

# BOMBHELL

BY CALIFORNIA KAT

## STORY DESCRIPTION:

*Bombshell* begins in the middle of the events of *All Together Dead*, right after Andre had agreed to let Eric bond with Sookie—rather than doing it himself. It is inspired by the following prompt by Switbo: “Personally, I was always appalled that after Eric saves [Sookie] from being bonded to Andre by letting her bond to him instead, she never so much as thanks him from keeping her out of Andre’s clutches and they never really talk about what the blood bond means. As a ‘proper Southern woman’ as she always claims to be, how she could fail to thank him for saving her always galled me. And he’s too intelligent to fail to explain to her exactly what the bond means. Her not knowing is dangerous for both of them (as becomes obvious in later books).

STORY INSPIRED BY SWITBO



## **DISCLAIMER:**

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

## **MANY THANKS TO:**

Three people helped to make this story possible.

1. switbo for the inspiration
2. Sephrenia for the banner art
3. Kleannhouse for the beta-ing

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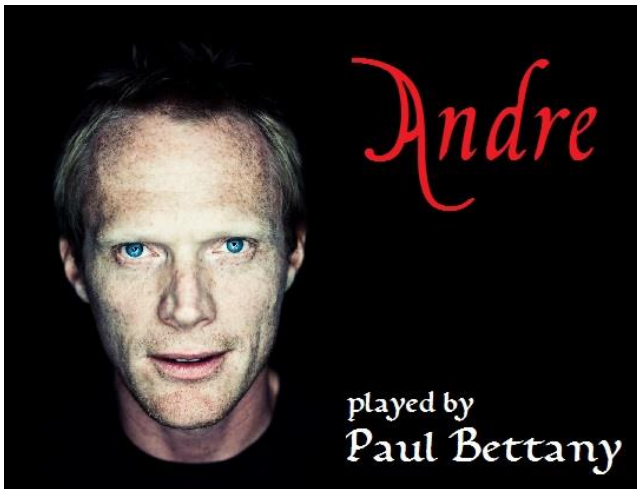
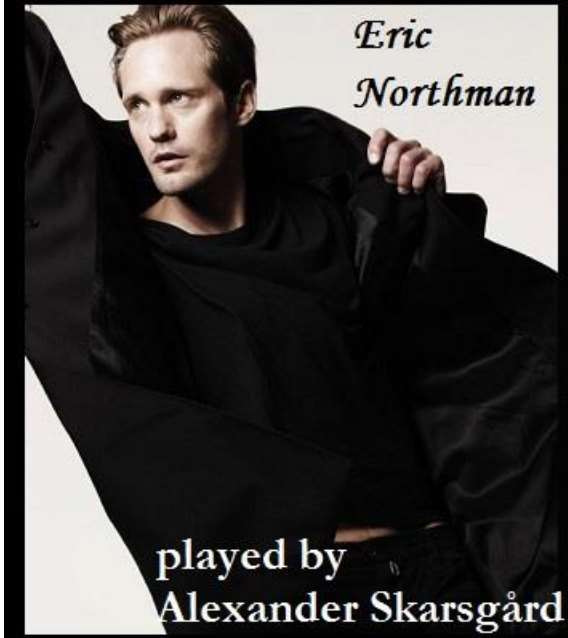
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# CAST



# BOMBSHELL

## CHAPTER 1: SCHOOLED

### SOOKIE POV

The idea that a person's life passes before his or her eyes in the moments before death is very true; I know that with certainty because little flashes of that life will converge into a person's thoughts when he or she is experiencing moments of great stress.

Trust me. I'm a mind-reader, so I should know. Plus, I'm also a mind-reader who has killed people, so I *really* know.

I had to suffer Rene Lenier's "greatest hits," and let me tell you, that experience was horrifying enough that I was glad he'd been killed.

And Debbie Pelt's snarly remembrances? One word: disturbing.

I'm just glad I'd not been able to hear Lorena's last thoughts; I would have likely been scarred for life!

And, of course, I've been in enough anxiety-laden situations myself to know that my own memories will zing haphazardly through my head in times of trouble.

Behind a black cloak—where I was creating an even bigger blood connection with Eric Northman because Andre was forcing us to do so—my thoughts turned to my education, of all things!

Snippets of my life—representative and random.

I had never gotten a college education; hell, I'd passed my high school classes *only* because my teachers had been scared shitless of me.

Score one for the crazy girl.

“What if she tells the principal that I used the copy machine for personal documents?”

Ms. Johnson had wondered right before she gave me a C- on my algebra text, even though I had missed enough questions to have merited a D.

“What if she tells my wife that Dawn Green gave me a blowjob to get out of detention?”

Mr. Carter, the Drivers Education teacher had dwelled upon—for a whole semester. Dawn had been seventeen at the time.

I had been disgusted by both her and Mr. Carter. And I'd been even more disgusted because the blowjob had taken place in the Drivers Ed car—the very car that I had to drive once a week.

That whole semester.

I cringed a little in pain as Eric bit into my flesh. I figured it made me a little masochistic, but I liked to be bitten during sex. However, this moment was *not* about sex. It was about control—and I was currently sacrificing a lot of it so that I wouldn't lose *all* of it.

Lesser evils and all.

As Eric tried to comfort me with a caress, my thoughts went back to school—so to speak.

If I'd had better ethics, I might have assured my teachers that I would keep their secrets locked up with all the others in my head.

So many secrets.

Stray thoughts about wrongs done to others.

Flashes about wrongs done to themselves.

Petty crimes and misdemeanors mostly.

I had learned early on that it was important to keep these things locked up inside—unless I wanted to get locked up in a padded room, that is.

Otherwise, I might have told Ms. Johnson that I didn't know anyone in Bon Temps who'd not stolen at least five bucks out of his or her mom's or wife's purse—or father's or husband's wallet. A few photocopies of tax returns made clandestinely (thank you word-of-the-day calendar) weren't anything!

Or I might have let Mr. Carter know that Dawn had made it a personal mission in her life to give “head” to as many teachers at Bon Temp High School as possible. It had been how she was getting her self-worth at the time. It was also how she was getting her grades.

Not to mention the fact that she had given a blow job to one of the deputy sheriffs in town to get out of a ticket.

*And* to the minister of the church that Gran had preferred for no other reason than because of the forbidden nature of it.

I cringed with that memory—*her* memory, still embedded in my brain even though she was dead.

Indeed, I might have told any number of secrets—to any number of people. But I didn't—not then and not now.

Instead, when I was in school, I had been kind of grateful that my teachers had feared me. And I'd been even happier that they'd passed me along from grade to grade, year after year—because going to summer school was a prospect that I hadn't even wanted to imagine back then. Summer, except for Sunday mornings when I'd gone to church with Gran, had been my time to hide in the woods—my time to rest.

I shivered a little as Eric licked the wound he'd made in me. My turn to drink.

I closed my eyes for a moment. It hadn't taken me long to learn the two most tangible lessons that school would ever teach me. Number one—some subjects were just too hard to learn. Number two—anything I did manage to learn was going to hurt.

I opened my eyes right before Eric opened a wound in his chest. I latched onto the cut. And then I slipped back into my random memories.

Math classrooms had been the worst places for me to endure—so many numbers going through so many heads all at once. It was similar to the time that I'd stepped foot into a casino in Bossier City; it had been for a “girls' night out,” a treat to Tara and me from Gran after we'd both turned 21.

I'd known that it was a bad idea, but Tara was so excited, and I'd been telling Gran that my shields had gotten stronger, so she didn't think it would be a problem.

It had been. All at the same time, I'd heard a cacophony of slot machines—all singing at different rates—and human thoughts—all begging for different things.

*Screaming* for them.

“An ace! Just an ace!”

“Red 22! Red 22!”

“Three 7's in a row!”

“I need another bottle to drown the losses!”

“Just one time! Just wanna be lucky one time!”

“If I don't win this, I'll lose the house!”

Before Tara could even put a coin into a slot machine, I'd turned around and run out of the casino. When she'd followed me, I convinced her to go back inside for a while. But, by



herself, she'd not had much fun. She hadn't much cared for what the vampires saw as my "gift" that day. But she had helped me to lie to Gran; we'd told her that we'd had a great time.

See? I'd run from difficult situations before! But I couldn't leave the one I was in, so I drank on—trying not to think about how thick Eric's blood was.

Sadly, I'd never been able to drop out of school either. It would have broken Gran's heart for me to be a dropout—not to mention the fact that she would have never heard the end of it from Maxine Fortenberry.

Instead, I'd learned to endure—as much as I could. And I'd learned to lie every time Gran had asked me how school had been.

Shields had not come naturally for me, nor had they come early. I made my first one when I was thirteen—after five hours of prayer. At school that day, Jason had fought people who were bullying me—*again*. Gran had been proud of him. But in the dead of the night, I had heard Jason wishing that I could just be *normal*; in fact, a part of him had just wanted to make fun of me along with all the rest of the kids, some of whom were his friends.

I can't say that Jason and I were ever really "friends." Family—yes. Friends—no. I thought back to the sting of his strike after Gran died.

I sighed. Gran had wanted me to be *normal* too. In fact, she had often prayed for a higher power to take away my 'handicap.' And she had often felt guilt as she'd prayed it.

Shields had been the best that God could offer to either Gran or me.

It had been *a lot* better than nothing.

At first, those shields had been mostly ineffectual—like a raised hand trying to keep the sun out of the eyes on a really bright day. One slip and the sun would be even worse than before. But I'd worked at them.

And worked.

And worked.

And, within a year or so, I'd been able to shield for about three hours of my school days.

Unless I was jostled in the hall.

Or unless there was a difficult test to take, which raised my anxiety levels.

Then all bets were off.

Still, despite my early failings, I kept practicing my shields—especially re-raising them when the world took them down.

By my senior year of high school, I was able to raise them when I left home in the morning and keep them up for almost the entire day; usually, it was fifth or sixth period when I became too tired to keep them up.

They would slip away, and I'd try to re-raise them. Again and again. Rinse and repeat.

Of course, my shields sapped my energy, and—ironically—I made more mistakes related to answering unasked questions after I had started counting on my mental barriers to help me know the difference between thoughts and words.

So there was no “winning” for me.

My teachers would alternate between thinking I was crazy to thinking I was listless and lazy.

But they still feared me.

Thus, my report cards had read like the scantron tests of a bad student trying to play the odds.

All C's.

Funny—Gran had been so proud of every C that Jason had ever brought home. A report card, showing the results of Jason’s junior year of high school—five C’s and a B—had decorated the old refrigerator in Gran’s kitchen until Debbie’s blood had dotted it.

Not surprisingly, none of my report cards had ever made it onto an appliance. Gran always tried to comfort me. She would tell me that she knew I would have been a wonderful student—if only my little “hiccup” didn’t get in the way.

*If only.*

I appreciated Gran’s words. She knew I tried to do well in school. She knew that a part of me hated getting C’s that weren’t earned. So the report cards were simply signed and returned to the school: an acknowledgement of charity.

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*Charity.*

I had come to hate that word—and the feeling of receiving it. It was too close to pity.

I thought of that word, “charity,” as I finished swallowing the blood of the thousand year-old vampire who had swept into the room to save me from having to take Andre’s blood.

Was it “charity” that had made Eric do it? Pity?

I looked up into his bright blue eyes. He’d obviously been aroused by my drinking from him, and his expression contained an element of bliss. But his eyes also told me that he felt bad about the situation.

And that’s why I had to close my own eyes again—this time in order to escape from his gaze. I didn’t want to see if he felt bad for *me* too. Or bad for *himself*.

I could feel the slight breeze created by Eric lowering the cloak. Vampire blood always sharpened my senses.

But this time, the blood seemed to be doing *more*. I wasn't sure what that "more" was, but I felt different—both more like myself and less. But, even if a gun were put to my head—or more fangs to my throat—I couldn't have described the sensation.

But I could describe my newest fear.

What if the 'sensation' I was feeling was Eric's thoughts trying to creep into my mind?

"No! No! No! No! No! No!" my mind cried out, though my lips stayed sealed.

Having vampire blood had made me hear vampire thoughts—though fleetingly—in the past.

What if this blood exchange was the one that made that phenomenon more common—or permanent?

"I hate having feelings," Eric might be thinking. "I hate having feelings—for *you*. For someone *like you*," he might be adding with accusation. Hatred.

I felt Eric's hand touch my shoulder softly, and it seemed as if a jolt of comfort propelled itself into my body.

I braced myself and opened my eyes, and I looked into his eyes again. As I did, I prayed that my shields would be bolstered by the fact that I was surrounded by vampires—rather than destroyed by vampire blood.

A paradox—I know.

Eric gave me a slight smile. His fangs were still down, still pink from my blood.

My shields held. I thought about smiling back at him, but I couldn't muster the expression.

I didn't have long to celebrate not hearing Eric's thoughts, however, as Quinn hurled himself through a door and into the corridor, and with his presence, my shields dropped.

# CHAPTER 02: BLOWN APART

[A/N: Thoughts being "overheard by Sookie are in italics. The quotes in bold are directly from *All Together Dead*.]

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## SOOKIE POV

**“What the hell are you doing?”** Quinn demanded with a growl, his eyes glowing yellow.

I didn't know whom Quinn was asking, but it was Andre who answered. As he did, a little bit of my own world crumbled, but not because of anything Andre was saying—or *thinking*.

As with Eric, I couldn't hear Andre's thoughts, and for that I was thankful.

But the Viking's blood *had* certainly strengthened my ability to hear Quinn's thoughts! And the relationship puzzle I'd been trying to “solve” with the Weretiger was immediately destroyed. In its place, a very different image emerged.

Quinn's mind was filled with expletives and thoughts that half of me wanted to un-hear as soon as I'd heard them.

The other half of me was thankful for the truths I got from Quinn's head. Better to be in the light than in the dark—I'd learned that the hard way with Bill.

*Fucking Northman! Want to kill him—so bad. Want to rip off the hand touching my woman.*

*Mine!*

*Hate Andre! Want to kill him, too. All blood suckers! Kill them all!*

I shivered a little at the venom in Quinn's thoughts. They were dark and violent. Apparently, there wasn't a vampire that Quinn didn't want to kill. However, he was looking at me as if I might be his first target.

*Fuck, Sookie! Thought we might be able to get through this shit! I was starting to actually like you—despite the fact that you are damaged goods. Damaged!*

His face clouded with disgust as the color of his thoughts grew darker—almost black.

*She's had so much vampire blood in her! Wonder if she's even worth it.*

*Fangbanger! Blood Whore!*

Quinn's eyes traveled and took in Eric's stained crotch.

*Bet she liked giving him blood! Bet she rubbed his cock while he fucking fang-raped her!*

*Damaged goods!*

Quinn shook his head a little, obviously trying to change the tenor of his thoughts.

*No, Sookie's not like that. She had no choice here, but it doesn't make it better.*

*Plus, I don't have any fucking choice in the matter! I gotta stick with this. I gotta ignore the fucking vamp stench on her and keep her happy! If I don't, Felipe will hurt Mom.*

I needed Eric's hand as support as Quinn's thoughts continued to pepper me with truths that were eerily similar to others—truths that had brought me to my knees not so long ago. One truth was very certain: Eric's blood had ripped away the relative peace that I had once found in Quinn's arms. Quinn was now an open book to me—an open book written in large print like Gran had needed during the last years of her life.

And I couldn't help but to read the pages as Quinn continued to turn them.

*Mom and Franny—I gotta protect them. Keep them safe.*

*Fuck Felipe de Castro! Fucking fanger thinks he owns me!*

*He does own me! Fuck!*

*He just fucking had to order me to learn all there was to know about the famed telepath.*

*Had to seduce her.*

*Doesn't matter that I might have actually liked her under different circumstances. Have to see this through for Fannie. For Mom. Can't think with my dick.*

*Just wish I could kill de Castro, Northman, Andre, and all the rest of them fangers! Then she could be mine.*

*Mine!*

*No—Sookie's too far gone; she's too much of a fangbanger. If I killed them, she'd just find another. Plus, I couldn't have a child with her—not a Weretiger. Gotta carry on the line.*

*Wish I could cut bait and get the fuck out!*

*Sex with her wasn't even that good—though her tits were nice. Just couldn't stop thinking about Sookie fucking dead men.*

*At least, her cluelessness about my true feelings told me she couldn't hear my thoughts very well. At least Felipe was happy about that! Famed telepath though? Really? She can hear only humans, and I can get information out of humans!*

I closed my eyes tightly, but there was no escaping Quinn's head.

Together, we relived a conversation he had with a vampire king, one wearing a red silk cape.

An initial order from Felipe de Castro, King of Nevada, for Quinn to approach me.

Endear himself to me.

Sookie Stackhouse—the weak link in Sophie-Anne's retinue.

I was perfect! Not close enough to Sophie-Anne to be suspected of being an unwitting spy, but close enough to know useful things.

I could be seduced.

I would spill information—not understanding that I was doing so.

I would be able to supply intelligence about Eric.

I swayed a little on my already weak knees. At some point, Eric's gentle touch had become strong enough to support me almost fully—to keep me standing. I became even more grateful for that support as a more recent meeting with King Felipe popped into Quinn's mind.

Though Quinn had not wanted to continue his relationship with me for a variety of reasons—some of them even honorable—Felipe had ordered him to do just that.

Having heard too much, my own mind began to scream in order to drown out Quinn's thoughts and the images associated with them.

“Raise your fucking shields, Stackhouse!” my internal voice begged, even as I tried to do as it ordered.

At that moment, I felt strength from a source I couldn't name, but I latched onto it and got my shields raised. I glanced at Eric. He was looking at me with about a million questions in his eyes. But I wasn't emotionally ready to handle any of them.

It wasn't time for “fight.” And it sure as hell wasn't time to “deal.” It was time for “flight.”

“Andre,” I said, trying to keep my voice from quivering, even as I attempted to avoid eye contact with Quinn, “I will finish the work I agreed to do for the queen, but right now I need to see to my human needs.”



Andre's brow rose. "Human needs? Ah!" he exclaimed as if hit by a sudden realization. "Oh yes. Fine."

I nodded gratefully and looked up at Eric. "Thank you for making that as painless as possible," I said sincerely.

"There was no pain for me," he responded. Even as he did, however, my insides literally twitched, as if telling me that he was lying. Regardless, his hold on me dropped as I stepped away. Well—at least the wet spot on Eric's pants did tell me that he'd experienced no *physical* pain during our blood-sharing.

I turned to leave, but there was a large impediment in my way: Quinn.

"Sookie," he said, as he grabbed my arm—roughly.

Eric growled, but I gave the vampire a look asking him to stand down.

He did—thank God! But he wasn't happy about it.

"I'll talk to you later, Quinn," I said, trying to sound calm. "Remember—we said we'd talk later?"

"Come with me *now*," the Weretiger growled, even as he looked at Eric with defiance. It was clear that Quinn was trying to show his "ownership" over me in the face of a clear challenge.

"Not now, Quinn," I sighed as Andre laughed and Eric growled again.

"Now, Sookie!" the Weretiger exclaimed, his eyes still on Eric, even more alit with hate than before.

Desperate times, desperate measures. And I was desperate, so I found myself saying something I never thought I'd say.

“Sorry, Quinn, but I really gotta go take a shit right now! And I *really* don’t need any help wiping,” I said impatiently, even as I imagined Gran rolling over in her grave all the way back in Bon Temps. But I seriously needed to get the hell out of there before I fell apart, and Quinn’s hold on my arm was *not* doing any favors for my shields.

Thankfully, my uncouth words had the desired effect. Quinn dropped my arm.

“Oh,” he sounded surprised—and a little disgusted (as if he’d never taken a shit). “Oh—okay. Later then,” he stammered.

I *tried* to give Quinn a comforting smile, and I mustered the strength to pat his arm as I passed him. And then I set a quick pace down the hall.

Andre was laughing even louder than before, but I didn’t turn around. I got to the end of the hall and then turned right. Seeing a sign that read, “Baggage Area,” I remembered that I was supposed to pick up an unclaimed piece of luggage for the queen’s group. Thankful for the distraction, I followed the sign to another sign—and then another sign—before eventually ending up at a large loading dock. At one end was a collection of suitcases under a sign reading, “unclaimed luggage.”

“Oh to be *unclaimed* and un-coveted,” I muttered sarcastically, keeping a tight reign over my emotions, even as my mind was trying to process the events of the previous ten minutes.

Andre’s threats.

Eric’s “gallantry.”

Quinn’s betrayal.

Nope—I wasn’t ready to process yet.

Still in *flight* mode. And I was okay with that.

I concentrated on finding the suitcase I was sent to fetch, even offering to help another lackey find one for his queen.

“Geez! How many misplaced bags could there be?” I asked, concentrating on anything but my own problems.

The other lackey—I think he said his name was Jeff—just shrugged.

“And why can’t they just bring them up to us?” I added, gesturing toward two employees who looked to be doing anything but work. The two guards with the shotguns at the entrance didn’t seem to be doing much either—other than playing cards.

“Some kind of liability thing,” Jeff responded with another shrug.

“Liability my ass,” I thought uncharitably as I glanced again at the employees. One of them was now looking at me sideways, probably ogling my breasts. I tried to bolster my shields again, but they *really* didn’t seem to want to cooperate—not with the strong new dosage of vampire blood in my body, which seemingly wanted to hear everybody! “Fuck!” I muttered as I broke a nail while shifting a bag that said “Maine” on it.

“Found it!” Jeff said in triumph as he found the errant bag for Iowa. “Good luck on yours,” he added, as he hurried from the room.

“Right,” I sighed. It wasn’t long before I found a bag with a tag that simply said “Louisiana.”

“Odd,” I muttered. All of the suitcases were labeled with only a state name, and there were a lot of them.

“You need help?” one of the employees asked from across the room. His nametag was large and read “Joe.” He was walking toward me now—a somewhat worried expression on his face.

I wanted to curl up into a little ball as his thoughts were practically propelled at me.

*Is she suspicious?*

*Fuck! I knew I shouldn't have agreed to do this. But that Fellowship guy gave me so much money, and Mom's medical bills are so high. And now they know who I am, so I can't exactly tell the authorities about it! They'd fucking kill me and my family, too—all in God's name. Crazy fuckers!*

*God! I never should have opened that suitcase! Got to make sure they are all planted—like I am supposed to. They'll know if I don't. Shit! They won't go off tonight, right? Not till they're all set. Right?*

*Right. Calm down. Just get this done. Finish your shift. Tell the Fellowship guy that it's all set, get the rest of the money, and get the fuck out of Dodge.*

*Fuck! Why did I have to open it? They have fucking locks for a fucking reason!*

And in the midst of all Joe's thoughts, I saw the image that he'd seen when his curiosity had gotten the best of him and he'd picked the small luggage lock and opened the suitcase labeled "Texas."

**A BOMB!**

I felt my patented Merlotte's smile turn up my lips. "Nope. I found what I needed," I said, lightly patting the top of the suitcase that I was to deliver to its place in the queen's suite—so that it could blow her up!

Years of practice with hiding my true feelings, I continued calmly. "I just broke a nail trying to get the bag out of the luggage corral," I added, showing Joe the broken nail as evidence.

"Hey, you got blood on your collar," Joe said, pointing at my clothing. In a split second, his thoughts changed from guilt and fear to disgust.

*Fucking fangers turning pretty women into blood whores. Maybe the Fellowship is right. Maybe vamps should be taken out.*

I kept my smile firmly in place, despite his thoughts. “Well, thanks,” I said as I raised the handle of the suitcase bomb and rolled it out of the area. My every instinct told me to leave the bag and run out of the hotel, but I didn’t do that. I went back the way I’d come, stopping at a supply closet once I was out of sight. And that’s where I left the suitcase.

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I knocked on Eric’s door. “Please be here. Or even Pam,” I begged as I knocked louder. Only the air in the hallway heard my pleas.

“Where are you, Eric?” I wailed.

“Fuck!” I muttered when there was still no answer after another minute of knocking. “Fuck!” I said louder, trying to figure out what to do next. One thing was certain: I couldn’t simply run into the middle of the lobby and yell, “Bomb!”

Or could I?

I took a deep breath. “Where is that vampire when I need him?” I laughed ruefully, knowing that Eric had already “appeared” once when I’d needed him that night.

I turned and went toward the elevator. “Maybe he’s in the queen’s suite,” I mused aloud, still actively keeping myself calm.

I figured that Joe was right. The Fellowship nuts would be just sane enough to make sure that their bombs were all placed before they set them off. I also figured they’d wait until daytime to attack—thereby maximizing the loss of vampires, who might survive the bombs, but couldn’t survive the sun if they tried to escape the blasts.

As I entered the elevator, thoughts of school once again invaded my anxiety-soaked brain.

There was one place at my old high school that had offered me shelter from the thoughts of the other children and the teachers. I'd thought of it as my safe haven.

The football field had been built almost half a mile from the main building. Given the fact that my teachers welcomed it when I "skipped" class—especially on one of my "crazier" days—I would run there when the minds of those around me became too much.

Too suffocating.

It wasn't the field itself that I ran to. It was an old supply shed just to the south of the field that served as my safety zone. The shed housed only a bunch of old uniforms and discarded equipment, but it was better than a Hilton to me—not that I'd ever stayed in one of those.

The football team would practice after school, so I had to leave the shed by 2:50 p.m. in order to avoid the coaches' arrival to the area, but that was fine. I usually had enough time in my haven to get my shields back up or simply to rest before I'd have to face getting on the bus that would take me to Gran's house.

The teachers never mentioned my absences to Gran. I was thankful to them for that.

Gran would have wanted me to "soldier through"—like a good Southern lady (obviously not the kind that announced their need to "take shits"). Maybe I should have "soldiered through"—in order to learn better endurance.

Instead, however, I had learned to run to safety. As the elevator doors opened, I knew that I was running to something else now.

*To Eric.*

I wasn't exactly sure why, but I really *needed* him in that moment.

Maybe he was “safety” now.

“And he’ll know what to do,” I whispered to myself. “He’ll know what to do about *all* of it.”

The bond.

The bombshell about Quinn.

The literal bombshells that were moving into place around the entire hotel.

The little lobby around the elevator on the queen’s floor was deserted—not that I was expecting anyone to be hanging out there. I looked around pensively—maybe expecting Andre to pop out of the urn next to the elevator. And that’s when something in that urn caught my attention.

“Damned litter bugs!” I exclaimed as I picked up the soda can that had been discarded there instead of being put into a trashcan—or preferably a recycle bin.

Why I picked up the can when the whole hotel could be reduced to recycling any moment was beyond me. Maybe it was Gran’s voice in my head.

Maybe it was because the world being polluted was a bigger problem than any of mine, and I could actually help with that one—if only a tiny bit.

Maybe there was an electric charge in my body that pulled me to the can.

*Trouble magnet indeed.*

The can was heavier than it should have been. And I knew in a split second that I was holding my second bomb of the day.

“Fuck!” I yelled out to nobody.

Except that there was suddenly a somebody there—but not one I'd expected. It was Batanya with her charge, the King of Kentucky; they were looking at me suspiciously through the open elevator doors.

“Stop!” I ordered. “Don't get off of the elevator.”

Batanya placed her body in the doorway to stop the doors from closing, and with her arm, she barred the king from moving.

“Why not?” the Britlingen warrior asked.

“Bomb,” I said, looking down at the can. “At least, I think it's a bomb.”

Batanya nodded and quickly stepped back into the conveyance fully, simultaneously pushing the elevator button and speaking into a communication device.

I heard her telling Clovache about the situation even as the king looked at me with pity—and maybe a twinge of gratefulness.

“We'll send help,” the king said as the elevator doors closed.

“Thanks,” I squeaked out, remembering my manners—and hoping I'd have the chance to say “thank you” to the one to whom I really owed the words.



# CHAPTER 03: BABY BOMB

[A/N: Anything in bold is a direct quote from *All Together Dead*.]

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## SOOKIE POV

“A cute little baby bomb,” I muttered, almost madly, as I wondered if the help the King of Kentucky offered would arrive in time.

I looked down at the can. I knew enough about bombs from watching movies to know that they shouldn’t be moved much.

So I ordered the same hand that had picked up the object to hold it steady, and then I brought up my other hand to help it out when the first one started to shake.

“No shaking now. Not yet,” I ordered myself. “Later—I’ll let you shake about everything. Later.”

My hands stilled to stone.

Well—at least—it was now clear to me that I did, indeed, have *some* self-preservation instincts no matter what anyone else might have said.

Just not enough of them to have never picked the can up in the first place.

“Fucking overkill with the bombs,” I silently admonished any Fellowship member involved in the fucked up situation that I was smack dab in the middle of.

Or maybe the Fellowship hadn’t planted the bomb in my hands. With my luck, a rogue health freak had planted it as an ironic protest.

I sighed.

*They*—whoever “they” were—*did* say that soda was bad for one’s health.

“I’ll never have a Dr. Pepper again if you just get me out of this one, God,” I begged and vowed in a whisper.

Just then the elevator door opened and Quinn stepped out. His face was a picture of tension and concern. From his mind, I heard that he’d been near Clovache when Batanya had contacted her. So he knew about the bomb.

Just like I knew about all the bombshells in his thoughts.

“Just put it down, babe,” he coaxed gently, though his mind was screaming the words.

“I’d love to,” I responded truthfully. “I’d also love to climb into a time machine and never pick it up in the first place,” I muttered. “*Never get involved with you in the first place,*” I added in my head.

“Put it down,” Quinn repeated—ordered.

I shook my head, not having the energy to tell him about the various movies I’d seen that contradicted his request.

“Okay—then hand it to me,” the Weretiger cajoled.

I looked into Quinn’s violet eyes, knowing that I’d never be able watch another Elizabeth Taylor movie again. I wanted to slap him. When I was a child, *National Velvet* had been one of my favorites.

Indeed, part of me—a bitter and vindictive part—wanted *very* badly to hand him the bomb and then tell him to shake it up.

*After* I’d left, that is.

But I wasn’t *that* bad of a Christian. *Not yet.* And Quinn had been forced into his betrayal of me as much as Bill had once been. I’d been a “job”—pure and simple. That didn’t

mean I could forget the betrayal, however—or even really forgive it. But I *could* understand priorities.

Quinn’s priorities included his mother and sister—and his desire to be free of vampire politics. Understandable.

Given those truths, it was downright gallant that he’d even come up to join me in my peril. I looked into his thoughts. Yes—he cared about me, even more than he’d thought he had five minutes before. But I knew that the emotion of the moment was messing with the priorities he so clung to.

And I also knew that—despite the dreadful moment we were going through—there was nothing in his mind compelling him to tell me about his secret motivations. There was nothing telling him to purge his soul and to come clean—not that I wanted to be his confessor.

But I *did* want a man who would tell me the truth—especially when faced with the possibility of death.

But I had no such luck with Quinn. It’s not like we would ever be a “we” again—not after his mind had unwittingly spilled his secrets. But it would have been nice to not hate him.

“Give it to me!” he ordered again.

“No,” I responded evenly. “The King of Kentucky promised to send help, and I bet they’re sending a guy—or gal—in one of those special bomb suits up here right now. Until then, I’m not moving, and neither is this can,” I added firmly.

From the looks of things, Quinn was quite perturbed by my defiance. But I no longer gave a fuck about what he thought of me.

I wasn’t “his.” And he *certainly* wasn’t “mine.”

“You are willing to martyr yourself—aren’t you? For those fucking vamps!” Quinn said bitterly, his anger stirring and his thoughts darkening. “I don’t see any of them here ready to help you out! So just give me the fucking bomb!” he added, raising his voice.

“*One* is here,” Eric said softly, stepping out of the stairwell.

In truth—somehow—I’d felt Eric before I saw him; I just hadn’t known what I was feeling. But now that he was there, I realized that I’d somehow been tracking him as he’d flown up the stairs like a bullet—a bullet with golden hair and a god-like physique. And—somehow—I’d felt better, more sure of myself and of my survival, with each foot he’d traveled.

**“We’re bound a bit too tightly to suit me, Sookie. I’m here to die right along with you, it seems,”** he said, taking away a bit of my new-found optimism.

“Get the fuck away from her!” Quinn yelled.

“I’ve heard of bomb-sniffing dogs, but not bomb-sniffing tigers,” Eric smirked.

Quinn snarled and Eric growled back.

“Not helping,” I whispered as their noises seemed to stir up the air in the room—air I wanted to be perfectly still.

Quinn kept making threatening noises, but Eric stopped, though his expression was still almost feral. In that moment, I was struck by how dangerous Eric Northman really was, especially to me.

*Though not physically.*

Something else struck me too; Eric held my heart in his hands, just as I held the bomb in mine. And with one little squeeze of it—*from him*—I knew my heart would break into a million pieces.

Once upon a time, I'd given my heart to Bill. It had taken his indifference, followed by his unfaithfulness, followed by his raping me, followed by his betraying me—but I had finally managed to take my heart back from him.

And I'd patched it up with figurative duct tape and superglue—only to find that I'd already given it away again.

This time to a one thousand-year-old Viking who didn't even remember he had it.

Yes—Eric had possessed my heart since he'd stayed with me, but I'd convinced myself that *another* Eric was in possession of it. I'd convinced myself that this *other* Eric had taken it to whatever make-believe world he'd gone back to—a world full of fairytales with princes and princesses who got to live happily ever after surviving *only one* big battle, rather than having to face nothing but battles forever.

Yes—that was where I'd convinced myself that my heart had gone. And the beating muscle in my chest? Well—it was simply a pump for vampire sustenance, but hollow of real feelings.

I almost laughed. Because of Hallow, I was hollow.

She'd managed to curse me too.

Despite my made-up fairytale world where I had pretended my heart was protected, I *had* felt heartache whenever I saw a flicker of *Sheriff* Eric's eyes turn into *my* Eric's eyes.

“Never the two shall meet,” I whispered, eliciting a funny look from the vampire before he went back to glaring at Quinn.

I looked at the bomb in my hands. Maybe I was meant to be a Tinman. Maybe if Eric crushed my heart, he'd be doing me a kindness. Not having a heart, after all, would mean that I wouldn't be capable of feeling heartache—or loss.

I didn't know why I needed to replace the tense silence in the room with words, but I did. "This is all so awkward," I stated the painfully obvious, with a nervous—almost hysterical—laugh.

Vampire and tiger both looked at me like I was crazy as I laughed even harder, though my hands stayed perfectly still.

A feat of physics—let me tell you.

"Give it to me," Eric coaxed as he looked at that soda can; his tone was like the serpent in Eden. He was trying to convince, cajole, charm.

In the South, it was called sweet-talkin.' And Eric did it *much* better than Quinn.

However, I wasn't particularly fond of sweets—except for a certain pecan pie, which was last made by a person who was just as dead as I was probably about to be.

I continued to snigger as I shook my head in denial in the direction of the vampire.

"I am stronger than you," he reasoned. "I could survive a blast."

"Fuck him, babe!" Quinn yelled. "Send him away! Give me the bomb!"

I laughed bitterly. "Maybe I *should* give it to you, *babe*," I said, saying his pet name for me sarcastically. I'd never liked it. "And then Eric and I could *blow* this Popsicle joint."

"Excellent idea, lover," Eric said roguishly.

It was clear that the vampire liked either my words or my shitty pun. Or maybe he could just tell from my emotions that I was no longer fond of Quinn.

I ignored the Viking for a moment and kept looking at the Weretiger. Clearly, Quinn had been hurt by my words. I steeled myself, knowing he'd be hurt by my next ones even more.

I took a moment to regret what might have been with Quinn. Granted, I hadn't really had a heart to give him, but I *had* given him my affection. He'd been the only warm-blooded

creature I'd ever "been" with, and I'd been ready to make an effort to share my life with him. But now all that was done.

It seemed that the truth was always quite damaging to my relationship chances. Maybe that's why I'd been so reticent about telling Eric about our time together. After all, the fairytale version of him would have never crushed my heart. Sheriff Eric—like Quinn and Bill—had other priorities. And I just didn't know where I ranked among them.

But I figured that I was lower than most vampires and higher than most other humans.

I shook my head, expelling thoughts of Eric for the moment. There were bombs to be dealt with—the least of which was the one I was holding!

And there was the bombshell to drop.

Five—four—three.

I looked at Quinn through narrowed eyes, and I spoke his thoughts aloud into the corridor.

Two—one.

"You hate Eric because he's a vampire and because you perceive him to have more freedom than you will ever have. You *do* want me to give you this bomb, but mostly so that you can be the hero. Oh—and so that you can lord our relationship over Eric. Like you've been trying to do every time you could for months. You like doing that, and you are glad that I've been too clueless to pick up on it. You also like me, and you even enjoyed fucking me—though I'm tainted goods to you. But—I know that the main reason you enjoyed the sex was because you liked the idea of taking the 'property' of a vampire, and you knew that Eric and I had shared blood. You liked the idea of beating *him*."

“Sookie?” Quinn asked, for the first time hesitating in the way he spoke to me.

Immediately, he tried to cover up his thoughts, too.

Too late. Way too late.

I sighed and shook my head. “‘Row, Row, Row Your Boat’ isn’t gonna help you, John.”

Let’s see how he liked being called something he didn’t prefer.

His expression became horrorstruck as it was confirmed that I was, indeed, inside of his head.

“You and I just never really connected—did we?” I commented. “You *wanted* to like me, but I was a job to you. And I really wanted to like you, too, but—to be honest—drumming up those feelings was more work than it should have been.” I paused. “For not being truthful about that, I am sorry.” I sighed long and hard—feeling very tired all of a sudden—and scared. “I’ve been a job to *at least* one other person,” I added, my voice shaking, though my hands were not.

Feeling that my very soul was in the balance—along with my life—I looked from Quinn to Eric.

“Am I a job to you?” I asked the vampire.

“No,” he responded quickly. “And—even though I hate having feelings—it has never been ‘work’ for me to find them, where you are concerned.”

It was as if I could actually *feel* the truth in his words, and I let out a little sob. I kept speaking directly to Eric as I spilled Quinn’s secrets. “John works for the King of Nevada, Felipe de Castro. He was instructed to seduce me—and eventually even marry me if that’s what it took to get me to Nevada. Felipe—who wears a cape, by the way—wants me for his own.” I



tilted my head a little, ignoring the growl from the tiger in the hall. Thankfully, the bomb in my hands kept him from pouncing on me—and, thereby, shutting me up.

“Eric, Bill had hurt me so much,” I said, changing the subject, “and that was even *before* I knew Sophie-Anne had sent him to procure me. And then I wanted to trust that Quinn could be trusted.” I shook my head. “I’ve been so wrong about everybody—everything.” I felt like my eyes were begging the vampire to understand.

“I could,” I stammered, “I could—could—give myself to *him*—to the *other* you—when you *weren’t* you. I could trust you then—trust that you wouldn’t have any reason to hurt me.” I shook my head. “I was stupid—stupid to think that anyone with any brain could want me.”

The vampire growled as he realized that I had been talking about him in his amnesiac state—a state he still didn’t remember.

“I don’t mean that you didn’t have a brain when you were *him*,” I corrected quickly, wishing that I could stop rambling. “All I meant was that there was a clean slate,” I prattled on. “Of course, after it was over, I worried that *I* was the one—the one who had manipulated *you*. I figured that if I told you how I’d not stopped it when he . . .” I paused and felt a warm tear on my cheek. “He wanted me, and I knew he wouldn’t hurt me, so I let it happen—*us* happen. I let myself *like* the fact that he liked me—or maybe even loved me. I knew it was real—if only for a little while. It’s fucked up! I know! Because it wasn’t really *you*.” I was sobbing at this point, though my hands were barely shaking. “And then, when you forgot, I started to wonder if I’d imagined it all—like a love-starved crazy person! And then I worried that I’d taken advantage of him—of *you*. And Bill had just . . .,” I paused, letting out a sob, “done what he did in the trunk.”

“Sookie,” Eric said softly. And, again, I felt little tendrils of calm trying to fill me. I knew they were from him this time.

“Let me finish,” I begged.

He nodded.

“No queen or king sent me to seduce you, Eric. But I really, *really* wanted you to be mine. I *needed* something to be mine—something safe,” I added more forcefully. “Even if it was all a lie—even if *he* was never real to begin with.”

“You don’t trust me,” Eric asserted.

“I trust you *too* much,” I responded.

Eric sighed and nodded. “Give me the can, Sookie. Please.”

I shook my head. “I can’t.”

“Sookie?” Quinn asked, rejoining the conversation. In that moment, he couldn’t have been less welcome. “Don’t tell de Castro that you know about any of this. Please. He’ll kill me and my family if you do. You don’t want their deaths on your hands. I know you don’t,” he added playing upon my guilt.

I looked at him and took a deep breath. “You and I are done, John. *Done!*” I repeated firmly.

“Sookie, I didn’t want to. . . ,” he started to defend.

“But you *did*,” I sighed and then looked back at Eric. “Felipe de Castro is looking to align with Sophie-Anne. And if he cannot do that aboveboard, he intends to discover her vulnerabilities. Quinn was the first infiltrator. He has told de Castro all he knows about me, about Sophie-Anne, about the power structure in Louisiana, about my telepathy, and about you,” I said sorrowfully, feeling responsible for all of the information Quinn had gotten ahold of.

“Sookie! Be quiet!” Quinn yelled, taking a step toward me.

“One more move, kitty,” Eric growled, “and I will neuter you for what you have done to my bonded.”

I looked at Eric. The vampire’s face was a confused mess of rage and concern.

“Give me the bomb, lover,” he said to me again.

I shook my head, still trying to keep my hands perfectly stationary, despite the fact that I felt like I’d been run over by a truck. “I’m so sorry that I didn’t know all this before,” I said to the blue eyes that had haunted my dreams for months. “You have to believe that I would have told you. I was trying *not* to listen to Quinn’s thoughts—trying to reach out and grab a little ‘normal.’” I laughed ruefully. “I should have realized that normal for me *would* be someone seducing me for his boss. After all, how could anyone possibly just want me?” I finished.

Yes—I was the queen of self-pity in that moment. Only—my scepter was a soda can bomb.

“Someone could want you *very* easily,” Eric corrected me quietly, as if trying to keep Quinn from hearing his words. He took another step toward me.

And that was when I heard the sound of Quinn shifting, and I saw orange and black fur flying through the air. I think Eric was flying, too.

I couldn’t be sure because I had closed my eyes as soon as I knew that Quinn had shifted. It wasn’t even that I was afraid of the gore; I simply knew that if I watched the scene unfold, I would move or drop the bomb—perhaps killing us all.

I won’t lie. Eric’s words had heartened me. And, standing in the corridor with a bomb in my hands, I could feel the Viking’s strength as if it were my own.

He was *very* strong.

I knew—somehow—that I could feel him because of the blood we'd shared.

And—at least for the moment—I didn't question it. Or hate it.

I simply prayed.

*Not* for my life. *Not* for Quinn's. *Not* for all the beings in that hotel—unknowingly sitting on top of ticking time bombs.

*Not* the man I'd fallen in love with months before—the one that looked like Eric.

No. My prayers belonged to the Sheriff of Area 5.

# CHAPTER 04: SKIN THE CAT

## ERIC POV

I swatted the cat away like a fly and was pleased to hear bones cracking against the steel-reinforced walls that were standard on the vampire floors of the Pyramid of Gizeh hotel.

Truth be told, I'd been looking for a reason to skin this particular cat—as many ways as I could—until he was out of lives. Clearly, Sookie could now read the tiger like a picture book and had offered me a litany of new reasons to despise him.

The biggest offense? *He'd hurt her!*

Speaking of which—I needed to find a way to kill Bill, too.

Preferably without Sookie knowing or *after* he'd made the first move.

Just like the pussy had.

I smiled and enjoyed the sensation of my fangs dropping.

I'd already been returning to my bonded when I'd felt her fear. But I'd been tardy in reaching her because I'd been five miles away—meeting with a spy of mine, a Fellowship member whom I'd glamoured to feed me information regarding vampire attacks.

Come to find out, Gus wove quite a tale!

Even as I waited for the kitty to get to his feet, I recalled what my spy had spilled. Sadly enough, the bomb in Sookie's hands was likely the smallest one in the building, and if Gus's information was correct, there were currently 21 bombs in the pyramid. They'd been put into suitcases. And a few at a time, representatives—*human* representatives—of all the states in attendance at the summit were being called with instructions to pick up a piece of vampire luggage that had been missed upon regular check in. The humans, not wanting to overstep—or be killed—wouldn't dare to open the bags. No. Dutifully, they would take the luggage to the

chambers of their monarchs and let the nest in attendance figure things out. Given the security protocols that were *supposedly* in place at the hotel, no one would suspect foul play.

Thankfully, Gus had come through, and I'd learned that the bombs would be set off the *day* after tomorrow. I'd been on my way to get my bonded so that we could inform Sophie-Anne of all of this—and then get the fuck out of the ticking time bomb—when Sookie's fear had gone through the pointed fucking roof of the hotel's pyramid.

And I'd found her, holding a tiny bomb—of all things—in another hotel corridor. If only Andre were there, we'd be able to relive our earlier party. I was pretty sure that Sookie would have been willing to hand that mother fucker the bomb in her hands!

The kitty stumbled and I looked over at Sookie. Stress was eating into her face, but she was still lovely.

Did I regret bonding permanently with her? No.

Never.

First of all, I wasn't one to have regrets; they were a waste of time. Plus, I wanted Sookie Stackhouse. I'd wanted her for a long time now. And a bond would make my getting her inevitable. If she would simply listen to reason and cooperate, I knew I'd have her that very night.

But listening to reason and cooperating were *not* Sookie's strong points. She was still young—headstrong. But I honestly didn't mind that so much. I'd been much the same—before I'd had a thousand years of vampire life to temper me.

However, *feeling* Sookie after we'd become permanently bonded had been a sensation I was still adjusting to. I'd had her blood before, felt her emotions before. But now feeling what

she was feeling was like being in freefall with no hope of landing well—or at all. She felt things *so* strongly, *so* constantly, and *so* uncompromisingly.

We were opposites in that way. As a vampire—when I allowed myself to feel, which was rare—I hated it. And I tried to stuff any feeling away into the darkest recesses of my soul.

*As if I had a soul.*

When Sookie felt, she went all in—at least until she could no longer take it. And then she, similar to me, would tuck the feeling away. Only, that feeling would always swirl inside of her and then resurface—even stronger than before.

The paradox was that I didn't mind feeling all that she felt. And I didn't mind feeling *for* her. Doing so was reckless—and she'd likely be the death of me—but even so-called immortals died.

The tiger staggered again, having a difficult time putting weight on all four of his feet. He truly was a magnificent creature. But—even the mighty Weretiger was no match for a thousand-year-old vampire, and I wasn't in the mood to make it an “even” fight—not with Sookie holding a bomb not ten feet away from where I stood.

With that in mind, I moved down the corridor—a little toward my foe and a little away from my bonded.

I glanced back at her. Even from my first meeting of her, there had been many things that I figured I would do with—and *to*—Sookie Stackhouse before her mortal coil was pulled. However, binding myself to her permanently hadn't been one of them.

*Until the previous January.*

And the moment I'd seen Andre cornering her in that quiet hallway, something in me had snapped into place—not a memory of our time *together* exactly. I still had not been gifted with those recollections.

No—what I felt was more primordial than memory. It was nothing tactile or finite. It was a simple need: the need to protect Sookie.

Not because she was mine—because she was not.

Not yet.

But because she was *Sookie*.

And I aimed to have her stay that way.

So I'd stepped in to bond with her so that Andre couldn't destroy her.

I'd already shared blood with Sookie several times—though never simultaneously. A drop of blood here. An ounce of blood there. Thus, I knew that we were already teetering on the line of permanence.

And I'd already had a good sense of her feelings.

For a while, I'd known, for example, that she loved me—even though she also resisted that love with the stubbornness of a mule.

I also knew that—after I told her all about the bond we'd completed—she'd likely try to kick me like a mule would kick a demanding master. And I didn't expect that kick to be figurative either.

I glanced in her direction. Her eyes were closed and her hands were perfectly still. She'd obviously watched too many movies where bombs were involved. I'd have to educate her. Of course, she didn't want to be shaking the damned bomb up and down! But cautious movements were okay for most explosives.



In other words, she could have put the goddamned bomb down carefully and run the fuck away!

Calming myself down as I waited for my foe to find his feet, I let myself sink into Sookie's emotions for a moment.

And I felt something from her that I never really expected to feel: affection.

*For me.* Not the "me" she'd known last January.

It was—*enjoyable*—to say the least.

Quinn, of course, just *had* to choose *that* moment to get up. The fucker should have stayed down. I had already committed to stopping the fight whenever Quinn did.

*For Sookie's sake.*

As if he were thinking about my personal preference to kill him, however, the fool rose and snarled, reminding me why I really did hate the motherfucker.

Was I jealous? Hmm....

Perhaps.

No. *Definitely.* But not because of Quinn himself.

I was jealous because I was a territorial vampire—made even more that way by my leftover Viking ideals. I wanted Sookie for myself—for myself *only*.

But I didn't fear that Sookie loved the tiger. Through the blood tie, I had felt that she was "trying" to love him, doing all that she could to be a "good girlfriend" to him.

But he was *not* the one she longed for.

*I was.*

At least the "I" that had been cursed.

However, as much as she might have longed for me, she never came to me, nor did she particularly welcome me when I came to her. Analyzing her feelings was very confusing—especially given the fact that I’d avoided analyzing my own for centuries.

Simply put, one did not survive Appius by dwelling on one’s feelings.

And I had always been a survivor; however, I was also a “feeling” survivor now.

And—after a thousand years—I accepted those feelings as my new “normal.”

I couldn’t quite recall how I’d managed both to feel and to survive as a human—at least, until Appius found me. But I was slowly getting the hang of things again, so to speak.

So I knew without a doubt that Sookie loved me, but she was afraid of rejection.

She and I had a lot in common.

The tiger lunged and, with a backhand, I sent him flying again. There was a cry and a throaty mewl from him before he rose once more.

Forcibly stifling the vampire in me, I found myself speaking, *instead of killing* (like I wanted to be doing). “In deference to my bonded, John Quinn, I will let you leave this place without laying another finger upon you. You betrayed her, but her heart is kind, and she would want you to go on.”

He growled.

“I suggest you leave, tail between your legs. Sookie and I will give you five hours before we tell Sophie-Anne about Felipe. If you can make yourself and your kin safe before then, then do it. If not, go to your king and beg for his mercy. Tell him that I uncovered your plan through torturing that sister of yours. But do *not* tell him that Sookie heard you with her gift. If you do, I will extract suffering from you in a way that the Spanish king could never fathom. I am older

than he is. And I am more brutal. I have great patience. And I have cause,” I added, glancing at Sookie.

She still had her eyes closed, but there was the faintest of smiles on her face. I searched the bond.

She was grateful that I was giving him a chance to live.

I sort of hoped he didn't take me up on it. Sadly, he had at least one brain cell in his thick skull.

With a final growl, Quinn—still in his Bengal form—took off down the hall, likely going toward the back staircase.

He left his clothing behind.

I turned back toward my bonded.

Her eyes slowly opened to study me.

“Give me that bomb,” I requested for what felt like the umpteenth time.

She shook her head. “No.”

I was just about to school her in the physics of such devices as the one that she was holding when the elevator doors opened.

Out walked a vampire in heavy bomb gear, a fact that likely reinforced all of Sookie's previous notions about bombs.

It didn't matter. All that mattered was that he was already instructing her on how to pass the bomb over to him.

Carefully, with a steadiness that was as beyond ordinary as Sookie was herself, my bonded put the device into a little box that the bomb squad person was carrying. Just as carefully, she lifted her hands out.

“Thanks, ma’am,” the bomb squad guy, who was wearing a nametag reading “Boom,” grinned.

He gestured toward the elevator, and I hit the button for it. The doors opened immediately, and I pushed the button to keep them that way. Slowly, “Boom” got into the conveyance; he was holding the box—and, therefore, the bomb—with both hands.

“Lobby, please,” Boom requested, still grinning. He seemed extremely pleased to have gotten hold of the bomb.

“To each his own,” I mumbled as I pressed the button.

“Or *her* own,” Sookie added, waving to Boom.

Once the door closed, it was as if time stopped for a moment.

And then—just as I was *feeling* that she would—my bonded fainted.

Of course, I caught her long before she hit the floor.

I would never let her fall—whether I had my memories or not.

*I* loved her—whether or not I remembered how *he* had loved her.

# CHAPTER 05: OF BOMBS AND BONDS

## SOOKIE POV

“What time is it?” I asked groggily as I sat up in a bed that I could smell was Eric’s. I’d shared a home with him for a week, after all, and he had a very distinctive scent—crisp like a winter morning, but gentle like cotton.

*So beautiful. Stay with me, min kära. Stay. Stay. Stay. Or I could make you stay. No! Just, please, stay. Please choose to stay. Choose me—not the imbecile with my face—goddammit!*

I tensed as I heard wisps of Eric’s thoughts. I quickly grabbed his hand, ironically using his own silence to help my shields construct themselves.

His body used against his blood.

Ironic, indeed.

“What is it? What’s wrong?” he asked, his concern clear.

“Nothing. Is Quinn okay?” I asked trying to deflect.

“You are lying to me,” Eric said evenly. “But,” he added with a sigh that I didn’t realize a vampire could produce, “I will allow you to keep secrets from me.”

“Allow?” I asked. He’d said that word as if I needed his permission to have secrets, and my indignation immediately rose.

“I hate you, Sookie Stackhouse,” he said in return.

I felt a ping right next to my heart.

“What was that?” I asked.

“Our bond—informing you that I lied,” Eric informed calmly. “Here,” he said, handing me a cup of water. “Drink.”

“I’m not thirsty,” I insisted.

He raised an eyebrow. “Liar,” he smirked, pushing the cup into my hand.

I scowled at him, but drank nonetheless.

“Sometimes you will *choose* to lie to me; however, I will always know—as you will always know if I am lying to you. I am simply saying that I will not *force* the truth from you,” the vampire said, before getting up from the bed and moving to a chair across the room.

I gulped down the water, having no immediate response to his words.

“So many things *should* be said,” he sighed, sounding very tired, “and it’s best if I am not so close to you when I say them.”

“Why not?” I asked.

“Because when I am close to you, I want only to touch. I forget the things I wish to say,” he admitted.

“Why?” I asked, suddenly wishing that I had more water as my throat went dry.

He gestured toward a half-full bottle on the bedside table.

I blinked once. Twice. Who knows how many times? And I forgot I was thirsty.

“Are you reading my mind?” I squeaked out.

“No,” he responded. “I am reading our bond.”

I felt my body wanting to run, and I backed up against the headboard.

“There are bombs in the hotel!” I yelled out, trying to distract him from any discussion of the now even more substantive connection between us.

Eric looked momentarily surprised, but then he let out a loud laugh—almost a snort. “I know. And it doesn’t surprise me that you learned of this too.” He nodded as if coming to a conclusion. “Indeed, you and I *will* be excellent partners.”

“Wait!” I cried out insistently. “How do *you* know about the bombs?”

“A spy I have in the Fellowship. Gus.”

“Do you know that they are in suitcases?” I asked, trying to supply information he didn’t have. Why—I didn’t know, but I *really* wanted to one-up him.

And keep him distracted from ‘us.’

And, yes, I will admit to being a coward in that moment, but I was a coward with information about explosives!

“Yes,” he responded matter-of-factly. “Suitcases that are identified only by state names and which are to be systematically taken to the quarters of all the royals.”

“Do you know how many there are?” I followed-up.

“Twenty-one.”

“Do you know where most of them are right now?” I asked triumphantly.

“I imagine that—other than the few that have already found their way to their targets—the bombs are in the delivery dock.”

I deflated a bit. “Do you know where the one for Louisiana is?” I asked, knowing I would stump him on that question—at least.

“Let me guess,” he smirked. “*You* were the human who was bid to pick up that one?”

I nodded in affirmation.

“And you went for the suitcase *after* we’d bonded?” His smirked deepened. “To distract yourself?”

Glaring at him, I nodded again.

“And you heard a suspicious brain while you did this?”

“Yes,” I said gruffly, vocalizing my affirmation this time.

“Then I bet the Louisiana bomb is somewhere near the loading dock—perhaps in a supply closet?” He grinned as I scoffed. “Do you know the *when* of the attack?” he asked.

“No,” I admitted.

“Day after next,” he said, cool as a cucumber. A *gigantic*, annoying cucumber!

“How can you be sure?” I asked, with challenge in my tone.

“You doubt Gus?”

“Your Fellowship spy? Oh no,” I said sarcastically, “why would *anyone* question Gus?”

Eric chuckled. “No reason at all. But—if there are still many suitcases in the area where you picked up the one for Louisiana, then I think we are relatively safe for the time-being.”

I rolled my eyes. “*Relatively.*”

“Indeed—so, where *is* Louisiana’s rogue suitcase?” he asked with a smirk.

“A storage closet on the ground level,” I replied sullenly, confirming his supposition. “Behind a bunch of dirty mops.”

He grinned even wider than before. He was showing some fang.

“So you stowed a bomb just to pick up another one minutes later?”

“Hey,” I defended. “I was trying to find *you* and tell *you* all about the Fellowship’s plans! I didn’t know you had Gus.” I rolled my eyes. “I tried your room, and then I went to the queen’s suite.”

Eric nodded. “While you were asleep, I got a call from Andre. The device you were holding was rudimentary. We think Jennifer Cater planted it. It’s probably not one of the Fellowship’s devices.”

“Makes sense,” I agreed. “That’s what I was thinking too.”

Eric smiled. “You know—you would make an excellent vampire.”



I felt the hair on the back of my neck stand up.

“But,” he quickly added, “I *won't* turn you or allow you to be turned unless you ask me to.” His eyebrow rose. “There. Happy?”

“Happy that you agreed *not* to kill me?” I challenged.

“No,” he returned somewhat sternly. “Happy that *I* agreed that I will likely meet the sun when you insist upon dying of old age!”

“What?”

“The bond we made,” he said flatly—enigmatically. “Anyway,” he changed the direction of the conversation with a wave of his hand, “will you let me tell you about our bond? Or will you try to distract me with another bomb story?”

“*Bombs!*” I cried out. “Plural! It’s important that people know about them!”

Eric nodded, and his features relaxed a little. “Yes. You did well, min kára. Ég hefði ekkert annað fyrir konuna mína.” [*“You did well, my dearest. I would have no other for my wife.”*]

“What did you say?” I asked, suspicious of both his speaking in a foreign language and his using such a soft tone.

He merely smiled. “I was simply agreeing with you.”

“There’s nothing *simple* about you,” I returned doubtfully.

“Except when I was *him*—the *me* that you loved,” he returned.

I thought for a moment. “You weren’t simple then.”

“But I was,” he retorted. “You said so yourself. I was uncomplicated.”

I rolled my eyes. “You were no simpleton,” I corrected him—*about himself*.

He smiled and nodded, though neither the smile nor the motion of agreement reached his eyes.

“You *weren't!*” I insisted.

“I wouldn't know,” he answered stubbornly—sullenly.

“You can sense if I'm telling the truth, so you *do* know!” I challenged.

His features softened. “Will you tell me about him—about *me*.”

I sighed and I bit the bullet—a second bullet-biting situation with Eric (though not so literal as the first—which had occurred in Dallas). “He was unsure of himself at first, but it didn't take him long to find his strength. He wanted to protect me. He was kind to me. He,” I stopped and choked up a little, “cared about my days.”

“Your days?”

I nodded. “He asked about them and listened when I talked about them. He made me feel,” I shrugged, “like I mattered. I *did* matter to him.” I could feel my shoulders slumping. “But—then again—I was all he knew. And I realized—even as I was living through those days—that it wouldn't last.”

“*He* offered to give *me* up though,” Eric reminded. “At least, that's what you told me in the shifter's shitty little apartment.”

I shook my head and then lowered it so that Eric wouldn't see the moisture in my eyes. Damned vampire eyesight.

“I couldn't do that to you, Eric. I'd had *him* for almost a week.” I steeled myself and straightened my back; with my quickly-imposed stalwart expression, I would have been the envy of any so-called Southern Steel Magnolia. “I'd already been pretty damned selfish with you.” I chuckled, though there was little mirth in it. “Just ask Pam.”

“That is what I was waiting to hear,” he sighed, as if I’d just given him the key to a treasure.

“What?” I asked with confusion. “That you should ask Pam?”

“No,” he chuckled. “That you were willing to sacrifice *him*—and, therefore, *your* happiness—for *me*.”

I stiffened, not liking the direction of the conversation. So, of course, I tried to distract him again. “So—that proves what? That I’m a masochist?”

He chuckled and shook his head. “No. It proves,” he paused, “*so much more*.”

I didn’t ask what he meant.

“So—um—the bonding?” I asked. Suddenly *that* felt like the easier topic.

He looked at me knowingly.

“Yes. The topic of the night,” he replied.

I rolled my eyes. “Along with the bombs.”

The vampire smirked. “I gave Quinn five hours. He still has three. I think we should tell *everything* to Sophie-Anne near dawn—both about the bombs and about de Castro. I have no desire to meet with her twice tonight,” he said somewhat sourly.

“We’re stayin’ here today?” I asked. “With the fucking bombs in the building?”

He chuckled. “Hell no! I’m into self-preservation—remember? After we tell Sophie-Anne, we are getting the hell out of Dodge—or Rhodes, as it were. An Anubis jet is scheduled to depart at 5:30 a.m. Pam, you, and I already have confirmed tickets.”

“Bill?” I asked.

“On standby,” Eric smirked. “But—regardless—he’ll be at the airport in a very secure coffin in a very secure area if the shit goes down early.”

I felt my eyes burning again—this time with tears of gratefulness.

“You still love Bill?” Eric asked, his voice betraying the tiniest hint of jealousy.

I looked up at the Viking and let a tear drop. “I *did* love him, and Gran once told me that love—when it’s real—never goes away.” I took a breath and pushed the tear away mid-cheek. “But the Bill I loved was an illusion in most ways, and—even before Lorena called him—I wasn’t happy with him. He romanticizes what we were, but I don’t. Not anymore.”

“But you *do* still love him,” the vampire repeated, stating his words this time, instead of asking them.

How *well* he knew me sometimes!

I sighed. “I love the Bill that I first met,” I responded, closing my eyes and remembering. “But I tend to romanticize the details too.”

“That is how love works,” Eric commented.

“Puppy love,” I commented dryly. “But—yeah—I think I’ll always have a place in my heart for Bill.”

“Despite what he did?” Eric asked.

“Maybe *because* of it?” I said as a question. “I *need* to remember.”

“Why?”

“So that I will always recall the difference between what is true and what is false. So that I’ll remember how fast everything I believe in can go away,” I added, my voice becoming quieter and quieter as the sentence went along.

It didn’t matter. Eric had vampire hearing.

“I see,” he commented. “You think that *I* will go away too.”

“You already did,” I reminded.

“Ask me to stay with you, Sookie Stackhouse. Ask just once,” the vampire challenged.

“Stay where?” I gulped.

“Stay with you; the *where* does not matter,” he said passionately, his blue orbs powerfully compelling even from across the room.

“I can’t,” I whimpered.

He nodded. “Not yet.”

I blinked. He didn’t remember *us*. How could I ask him to stay with me? After all, he’d left as soon as he’d remembered who *he* was.

I was cautious. Frightened.

Who could blame me?

“We can’t lie to each other?” I asked, changing the subject again.

“No. And you should be able to feel my emotions too, though I think you are blocking them.”

“Blocking?”

“Hmm. Like your shields.”

I closed my eyes and lowered my shields. I heard the echoes of nearby humans, but nothing else.

“*Like* your shields. Not exactly them,” Eric clarified.

I nodded and then stumbled across a mind-wall I’d not seen before. I peered around it.

“There,” Eric said with a sigh. “What do you feel?”

“Excitement, anxiety,” I reported. “Hope.” The third emotion surprised me, and I was sure my face showed it.

“Yes,” he confirmed. “*All* of those.”

“Can you read my emotions?” I asked, though I already knew the answer.

“Very well,” he responded.

“You can track me, too—right?”

“Yes. And either you can track me right now, or you could learn to do it,” he affirmed.

I nodded, remembering that I’d felt him coming closer and closer as I’d held the bomb.

“What else? What’s the difference between the kind of thing I had with Bill and with you—*before*—and what we have now?”

“You already know the differences,” he said with certainty, “at least the biggest one.”

“It’s a two-way street now,” I half-asked and half-stated.

Eric nodded. “Yes. You now feel me as I have felt you. You now sense my presence as I have sensed yours.”

“Okay—that’s the practical day-to-day stuff,” I said. “But what does it mean beyond all that? Can you,” I felt myself gulp, “control me?”

“I doubt anyone could,” he mumbled sarcastically.

I glared at him.

“Nor would I want to,” he said louder.

“So? What else is there?” I asked impatiently. “I can feel that you are holding things back,” I added, latching on to his emotions, through the bond-thingy.

He looked momentarily proud of me for accessing his emotions, and then he responded to my question, effectually taking all the air out of the room—at least for me: “We are bonded *permanently*.”

“Permanently?” I gasped, hearing the trepidation in my voice. “Uh—won’t it wear off?”

He shook his head. “No.”

I wanted to run from him. I looked at the door.

“I could find you no matter where you went,” he said somewhat sadly. “And I would *need* to. If we are too far apart, we will live in misery.”

“Earlier,” I breathed out, “the comfort—the strength—that I felt? Can you make me feel things?”

“Make? No,” he responded. “But I *can* send you emotions. And *you* can accept what I send. You could also *choose* to send me emotions, too.”

I looked at him and glared. I thought of the moment I’d staked Lorena and channeled the rage I’d felt then into my very soul.

His fangs popped down, and I immediately stopped my sending.

“Would you have me go on a killing spree?” he chuckled.

“No,” I whispered, freaked out that I’d been able to send him my rage.

I looked at him again and mustered up every ounce of lust I could, thinking of the moments I’d spent with the memoryless man who looked just like him.

His fangs grew impossibly longer.

He spoke to me in a long-dead language—though in such a low tone that I couldn’t clearly make out a single syllable—not that I could have understood him anyway. And then he closed his eyes and put his fangs away.

When he reopened those blue orbs, they were placid. “It is difficult to resist the promptings of a bonded one,” he said, “but it is not impossible.” He paused, leering at me.

“Even though I wanted to accept and then double your lust.”

“But you knew I was testing you,” I said.

“Yes. You *always* do.”

Somewhat reluctantly, I nodded in agreement. “What else should I know about this bond?”

His expression sobered. “It is more sacred than a human marriage—at least to the supernatural. When Quinn tried to claim you again, he was basically attempting to make me a cuckold.”

Thanks to one of my word-of-the-day calendars, I knew what that meant.

“And me an adulteress,” I added bitterly. “Is that how I would have been seen? By other Supes?”

Eric nodded. “Yes. But that didn’t happen.”

I shook my head. “Quinn wouldn’t have told me any of this,” I said bitingly.

“I would have,” he promised. “I was coming to you even when I felt your fear.”

“What else is there?” I asked, my voice wavering. And then I asked the question I’d been dreading since he’d introduced the idea. “When I die, what will happen to you?”

“If we become a true bonded pair—partners, lovers, friends, confidants—then we will exchange blood often. My blood is strong and could keep you young for many years. I am well aware of your dislike for the idea of becoming like me. But I will try to convince you otherwise.” He shrugged. “Regardless, if I do my duty and keep you safe, then you will live a very long time. However—if you stay obstinate and stubborn—you *will* eventually die.”

“Vampires die too,” I reminded. I’d seen my fair share explode, after all.

“That they do,” he agreed with a dark chuckle. “And when you or I go . . . .” His voice trailed off.

“Suicide?” I gasped.



He shrugged. “Many human partners die of what is called a broken heart after a long relationship. A diluted version of the same magic that now binds us is responsible for *their* bonds too. If you have no affection for me, I perceive that you will survive if I meet the true death, though you will be in physical pain for a while.”

“What about you?” I asked. “Can your heart break?”

I hadn’t meant for the question to sound harsh, but it had.

“Only one being on this earth could cause that,” he whispered.

“And has she?” I panted.

“No—not yet,” he responded, his face impassive.

“You don’t even remember us,” I said, agony rising into my tone.

He nodded. “I don’t, but—given what you have told me and what I feel from you now—I can guess many things.”

I nodded, though I couldn’t say how I’d felt about the other “him” out loud.

He closed his startling blue eyes. “Do you know what the witch’s spell book told me?”

“No idea,” I whispered, looking for him to open his eyes. He didn’t oblige.

“The curse was to take me to my heart’s desire—though I would not know it.”

“Heart’s desire?” I whimpered.

“I am a Viking, Sookie,” he said, opening his eyes—finally. “And Vikings were not misogynistic assholes. We wanted our women to be strong and bold. After all, they needed to be able to rule the roost while we were gone a ’Viking for nearly half the year. In truth, they did most of the hard work: the overseeing of crops, the raising of children, and the growing of culture.” He chuckled. “Take it from me: my mother was twice the man my father was—by today’s societal standards. But she was all woman. And—unapologetic about that too! She was

soft and welcoming to my father. And all the stronger because of that mixture of soft and strong.”

“Are you comparing me to your mother?” I asked with a gasp.

“No,” he said, his gaze steady. “I held her in the highest esteem. I still do. All others have been measured by her, and they have been found lacking.”

“Oh,” I sighed.

“*You* surpass her!” he continued forcefully.

“Don’t,” I said—just as forcefully.

“Don’t what?” he snarled. “Don’t tell you that I’ve wanted you for a long time? Don’t tell you that I envy the *me* that got to have you? Don’t tell you that I fucking celebrate the bond we formed tonight? Don’t tell you that you are my heart’s desire?”

I gasped.

He scoffed. “*Don’t* ask me to lie, Sookie Stackhouse!”

“Eric,” I sighed. “I don’t know how to trust that you could . . . .”

“Love you!” he finished.

“Something *close* to love,” I said, my chin raised up. “That’s all you—or *he*—and I ever reached.

He laughed heartily, a reaction I’d not expected.

“I said *before* that I couldn’t lie to you.”

“And what are you saying now?” I pushed.

“That I am a violent predator of the night. And I don’t give a fuck if I deserve a creature of the light—a woman like you. What matters is that I want you—*love* you.”

“Love?” I gasped out.

“You wanted to know what the bond meant?” he asked. “Love. Love is what the bond means—to me. I chose to love you *fully*—unapologetically—the moment I interfered with Andre’s plans.”

“That simple?” I choked out.

He chuckled. “Love is the *least* simple of things. If it were simple, I would have done it before I was a thousand years old.”

“I’m scared of it—of you,” I admitted.

“Yes—I am aware.”

“I’m scared of everything. I mean—bombs are gonna go off soon!”

He chuckled. “Only figurative ones—*when* you yield to me again.”

“That’s not what I meant,” I sighed.

“I know.” He nodded toward the clock by the bed. “As I said, in two and a half hours, you and I will go to the queen’s room. We will tell her about Felipe. We will tell her that Quinn was a spy. We will let her know that—through our combined efforts—we have discovered a threat against this hotel. We will leave and then stand back as Sophie-Anne and Andre thwart the plan and are made heroes. Meanwhile, you and I will return to the relative anonymity of Northern Louisiana. The Queen and Andre—who will become the new King of Arkansas, thanks to your advice—will be beholden to us. We will watch them both—her to the south and him to the north. One day, one of them will attack—probably Andre—but we *will* thwart him.”

“You’re talking about all this so calmly,” I sassed.

“Live a thousand years and you will too,” he returned.

A part of me wanted to tell him that I’d never live that long. Another part told me to stay silent.

“*Progress*,” he grinned as if reading my mind.

“Don’t meet the sun!” I said suddenly. “If I die—promise me.”

He looked down and then shook his head. “You would know the lie if I told you I wouldn’t.”

“Eric. . . .” I started.

“Today? If you died?” he contemplated. “I think it would be fifty-fifty. Who knows what tomorrow’s chances might be.” He grinned. “And who fucking cares? I have lived with only the next night in mind for a thousand years.”

I shook my head. “I don’t believe that. I think you are already planning for many, many nights ahead.”

He rolled his eyes. “That’s not what I mean. Yes—I plan. I plan for all angles I can imagine. But I don’t let that planning ruin a moment. And,” he added, “I’m never too stubborn to change a plan when the need arises.”

I considered those words for a moment. “Was your bonding with me tonight a change of plans you’d already made—for me?”

“Yes,” he admitted. “But not just for you. For *us*.”

“Did you plan to bond with me all along?” I asked, feeling my fear rise a little.

“Of course I did,” he said unapologetically.

He sighed loudly, even as my fear spiked.

“Why are you feeling fear?” he demanded, his anger coming to life. “I didn’t intend to force you! I was trying to figure out ways to woo you, stubborn woman!”

“Huh? Woo? Me?”

# CHAPTER 06: AGREEMENT

ERIC POV

“Sometimes your skull is so thick that I suspect you of having goblin lineage,” I muttered.

Indeed, at times, she really was too stubborn to see what was right in front of her.

“Wait just a minute, buster!” she said, that temper of hers flaring.

“Are my intentions for you unclear?” I asked her, somewhat facetiously. “Is my *want* of your unclear?”

“Yes!” she yelled, her hands finding those supple hips of hers, even though she was sitting. “As a matter of fact, you are the king of mixed signals—or no signals at all!”

“Huh?”

Obviously it was my turn to ask the inelegant question.

“Huh?” she repeated sarcastically. “Let me clue you in—okay?”

“Enlighten me,” I enunciated, my own irritation rising with hers.

“Your intentions when you first met me were to fuck me and bite me—right?” she challenged.

“Oh yes,” I responded, unapologetically. “You are beautiful and you smell better than almost any woman I’ve ever known.”

“Yeah—thanks for the wonderful objectifying.”

“Huh?” I asked again.

“You like me for my body. You like me for my scent. Neither of those things relates to who I am in *here*.” She gestured toward her head and then her heart.

I glared at her. “Was it not *also* clear that I enjoyed talking with you—being in your company—even before amnesia *me* came into the picture wearing his fucking Superhero cape?”

She glared right back. “I don’t like capes! And when did we ever talk about stuff not related to the work you wanted me to do or to how much you wanted to get me into your bed?”

My eyebrow rose. “There were many times. And—yes—the conversations were often about what you are calling ‘work,’ but that was for necessity’s sake. And—yes—we sometimes flirted. *WE!* Not just me.”

She practically growled at that.

“Tell me you don’t want *this* body,” I challenged. “Tell me you haven’t objectified me at times.”

“Just your ass!” she yelled in frustration, obviously not intending to say her words aloud.

I couldn’t help but to chuckle a little—until I saw a tear fall from her eye and felt her sorrow. I knew that she could be thinking of only one thing—her time with “not” me.

“You are sad,” I said, pointing out the obvious.

She nodded. “I miss you—*him*.”

I sighed. “I cannot give him to you, though I have consulted many witches on the matter, and I am still trying to figure out how to regain my memories of that time. Don’t you know that I want them back as much as you do? I want to understand exactly why and how my feelings for you evolved during that time.”

“Evolved?”

I nodded. “I went from liking you and very much enjoying your company—and, yes, wanting to fuck you, too—to feeling an intense desire to be with you always.”

Her mouth gaped. “Oh.”

“Oh—indeed,” I agreed.

“You didn’t tell me any of this,” she said with frustration.

I chuckled. “Sookie, I am a vampire who has spent a millennium perfecting the art of shoving feelings to the side—especially those of which I cannot understand the origin. Plus, I am a man. And—as Pam has told me *many* times—men are often inept at relationships. You must remember that I am not,” I paused, “experienced in such matters, so I fucked up.”

“So your just dropping out of my life without a word for weeks at a time was you fucking up?”

I shrugged and nodded. “Sometimes—yes. Other times I stayed away because I was angry that you wouldn’t tell me what had happened between us. You acted as if I would hurt you if I knew, and I certainly never deserved that! Plus, I felt your pain every time you saw me. I knew that I added to that hurt—though it wasn’t my intention to do so; thus, I stayed away—when, perhaps, I ought not to have done so.”

“I missed him and then I missed you,” she said sadly.

“Explain?” I requested softly.

“He—well—the *other* Eric became a companion to me. It was nice spending time with him,” she smiled tenderly. “Being with him for those short days—nights—was the closest I’d ever come to living with a romantic partner, and I really liked it. He and I talked and watched television and,” she blushed, “did other things, too.”

I nodded knowingly.

“There was more though. He looked to me for support.”

“He was weak,” I said with a growl that I couldn’t help.

“I thought he was strong to admit that he needed support!” she returned forcefully, defending her beloved *me*. “And he offered me support too. It felt like a partnership. We figured things out together. He valued me, as I did him.”

“And then he was gone.”

“Yes. You woke up after the curse was broken, treating me differently, not only from *him* but also from the way you’d always treated me before. You were almost,” she paused, “indifferent towards me. Angry even. It seemed that you wanted only information from me about our time together—so that you could fill in the gaps. I honestly didn’t think you would like what I had to say.”

“And you also thought I might use the Were-bitch’s death against you.”

She nodded. “I figured you’d think I owed you a favor; it was something you could hold over my head.”

“What did you think I would demand of you?” I asked with irritation. “Do you think I’m the kind of man who would require sex or blood as payment for a favor?”

She sighed. “Honestly, not the sex part. But maybe the blood part? Or maybe you would make me work for you full-time. I didn’t want to lose control of my life, Eric.”

“I don’t aim to control you!” I growled.

She shrugged. “I believe you don’t want to take away all my freedom or my will,” she said carefully. “I know you’re not Andre—or the queen.” She paused and took a breath—a deep one. “But I also knew you wanted me to be yours. And here I am—bonded to you. *Yours*. And you all but admitted earlier that bonding was a part of *your* plan.”



I closed my eyes and took air into my body before pushing it out in a sigh. I tried to think of a way for Sookie to understand what I had planned. I imagined the ways she'd respond to various things I wanted to say.

I gestured toward the clock. It read 3:20 a.m.

"I have a request for you. I believe it is an important one."

"What is it?" she asked tiredly.

"Let me speak—without interruption—until 3:40."

She narrowed her eyes at me. "What if *I* need to say something?"

"Hold it in until I am finished speaking."

"Alright," she agreed—too quickly.

"Alright?"

"If you agree to let me speak without interruption for twenty minutes after you go," she said with challenge in her tone.

I smirked. "*If* you need to speak for that long."

"Or leave," she added.

"Or leave," I whispered in agreement, not liking the amendment, but accepting that she needed it.

She nodded, sealing the deal. "Okay. *Go.*"

I knew that the honesty I was about to display would be viewed as weakness by some. Of course, Sookie would see it as strength. And—*she* was my bonded. She was the one who mattered. And I was willing to give her my vulnerability since the Weretiger was no longer an issue.

Caution went to the wind as I blew out the air from my lungs.

“I will admit that my initial attraction to you was mostly sexual. You have to understand that—without any thought of doing otherwise—I have used most human women as merely food and/or sexual release for a thousand years. Before the Great Revelation, I rarely formed attachments with them.” I shrugged. “Why get to know a being who cannot know what I am? Most humans were, indeed, meals to me, and if I found them attractive—and they found me attractive—I would also fuck them,” I continued matter-of-factly, despite her rolling eyes. “I never glamourised anyone to have sex with me. I would glamour them to forget me, however. It was safer that way. So—again—why spend any effort on them?”

“After the Great Reveal and the opening of Fangtasia, human women came to me. I no longer had to glamour them to forget about me, but no fangbangers have inspired me to get to know them—so to speak. I have found a few who had very pleasant blood and good sexual skills, however, and I have sometimes requested that those women return to Fangtasia so that I could have them again.”

Sookie cringed, but I kept going. “There have been three exceptions throughout the years when it came to human women. You are the latest of the three. The first was that psychic I once mentioned to you. With her extra sense, Colleen knew about vampires. And—like you—she couldn’t be glamourised. Her personality was quite pleasant as well. Because of this, I spent many years with Colleen, and she often anticipated danger that would come, so we could avoid problems. I did not fall in love with her, but I enjoyed our relationship.

“Colleen was educated and had an extremely inquisitive mind. She loved to travel and to learn about new cultures. And I enjoyed the fact that I had a sexual partner who knew me and cared for me. It was a new experience for me. Indeed, instead of growing tired of her—as you probably think I would,” I added, noting that Sookie was actually now biting her tongue so that

she wouldn't speak, "I grew to like the sex more and more. More than that, however, I grew to like the company more and more. And she and I shared a monogamous relationship for thirty-five years."

Sookie gasped, but didn't speak.

"I gave her my blood only once a decade or so—just so that I could track her and sense if she were in danger. I never felt the urge to bond with her, and the blood-giving was so sporadic that a bond never formed."

Hearing Sookie practically grunt, I chuckled. "I sense that you have questions about the way bonds are made."

She scowled at me, but nodded.

"Well—the vampire and the human must have each other's blood—obviously. A bond can form in as few as three exchanges, though those exchanges need not be made at the same time. However, a simultaneous exchange, like the one we shared earlier, is often stronger. Anyway, more than three exchanges are sometimes needed." I shrugged. "It depends on the amount of blood given, the time between exchanges—things like that. Honestly, not very many vampires create bonds—unless they want to completely control humans. Like Renfield."

I could see her wanting to speak out, and she looked at the clock as if willing the minutes to go faster.

I chuckled, liking the relative power I had over her in that moment—especially because she was gifting me with that power.

"Earlier, Andre asked me if you heeled. The feelings that I can push into you are like compellations to weak-minded humans, those who forget how to think for themselves because glamouring is mixed with the bond. And the vampires who make such creatures disgust me," I

added, feeling my lips skew in derision. “They are worse than rapists in my mind in that they take the free will of a human for life.” I scoffed. “Oh—I’ve had humans that have worked for me, Bobby Burnham, for example.”

She rolled her eyes.

“Those will roll out if you’re not careful,” I smirked.

She flipped me off.

I chuckled. “Yes. Bobby *is* quite the stuck-up asshole—isn’t he? I’ve glamoured him to forget things that could hurt me, but his desire to keep working for me and his personality are his own. I suppose he would deserve it if I glamoured him to behave like a duck, but I wouldn’t do that kind of thing. The more repulsive of my kind do such things for sport, however,” I added, thinking of some of the things that Appius used to do. I truly did despise most things about my maker and prayed that Sookie would never have to encounter him.

Ironically, working for Sophie-Anne kept Appius at bay. They despised each other—something about a connection they once had in France. It had been one of the reasons why I’d chosen to work for her, and she knew it.

Sookie looked horrified, but I went on. “You might have to *appear* to ‘heel’ at times—but just in public. I will try to always discuss these types of situations with you beforehand, and you will have input in the work the queen will inevitably ask you to do. But you’ll have to *seem* to defer to both me and her. But—then again—I know you well enough to realize when you are being pushed too far, and I will keep you out of such situations one way or another.” I shrugged. “This is one of the things I will feel compelled to do—as your bonded. Plus, I would do it for you anyway. I already have—with this fiasco!” I added, gesturing around the room so that she

knew I'd had a hand in her current arrangement with the queen. The bitch hadn't wanted to pay Sookie at first!

"Anyway," I continued, "now that we are permanently bonded, there are benefits. Unless I give my permission, other vampires cannot feed from you; if they do, I can kill them. That applies to even kings and queens," I smiled. "And certainly to peons like Andre."

She lifted a brow.

"Ah! I can tell that you want to know *why* Andre agreed to let me bond with you—since it cuts off his chances of getting your blood?" I asked.

She nodded.

"Likely, he didn't know that tonight would make things permanent between us. He took a calculated risk. More so, however, his move was both political and practical. I am the queen's best and strongest sheriff. Thus, it is best to keep me happy. Also, Andre is a little lazy. He probably weighed the pleasure he'd get from toying with you with the effort he would need to expend in 'training' you. Obviously, you didn't want to bond with him, so he would have needed to 'break you.' And I raised the very relevant point that your telepathy might not 'work' if you were 'broken.' Moreover, you might not be honest about what you heard if you were unhappy. For these reasons, Andre relented. Plus—let's face it—he was probably acting beyond the queen's direct purview anyway. Otherwise, *she* would have ordered you to bond with him, and I could have done nothing. But he accosted you in a deserted hallway and was willing to use force. Thus, in the aftermath, the queen *might* have punished him. But—now—if you were to complain about being 'forced' and if the queen decided to sympathize with your plight, then *I* would be the one punished."

She looked horrified for a moment.

“Anyway—back to the psychic,” I said, looking at the clock and knowing I needed to get back on track. “I *did* feed from Colleen—almost exclusively—during our years together. But I was younger then and sometimes I needed more blood than she could safely give.” I shrugged. “She knew this, and she didn’t mind it. I never fucked another, however. I asked her to let me turn her about once a decade. She always refused, and I accepted this, despite knowing I’d miss her once she’d lived out her days. Eventually, she died at the hands of a vampire who had a grudge against my maker. She knew what was coming, but she chose to die, even as she helped me to live and defeat my maker’s enemy.

“Colleen left me a letter, explaining that she’d had visions of her life with me, and that she’d chosen that life despite knowing that my maker’s enemy would eventually track us down and kill her.” I shook my head sadly as I remembered her. “She wrote that she’d very much enjoyed our years together and that she didn’t regret her choices, including her choice not to be made vampire. I was melancholy about her death for many decades, and I missed her. But I went on.”

I took a moment to gauge Sookie’s reaction. She was still with me, though clearly she was aching to speak. However, I still had time.

I grinned, lightening the mood. “The other exception was a human queen—England’s Queen Elizabeth.”

Sookie gasped.

“Impressed?”

She nodded.

“Because of the make-up fashionable at the time, which made everyone look extremely pale, I fit right in,” I chuckled. “I worked in Liz’s court for about a decade. I enjoyed the

intrigue of it all, and courtesans were aplenty. Liz was intrigued by the occult, and I *did* tell her about my nature; however, I used glamour to ensure that she told no others of it. She was certainly not the ‘virgin queen’ that some people thought she was, and I could sneak in and out of her chambers to pleasure her without being noticed. Sex with her was,” I paused, “*okay*—but just barely. She wasn’t fond of bathing. And her blood was *not* delicious, so I took my nourishment from other sources, whom I glamourous. But Liz and I became what you would call friends, and she offered me a haven in her court in exchange for advice I would give about warfare, politics, things like that,” I added with a wave of my hand. “Eventually, however, I moved on.”

I ran my fingers through my hair. “And then there was you. It didn’t take long for my initial lust for you to become genuine esteem. Your loyalty became apparent almost immediately. And I liked that you were willing to stand up to me—to share your thoughts and opinions. Your bravery was also soon apparent. I admired you and respected you—though I continue to think that you are *too* loyal at times. Bill comes to mind. And the little kitty.”

She gave me a glare.

I chuckled. “Anyway. I also like that you are clever. You might get yourself into situations like the soda can bomb incident, but you really do apply your mind to creatively get yourself out of them once you do. You are smart, though you are currently unschooled, something I would help you change *if you like*. Your common sense is quite prevalent; however, sometimes you make poor choices based upon naivety or misplaced loyalty.”

Her glare became more deeply ingrained in her face.

I simply rolled my eyes. “Indeed, I admire a great many things about you, Sookie Stackhouse, not the least of which is how you are currently managing to fulfill the terms of our

agreement. So—yes—smart, beautiful, loyal, and brave.” I shrugged. “Not surprisingly, I found myself wanting you more and more. But I am patient. I knew that Bill and Quinn were both wrong for you, and I figured that you’d eventually know this too. So I waited. I had planned to court you following our time in Jackson, but you were hurt by Bill’s assault. Your mind needed to heal—to find a way to deal with the fact that someone you cared for had harmed you in that despicable way,” I spit out.

“Gods, how I wanted to kill Bill!”

She grunted.

“I imagined it countless times and in countless way,” I went on, knowing I’d likely never be able to get away with expressing my true feeling about that fuckwit again—without her trying to defend him, that is. “I would have taken him apart piece by piece and then let it all start growing back—right before I staked him.”

She gasped.

“It’s not as if I did it,” I said rather flippantly, knowing that my tone would frustrate her to no end. Maybe I just *liked* pushing her.

She narrowed her eyes at me.

*Definitely*—I liked to push her, just as she pushed me.

“Sadly, vampire blood could not take care of your mental pain,” I said, returning to my narrative. “And then the witch cursed me, and—like I said earlier—I fucked up after that. I was confused. But I still wanted you for all of the reasons I noted earlier—*and* one more.”

She looked at me curiously.



“I’m sorry, but I cannot put a name to that reason. I suppose I wanted—and still want—you *‘just because.’*” I shrugged. “Something about you simply suits something about me. And I think we could be good together—maybe even great.”

She tilted her head a little, biting her lower lip as she did so. She was contemplating my words.

Good.

Again, I got back to the narrative, “And then I learned about Bill’s orders from the queen, and you needed to grieve for that. So I had to be patient—*again*. And then there was the Quinn nonsense.

“Speaking of which—I hate that he betrayed you, but I am very glad he is out of the picture.”

She rolled her eyes.

“Anyway, I had a long-game in mind when it came to you—not that I see you as a game piece to be won,” I amended quickly. “I did plan to pursue you—to woo you—as soon as the timing was right. It was so often quite wrong, however. But tonight, Andre has forced our hand.”

I sighed. “I am grateful to him in a sick and twisted kind of way.”

She groaned, but I could feel that she was a little grateful too—not that we’d been forced into things, but because she’d gotten the boost of vampire blood she needed to learn the truth about her erstwhile beau. Sookie might resist the truth at times, but I knew that she’d rather know it, nonetheless.

“So, you see, I *had* planned to woo you. And I had hoped—and still hope—that you will develop the same feelings for me as you did for the *other* me, of whom I will admit to being jealous. Though it feels odd to be jealous of a part of,” I paused, “*me.*”

She tilted her head and looked at me curiously.

“And—yes—I do believe that the ‘me’ you knew then *is* a tangible part of me—though without all the baggage attached to *this* me.”

She sighed, but nodded. From the bond, I knew that she thought the same.

“Anyway,” I continued, “as I was saying, our situation is odd. But I *always* wanted you. I told you about Colleen because I want a life with you similar to the one I shared with her—though more meaningful. I just wanted to woo you before offering it. I would have also broached the idea of bonding at some point. Unlike with Colleen, I was drawn to bond with you—well *before* tonight. I *wanted* to do it, Sookie.” I paused to let that information sink into her brain.

“I want to share myself with you,” I continued after about thirty seconds of silence. “Call it love if you like—but I say it’s more. And I like the bond already—though it is new. I think you might come to like it too. I hate that it was forced upon us the way it was, but I want you to know that I *chose* the bond—and you. I want you to know that if you don’t choose to give a relationship with me a try, I will be your bonded *only* in the sense of protecting you. I will *not* take your freedom from you.

“Will I be disappointed if we are not together? Yes.

“But I don’t want to be disappointed, Sookie.” I sighed. “Even now, I can imagine the life we could find together,” I said, closing my eyes, “and the prospect thrills me and delights

me. I *want* it. And I am selfish, so I will continue to try to convince you to want it too—unless I find the situation hopeless.”

I opened my eyes and glanced at the clock. Two more minutes.

“One final thing. We are bonded, and there is affection between us. The Renfield thing, therefore, couldn’t happen—and not just because you can resist glamour. It wouldn’t happen because I wouldn’t use the power I have over you in that negative way. You will have to trust me on that, but there is trust required in relationships between humans, too—right? You will have power over me as well—you know—and you could use that power against me. You could defy me in front of my superiors and peers. You could make me a laughing stock. I believe the term is ‘pussy whipped.’ However, the prospect of being whipped by your pussy is,” I paused, “*intriguing.*”

Sookie blushed and looked at the clock.

One minute.

“Since there is affection on my part, if you don’t one day choose to be a vampire, I may very well choose to meet the sun following your death; you’ll just have to deal with that. I will not know if I can go on *unless* you die, and I don’t want that to happen. Also, as I mentioned earlier, if I were to die, you would be miserable—at least for a while. Losing a bonded one is painful—another reason vampires don’t bond often. Suicide is common after the loss—unless the vampire holds no affection for a bonded one. That is not the case between you and me, but I am not sorry that this is true.

“So now I have another reason to stay alive—to protect you from the pain of a severed bond. I will not give up trying to convince you to join me as vampire, though I will not nag. Pamela informs me that Dear Abby insists that nagging can ruin a perfectly good relationship.”

And, with that, my time was up.

And Sookie was up.

# CHAPTER 07: ACCORD

## SOOKIE POV

Listening to Eric had been enlightening—and a little scary. He thought everything ahead to a point further away in time than I would likely be alive.

And he seemed willing to die for me—*after* a respectable lifespan on my part, that is.

Why did the idea of *his* death bother me so much—when I was perfectly fine with passing away when I reached old age?

Probably because the world would be a little less bright if he weren't in it. Some people just made the world better; he was one of them.

I sighed, feeling the weight of his life on my shoulders. I guess it was only fair; he was now carrying mine.

But the damned Viking was taller—and heavier!

Dead weight!

Eric had said so many things—things that made me want to slap him at times.

And then other times, I'd wanted to kiss him.

“I want to renegotiate,” I said after the clock had finally reached the time that Eric and I had agreed upon.

He lifted a brow but didn't speak. He was already doing as he'd agreed.

“I have heard what you had to say, and I want to speak now—*uninterrupted*—but if I have questions, I want to be able to ask them, and I want you to tell me the truth.” I shook my head. “I know. I know. I can tell if you are lying, but you are good at crafting your words so that you tell people the truth without telling them the truth.”

He gasped in feigned innocence.

“Don’t pretend you aren’t!” I admonished when his eyebrow rose as if to second the notion that he wouldn’t mislead a fly. I knew better. “Do you agree to answer my questions or not?”

He smirked, but nodded his agreement.

“And when I have heard enough from you, you *will* shut up,” I added with a smirk of my own. “Right?”

“During *your* allotted time—yes,” he qualified.

“And no responding to non-questions!”

He nodded in affirmation, giving me that innocent look again.

I took a breath. “In that case, let me begin with this. You are a high-handed vampire!”

He seemed to half shrug and half nod in agreement.

“And I just want to kick you—a lot of the time!”

He smirked again—as if proud of himself. Damned vampire.

“But I can live with your highhanded, assaholic ways as long as you promise to be highhanded only when you must be. And an asshole as infrequently as possible!”

His smirk grew and I felt genuine amusement from him in the bond. Feeling him was odd. I could definitely tell what were his emotions and what were mine—and having insight into him without having to hear all of his thoughts was probably a good thing, given my track-record with men. However, knowing how he felt was going to take some getting used to.

“And, with *me*, I want you to promise that you won’t be highhanded unless one or both of us is in danger. Otherwise, I want to be consulted. Do you agree? Yes or no.”

“Yes, I promise,” he said sincerely.

“Good.” I sighed. Having that assurance, though, I knew that I would have to continue “dealing” with him and our situation, and my nervousness grew. I glanced at the door, thinking about running. But I didn’t; I put on my big girl panties, as Gran used to say, and I spoke to Eric from my heart, which had—miraculously—reappeared in my chest as he’d been speaking.

“I did you wrong after Hallow’s curse was lifted,” I confessed. “Men aren’t the only ones who can be idiots—you know? I was hurting and mourning and scared and insecure. Insecure most of all. After all, you are beautiful,” I said gesturing toward him, “and I’m *just* me.”

He seemed to want to speak—badly—but I shook my head. “That wasn’t a question, Northman!” I went on, “Even when I was with Bill, so many people’s thoughts told me that I wasn’t worthy of him. And with you? Well those thoughts come at me tenfold!”

He grunted.

“*Still* not a question,” I admonished. “Anyway, here’s the deal. I need a little healing time. The Quinn thing is fresh, and I am not one to jump into a new relationship before the old one is cold in its grave.” I gestured toward him. “No offense.”

He nodded.

“Honestly, Quinn and I *weren’t* awesome together. I felt even more neglected by him than I did by *you* at times.”

He looked like he wanted to speak again.

I gave him a warning glare. “Anyway, here’s the deal. I *like* your wooing idea. I think that we need to woo *each other* for a while. It’s backwards. I get it. But I like you, and I have decided that—for once in my life—I’m going to be optimistic. I am willing to bet on us—to bet that *my* Eric is inside of you. That he is a part of you—as you said. After all, how could he not

be? For a long time I was too scared to want that because I didn't know if *you* wanted me." I sniffled to keep a tear from falling. "But now I do know. Those things that you said to me?" I paused. "I believe them because of this bond that we have. I could *feel* that they were true—are true!"

He nodded as if to confirm that they were.

"Anyway, I think that you are *him*—just *more*. That *more* scares me to no end, but I want the chance to know the *more*, nonetheless. And it looks like the bond is going to make us do that one way or another." I took a deep breath. "I'll *try* not to fight against that."

He smiled sincerely.

I liked that smile—very much.

"I will learn vampire protocol for you, and when needed, I'll follow it *for you*."

He smiled wider.

"In turn, you need to learn human protocol, and when vampires aren't around, I want you to make an attempt to fit in. Oh—and don't kill Bill!"

Eric growled. Of course! Sometimes he was quite predictable—at least, to me. Truth be told, I kind of liked that I sort of knew how Sheriff Eric ticked.

"In fact, when Bill's around and other vampires aren't—like when it's a social gathering, *if* I ever decide to invite him to one of those again—I want you to . . ." I paused. "Well—you don't have to be nice to him; I know you don't like him. Just don't," I threw my hands up, "growl and stuff. Okay?"

"Agreed," he said gruffly, though he obviously wasn't that happy about it.

"Okay. And since you are compromising, I will too." I took a deep breath. "I'll go ahead and okay the security measures I'm *sure* that you will insist upon for my house—as long



as they don't interfere with my life too much. But I am vetoing the new car that I *know* you will want to get for me."

He looked surprised at my words, but then smirked as if a plan were already churning in his supple brain.

"And no mysterious tornadoes killing my car either!" I said demandingly.

Again, his expression turned innocent, though I felt pure mischief in our bond.

I sighed loudly as I glanced at the clock to check my time. I had plenty left.

"Okay. I'm gonna change the topic a little and ask you another question. And I need you to *not* be offended by it. I just need to know. Can the bond be broken?"

Immediately he stiffened a little.

"Not by any means I know of," he answered, and he was being truthful. "I've heard rumors that witches can break bonds, so you should ask your friend, Amelia Broadway. However, you should think before acting," he cautioned. "If the bond is broken, my blood will not be identifiable in you. And that means that you will be fair game to *anyone* who wants to claim you."

I gasped.

"I don't mean to raise undo fear in you," he continued. "But you *do* need to be afraid if you are unclaimed, and that is the truth of the matter."

"Should I be afraid of you?" I asked challengingly.

"No," he answered immediately, honestly. "Plus—if nothing else—I would hope that you see me as the lesser of evils," he added somewhat forlornly, the confident vampire from before all but gone.

I felt guilty. Just earlier that same night, I'd judged Eric as the lesser of evils—when comparing him to Andre.

“You aren't an evil,” I said contritely. “If I'm being honest, most of the negative ideas I've had about you were planted by Bill. *And* because of my own misconceptions. Yes—I thought of you as a man-whore, but my idea of that is tainted by my own brother.” I shook my head. “He leads women on—telling them whatever they want to hear, lying to them—in order to get them into bed. You're—at least—honest about the fact that you don't want them.” I tilted my head. “You said that you were faithful to Colleen before. Could you *really* be faithful to me, Eric? Could you be satisfied with just me?”

“Yes,” he said quickly, “and when it comes to you, the word ‘just’ does *not* apply.”

“What if you're wrong? What if we don't work out? What if we try a relationship, and it doesn't work?”

“Then we'll figure that out together, but I *will* protect you from other supernaturals no matter what. That is my vow,” he said seriously.

“No more long separations. No more *not* talking to each other. And I expect you to remind me of that when I get stubborn, too. Agreed?”

“Agreed,” he smirked.

“You said you wouldn't try to control me and that any healing I had to do in public would be necessary.” I cringed. “I'll accept that, and I trust your discretion in that.”

He nodded his thanks.

I took one of my minutes to really think about things in silence. Eric—though he was a stubborn, high-handed vampire—had honor. And he'd come through for me more than once. After Hallow's curse had been lifted, we'd hurt each other because the witch had stolen precious

things from us, and we'd both been hurt by that theft. However—looking back at our entire relationship—I knew that we'd been in so much pain because we'd already begun to love each other.

Even before Hallow had come into the picture.

The vampire staring at me intently was the one who had saved me from Longshadow.

He was the one who had hovered outside of my hospital room after Rene had hurt me.

He was the one who'd arranged for my healing after the Maenad attack.

He was the one who'd picked shards of glass from my skin and said kind words to me after my ordeal in the Fellowship church.

He was the one who had stayed by my side after I'd been staked.

He was the one who had been exactly what I'd needed after Bill had raped me.

He was the one who had given me a new driveway *before* he'd been cursed.

And a new coat after that curse was over.

He'd noticed things—things about *me*—that no one else had ever bothered to see.

He didn't try to hide the ugliness of the world from me. He somehow knew that I'd seen enough of it already to be able to handle myself.

He'd made sure I found out about Bill's duplicity and the queen's interest in me.

He'd saved me—and Quinn—from Debbie Pelt's kin.

He'd been watchful enough over me to save me from Andre, whom I had no doubt would have tried to make me his *Sookie-field*.

He was the one who had asked to take a bomb from my hands—not to show up his rival, but because he was physically stronger and truly wanted to save me.

I gasped in realization.

Eric Northman, a thousand-year-old Viking turned vampire, was *the one*.

The “one.”

THE ONE!

The one that I was meant to go through my life with. The one that I wanted to see the world with. The one I wanted with me when I was old and gray—unless he convinced me otherwise.

The “him” without the memories belonged in the fairytale world, but the Eric before me belonged to *my* world. And—though I had resisted it—I knew in that moment that I belonged in his world too.

*Our* world.

“I don’t need much more of my time,” I said, swallowing hard. “I have only one more question to ask—one more question I’m *ready* to ask.”

He nodded, his eyes literally shining. He knew which question I meant.

“Stay?” I practically whimpered. “Stay with me? Be with me?” I knew that he would also understand that I needed him to be patient with me—that it might be a while before we could be intimate—as in the sex part. Still, I wanted him *near* me again. I wanted him *home*.

If nothing else, I knew that I would sleep best if I had his hand to hold.

I could see in Eric’s eyes immediately that he understood—understood it all.

He nodded and then he gave his answer.

“Yes.”

I felt a single warm tear traveling down my cheek, cooling as it went.

“You were right earlier,” he said softly. “Your home *will* need better security if we are to stay there together.”

“Okay,” I choked out, trying to keep more tears from falling, though I had a feeling that it was a futile effort.

“And your car needs to be bomb-proofed.”

“Bomb-proofed?” I asked skeptically, even as I realized that he was trying to get a rise out of me in order to put a stopper to my tears. “You’re making that up.”

“Absolutely not,” he said evenly, though his eyes glinted with mischief.

“You’re lying,” I said confidently.

“I’m simply giving you a way to give that piece of shit up—and still save face.”

“I *won’t* be a kept woman,” I said insistently.

“But I will find a way to keep you nonetheless,” he replied confidently. “And I will find a way to ensure that you keep me as well,” he added, obviously in an attempt to head off my ire.

I wanted to rant and rave at him. I wanted to call him highhanded.

But I also wanted for him to be right.

I smiled at him. The vampire still sitting on the chair across the room didn’t want to take things from me. He wanted to give me things. He didn’t want to degrade me. He wanted to uplift me.

“Eric?”

“Yes?”

“Thank you,” I said, trying to use the bond to convey my sincerity. He gasped and then smiled.

I was catching on to this bond thing.

**THE END.**