“No, this is Eric’s house,” Sookie answered. She looked up at me. “At least I assume you have no food.”

“You are right; I have none,” I responded.

“Well – if you are to be the mate of my great-granddaughter, then you’ll need to rectify that,” Niall returned. “Though, I suppose, things have just been settled between you two. You are cured and immune to the Hep-V virus now?” he asked me.

“Yes,” I said.

“Good – then my magic and your blood can cure Sookie as well,” he announced.

“What? Cure me?” Sookie asked.

Niall nodded. “Yes. *This* is the one you have made a bond with, Sookie. Thus, his blood and your inherent light will always mix together to good effect, and – after I use my magic to begin to heal the damage you did to your own light last year, your body will be able to make its own cure from his blood.”

The fairy looked at Sookie pointedly and continued. "You ought never to have tried to do away with what makes you Fae. I understand why you did it, and I know that you see the fairy in you as an invader of sorts – an enemy to the person you've wanted to be. But to be happy, you must love *all* of what you are."

I smelled Sookie's tears before I saw them and pulled her to my chest in comfort.

"By the way, Sookie, *this* is the one I *like* for you," Niall said.

"He is?" she asked, wiping away her tears.

Niall nodded.

"What are you talking about?" I inquired.

"I asked Niall to try to heal Bill," Sookie explained.

"Yes, you said that during your phone conversation with him."

"My magic heals only other Fae magic," Niall explained. "Plus," he added sourly, "the other vampire is not good for Sookie – not good at all. He views the world – and Sookie – through only his own perspective. He would stifle her light with his self-absorbed ways. I informed my great-granddaughter that I didn't like Compton – *for her*. You are the far better choice; it is good that Sookie has now realized that."

"I'm sorry I treated you so badly during your visit," Sookie said.

"You were trying to save the one you blamed yourself for infecting," Niall returned kindly. "Think nothing of it."

He moved toward Sookie and extended his hand to her. "Let me start the healing of your light, great-granddaughter. Then Mr. Northman's blood will finish the job and help your light kill off the Hep-V virus invading your blood."

"Eric," I said offhandedly. "Call me Eric."

The fairy looked at me and nodded, even as Sookie took a deep breath and stepped toward him.

"I'm ready," she said.

Niall gestured for me to move away. "As soon as you and my great-granddaughter bonded, her light became incapable of hurting you, but mine would pack a punch if you were touching her while I used it on her," he cautioned.

I nodded and stepped to the other side of the room. Then I watched as Niall took Sookie's hand. Glowing white light encased their joined hands within moments. Sookie's eyes were closed, nervousness and acceptance fighting in her expression. And – then – suddenly, those emotions were replaced by a sense of calm I could feel echoing through our bond.

A few minutes later, the light disappeared, and Niall stepped back from Sookie. "Take your vampire's blood. I will return in an hour to make sure you are cured of the Hep-V."

With a loud pop, the fairy was gone.

Sookie turned to me, her eyes calm, but inquisitive. "When Niall talked about a bond between us, what was he referring to?"

“What happened in the cubby – when I took your blood and then you took mine,” I responded, walking back over to her. I brushed a piece of her golden hair over her ear. “I might not have had my memories then, but when I said that we would be one, I was accurate.”

“But, how’s this bond thing different from what I’ve had with you before – or with Bill?”

“It’s permanent,” I responded. “That is why I can still feel you – despite the fact that my blood is out of your system. If we exchanged two more times, you would experience the bond as I do. We’d feel each other’s emotions and sense each other’s locations.”

“Why didn’t I form one of these with Bill?” she asked. “I mean – from what happened in the cubby – I assume that the bond comes from an exchange, and the very first night I had Bill’s blood, he had some of mine too.”

“There’s more to it than just an exchange,” I said, trying to keep my temper under control given the reminder of Bill’s crimes against Sookie. “I never bothered to learn much about bonding beyond the basics because I never thought I’d attempt one,” I informed.

“Are you upset that we bonded?” she asked.

“No.”

“Not even when you got your memories back?” she asked.

I chuckled. "I'm pretty sure that the only reason my memories came back at all was because of our bond. Otherwise, your light would have knocked me on my ass at the Festival of Tolerance. But – no – I have never regretted our bonding."

She smiled a little. "You said that you'd never bothered to learn much about bonds. But what are the basics?"

"I know only what Godric told me of bonding. Most vampires are instructed by their makers to be careful with their blood, for it is unknown why sometimes a bond forms and other times it does not. However, Godric had a theory."

"What was it?"

"Well – undeniably – a bond is about equality, not power; that's why you wouldn't have had any blood dreams about me after our time in the cubby. In essence, we lived out a dream of sorts together – following the bonding. That is the general way it works – though I couldn't remember that at the time. Godric posited that a bond formed only when the vampire saw a true partner in the person with whom he or she shared blood."

"Is that how you see me? As an equal? A partner?"

"Yes," I answered simply. "That is what I want – what I have never had with anyone."

"But you and Pam are partners – at Fangtasia."

I smiled. "There is a difference between business and personal, Sookie. Plus – as Pam's maker, I have always been above her. True partnerships cannot exist when one could have absolute control over the other. Now that I've released Pam, we could be

true equals, but I cannot fathom having a romantic relationship with her again. You are the only being in a thousand years that I have ever viewed as a true complement for myself.”

“Oh,” she said with a little blush reddening her cheeks. “Um – thanks,” she added a bit uncertainly.

“You’re welcome,” I said with a chuckle.

“It’s hard for me to imagine someone thinking of me like that,” she said quietly.

“You will get used to it,” I returned.

We were quiet for a moment, but she broke the silence with a laugh. “After that exchange in the cubby – I thought you were drunk on my blood and I was drunk on yours.”

I smirked. “I supposed that’s an accurate enough description.”

“So – uh – do you mind giving me your blood again now? Like Niall said?”

“My blood is yours, Sookie,” I responded as I ran the backs of my fingers along her cheek.

“Should we – uh – exchange?” she asked shyly even as she shivered at my touch.

“Not if you still want to hold off on recommencing our sexual relationship,” I chuckled. “I’m not sure I’d be able to control myself.”

She looked slightly disappointed. “Okay – but, in the future, would you want to complete the bond?”

“Yes,” I answered immediately. My body and my mind – my very spirit – had been calling out to complete the bond since we’d started it.

She smiled up at me as I led her back to the couch.

“Pam does good work,” Sookie remarked as she glanced at the screen to see the ‘finished product’ of Sarah Newlin’s once again blond hair.

I only nodded in response as I sat as far back into the couch as possible and guided Sookie to sit in front of me – her back to my front.

“Do you mind if I use you to make a little friction?” I asked, even as she inhaled sharply from feeling my suddenly excited cock against her back.

“No problem,” she whispered as the scent of her own arousal filled the air.

She moved against me a little, and my cock celebrated. I’d cum when she’d taken my blood in the cubby, and I was pretty certain I’d be doing that again, but I couldn’t find it in myself to apologize for that. I only regretted that I wouldn’t be cumming inside of Sookie when my release came.

I wanted to have Sookie drink from my neck, but I knew I wouldn’t be able to stop myself from ravaging her if she did. However, to drink from the palm of the hand was considered more intimate than the wrist, so I bit the same place I’d bitten when Sookie and I formed our bond.

As soon as her questing tongue swept across my palm, I felt my cock weeping out its pre-release, and my body began to grind against her back without my being able to stop it. I was glad I’d already asked permission, especially when she moaned.

“How is it possible that you taste so good?” she purred against the wound, right before she bit a little to keep the blood flowing.

I growled and grinded.

The scent of her arousal was so thick in the air – in my mind. My free hand itched to unbutton her jeans and travel to the center of that arousal. But something rational in me told me that would *definitely* not be taking things slowly.

“Please,” Sookie panted, now moving her body so it would rhythmically stroke my confined cock. “Bite,” she whispered as she nipped at my wound again.

Greed – that’s what I felt from her. Greed for pleasure. Greed for blood. Greed for me.

I loved the feeling. Loved my blood moving inside of her once more. Loved the way her emotions sharpened inside of me again.

Loved her.

I bit.

And then I came, even as I felt her body shiver to announce her own orgasm.

Somehow – I kept myself from tearing off her clothing and fucking her as she licked my now-sealed wound.

Somehow – I kept myself from taking more than a few gulps of her blood.

Somehow – I kept my fucking sanity as our bond strengthened and grew.

Somehow – I retained the power of speech.

“You make it difficult to take things slowly, lover,” I moaned as I kissed her neck, over the now-healed spot where I’d just bitten.

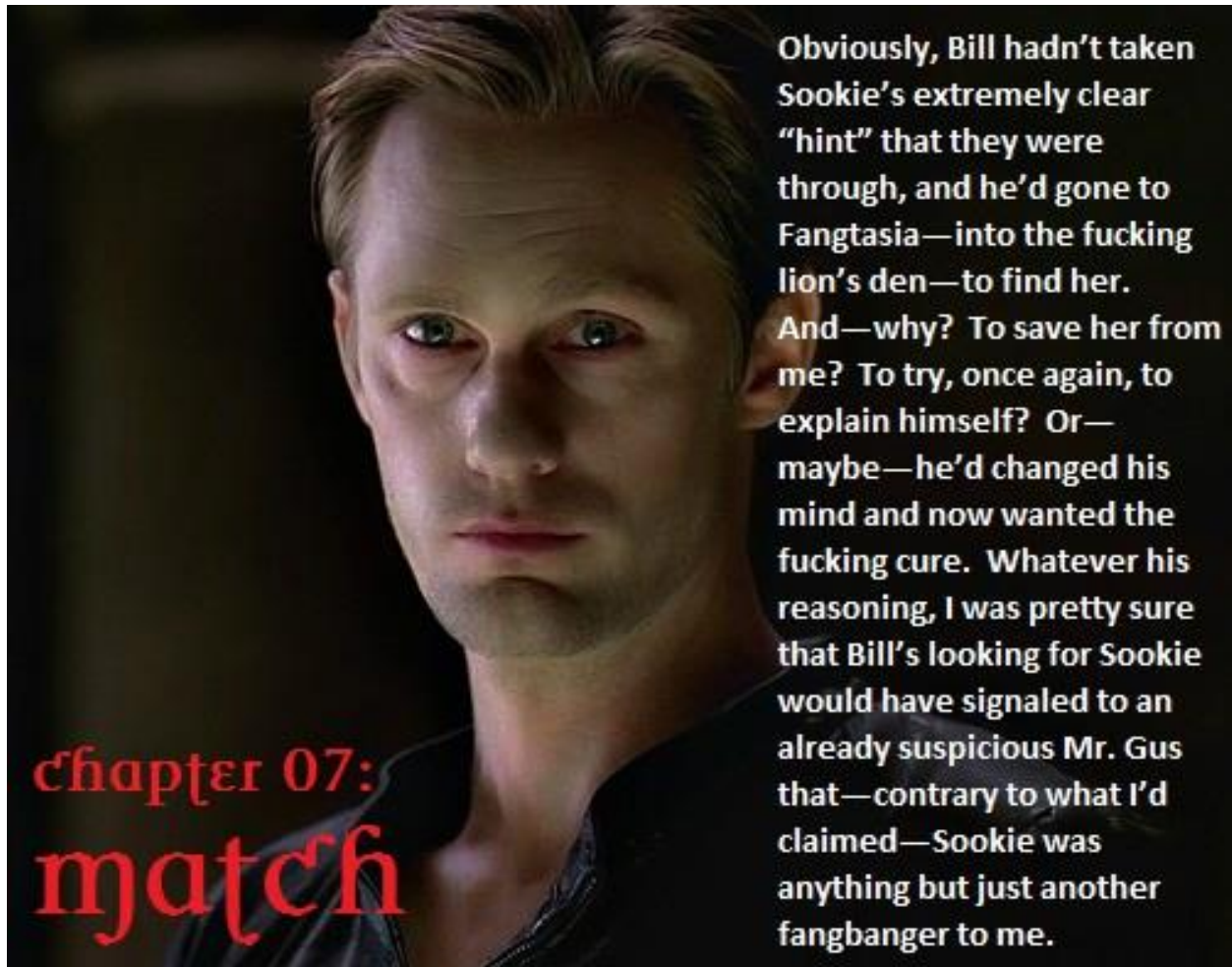
“Sorry,” she panted.

“I’m not,” I growled. And I wasn’t. Well – I *was* sorry that I wouldn’t be ravaging her for the rest of the night, but I could be patient.

“What the fuck?” Sookie asked, her dreamy tone coming to an abrupt end as she sat up.

“Huh?” I asked.

“Bill!” Sookie shouted as she pointed to the television screen. “At Fangtasia!”



chapter 07: match

Obviously, Bill hadn't taken Sookie's extremely clear "hint" that they were through, and he'd gone to Fangtasia—into the fucking lion's den—to find her. And—why? To save her from me? To try, once again, to explain himself? Or—maybe—he'd changed his mind and now wanted the fucking cure. Whatever his reasoning, I was pretty sure that Bill's looking for Sookie would have signaled to an already suspicious Mr. Gus that—contrary to what I'd claimed—Sookie was anything but just another fangbanger to me.

Chapter 07: Match

Sure enough, Bill Compton was dragging his withering body into my club. "Fuck," I said, knowing his presence wouldn't bode well for anybody.

Much sooner than I'd wanted to, I released Sookie, whom I'd been holding tightly since our exchange, caressing the PG parts of her body that I could reach—to calm and comfort us both.

The wet spots on my jeans, her back, her jeans, and the leather couch told the story of how strong our orgasms had been, and Sookie immediately blushed.

“Jesus Christ!” she exclaimed.

I chuckled. “I’m afraid I have no clothing your size here, but if you can find something among my things, feel free to change,” I said, even as I watched Bill trying to speak to the Yakuza henchmen. They were obviously speaking back to him in Japanese.

Pam and I had already determined which of Mr. Gus’s minions spoke English, and none of the English speakers were present. Of course, I spoke Japanese, but Pam didn’t, and from the look on Bill’s face, neither did he.

“I don’t suppose you can read lips – can you?” Sookie asked me, looking at Bill, who was obviously still trying to explain something to the confused-looking henchmen.

I chuckled. “Nope. You?”

She frowned. “Minds are bad enough,” she sighed as she moved toward the screen as if to take a closer look.

Just then Mr. Gus entered the club.

“Shit,” I intoned, figuring that bad was about to go to worse. It was apparent that Mr. Gus wasn’t happy to see that there was an infected vampire in Fangtasia. It was also apparent that I needed to upgrade my surveillance system to include audio.

“Was that *Sookie*?” Sookie asked, causing me to look at her in confusion.

Thankfully, she explained immediately. “I’m pretty sure Bill just said ‘Sookie.’”

Looking back at the screen and seeing the look on Mr. Gus’s face, I was pretty sure she was right.

“Fuck!” Sookie said loudly, as Bill was unceremoniously placed into custody. In the next moment, Pam was dragged into the main part of the club as well – in silver chains.

“Fuck!” I said in agreement. Obviously, Bill hadn’t taken Sookie’s extremely clear “hint” that they were through, and he’d gone to Fangtasia – into the fucking lion’s den – to find her. And – why? To save her from me? To try, once again, to explain himself? Or – maybe – he’d changed his mind and now wanted the fucking cure. Whatever his reasoning, I was pretty sure that Bill’s looking for Sookie would have signaled to an already suspicious Mr. Gus that – contrary to what I’d claimed – Sookie was anything but just another fangbanger to me.

And – of course – Bill had had to walk in the front door, instead of sneaking in through the tunnel. Gods! It was obvious that the last of his common sense had exited with his senses.

I growled as we watched Pam being dragged down into the dungeon and then tied to my *own* goddamned torture table. The Yakuza had obviously found all my toys and were currently getting one of my more effective interrogation devices, a large wooden object with a point I’d carved myself, out of the supply closet.

The fuckers – using my own devices against my child!

Even as I began formulating ways to free Pamela, Niall popped back into the room.

He took in our expressions, the wets spots, and then the television screen. And then he inhaled deeply.

“I sometimes forget all that can be accomplished in just an hour,” he said offhandedly, as Sookie’s skin flamed red.

I smirked at her reaction.

Niall inhaled again. “Well—the good news is that the disease is no longer in your blood,” he commented to Sookie before looking back at the television screen. Bill was being tied to a chair with silver chains. “The bad news is that Compton seems to be messing things up for you *yet again*.” He walked closer to the screen. “The blonde is your vampire child—correct?” he asked me.

“Yes,” I confirmed.

“Looks like you will be walking into a trap,” he commented.

“Yes,” I said again. “It seems probable that something Bill said has clued Mr. Gus in on Sookie’s importance in my life. And I know the way the Yakuza works. They like to punish those who don’t fall in line with their desires.”

“How?” Niall asked with curiosity.

“The last time I defied them, I was forced to choose between my child and the human lover I had at the time. When I chose Pam, they killed Sylvie. And then they forced me to become the Sheriff of Area 5—so that they could keep tabs on me.”

Feeling Sookie’s slight twinge of jealousy at hearing about my past lover made me feel damned good, especially considering I had the same twinges when I thought of her with Compton or Herveaux.

“What will they do?” Niall asked.

“If I had to speculate, I’d guess that they are going to threaten Pam to get me to tell them whether or not Sookie knows about the cure – unless Bill has already spilled those beans, which is highly probable. In that case, they will test my honesty. And – after that – they will likely call upon me to choose between my child and Sookie. Of course, given our history, they will expect me to choose Pamela. They’ll want me to tell them where to find you,” I sighed, looking at Sookie and taking her hand. “And then they will likely hold Pam and me in silver while they go to get you.”

“And they’d kill me?” Sookie asked.

“Likely, they’d bring you to Eric’s location to make him watch as they killed you,” Niall said casually, as if he were talking about the weather.

I suppose the subject of death did become equivalent to the topic of the weather once a Supe reached a certain age.

I nodded in agreement, knowing that they’d do just what Niall had posited.

“What they don’t know is that I would choose Sookie above all else.”

Sookie went to protest, but I put my fingers gently against her lips to stop her.

“Not that I will be making a choice tonight, lover. Because Ludwig is able to produce the cure, my arrangement with Mr. Gus was already on borrowed time. But – if he insists upon forcing the issue by threatening those I care about – our arrangement will be ending tonight.” I smiled in anticipation.

“May I help?” Niall asked. “I admit to having a desire for a good fight. It’s been too long. And I’ve never fought beside a vampire. I believe humans would call it a bucket list item of mine.”

I chuckled and nodded. "Your aid would be welcome. Thank you."

"I'm coming too," Sookie said stubbornly.

"Yes – you are," I said with a smirk. I knew that even if I asked her not to come – and even if she agreed – she'd follow anyway. It was the way Sookie operated. She'd agree to what was rational, and then her mind would begin spinning around what she could do to hurry things along. She was fearless and – at times – foolish.

But she was now mine, and I figured that – given enough experience – she'd learn to work within her limitations. And mine.

Surprised, she smiled up at me. "Thanks."

"Where have you been?" Ginger asked, sounding like a neglected spouse as I strolled casually into Fangtasia.

Neglected? Yes.

Spouse? Hell no.

I kept my gaze on her as I walked to the bar, ignoring the fact that I knew Mr. Gus was using my own close-circuit cameras to track my movements. Obviously, he had no idea I could sense my child's distress – even though our maker-child bond had been severed. Pam would forever have my blood, and my blood told me she was in pain and pissed off.

As Ginger looked up at me with the kind of awestruck eyes she always did, I smiled softly at her.

Ginger's loyalty could never be questioned. From the moment she'd walked into Pam and my cheesy-as-hell version of Blockbuster, she was enthralled by both my progeny and myself. If I had a nickel for every time she'd asked me to fuck her, I'd probably be the richest vampire in the world, and that was saying something.

But—truth be told—I didn't want to *hurt* Ginger, physically or emotionally. As I said—she was loyal. And loyalty couldn't be bought or overlooked.

Which was why I'd never fucked with it.

And I wasn't going to fuck her now. My fucks would now be given only to Sookie Stackhouse.

Still, I wanted to leave Ginger with something.

After all, in the very room where we were standing, she had taken the news of Pam and me being vampires with a look of realization and then a nod. "I thought y'all were too pretty to be *real* people," she'd said.

Finding out that it was Ginger's idea that we change our video store into a club made me soften toward her even more. In fact, if Sookie had denied us our chance, I would have been fully prepared to fuck Ginger—just once.

However, now that Sookie and I were together, I knew that Ginger would need to be set loose—for her own good. She'd watched me parade hundreds of women into my office or the dungeon at Fangtasia; however, she'd never seen one about whom I cared. And—I expect that's why she'd always held out hope that *she* was the one I *did* care about.

And she was right – at least in a manner of speaking. For years, she'd been trusted beyond many other humans in my employ.

"Ginger," I said by way of greeting.

"Wait!" she cried out, scanning my chest. "Where are your veiny things? You're healed – aren't you?" she said with accusation. "Why didn't you tell me?" she demanded.

I sighed, seeing the real hurt on Ginger's face. The idea that she thought I *should* have told her before helped reconcile me to what I needed to do. In truth, I knew that part of me would miss Ginger, and Pam would miss her even more. But I also knew that some things really were for the best.

"Ginger," I said again, this time immediately enthralling her with my glamour.

"Yes, Master," she responded, eyes widening almost comically.

Actually, there was no "almost" about it.

"Ginger, you and I just had sex," I informed her evenly.

"*Finally*," she replied dreamily. "How was it?"

"The best I ever had," I responded, holding in my chuckle.

"Wow!" she smiled. "Where did we – uh – do it?" she asked with confusion.

"Where did you want it to be done?" I asked.

"The throne," she responded immediately.

"It was there. I sat down, and you," I paused, "mounted me."

"I did?" she asked. "Like a horse?"

"Absolutely," I avowed. "But there was a problem."

“What? Wait. No there wasn’t – was there?” she asked.

“Yes. You see – now that I’ve had you, I fear that you’ll be the only one I ever want again.”

“That’s not a problem,” she sighed drunkenly.

“But it is,” I said more forcefully. “How will Fangtasia survive if I am to be had by only one?” Truth be told, now that I had only Sookie and that she would have only me, I didn’t care what happened to the bar. It’d been closed for months anyway, and I was about to make a shitload of money off of the Hep-V cure.

Ginger’s face fell. “You’re right. Fangtasia couldn’t survive without you.”

“Ginger, your sacrifice for me will never be forgotten.”

“My sacrifice,” she nodded. “Wait – what sacrifice?”

“You are going to leave Shreveport and return to graduate school; I think Michigan would be a good place. Don’t you?”

“Uh – huh,” she affirmed.

“Feel free to write your dissertation about how to tame a vampire, for you have *most certainly* tamed this one.”

“I have,” she smiled. “I have?”

“Yes. And Ginger?”

“Yeah?” she asked.

“I want you to remember a number for me – okay?”

“Your phone number?”

“No – I different number,” I said with a chuckle

“Okay, Master,” she responded with a nod.

“67923093,” I said. “Got it?”

“You got it,” she said.

“Repeat it to me,” I commanded.

“67923093.”

“Good. That number is to an account with Bank of America. That account is in your name. I want you to go into the nearest branch tomorrow, take out the funds, pack up your essentials, and go to Michigan.”

“Yes, Master.”

“Thank you, Ginger, for everything,” I said sincerely.

“Thank you,” she responded, still in a haze.

I leaned in and whispered, “Wait five minutes and then leave.” I kissed her cheek as she nodded.

I smiled. Indeed, I would miss Ginger. But it was best she move on while she still had enough brain cells to find a new life for herself. The account number I’d given her had been Pam’s idea – actually. I knew that Ginger would find a half a million dollars in it. She also had ample money of her own saved. And she’d go to her new life thinking she’d ruined me for other women. All in all, that would be a good thing for her.

And finding her sitting at the bar had been a good thing for me, too – and for my plan. I didn’t want Mr. Gus to suspect that I knew anything about the current captivity of my progeny and my soon-to-be former king. To anyone looking – it appeared as if

I'd had a simple conversation with Ginger, who even Mr. Gus could tell was completely innocuous.

As casually as possible, I walked to the basement door and then down the stairs. I looked appropriately horror-stricken at the sight of my child in silver chains.

Then, Mr. Gus played his role—just as I'd thought he would.

He demanded that I tell him whether Sookie knew about the Hep-V cure. I pretended to hesitate, and he lowered *my* machine two of the four levels I knew it had before I told him—“reluctantly”—that Sookie *did* know.

Bill, predictably, began to curse my betrayal. However, before the first group of indicting words could come out of his mouth, a popping noise was heard next to me. Sookie's blood was inside of me now, so Niall had no problem “popping” to me with Sookie in tow. Even as they began blasting all the Yakuza in sight, I sped to my child, tearing the head from the shoulders of one of Mr. Gus's men as I went. Before another of Mr. Gus's minions could fully release the sharpened wood into Pam's heart, I had her off the table. In the next instant, I'd snapped a spine and had thrown the victim to Pam so that she could feed.

All the fighting was over within a minute—fairy light igniting around the room and heads being torn from bodies in quick succession. At the end of the minute, Mr. Gus was the one on the torture table, and the other Yakuza were all dead.

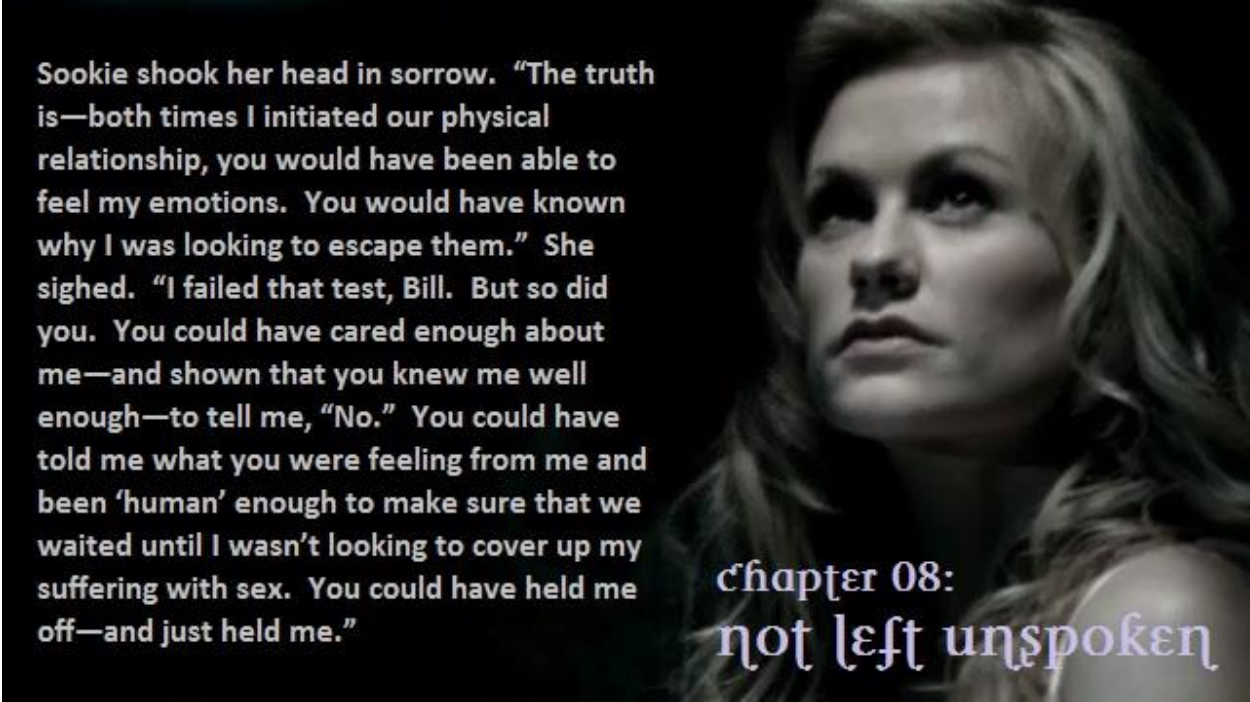
“You get the ones outside?” I asked Niall and Sookie.

Niall nodded.

“Sookeh?” Bill asked, though the name was even more butchered than usual since he said it through the ball gag in his mouth.

“Present,” Sookie returned sassily – though she wasn’t looking at Bill. She was looking at me, and there was love in her eyes, despite the fact that I was currently covered with the blood of my enemies. Yes – Sookie Stackhouse was my match.

And – better yet – she finally knew it.



Sookie shook her head in sorrow. “The truth is—both times I initiated our physical relationship, you would have been able to feel my emotions. You would have known why I was looking to escape them.” She sighed. “I failed that test, Bill. But so did you. You could have cared enough about me—and shown that you knew me well enough—to tell me, “No.” You could have told me what you were feeling from me and been ‘human’ enough to make sure that we waited until I wasn’t looking to cover up my suffering with sex. You could have held me off—and just held me.”

chapter 08: not left unspoken

Chapter 08: Not Left Unspoken

I quickly secured Mr. Gus’s arms and legs into the cuffs at the four corners of my custom-made torture table and gave the lever at the side a turn, stretching out the man. This particular feature of the table wouldn’t work with vampires or Weres since our strength would have broken the device. So I was pleased to be able to try out the mechanism on Mr. Gus.

“Fuck, Northman!” he yelled in his Southern drawl.

I almost laughed. But, instead, I cranked the table until I heard one of Mr. Gus’s tendons snap.

He cried out.

“Painful—I’d imagine,” I observed. “Now—tell me—who all knows of Pam and my involvement in your corporation?”

“Go to hell,” he seethed.

I gave the table another crank, and there was another tear.

“Who?!?!” I demanded. “Tell me! Who knows about Pam and me? Who knows the cure is from Sarah Newlin? Who knows of your plans for NewBlood?”

“Fuck you!” Mr. Gus spat.

I cranked again.

“Geez,” Sookie commented after a moment. “He even thinks in a Texas accent.”

“And what does he think?” I chuckled.

“Well. He hopes you don’t find out that *only* his people that *were* in this room and the parking lot knew you and Pam were involved. He gave his chief scientist a sample of Sarah’s blood, but he didn’t say where it had come from. And he didn’t tell him about NewBlood either. He just instructed him to analyze the blood and paid him to keep his findings to himself. Oh – and no one has any idea Mr. Gus is here, in Shreveport. And, actually, his name isn’t Mr. Gus. It’s Tako, which he hates – by the way.”

She paused and then chuckled.

“I think I would like to try this taco food product,” Niall commented.

I looked at the fairies with confusion. Niall was obviously listening into Mr. Gus’s thoughts too, but I’d obviously missed something.

Sookie giggled and then explained. “It seems that Tako’s daddy loved tacos – the Mexican food – so much that he named his son after them.”

She looked at the man spread out on the table. "Where'd you come up with Mr. Gus?"

"Go. To. Hell!" the man seethed, before I cranked again.

Within seconds, both Sookie and Niall were laughing heartily.

"What?" Pam asked.

"He named himself after food too," Sookie explained. He ate a steak made from Angus beef when he was fourteen, and when he moved to Texas, he picked 'Gus' 'cause Texans like their beef."

I chuckled, even as Sookie tilted her head to the side.

"Why didn't you tell more people?" she asked.

"What the fuck are you? A witch?" Mr. Gus asked her as she touched his hand, probably to get better reception of his thoughts.

"I'm between jobs right now," Sookie intoned. "If you disappear, is there anything left behind to tell other people about what you've been doing?"

Sookie waited a moment and then nodded while Mr. Gus looked at her with a combination of awe and pain.

"Good," she pronounced. "I'd hate for your death to come back and bite us in the butt."

"You can read my thoughts – can't you?" Mr. Gus asked, dollar signs glistening behind his eyes. "Listen – make the vampire stop and we can make some kind of arrangement. I can pay you more than you've even hoped to have."

Sookie nudged me aside and gave the table a little crank of her own. "You don't have any idea what I've hoped to have," she breathed. "And you'd best stop thinkin' what you're thinkin', or I'm gonna give this lever a few more turns."

"What is he thinking?" I asked with a growl.

"He wants to turn my great-granddaughter into a high-classed hooker who steals thoughts from her clients' heads so that Tako here can blackmail them," Niall informed.

It was me nudging Sookie to the side this time so that I could give the table another crank. I was partly placated by the sound of a bone snapping; I was better satisfied by Mr. Gus's scream.

I looked at Sookie. "What else did you learn?" I asked.

"That you're one lucky vampire," she smirked up at me. "Mr. Gus, here, has been competing with his older brother. Both want to take over their father's company when he retires, and their father has basically set up a competition between them. Whoever best proves himself by next year wins. Mr. Gus has been losing since the Hep-V was snuck into the TrueBlood shipments on his watch. Mr. Gus was sure that NewBlood would assure his victory over his brother. The people with him were Yakuza soldiers, but they were completely loyal to Mr. Gus, so they wouldn't have told anyone about Pam, you, or Sarah either."

I smiled at my bonded. She'd asked the questions I would have asked. And she'd gotten all the answers I needed for my peace of mind. "You are right, Sookie. I

am lucky," I said. And I wasn't just talking about with the Yakuza either. "Thank you, *min kära.*"

"You're welcome," she smiled back. She glanced nervously at Mr. Gus. "I think I'm gonna head upstairs and get a drink while y'all finish up here."

I nodded, even as I used my senses to ensure that there was no one in the bar above us. "Okay. I'll be with you soon," I said, acknowledging that Sookie didn't want or need to see Mr. Gus's end.

"You're with her now?" Pam asked me as soon as the basement door had closed behind Sookie.

I nodded. "Yes. We are together."

Bill grunted from the corner. I sauntered over to him.

"Oh—sorry—I forgot you were here," I said as I removed the ball gag from his mouth.

"I asked you to speak to her for me," Bill bit out with bitterness. "I didn't expect you to swoop in on her when she was at her most vulnerable."

Pam's fangs snapped down, but mine stayed where they were.

A burst of light traveled from Niall's hands to Bill's chest, clearly stunning the Civil War vet.

Pity the blast didn't kill him.

Niall popped over to us so that he was right in front of Bill, glaring down at him.

“You dare accuse *another* of preying upon my great-granddaughter?” he gritted out threateningly. “I’d kill you for that statement – if I weren’t hopeful for your more painful demise.”

“Oh – I like him,” Pam intoned. “Where’d you pick him up?”

“Niall, meet Pamela, my progeny. Pamela, this is Sookie’s great-grandfather, Niall Brigant.”

“Enchanté,” Niall said, turning to Pamela with a charming smile wide enough to show that his back teeth were as sharp as razors.

Pam actually gave him a little curtsy. “Right back at you.”

I chuckled and moved over to where Sarah was tied up. Immediately, I caught her in my glamour. “You won’t remember *anything* that’s happened in this basement – will you?”

She shook her head and mumbled a hazy, “No,” through her gag.

That done, I looked at Pam. “Would you like to do the honors?” I asked, glancing down at Mr. Gus.

“Fucking A,” Pam said, before she went to the table and started cranking. Immediately, Mr. Gus’s screams filled the room. The sound was nice – until it was replaced by a more annoying one.

“What about me?” Bill asked. He was still chained to the chair.

“Can’t you just die?” I asked before putting on leather gloves and freeing him.

He stood up sluggishly. “Not as long as Sookie’s at risk.”

I shook my head. “Sookie will *never* be at risk from me.”

I looked at Pam. "Make sure the tunnel is secure, and keep an eye on her," I said, motioning toward Sarah. "We might not need her anymore, but it's better to be safe than sorry. Once we know for sure, we'll send her to her maker."

"After we play with her a while?" Pam asked hopefully.

"Of course," I grinned. "I was inspired by some of the experiments I saw in the vampire concentration camp she helped to dream up. I'm sure we can design variants – especially for Ms. Newlin."

Pam's fangs popped down, and she leered at Sarah. "We're gonna have so much fun! I spent most of my time at your little hell-hole talkin' to a shrink. And I can't wait to try out some of his mind tricks on you."

Sarah cowered as much as she could, given her tied-up position.

I looked at Bill. "Last chance to take a sip?"

He lifted his chin stubbornly.

"Your loss," I said as I left the basement, followed by Niall.

Bill came up after us, progressing slowly due to having been silvered and to his advanced illness – and probably his unconscious desire to garner sympathy, as well. He'd have to look elsewhere for that – like in hell.

"Oh – libations!" Niall exclaimed, going up to the bar where Sookie had poured herself a gin and tonic.

Sookie chuckled at him. "What would you like?"

"Can you make me something with an umbrella?" he asked.

"Uh – no," she said. "We don't have anything like that at Merlotte's."

I zipped over to the bar. “I have this,” I offered, grinning at Sookie. Before long, I was shaking a cocktail. There was no fresh fruit in the bar, but there were some jarred cherries, which I added liberally to the drink. And, of course, I added an umbrella.

Niall’s eyes lit up as he sidled up to the bar and then took a drink. “Delicious! I knew I liked you.”

I chuckled and looked at Sookie, who was looking at Bill.

“Sookeh,” Bill greeted, “you shouldn’t have placed yourself in harm’s way.”

She sighed and shook her head. “Bill – first of all, I wasn’t really in harm’s way. And, second, I wasn’t about to let the Yakuza hurt someone I loved.”

“Sookeh, you shouldn’t have risked yourself for me,” Bill admonished.

“I didn’t,” Sookie said evenly, looking up at me. “I did it for Eric and for – believe it or not – Pam.” She turned back to Bill. “Your rescue was not a factor in my coming here,” she said with some regret.

Meanwhile, Bill was looking at her with utter shock.

Sookie let out another long sigh. “You have made it *abundantly* clear that you’re okay with dyin’, Bill,” she reminded.

“Yes!” Bill said with as much vehemence as he could muster. “But I’m sacrificing myself for *you* – so that you can escape the damage that vampires will cause you. Please tell me that you’re not going to start seeing Eric after I’m gone,” he pled.

“I’m not gonna start seeing Eric after you’re gone,” she parroted.

“Thank God,” Bill said with relief.

“I’m seeing him *already*,” Sookie announced, sending Bill into a tailspin.

“But, Sookkeh! Our darkness – it will extinguish your light! You need to be free from vampires.”

“Where does he come up with this nonsense?” Niall muttered, even as I started making him another drink.

I shrugged as I shook his cocktail.

“More of the red fruits, please,” he requested.

I chuckled and nodded before Niall and I both looked back at Sookie, who was taking deep breaths as she tried to calm the anger I felt inside of her – and the sorrow.

In that moment, I hated Bill Compton. Even if I believed he was doing right – which I didn’t – his ignorance of Sookie made me want to de-fang him, de-ball him, and de-life him.

But – if I was going to be with Sookie – then I was damned sure going to start by trusting her to handle the likes of Compton, especially now that her eyes were opened to him. And – if she were taken in by him yet again – then that would be the final straw for us.

But I now had confidence that straw wouldn’t be coming into the picture.

Finally having her emotions in check, Sookie spoke. “I know that you truly believe what you’re saying,” she said wearily. “I know you want to protect me and to set me free. I know that you love me.”

“I *do* love you,” Bill insisted.

She nodded. “A part of me will always love you too, Bill. But I think it’s time for *both* of us to move on now.” She took a deep breath. “So – if you’re plannin’ to die just

for me, then don't." She reached out and took my hand as soon as I'd passed a new drink to Niall. "No matter what, Bill, I'm not gonna be coming back to you. I don't regret being with you again. Maybe it was what we both needed to get closure."

"Closure," Bill whispered sadly.

"Guilt, desperation, sorrow," Sookie listed, shaking her head. "I was feelin' those in equal parts the other night when I ran to you and we had sex."

I felt myself tensing next to her, but I held my resolve. Three nights before, I'd fucked and drunk from a "donor" as I'd celebrated my Hep-V-free status. And I was man enough to understand that what came before would only taint my relationship with Sookie if one of us let it. And Bill Compton wasn't going to have a place in what Sookie and I shared – not if I could help it.

Sookie straightened her back. "It was similar to how I felt after Gran died. I blamed myself for her dyin' too." She took a deep breath. "It took me a while, but I've finally realized that sex isn't really effective in covering those things. And I've also realized that I was using you to do just that. Or maybe I was just hoping that I could rewind the clock and get us back to how we were before so much happened to tear us apart."

"Sookeh . . .," Bill started.

"No – *please* – hear me out. If you ever really loved me, then you'll listen to me."

Bill nodded his agreement.

"It wasn't fair of me to use you like that the other night. And it also wasn't fair to myself. I was hoping to take away a little of my own guilt and sorrow by making

sure that you had what you wanted during your last days on this earth.” She scoffed at herself. “A last meal provided to a dying man by his own executioner.”

“Sookeh, I want to die,” Bill said. “It’s the only way for you to move on.”

She shook her head. “You say that, Bill, but it was *Eric* who understood that as long as I believed that I was responsible for your disease and death, I would *never* be able to move on. But Eric is right,” she said, leaning into me – taking strength from me.

“He pointed out something so obvious, but I couldn’t see it because I was so lost in my guilt. He helped me to see that *you* are now responsible for your own dying. But, instead of just walking out into the sun and ending things yourself, you’re lingering – like a bad actor on a stage.” When she paused to wipe her eyes with a bar napkin, Bill went to speak, but a growl from me shut him up.

Sookie shook her head in sorrow. “The truth is – both times I initiated our physical relationship, you would have been able to feel my emotions. You would have known *why* I was looking to escape them.” She sighed. “I failed that test, Bill. But so did you. You *could* have cared enough about me – and shown that you *knew* me well enough – to tell me, “No.” You could have told me what you were feeling from me and been ‘human’ enough to make sure that we waited until I wasn’t looking to cover up my suffering with sex. You could have held me off – and just held me.”

Bill went to speak again, and this time Niall was the one to growl him to silence. I kept one hand in Sookie’s even as I started mixing him another drink. I planned to double the cherries in it.

Sookie looked up at me and gave me a little smile before turning back to Bill. “Earlier – when I agreed to be Eric’s, he knew – without me needing to ask – that I should take some time to grieve you and Alcide before we – uh – restarted our physical relationship. And – even when we exchanged blood – because *I* begged him to bite me – he kept his hands to himself. And then he just held me because he knew that’s what I would need.”

“Sookeh, I’m the one who knows you,” Bill insisted. “I know that you’ll be better off without vampires.”

“Without *one*,” Sookie said with a mixture of sorrow and steel in her tone. “You’re right about the fact that there’s something in you that takes away something in me. I didn’t see that before. I didn’t want to see that.” She took another deep breath. “*I want* to remember you as the first man who loved me. *I want* to remember all the good memories, but – now – as I try to think back, I’m struggling to remember anything that’s both good *and* true.”

“Sookeh . . .,” Bill started again.

She closed her eyes and interrupted him. “Remember the walk we took – early on in whatever it was that we had? *I know* you didn’t love me then. I know I was still a job to you, yet that’s the night I fell in love with you.” She shook her head, but her eyes stayed closed. “I think the time we spent together during the past few days is the only really honest time we’ve ever spent with each other. And I spent it feeling like I had to make something up to you. I spent it feeling like I *needed* to love you ‘better’ so that I could keep you alive. I spent it feeling like a failure – and a murderer.” Her eyes

opened. "But it's not my job to keep you alive, Bill. The cure is available; it's here, and it's *your* responsibility now – not mine." She glanced at the clock on the wall.

It was only fifteen minutes before sunrise.

"Take the cure, Bill," Sookie said forcefully. "Or walk out into the sun when it rises. Don't waste away and linger anymore. Stop trying to make me understand what's in your heart. I know now that I never have understood that – nor could I ever." She let out a sob, and I squeezed her hand in comfort. "I'll never understand you because your heart was never really mine." She took another long breath. "I'm tired of our story, Bill. I'm tired of being hurt by a person who claims to love me. And I'm tired of feeling so unlike myself when I'm with you."

"Sookeh," Bill sighed.

"You're best at lying to yourself, Bill. So, if it makes you feel better to think that I'm gonna stay away from vampires once you're gone, then feel free to think that," Sookie said, though there wasn't bitterness or cruelty in her tone – or the bond. She went on, "If it makes you feel better to think that I'm gonna marry a human and have a mess of miraculously non-telepathic kids, then do that. Or, if it makes you feel better to think that I'm gonna travel to another dimension and live with other fairies, then go for it."

"I'll pretend like I'm going to kidnap her if it helps," Niall said, downing his drink as I handed him another.

I wondered if he would pop to the wrong place if he got drunk enough.

Sookie turned to give Niall a fake glare and then winked at both him and me as I started yet another cocktail.

“I just want you to be safe and happy,” Bill said, his voice more sincere than I’d ever heard it before.

“I believe you,” Sookie said. “And I thank you. But I know now that I won’t be needin’ you to make either of those things happen,” she finished softly.

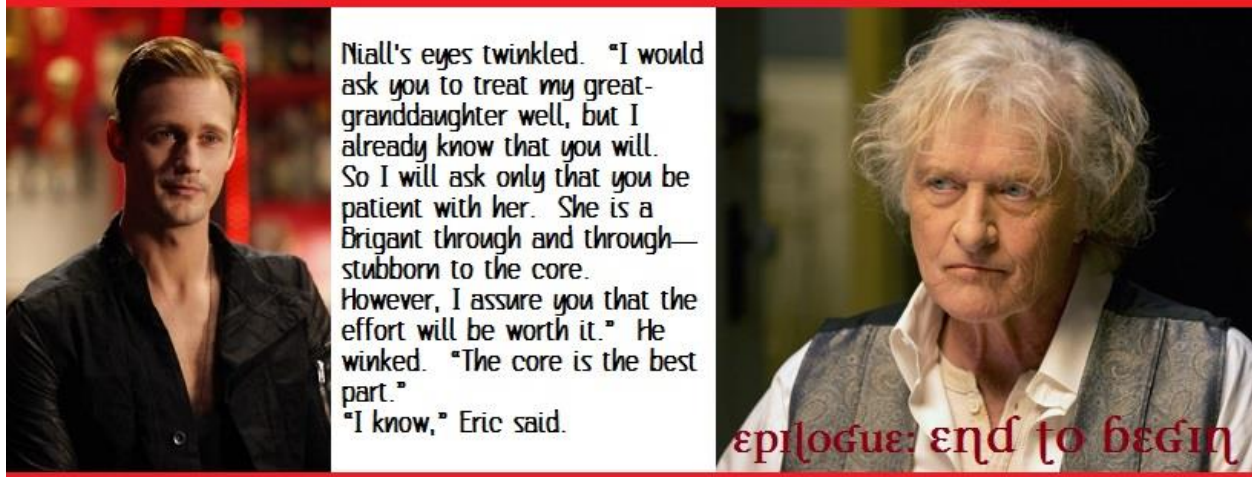
The sound of me shaking the cocktail was the only noise in the room for a moment after that.

“Will you come outside with me?” Bill asked meekly. “I don’t want to die alone.”

Sookie let out a sob. “Yeah. Of course I will.” She turned to look up at me, probably looking for my disapproval. But I didn’t disapprove of anything she’d said or done during her confrontation with Bill. I didn’t disapprove of her compassion or her love, which—once given—endured.

I was counting on that fact for myself, after all. And I was damned sure going to offer her a different kind of love than Bill Compton.

“I’ll be here,” I said, bending down to kiss my bonded’s forehead.



Epilogue: End to Begin

"From the end spring new beginnings." – Pliny the Elder

Sookie POV

I didn't want to see another vampire meet the sun; Godric had been enough.

But the part of me that would always love Bill because he'd been my first love put one foot in front of the other and walked with him until we were outside of Fangtasia.

"You saw Godric meet the sun," he commented.

"I did," I responded.

"What was it like?" he asked.

"Godric let go—let the sun take him. He disappeared into a blue light, leaving hardly any ash behind at all. It was beautiful in a way," I said honestly, wondering if Eric would ever ask me about that morning and knowing him well enough to figure that he likely wouldn't.

Eric wouldn't be comforted to know that Godric didn't fight against the sun. No matter what – I knew that Eric would fight. Hell – he'd apparently fought enough to cause an avalanche when Warlow's blood had left his system. No – Eric wasn't one to go "gentle into that good night" – or, in his case, *day*.

"Godric was more than ten times my age," Bill remarked, bringing my thoughts back to him. "But I was never meant to be vampire. I was never good at it," he added, looking toward the east.

"No," I said in agreement, but not judgment.

He looked from the horizon to me. "What did you and Godric talk about – before he died?"

"He wanted to know if I thought God would punish him for his sins."

"And what did you tell him?"

"I told him that God is big on forgiveness."

"And you? Will you forgive me?" Bill asked.

"I already have," I said.

He nodded. "Thank you."

We were silent for a few moments.

"I used to have hope that I would find Caroline and our children in the afterlife," Bill said.

"I hope you do, Bill."

"It's hard to let go," he said softly.

“It is,” I responded, knowing I’d feel Bill’s loss as acutely as I still felt Alcide’s. I knew that many of the people around me found me “cold” because they thought that I’d “moved on” from Alcide so quickly, and just as many would judge me for jumping from Bill to Eric. I wasn’t about to blame them for their opinions. After all, they were right in a way. For a while, I’d felt like I was on a carousel of men.

Bill, Sam, Bill, Alcide, Bill, Eric, Alcide, Warlow, Alcide, Bill, Eric.

Between them all, I’d been spinning for a long time.

But I was ready to get off that carousel with the only man left standing – the only one I’d never felt dizzy with.

And it was high time I quit taking that fact – and Eric himself – for granted.

“The sun will be up in only a few minutes,” Bill commented.

“You still have time to change your mind – to decide to take the cure,” I reminded softly.

“And would you change your mind if I did? Would you leave Eric to be with me?”

“No,” I responded. “I won’t be leaving Eric again.”

Bill looked at me through tortured eyes. “I’m afraid for you, Sookie.”

“I’m not afraid,” I said in answer, “not anymore. And that’s what matters.”

He sighed and looked toward the East. “My ashes – will you bury them in Caroline’s grave?”

“I will.”

“I’m sorry I couldn’t love you as you deserved to be loved,” Bill said.

“Me too.”

As the sun began to rise, Bill Compton looked at me for the last time.

“You look beautiful in the sunlight,” he said with a smile.

And then his body succumbed to that light.

Once he was gone, I looked around and found an empty bottle – Kentucky bourbon. I opened the lid and brushed the ashes that had been Bill into the bottle before tightening the lid.

“It’s not fancy,” I sighed, “but it’ll get you to Caroline.” I looked up at the ever-lightening sky and closed my eyes, saying a prayer that Bill was with his wife and children even then. I knew that Bill had done a lot of wrong during his life. But I also knew that he’d agonized over much of that wrong. And maybe – just maybe – that had been enough to buy him forgiveness with God. I hoped so.

I turned and looked at Fangtasia, wondering if Eric would open his club again.

I hoped so.

Eric POV

Niall had watched the monitor showing the parking lot until Compton was truly dead.

I didn’t need to watch a vampire burn – not even one who’d been a thorn in my side.

“I like this drink,” Niall said, downing the beverage and then waving me off when I went to start another. “Next time – add pineapple.”

“Pineapple?” I asked.

“I despise citrus – and lemon is like silver to me – but pineapple is absolutely divine.”

I smirked. “I will make sure I have plenty on hand – as well as other foodstuffs – for your next visit. But no lemon.”

Niall’s eyes twinkled. “I would ask you to treat my great-granddaughter well, but I already know that you will. So I will ask only that you be patient with her. She is a Brigant through and through – stubborn to the core. However, I assure you that the effort will be worth it.” He winked. “The core is the best part.”

“I know,” I said.

Niall stood up and bowed. “Tell Pamela that I enjoyed making her acquaintance.”

I chuckled. “I will.”

“I enjoyed making yours as well.”

I bowed in return. “Likewise.”

I heard Sookie opening the door and quickly ducked behind the bar until she’d closed and locked the door. While I was crouched down, I used a bar towel to wipe away the evidence of the bleeds from my nose and ears. Circumstances had been keeping me from my day-rest for several days, and I was certainly feeling the strain on my body.

I stood up in time to see Niall approach Sookie and kiss her forehead.

“The vampire is a good man,” he whispered. “And he loves you.”

“I know,” Sookie returned, looking over his shoulder at me. “I’m lucky.”

“See you soon,” Niall said before popping away.

“It’s over,” Sookie sighed as she walked over to me and placed herself into my arms. I could see – and feel – her sadness, but there were no tears in her eyes.

“No, lover,” I said. “This is only the beginning.”

The sadness left her eyes as she looked up into mine. “You’re right,” she agreed.

I smirked. “I like the sound of that. Say it again?”

“Don’t let being right one time go to your head, Viking,” she warned playfully.

I chuckled. “Shall we go to bed?”

“I like the sound of that,” she sighed.

I led Sookie to my office and then opened a secret chamber, which led to a bedroom.

“No nuke-proof coffin today?” she asked playfully.

“No – not today, not when I get to hold you for the first time in months,” I responded.

Neither one of us spoke as we took off our shoes. At my house, Sookie had changed into a T-shirt and a pair of boxer shorts, though the T-shirt had pretty much covered the boxers; she slipped off her bra in that way women could do at seeming vampire speed.

I refrained from growling with desire as I removed my jeans and T-shirt and climbed into bed. I’d worn boxer-briefs – for Sookie’s benefit.

She and I both sighed as she climbed in with me and rested her head on my chest.

And then we both slept – me the sleep of death and her the sleep of life.

But – somehow – we shared the same kind of rest.

Restorative. Peaceful. Complete.

It was – indeed – a new beginning.

A new life.

THE END