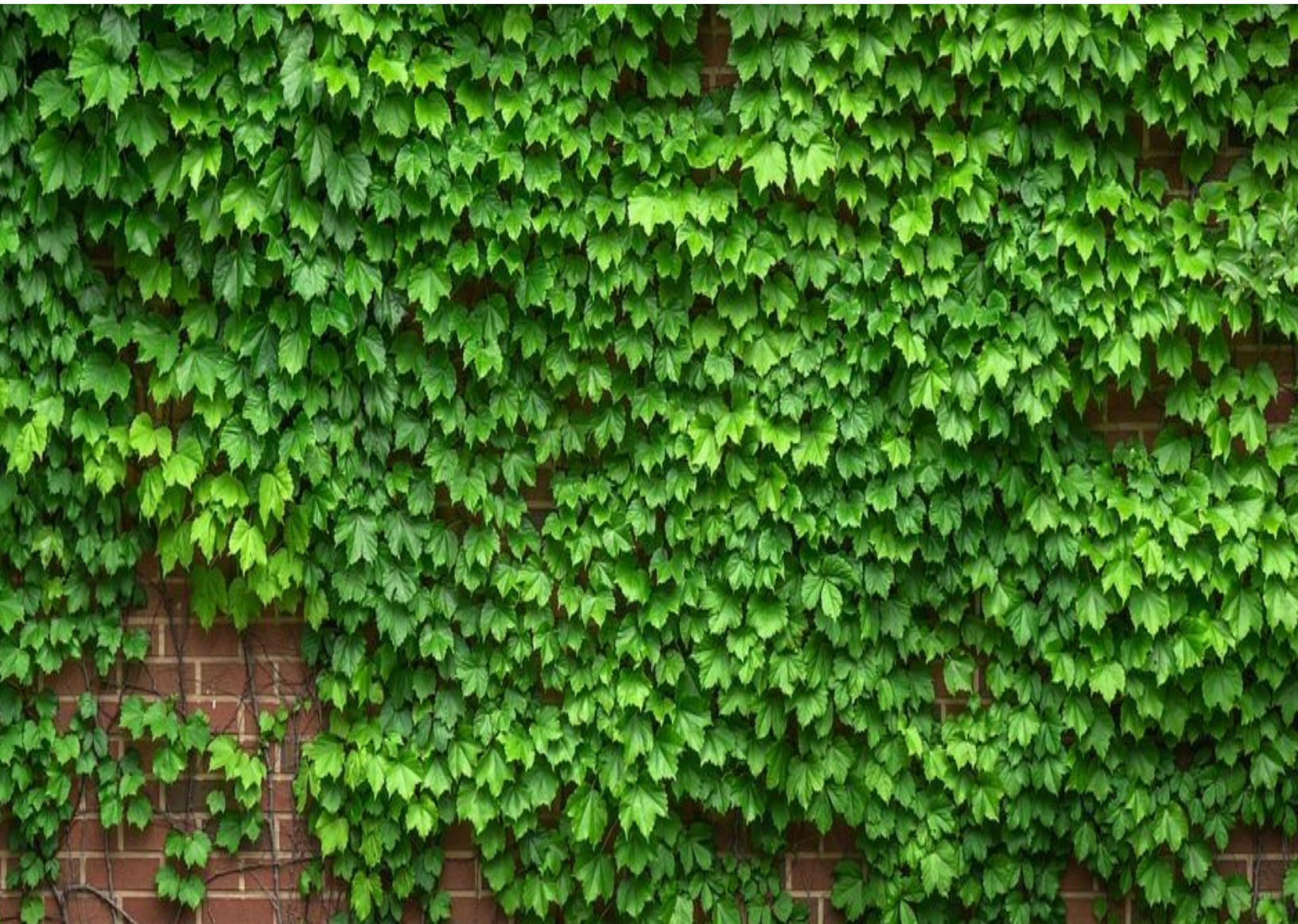
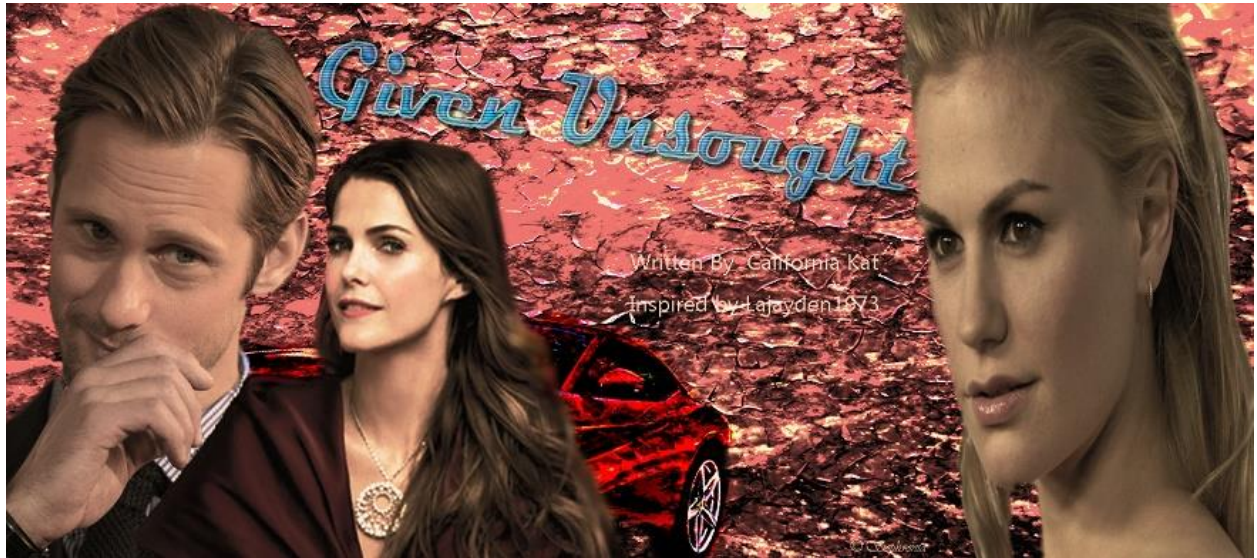




GIVEN UNSOUGHT

by California Kat





"Love sought is good, but given
unsought, is better."
-William Shakespeare

Summary:

When Sookie finally tells Eric about what happened when his memory was taken away by Marnie's spell, the vampire notes that she spent more time talking about Debbie's demise than any relationship they had. And he realizes something: Sookie doesn't trust him not to harm her with the information about Debbie. Even though Eric is new at love, he knows that it cannot flourish without trust, so he cuts ties with her and eventually develops a relationship with another. What will happen when Sookie realizes that she made a mistake? What will happen when it is she who must fight for love which is unsought?

Prompt:

I would love to read a story where Sookie has to work hard to get Eric. I feel Eric seems to go all out to earn Sookie's affections. What if Eric gets fed up and moves on (not [too] seriously) with maybe Yvette or Nora, and Sookie just cannot stand it. Something where Sookie actually has to pursue Eric, instead of the other way around. (Idea from Lajayden1973–March 14, 2015)

Context:

This story begins in the middle of *Dead as a Doornail* (Chapter 13). Sookie has asked for Eric's help getting Tara away from Mickey. Eric comes to Sookie's temporary apartment and Sookie tells Eric what happened when he had amnesia. In this fiction, Mickey and Tara don't come to the apartment, nor does Eric become amorous. Instead, he truly thinks about Sookie's words, and he finds them lacking.

Note:

Dialogue in bold is quotes from the books of Charlaine Harris. Passages in extended italics is closely paraphrased/quoted.

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Many Thanks:

To **Lajaxden1973**—for the inspiration

To **Kleanhouse**—for your generosity and your “eagle eyes”

To **Sephrenia**—for always giving me your time as you create art for my stories

Remember that on SHORTS, Sephrenia always “takes the challenge” with me, creating her banner with only the same prompt I had!

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Original Cast Banners by Sephrenia

Chapter 0: How Porcupines Mate

THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 3, 2005

ERIC POV

Sookie's voice was matter-of-fact as she finally told me what had happened between us not even a month before—when I'd lost my memory thanks to the now-dead Hallow Stonebrook.

Yes—Sookie and I'd had sex together. Multiple times. Throughout her home. And, apparently, outside of it.

I wasn't surprised.

She also told me that I'd offered to give up my life to stay with her—that I'd promised to get a job.

Clearly, I'd wanted to take care of her—to be with her.

I wasn't surprised by that either.

But Sookie had rejected my offer because she didn't think that accepting it would be fair to the memoryless “me.” In her words, it wouldn't have been “right.”

Right—it was a word I'd long contemplated where Sookie was concerned.

However, my notion of “right”—too often—seemed to be Sookie's conception of “wrong.”

By far, Sookie spent the longest part of her “summary” about our time together talking about Debbie Pelt, who had apparently broken into Sookie's home aiming to murder her. In fact, Debbie would have succeeded if I hadn't stepped in front of a bullet aimed at Sookie, who had—then—acted in self-defense and killed the bitch. I'd apparently taken care of hiding Debbie's body and car.

From the blood tying me to Sookie, I discerned that her emotions were mainly guilt and worry as she talked about Pelt; thus, I asked her if her anxiety stemmed from the possibility that the Pelts might try to take revenge.

Sookie waved that possibility off, telling me that the private investigator who'd been hired by the Pelts had spoken to her. The odd thing was that during this part of Sookie's narration, her worry actually waned. No—indeed—Sookie *wasn't* concerned that she would be discovered by the Pelt's P.I.

And that's when it hit me: Her worry was being caused by the fact that *I* now knew about Debbie's slaying.

I closed my eyes tightly—not wanting to allow myself to look at the woman who had been haunting my thoughts for months. Looking at her only befuddled my thoughts further.

Looking at her had made me willing to stake a vampire during only my second time seeing her.

Looking at her had made me almost lose my fucking mind and go berserker in Dallas when I'd seen all of the cuts and scrapes on her skin following her turn as a spy in the Fellowship church.

Looking at her had made me cover her body with my own when silver projectiles were flying into Stan's home.

Looking at her after she'd been staked in Club Dead had made me want to kill every fucking Fellowship member on the fucking planet.

Looking at her bloodied and bruised body in the trunk had made me want to tear Bill into pieces.

Looking at her made me want to protect her.

To hold her close to me.

To never let her go.

“How do porcupines mate?”

It was an old joke.

“Very carefully” was the answer.

“Or maybe not at all,” I whispered as I opened my eyes to focus once more on Sookie’s.

On January 5, 2005, I’d woken up in Sookie’s home—inside of a cramped, light-tight enclosure in a closet. It was now February 3—less than a month later. But I’d spent that month wondering what had happened between Sookie and me.

Wondering why her feelings for me had changed so much.

Wondering why I was so scared—and scarred—when it came to my own feelings for her.

Ironically—maybe tragically—less than a month before I had woken up in Sookie’s “cubby,” I’d resolved to give her time and space.

To separate myself from her.

Though I’d been *very* certain that I wanted her—even then.

No—I didn’t like having feelings, but I wasn’t idiotic enough to ignore them. In fact, I’d resolved to act upon them in the early morning of December 11, 2004.

However, Bubba’s interruption at Russell’s home—while my fingers had been buried in Sookie’s sweet pussy questing to find her sweet spot—had been both a good and a bad thing.

Bad for the obvious reason—I wanted her. Badly.

Good because I wanted to keep Sookie for *longer* than one night. Or two. Hell—I knew that hundreds of nights wouldn’t be enough. Maybe not even thousands of them. I’d been “living” for approximately 375,000 nights, and I was doubtful that even that number would be enough.

But I’d certainly intended to “test the mathematics” of the situation.

To test whether the undeniable chemistry that had existed between Sookie and me for months would translate into something binding.

Maybe even permanent.

But then—on December 12, 2004—I'd pulled the trunk of that damnable car from its hinges.

Only to find Bill—on her.

In her.

Just as I'd been too late to take the bullet which had caused her present injury—a shoulder wound—I'd been too late to protect her from Debbie Pelt pushing her into the trunk with Bill.

Pushing her into what amounted to a death trap with a starving vampire.

Seeing Sookie's condition as I'd pulled Bill's dick and fangs from her, three things had stopped me from killing him right then and there.

One—seeing the horror in his eyes. The immediate regret.

Two—knowing that Sookie would be angry at me if I killed him, only hours after she'd risked everything to save him.

Three—needing to get her into my arms. To get her to safety. To—*somehow*—help her to heal.

“So,” I heard Sookie say with a mixture of tentativeness and firmness, tearing me from my memories of her pain, **“I did your favor. Now you do mine.”**

I sighed aloud, a sound of weakness—according to vampires. But I couldn't help myself.

Yes—the only reason why Sookie had *finally* told me about our time together had been because she wanted me to get Mickey away from her friend Tara Thornton.

And that thought crushed me in a way that I didn't think I was capable of being crushed.

Sookie *hadn't* told me because she wanted me to know.

She *hadn't* told me because she recognized just how much not knowing had been tearing me apart inside.

She *hadn't* even told me because it had been the “right” thing to do.

No. I'd had to coerce her into the telling of it.

And what a telling it had been!

16.75 seconds had been spent recalling the sex we'd had.

56.67 seconds had been spent recalling Debbie's death.

56.64 seconds had been spent telling me about the Pelt family's private detectives.

5.52 seconds—those were the *only* ones Sookie had spent on telling me anything about how we'd “felt” about each other.

Meagre description though it was.

I would never forget the words from those 5.52 seconds: **“You offered to give up your position as sheriff and come to live with me. And get a job.”** Those words had been delivered as if she were detached from them. They were about my profession and my residence—rather than about my reasoning for wanting to stay with her.

Clearly, she hated having “feelings” even more than I did. Specifically, it seemed as if she hated having feelings about me.

But she *did* have those feelings. Even before my amnesia, I'd known that she “liked” me—maybe even more than that. After she'd taken my blood in Dallas, I even knew that she trusted me and was attracted to me.

And after my amnesia? I'd felt four things from her: love, grief, suppression—and regret.

Meanwhile, I was just fucking confused! My own feelings for Sookie were so much deeper than before. Encompassing.

I loved her. Of that, I had no doubt.

But had she let herself love me back? Only to regret that love? Were her feelings of grief about me? Bill? Or was she still dealing with her rape? I couldn't have blamed her if she was. After all, it had been fewer than two months since "the trunk incident" had happened.

Or maybe I had done something to cause her grief and regret? Had I pressured her? Did she regret letting me stay with her?

Were her feelings of love even for me? Did she still love Bill? Or the Were? Or the shifter? I sighed.

I had been "lost" on January 1—only to be "found" again on January 5.

Four nights.

Four nights out of more than 375,000.

But—somehow—I knew those four were the *most* important. I'd waited for Sookie to help me to understand why.

But she didn't—wouldn't.

But now I *did* know several things with certainty.

Debbie Pelt and her fate were *not* the answer.

The status of my job was *not* the answer.

My address was *not* the answer.

Even the sex we obviously shared was *not* the answer.

But Sookie had given me an answer—alright!

It just wasn't the one I wanted.

The fear and worry she'd felt when she told me of Debbie Pelt's death had originated from her distrust—*of me*.

Did she really believe that I would use that information against her? Blackmail her? Extort her blood from her? Or sex?

Did she really think so little of me?

Did she really believe me to have no honor at all?

“Eric?” she voiced with a hint of frustration. “I told you what you wanted to know. Are you gonna help Tara or not?”

Ripped from my thoughts once again, I dispassionately took my phone from my pocket and dialed Salome’s number. In some ways, Salome was just as unpleasant as her child, for she had an attitude as if the world owed her something; I believed that modern folk called it a “sense of entitlement.” Of course, I happened to know that Salome had “taken” plenty from the world during the long years of her life.

Thus, I couldn’t imagine her being owed a damned thing!

“Eric the Viking,” she answered, her voice slithering with a mixture of promised pleasure and poison.

Let’s just say that I’d spent many years avoiding dipping my sword into her snake pit.

I wasn’t one to believe the conflated stories of history—especially where women were concerned. However, if Salome did once perform a private dance with seven veils, I was pretty sure that it was only because six veils wouldn’t have adequately concealed the dagger she intended for the back of her audience member.

Keeping my voice even, I let her in on my request.

“Salome, do you remember that time in Istanbul?” I asked.

“Finally calling in *that* favor?” she purred.

“Yes. Your child, Mickey, is an interloper in my area. And has taken a human.”

“Ah—yes,” she said indifferently. “Franklin Mott owed him, and my Mickey told me that Mott’s companion was enticing.”

“The bartering of humans is no longer acceptable,” I said.

“You and I both know that some of the new mandates are relevant *only* as a prop for human authorities,” she returned.

“Mickey is mistreating the girl,” I added.

“Then she should work to be more compliant,” Salome responded.

“If that is your position, then let’s get down to my favor,” I said sternly.

“I’d like *nothing* more than to favor you,” she hummed.

I ignored the innuendo.

“I want you to call Mickey to you—tonight. I want you to order him to leave his human—to *free* her—without any further harm. Moreover, I want you to order him to give her ten thousand dollars so that she can replace any property he’s destroyed or recover from wages lost because he wouldn’t allow her to work.”

I listened to a growl on the other end of the line as I watched Sookie watching me.

I wanted to reach for her—to hold her.

But I didn’t move.

Instead, I waited for Salome to respond.

“I am not in the habit of limiting my child’s options,” she said after several moments of apparent seething—given the snorting sound I heard from the phone’s receiver.

“And I’m not in the habit of allowing incorrigible miscreants in Area 5!” I growled in return. “Do you know that he’s *never* checked in—though he’s been in my area for almost a month? For that alone, I could bind him in silver indefinitely. But I’m not going to do that unless my hand is forced. I simply want him out of my area—tonight. And I want the woman he’s claimed—*illegally*—to be left in peace. Tonight!” I added weightily.

“Who is the woman to you?” Salome asked, obviously trying to get the upper hand in the conversation.

“No one,” I was able to respond honestly, for Tara Thornton was no one to me. However, she was someone to Sookie.

“Then why can’t Mickey bring her with him when he leaves your area?”

“Because I’m not prepared to fill out the paperwork regarding a missing or murdered girl!” I said with deadly calm. “I have heard the rumors about Mickey and his human companions. I’m well aware that whenever he moves into a new area, he takes a new companion for a month or two and then moves on somewhere else.”

“Then you should be unconcerned,” Salome challenged. “Mickey will—as you said—soon move on from your area.”

I growled again, this time eliciting a gasp from Sookie because of the feral nature of the sound.

However, I could no longer allow Sookie’s reactions to matter to me.

“Aye—I know that your spawn would move on, Salome. But he would kill the girl first, likely draining her and leaving her somewhere that would require me to do an inordinate amount of damage control. And I am *not* going to do that. Actually,” I snarled, “never mind! Your child isn’t worth the favor you owe me!”

Sookie’s eyes widened. And I could see her mistrust for me rocketing into her eyes, unstopped or unquestioned by anything we had been through together in the past—either before or after my amnesia.

If I’d had breath, that mistrust would have robbed me of it. As it was, it robbed me of something else: hope. Sookie truly felt that I was betraying my word to her in that moment.

She had *no* faith in me.

I turned my head to look out of the medium-sized window in the living room. “Salome, you *will* call your child to you tonight—as I said before. You *will* require that he leave the girl unharmed

and richer—as I said before. And, in addition, you *will* make sure that he never steps foot into Area 5 again. He might be strong for his age, but he is a loose cannon. And—let’s face it—most people don’t touch him because they fear you. However, I don’t have that particular phobia.” I paused to let my words sink in for her. “Consider this a courtesy call from one ancient to another. If Mickey is in Area 5 tomorrow night, I *will* take his fucking head! And—if he harms the girl—I will take his balls, wait for them to grow back, take them again, and then take his head!” The volume of my voice rose. “And if you don’t like it, you can take your chances against me as well, Salome!”

The line was silent for a moment—absolutely silent since vampires didn’t need to breathe. I waited for Salome to back down, even as I felt Sookie’s glare from behind me.

At least with Salome, I had a good idea of what would happen. She was known for manipulation and scheming, *not* for being a warrior. In fact, though older than I, she enjoyed very little authentic loyalty from those around her, beyond that which she had to command from her child. Meanwhile, I had dozens of loyal vampires at my disposal. Thus, I honestly wasn’t worried that she could harm me or mine.

Moreover, I had shown a willingness to help Salome in the past—when that help benefitted me as well; I’d even saved her life before. And—given the enemies she would likely make in the future—she knew that it would be unwise to make one of me: a potential ally.

On the other hand, Mickey was a thorn in her side—forever causing trouble. She’d tried keeping him with her, but she’d grown just as tired of his being near as everyone else did. It was true that she didn’t want to kill him herself, but I got the distinct feeling that she wouldn’t mind if he had an “accident.”

Finally, Salome spoke.

“Come, Eric, let us talk this through. Neither one of us wants violence for such an easily resolved matter,” she said soothingly, clearly understanding that to play on would be to overplay her hand.

“No talk,” I said gruffly before hanging up the phone.

When I looked back at Sookie, it seemed as if a hornet’s nest had been released in her eyes.

“What the fuck, Eric!” she demanded. “Now—because you’ve alienated Mickey’s maker, Tara will likely be in even more danger! That bastard has already beaten her—more than once! He’s isolated her from her friends! And I’d bet that the sex acts they do together would be classified as rape by any *human* with a conscience!”

I stood up and used my vampire speed to take me as far away from Sookie as I could get in the room.

“That’s it—isn’t it?” I asked, my voice sounding foreign—almost agonized—to my ears.

“At long last—that’s the answer to the riddle.”

“What the fuck are you talking about?” she demanded as she stood and placed one hand on her hip. Her injured arm stayed limp in its sling.

“You and me,” I said, feeling defeat carry itself through my body on the backs of the blood cells that were Sookie’s. “The reason you feel both love and regret when I am near you. You loved me only when I seemed *human* to you. And now you regret everything that passed between us,” I added with defeat.

“Oh—so this is suddenly about us?” she demanded—and deflected. “You made a promise related to Tara! But I’m not surprised you didn’t follow through. I should *never* have trusted you to keep her safe. Or me safe!” she accused, raising her injured arm to show me her evidence.

I wanted to let my fangs down. I wanted to bite her. To hurt her. To kill her and, thereby, to kill the source of the worst pain I’d ever felt.

But—above all else—I was practical. I always had been.

Even from my earliest days, I could look at a situation and figure out the pros and cons.

Though—as a human—I'd not had what today's world would call a formal education, I was always good at solving problems.

It's why I'd been a successful captain at 13 years of age.

It's how I'd figured out a way to survive Appius's reign over me.

It's how I'd made fortune after fortune.

It's how I'd successfully run business after business.

It's how I knew that harming Sookie would ruin any equation I made for my life from that moment on.

And it's how I also knew that there was no math that could win her.

As long as she didn't want me.

As long as she thought the worst of me.

And those things seemed likely to never change.

I spoke in a low, even tone. “Your friend, Tara, will be fine. Even now, I am certain that Salome is ordering Mickey to do as I said. She is too savvy to cross me. And she would have known that I had a stronger vested interest in Mickey's actions—which might have led her to you—if I would have forgiven her debt for the life of one human female.”

Sookie scoffed. “Because *human* life means so fucking little to you?”

Once again, I turned away from her and looked out the window. I could still see her reflection there, her accusatory eyes indicting me for sins I couldn't even fathom. “You think so ill of me.” I paused. “I have tried to give you cause to think better. I *do* care for you, Sookie,” I tried.

It would be my last attempt to *try* with her.

However, as I turned to face her again, I didn't allow myself to hope.

At least, not much.

Chapter 02: Nails in Our Coffin

It was good that I didn't allow hope to encumber me.

“Care?” she asked bitingly. “You just want things from me, Eric. You want my telepathy. You want my blood and my body. Well—you’ve had all of those things now! Can’t you just be satisfied and leave me the fuck alone? Or do you want me dead, too?” she finished almost hysterically.

“I do want many things from you, Sookie,” I said evenly. “However, I will take nothing from you.”

“Except Tara!” she accused, wiping away her angry tears.

“I was not misleading you when I told you that your friend will be fine,” I said quietly.

“How? How do you know?” she asked, her voice thick with doubt.

“Trust me—*just this time*,” I entreated.

She shook her head. “I don’t.”

And there it was. The spoken phrase to match Sookie’s anxiety from the blood tie. The words that proved just how much she regretted opening up her heart—even to the amnesiac “me.”

I moved slowly until I took a seat in one of the uncomfortable chairs at the tiny table in what passed for a dining room in the small apartment. In truth, it was just an extension of the living room—or the kitchen.

Depending on how one looked at it.

“Have I ever told you about my mother?” I asked Sookie. Oh—I knew *I* hadn’t. I had perfect recall—except for those four days. However, I had no idea if the “other me” had remembered my human life and told Sookie about the woman she often reminded me of.

Sookie scoffed and sank down heavily onto the couch. “Eric—as much as I appreciate finding out anything about you—do you really think it’s time for a history lesson?”

“Perhaps not, but it will be my last opportunity to tell you about her,” I shrugged. “And—I just wanted you to know how strong she was, despite the things that happened to her.”

“Eric,” she said with exasperation, “what are you talking about?”

“I was young—maybe four years old,” I said softly. “Our village was attacked while the men were out on a trading voyage to the south. My mother—in trying to ensure that all the women and children were hidden away in the underground bunkers my people had designed for such eventualities—was, herself, taken. It took my father three months to track her captors and to get to her. In that time, she was” I stopped for a moment and looked into Sookie’s eyes. “My mother was a fighter, Sookie. She was abused in ways that I cannot even imagine, despite” Again I stopped midsentence.

“Despite?” Sookie asked.

Regardless of her reluctance to hear about ancient history, she was now looking at me with compassion, and the affection I felt from her in the blood tie almost made me change my mind about what I’d resolved to do.

Almost.

But I didn’t change my mind; I couldn’t—not if I wanted to keep my sanity. Instead, I told her the answer to her question. “My mother survived extreme labor, whippings, and rape. She was but a shell when my father brought her home. However—in time—she smiled again. She lived again.” I paused. “My maker is a man; he has an insatiable thirst for other men—those who look *just like me*,” I emphasized.

I watched as a tear streaked down her cheek. On any other night, I would have gone to her and wiped that tear away before erasing it forever.

But tonight I did not. “Like I said, I was young when my mother was taken. Of course, I could tell that something bad had happened to her, but . . .” I stopped for a moment, looking back out the window. “But I did not truly understand how she had suffered until many years later.” I stood up. “What I am saying is that I would *never* knowingly allow any being—human or otherwise—to remain trapped in such a situation. So—even if you do not trust me right now—trust in my memory of my mother, and know that I will ensure that your friend is not harmed again by Mickey.” I got up slowly and walked to the door before turning to face her once more.

“I am sorry, Sookie—more sorry than I can ever say—that I was not in time.”

“In time?” she asked, her voice sounding small.

“To keep you safe. Especially—in Jackson—from Bill,” I said, feeling myself stopping and starting again in my speech as if I were a child learning the words to say as I went along.

“Eric,” Sookie whispered, looking down at her hands.

“I failed you,” I said—prepared to drive all the necessary nails into my own coffin.

And—in that moment—I felt as if I deserved every single nail. But Sookie deserved a nail or two as well. After all, it already seemed as if her eyes had been sealed shut by them.

For she couldn’t see that I loved her. She didn’t want to see it.

She didn’t want to feel it.

Merlotte.

Herveaux.

Compton.

I knew in that moment that she trusted *all* of them more than she trusted me.

I just couldn’t understand why.

“Eric,” Sookie said again, this time louder, as if she were trying to interrupt my thoughts, but I didn’t say anything. I couldn’t.

I was too busy thinking about Sookie's other suitors. I thought about how she must have ranked us. I closed my eyes as that reckoning cut into me.

Merlotte—who had kept his true identity from her for years—even though she'd told him about her own gift.

Herveaux—who had lied in Jackson when insinuating that he had a sexual relationship with Sookie, thereby spurring Debbie into her murderous rage. Oh—and he'd also taken the bitch back—when he would have been able to smell her scent in that parking garage and around that trunk just as much as I had.

Compton—who had taken Sookie for granted, lied to her, pensioned her off, cheated on her, and, ultimately, raped and almost killed her.

I gasped.

The fact that I knew—without a fucking doubt—that Sookie trusted the man who had raped her not two months before more than she trusted me was almost too much for me to fucking bear!

I scrutinized her eyes, but she looked away as if holding my gaze hurt her more than the gunshot wound which had injured her shoulder.

Suddenly, I felt very angry that I ranked so goddamned low with Sookie.

I had never been too chicken shit to make my feelings known—as the shifter had been for years.

I had never chosen one of Debbie Pelt's ilk over her—as the Were had.

And I'd certainly never ignored her—or “pensioned” her off—as Compton had.

No. I had tried to *win* Sookie Stackhouse. I'd put myself into positions to look out for her—first in Dallas and then in Jackson—and I'd been there when danger befell her.

But—then again—maybe it was the fact that I'd been unable to keep her unscathed which had caused her to distrust me.

I would likely never know the answer to that question.

But I *did* know one thing: I couldn't continue on as I'd been living. I needed to move on—to grieve the loss of the “possibility” that had been Sookie Stackhouse and me.

Especially since the possibility had dwindled down to improbability.

Plus, I needed to prepare myself mentally if I was to continue into my second millennium. Before Sookie had come into my life, I had found a kind of contentment to fuel my nights.

And I was determined to find contentment again—even though I knew that going back to how I was before *her* wouldn't suit me.

Even though I knew that I would miss her.

But, as a vampire, I'd learned an important truth: time could be the great elixir. One day, I would simply become used to her being a part of my memory.

Meanwhile, the part of me that was hurting because Sookie had actually thought that I would use Debbie Pelt's death—of all things—against her *needed* to be heard.

So I let that part speak.

“Earlier, when you told me about our nights together, you claimed that you wouldn't allow yourself to take me up on my offer because it wasn't fair for you to do so—while I didn't have my memories.”

“That's right,” she confirmed.

“So you did everything you could to help me get my memories back; you even faced a battle against witches and Weres.”

“That's right,” she repeated.

“And we won,” I said, my voice breaking like an adolescent boy's.

“Yeah.”

“And I forgot our nights together.”

She nodded this time, unable to utter a word.

“But you wouldn’t help me get back my memories from those nights. Not even when they clearly meant so much to us.”

“To me,” she whimpered to correct me.

“Us,” I returned.

She shook her head as if to un-hear my words.

But I continued. “By your own logic,” I paused and closed my eyes tightly, “your behavior since I forgot *us* has not been logical.”

“Eric,” she whispered.

“And earlier, you didn’t tell me anything about *how* we were together.”

She frowned. “What did you want to hear about? *Positions* we had sex in?” she asked bitterly.

I sighed; I didn’t have any anger or bitterness left in me. “No. I wanted to hear that I was,” I paused, “good to you. I wanted to know why my feelings for you are so much more amplified than they were before. I wanted you to,” I paused, “tell me at least as much as Pam did.”

“What did Pam say?” she asked suspiciously—nervously.

Another nail in the *us* coffin.

“Many things. She said that I clung to you at first—like a child. However, she noted in subsequent meetings that we seemed quite content together—as if there was a deep connection between us. She told me that I was a bit unsure of myself in everything but two things: my desire to be with you and my confidence in battle.” I sighed. “She also told me that you would *never* want me as I am now.” I chuckled mirthlessly. “Of course, she tried to find someone to bet with. But no one would take her up on it but me.” I turned away from Sookie, not able to look at her glistening blue eyes in that moment. “Pam will be happy when I pay her tonight. Of course, Bubba felt I was

a fool for betting on myself.” I shrugged. “But—then again—I doubt if he will ever think of you as anything but Bill’s girl.”

Another nail.

I reached for the doorknob. “You have my blood inside of you, so—for some time—I will still know if you are in trouble, but Bill is closer. Plus, I imagine that you would prefer his help.”

“Eric?” Sookie asked, her voice uncertain now.

I mustered the strength to turn around to look at her again. “You should feel free to call Pam about anything you might need. If you ask for something within my power to give, it will be yours.”

“For what price?” she asked, skepticism clouding her expression once again.

I couldn’t stop my fangs from clicking down in anger—in desolation really. “You truly see no redeeming qualities in me at all—do you?”

“Eric, I didn’t mean to hurt you,” she sighed loudly. “It’s just been such a long day—and night. A long year.”

She sounded tired—worn to the bone.

“And I just want my life to go back to being,” she paused, “normal.”

I chuckled mirthlessly. “Well—I am the opposite of ‘normal’ to be sure.” I felt my body tense a little as I drove in another nail. “You need not worry about my requiring anything in return if you ask a favor of me. And I will no longer avail myself of your telepathy, Miss Stackhouse.”

Sookie seemed to cringe at my formality.

“What are you saying?” she asked.

“I think it’s time that I cut bait and move on—as the locals would say.”

“But Eric . . .,” she started a protest.

I interrupted her. “It’s clear to me that you don’t trust me. I had thought that you were beginning to; however, even the nature of your coerced summary of our nights together tells the tale perfectly.”

She frowned. “What tale?”

“I had thought you might have been embarrassed over the fact that we’d had sex—that you were worried I might use that fact to try to seduce you now that I am back to *myself*. However, when you told me about the sex part of our time together, you almost seemed to be,” I paused, “having fun. And then you offered me only a scrap—just hinting at what you’d come to mean to me during those four nights—and I felt regret from you. Then, instead of telling me how you’d come to view me—instead of telling me anything about *us*, which was what I was hoping to learn about—you went on to speak about Debbie Pelt. And do you know what I felt from you then?”

“No,” Sookie whispered.

“Liar,” I observed. “You felt guilt—even for killing someone who had already made multiple attempts on your life.” I paused. “Including trapping you in a trunk with a starved vampire.” I shook my head so that I could shake away the memory of finding Sookie as Bill had his fangs and cock inside of her.

“Of course, I feel guilty,” Sookie cried. “That’s what’s *supposed* to happen when you take a life.”

Ah—yet another nail for our coffin. Clearly, Sookie thought that I would feel no guilt if I killed someone of Debbie Pelt’s ilk. And she was right about that.

“That’s not all you felt when you told me about Ms. Pelt,” I said. “Tell me, Sookie, why did you feel worry—fear?”

“Because you could use the information against me,” Sookie said immediately—not doubting for a second that I would do just that.

“And so I have,” I whispered.

“What?”

“I *have* used the information against you—or, more specifically—against *us*. Tell me—why didn’t your summary include more about *us*?”

“Eric, I don’t want to keep rehashing this,” she whimpered.

“One cannot rehash something that one has never ‘hashed’ to begin with,” I reminded.

“What do you want me to say?” she asked, sounding more tired than ever.

“I feel love in our blood connection, but I feel regret and grief, too. Will you tell me why?”

She laughed mirthlessly. “That’s it? That’s what you want? For me to admit that I loved you?” She took a long breath. “Fine! I did love the version of you who stayed with me. He was kind and sweet. And I think he was close to loving me back. And—as for the grief?” she asked, sounding angry. “Well—that’s because the man that I loved? The one who cared about me? He’s gone forever—*dead!*”

“I am not dead!” I insisted, just as angrily.

“No—and you are *not* him either!”

“You don’t know that,” I responded.

She scoffed. “Oh, please! That Eric was willing to give up everything—to put me first! We both *know* that you would never do that! That Eric would have been faithful to me.” She shook her head and practically spit out her next words. “I doubt you even know the meaning of the word, ‘faithful.’”

“Condemned without even getting a chance?” I returned sarcastically. “I thought your grandmother taught you to be charitable.”

“She taught me to be a good judge of people!”

“Apparently,” I said sarcastically. “Judge *and* jury *and* executioner.” I smiled wryly.
“Perhaps, you should rethink your past judgements of the people in your life. If you did, perhaps you would reassess some of the punishments—or the lack of punishments—you have doled out.”

She rolled her eyes. “Come on, Eric. You and I both know what would happen if we ever gave *us* a try.”

“Enlighten me.”

“We’d have sex—probably quite a bit of it,” she said clinically. “But here’s the thing: you’d be in it for the physical pleasure and my blood. Meanwhile, I could never have sex without caring about someone, so my heart would be broken—*again*—when you inevitably got tired of me. But the worst part of it all is that you wouldn’t just stomp on my heart! You’d ruin my memories of those four nights that you wanted so desperately to know about! You’d kill *my* Eric all over again!” She was now crying tears of both sorrow and anger. “And the funny thing is that I couldn’t even blame you! I *know* what you are! And I *know* what you want from me. And I also *know* that I wouldn’t be enough to satisfy the ‘Great Eric Northman!’”

I could feel my shoulders slumping. “Well—since you have so definitively elucidated our future relationship, it seems clear that we should skip to the ending of it.”

I turned around again and gripped the doorknob.

“You know, Sookie, it is bad enough that you sell me so fucking short. But the real tragedy is how you sell yourself short.”

I opened the door to the sound of her gasp and the scent of fresh tears.

But I didn’t turn around.

It was time to move on.

Chapter 03: I Move On

Author's Note: The following picks up in the middle of *Definitely Dead*. More than a month has gone by since the last chapter. Sookie has met Quinn at the packmaster contest and has had her first date with him. You'll see that—without Eric in the picture—things happen very differently for Sookie.

SUNDAY, MARCH 20, 2005

SOOKIE POV

I looked at my companions in the back of the limousine: a vampire and a demon. It would be safe to say that I was *flabbergasted* (thank you Word-of-the-Day Calendar) by just how “un-normal” my life had become, despite my attempts to be just plain-ole Sookie Stackhouse, barmaid.

I shook my head. I was going to New Orleans to settle the estate of my recently-undead and recently-murdered cousin, whom I'd thought had already been dead years before! Why Hadley had left everything to me was still beyond me. She'd always been closer to Jason.

Still, I knew that Gran would do flips in her grave if I didn't do “right” by Hadley. It wouldn't have mattered to Gran that Hadley never felt compelled to do “right” by the rest of her family.

I stretched a little and cringed at the slight pain that my movements caused.

“Sookie,” Bill said with concern, “are you injured?”

“Oh,” I said, trying to wave off his apprehension with a wave of my hand, “it's nothing.”

“Nothing?” the vampire frowned as the demon looked on with interest.

“Yeah—um—plus Quinn took care of the situation anyway,” I said vaguely.

“John Quinn? The weretiger?” Mr. Cataliades asked.

I nodded. “Yeah. We’re—uh—dating.”

The demon looked intrigued, but also slightly concerned. I wondered why.

“I must insist, Sookie,” Bill said in that antiquated Southern “gentlemanly” way that told me he would keep insisting until I just spilled the beans.

I relented. “Well—Quinn and I went out Friday night. And—uh—when we were leaving the movie theater, two bitten—not born—Weres attacked us. Anyway, Quinn was spittin’ mad since I’m supposed to be a friend of the Shreveport pack and all, and we went to the Hair of the Dog.”

“He took you into the Were bar?!?” Bill half-asked and half-demanded.

I ignored his obvious anger. “Yeah. So—uh—Quinn told everyone there about what had happened to us, and he said that he expected them to take care of things—uh—since the bitten Weres were in police custody.”

I blushed a little as I thought about the make out session Quinn and I’d shared following our trip into the Were bar, and I blushed again when I recalled just how much he’d wanted to have sex with me in the dirty parking lot of the club!

I tried to school my expression as Bill looked at me as if I’d stolen his puppy. But I wasn’t about to change my plans regarding Quinn because of Bill. Forgiving the vampire for what had happened in the trunk and agreeing to remain his friend had been the limits of my charity.

No—I wanted to move on, and that meant *away* from Bill.

I closed my eyes for a moment. Indeed, Bill had hurt me *a lot*—first by basically ignoring me for months and then by lying to me and cheating on me.

And then by almost killing me.

And also by *hurting* me in the worst way a person could be hurt.

Rape.

I took a deep breath, refusing to allow myself to think about that word or the trunk incident anymore. Dwelling on it wouldn't help, after all. Bill had done what he'd done because he couldn't control himself, so I was determined not to hold him accountable. No—it was best to put the whole Jackson trip out of my mind!

What I *could* dwell on, however, was the fact that the queen was demanding my service at the upcoming vampire summit!

As if reading my thoughts, Mr. Cataliades spoke, “So, as I told you before, the summit is not until September; however, the queen will require your presence at several State events before then—as practice.”

I frowned. “But my agreement to use my telepathy is with Eric. Isn't he supposed to be involved when I work for vampires?”

“You are better off working directly with the queen,” Bill soothed. “I can help you negotiate payments—if you want,” he added, his eyes almost pleading with me.

I didn't have time to tell Bill ‘thanks but no thanks’ before Mr. Cataliades had taken several files from a briefcase. “Knowing of your previous arrangement with Sheriff Northman, the queen instructed me to inform him of her needs. The sheriff initially argued that your gift was not developed enough for you to work at large gatherings such as a summit; however,” he paused, “the queen was not to be dissuaded. So Sheriff Northman was kind enough to fax me a copy of your contract with him so that I could use it as a template.”

Bill frowned. “But Sookie has no official contract with Northman—nothing on paper.”

For a moment—as both men in the back of the limo looked at me—I felt as if I were a mouse who'd been presented with two choices: Trap A or Trap B.

Obviously, freedom was not a choice.

I couldn't begin to fathom why Eric had pretended that we had something more formal than just his words and mine. But seeing the eagerness in Bill's eyes and the caution in Mr. Cataliades's almost black orbs helped me to make my decision.

"Eric and I formalized things after you left Bon Temps to be with Lorena," I lied, trying to keep my voice even—trying to sound as if I were telling the truth. "You had basically left me to him—after all," I reminded.

Bill looked skeptical, but—then again—his blood in me was likely screaming that I was a liar. I looked down. At least my pants weren't on fire—yet.

"It's always best to have things in writing," the demon lawyer said as he passed me one of the files. "Don't you agree?"

"Yes," I responded as I began to look at the papers inside; in truth, I almost passed out because of what I saw. It seemed that Sophie-Anne would be required to pay me ten thousand dollars in advance for any job that required me to be out of Bon Temps. And then she had to give me five thousand dollars for every night I worked—or seven thousand dollars if I was required for both day and night duties. This money quadrupled if I was injured.

I noticed that Bill had moved so that he could read over my shoulder. I wanted to chastise him for sticking his nose into my business, but I didn't bother.

"I'm sure that the queen won't allow you to be harmed," Bill said comfortingly as he looked at the injury clause.

"Um—well—I'm sure you understand why I wanted that clause," I said, again trying to sound like I'd known about the so-called template that Eric had sent.

"Hmmm?" Bill questioned.

"After Dallas—when I was injured in the Fellowship church and then at Stan's house," I reminded.

Bill nodded solemnly as I continued reading the contract.

“You will see a stipend for your clothing—to be paid to you along with your initial payment for each job,” the demon said, pointing at a bullet point. “As indicated in Section 3, no job will take you from Bon Temps for more than one week’s time. Also, there is a limitation on the number of jobs that you can be asked to perform per month. And, as you can see in Section 3, Item 7, there is also the stipulation that you will receive at least two weeks’ notice before your jobs—when *possible*,” he said somewhat guilty.

“When possible?” I asked.

“The queen wasn’t aware that there would be so many limitations to,” he paused, “employing you, but Sheriff Northman was adamant that you would tire and become unable to perform effectively if your skill were overused.”

Bill looked as if he were about to say something to contradict what Eric had told Mr. Cataliades.

I didn’t think that would be a good thing, so I spoke up. “Yes, I confided as much to Sheriff Northman.”

“When?” Bill asked defensively.

“Some time in December—I think,” I responded evenly. “After you’d gone to be with your maker.”

Bill cringed a little at my words, and I felt guilty for them almost immediately. I knew that Bill couldn’t have resisted his maker’s call—even if he’d wanted to. Still—it made me a little upset that my first love seemed to be actively working to question everything about the contract that seemed like it would help me in the long run.

But—when I thought about it—I didn’t have a difficult time figuring out why. After all, the contract template had—apparently—come from Eric. So, of course, Bill would be suspicious of it. After all, Bill thought that Eric was always up to something and/or looking out for his own good.

But I was no longer certain about that.

Still, I didn’t see Bill changing his tune about Eric any time soon.

I smiled sincerely at the vampire in the limo. “I know you’re just looking out for me, Bill,” I said, reaching out to pat his cold hand. “And I do appreciate that.”

Bill looked ready to try to hold my hand in his, but I pulled back before that could happen. After all, I was ready—eager actually—to try something with Quinn.

THURSDAY, MARCH 24, 2005

It was so odd how much could change in just a few days.

And how surreal things could get.

And also how some situations seemed to repeat.

Like me. In a limo. With a variety of Supe species for company.

Only this time, I was sitting next to a Weretiger and across from a vampire. A demon was driving.

Moreover, two nights before, Andre had pronounced that I was part fairy. How fucked up was that!?!? But I guess it explained how I’d found myself with a fairy “godmother” and a “Claude” in my life.

Romance novel covers and all!

I suppose hearing that I was more “non-normal” than I’d already thought I was should have come as no shock to me. Still—I felt a little discombobulated (thank you Word-of-the-Day Calendar).

Of course, maybe I was out-of-sorts because I'd experienced two near-death instances, an ectoplasmic reconstruction, and my first sexual encounter with a warm-blooded man since I'd arrived in New Orleans on Sunday!

And I figured *that* combination would discombobulate almost anyone.

And—then—of course, there was the testosterone competition going on in the limo between the weretiger and the vampire.

I sighed and looked out of the window as Quinn possessively “possessed” my hand. But I figured it was better than him trying to pee on me in order to demonstrate his claim.

Supes!

Still, I couldn't help but to wish that Bill and Quinn could get along as I closed my eyes and thought back to my last several days/nights.

My first day in the Big Easy had been relatively calm. I'd met Amelia, and we became fast friends—a phenomenon I certainly wasn't used to. It seemed to me that most of my friendships were spiraling downwards—a few of them even circling the drain. But Amelia seemed happy to welcome me into her life, and—as a witch—she had no problem with my being different.

However, that night turned into a near-death experience for both Amelia and me when we were attacked by Jake Purifoy, a newly turned vampire. Bill, feeling my distress, had come to the hospital to see me. He'd even offered me his blood—though I declined it. I was banged up quite a bit, but I would recover without more vampire blood—thankfully.

The next morning, I'd awoken to Claudine's company at my hospital bed; Amelia, who was released before I was, soon joined us, and after the doctor determined that I was fit to be released, we all returned to Hadley's apartment, eventually deciding that an ectoplasmic reconstruction was the best way to figure out how Jake had come to be newly undead in Hadley's apartment. It turned out that someone had fatally wounded him, and Hadley had turned him, but the mystery of who had

caused the initial damage wasn't solved, so the whole thing had been a wash—except for the fact that Queen Sophie-Anne, as Jake's “grandma,” decided to take some responsibility for him.

I couldn't help but to feel sorry for him. He'd been a Were, and—apparently—they had a really hard time of it when they were made into vampires.

On the morning after the ectoplasmic reconstruction, I'd been packing up Hadley's stuff when Quinn arrived to help me. But it soon became apparent that he wasn't really there to help me pack—though he did manage to take my mind off of all of my problems for almost an hour!

A big part of me was screaming that I'd jumped into a physical relationship with Quinn way too quickly, but that part had shut up the day before—when Quinn had hoisted me up onto the kitchen counter and fucked me.

I know that Gran would hate me referring to sex as “fucking,” but that's what it had been—to be honest. My first time with Bill—I had, at least, thought that I loved him, though I sometimes wondered now if the “love” I felt was just the nice sensation of being in a relationship for the first time.

My first time with my Eric—well—it was difficult to know how I felt about him. I was on my way to loving “my” Eric, and I'd had a good deal of stored-up lustful feelings about the “real” Eric, too. But, despite any confusion I had about my feelings for Eric, I had never considered what we did to be merely “fucking.” In fact, our “couplings”—as “my” Eric once termed them—were the most mentally and physically intense experiences of my life so far.

With Quinn? Well—to be sure—I liked the fucking. And I liked him, too. But “love” in any form wasn't even on the table yet. Heck—“love” wasn't even in the room! I didn't know much about Quinn—to be honest. In fact, the whole physical act with him had felt strange to me. Less than a month before, I'd told Eric that I couldn't have sex without my feelings getting involved, but

my feelings for Quinn were *definitely* not as intense as I thought they would become after we had sex. In fact, sex hadn't changed them at all.

I wondered if—having lost “my” Eric so recently—I was holding back. I supposed that I was, for a big part of me just didn't feel up to “feeling.” And, honestly, I didn't get the impression that Quinn was hankering for anything too serious either—despite all the “babes” he was hitting me with.

I sighed. The reason why I'd liked “my” Eric's term “coupling” so much was that I'd truly felt like half of a “couple” with him—a first for me since I'd never really felt like I was in a “partnership” with Bill. As much as I wanted to try something with Quinn, I wondered if he and I were capable of becoming a “couple.”

Still, having sex with a warm-blooded individual had been a *different* experience for me—to be sure. Because of Quinn's nature, I'd never picked up much from his mind—just a fragmented thought or an emotion here or there. Of course, I'd never *tried* to “listen in,” preferring to be able to get to know him in the way that “normal” women got to know guys—from what they said and did. The experience was—for lack of a better word—“nice!”

However, I'd been worried that sustained touched would cause Quinn's thoughts to filter into my brain. However, his mind had—thankfully—been a kaleidoscope of colors during the sex itself. Reds and oranges and yellows—mostly.

Indeed, I was more thankful than I could say about that!

I closed my eyes and saw Gran's face in my mind. She'd told me once that my granddaddy had been her “first” *and* her “last.”

I couldn't help but to wonder what she would think about me now. Since her death, I'd had sex with three men. And none of them had been my husband at the time.

Would she be ashamed of me? She'd always felt a little disappointed in Jason's "lose morals"—though she also had thoughts like, "He just needs to sow his wild oats." I doubted she would have had those thoughts about me.

The modern world might accept that women could be as sexually active as men—and I'd certainly never judged anyone who had been. However, I couldn't lie to myself; I knew that the woman who'd raised me—the only one who had always accepted me despite my differences—would have been disappointed in me.

Even if she would have still loved me.

I hope.

"Sookie, I feel that you are unwell," Bill said, breaking me from my thoughts. "What is the matter?"

Quinn growled.

"Just processing the last few days," I said brightly, trying to stifle my feelings by affixing my "crazy Sookie" smile onto my face.

I smiled even more widely as Quinn squeezed my hand to the point that I wouldn't be surprised if a bone or two had broken. After all, I knew that there were at least 27 bones in the hand—thanks to one of the books I'd recently checked out at the library. I suppose I had a couple to spare.

"You are hurting her," Bill said with an edge to his voice.

Immediately, the pressure on my hand eased.

"Sorry, babe," Quinn said, before rubbing my hand.

"Fear not," Bill said somewhat arrogantly. "My recent blood infusion in her will heal whatever damage you caused."

The whole limo vibrated as I thought that Quinn was about to shift.

I prepared myself to be hurt in what felt like the inevitable fight between them and had a fleeting thought about Eric. I wondered where he was. After all, he was the one who always seemed to appear out of nowhere whenever I'd been injured.

At least, until the month before—when he'd said goodbye to me in the small apartment I'd stayed in until my home had been repaired.

I shook my head to expel thoughts of the Viking from my mind. After all, what good would it do to remember Eric now? I'd lost him in every way that I possibly could—more than once. And some of that losing—maybe even most of it—had been my fault.

Instead, as Quinn—thankfully—settled down, I turned my thoughts back to earlier that day and the reasons why I now had a fresh infusion of Bill's blood inside of me.

After Quinn and I'd had sex, I'd been keeping as tight of a hold on my shields as possible. Being held by a warm-blooded being had felt nice. But as soon as he'd cum, Quinn's thoughts had changed from colors to actual “thoughts.” The first thought that had slipped through had been something about his mother!

Yep—I'd put up my shields quickly and solidly! I didn't need to hear it if Quinn was comparing me to his mother! Or even if he was just thinking about an errand he needed to run for her. Nope! I figured that post-coital thoughts would likely be more “dangerous” to hear than pre-coital ones.

I'd been happy to find out that, with my shields at full strength, I couldn't really “hear” Quinn anymore, for—in addition to being a weretiger—he wasn't a strong broadcaster. Oh—there was *something* there in his mind, like whispers that I couldn't quite pick up on, but, thankfully, his nature and my shields equaled something a telepath could live with.

Of course, those shields being up so firmly had also meant that I'd missed the fact that a group of Weres had come to kidnap me. Thankfully, they decided to take Quinn too—rather than

to simply kill him. Luckily, the Weres underestimated me, and—with Quinn’s help—we escaped, though we had no idea where we were. Quinn had shifted into his impressive tiger form by then, and I rode on him—an odd experience to say the least—until we stumbled upon the kidnappers’ cabin and discovered that they worked for the Pelt family.

Quinn figured that we should go on the offensive to eliminate the threat, and I had been about to protest when Bill had shown up—having sensed my anxiety and location through our blood connection. A couple of vampires I recognized from Sophie-Anne’s court had accompanied Bill, including one of Sophie-Anne’s mammoth bodyguards. Unsurprisingly, there had been growling exchanged between Quinn and Bill before a plan had been settled upon.

I wasn’t really consulted for my input with said plan—beyond telling my companions that the five Were kidnappers were expecting the Pelts to arrive at the cabin during the next half hour; they planned to regroup and determine their next steps.

And when I argued that we should just leave and call the local packmaster or something, I was looked at as if I were a child asking for the Easter Bunny to keep the Twix Rabbit in line.

Oddly enough, Sigebert or Wybert—whoever was with us—agreed that I could do what I wanted with the Pelts, but he grunted that killing the Were kidnappers was necessary. Apparently, the queen didn’t like mercenaries for hire in her kingdom.

Proving that I really was a danger magnet, I was hurt during the battle that ensued—even though I tried to stay out of the fray. Between the vampires and Quinn, the Weres were quickly taken out—except for one, who literally stumbled upon my hiding place before trying to use me as a shield. Long story short—I’d gotten knocked down when Quinn and Bill had both attacked the Were, and my ankle had been twisted.

Again, Bill had offered me his blood, but I’d declined—a fact that had clearly pleased Quinn.

Not long after that, the Pelts arrived, and they were—thankfully—quickly secured without too much harm coming to them. Sophie-Anne’s vampires left as soon as the Pelts were tied up, leaving me to speak with them. I wasn’t surprised when Bill didn’t go with the other vampires. But I was surprised when he agreed to let me talk to the Pelts alone and convinced Quinn to do the same.

Given the situation, I knew that Debbie’s parents and sister needed to hear the truth about the events that led up to my killing Debbie. That’s why Barbara and Gordon Pelt, Debbie’s adoptive parents, had kidnapped me—because they desperately wanted to know what happened to their daughter. I knew that if I didn’t speak with them, they would never leave me alone; I just hoped that my explanation would satisfy them.

However, my decision to tell them the truth didn’t mean that I wanted Quinn or Bill to know the story, so I waited until they were far enough away from the cabin to ensure that their Super hearing wouldn’t pick up my words before I told the Pelts everything: about encountering Debbie for the first time at Club Dead where I was pretending to be with Alcide; about saving Bill, whom Debbie had helped to torture, from his maker; about Debbie trapping me in the trunk with him; about seeing her again before the witch war; about Alcide abjuring her once he’d learned about what she’d done to Bill; about her trying to kill me once again during the battle with the witches; and about her showing up at my house later that night with the intention of shooting me.

With tears flowing down my cheeks, I confessed that—after Eric had taken the bullet meant for me and as Debbie was about to shoot again—I’d killed Debbie in self-defense. I explained that I’d not called the police because I—honestly—didn’t think that any of the area Supes would want me to. I confessed that, looking back, I could have done about a million things differently—including telling Alcide what had happened and contacting the Longtooth pack for advice. But, then

again, Colonel Flood had just been lost during the Witch War, and I wasn't sure who to contact in the pack—since a lot of the members seemed much less tolerant of me than the colonel.

Finally, I admitted that I'd been scared—frightened that no one would believe I'd acted in self-defense.

Frightened that I'd be targeted by Weres who resented that a “mere human” had killed one of their own—abjurement or not.

Frightened that I'd be taken off to jail.

I could hear “acceptance” from Debbie's parents as I told them my version of events. In truth, Barbara and Gordon Pelt were well aware that Debbie had been “troubled”; they'd just needed to know what had happened to her in order to move on, and I was ashamed that I'd not been brave enough to tell the truth before then. After giving them a few details about Eric's amnesia, I promised them that I would contact them if I ever learned where Eric had buried their daughter. Debbie's parents were trying to convince their remaining daughter, Sandra, to accept that Debbie had been ultimately responsible for her own actions and death when Sandra got loose from her bindings and attacked me.

By the time Bill and Quinn arrived, I'd been kicked enough times that I had several broken ribs and a punctured lung, and I was choking on my own blood.

So Bill gave me some of his.

When I was healed enough to become aware of my surroundings again, I saw that Bill was glamouring Sandra to believe that I had nothing whatsoever to do with Debbie's disappearance. I poked into her mind long enough to know that the glamour had been effective since I was aware that glamouring Weres sometimes didn't work.

I was grateful to Bill and Quinn for not killing Sandra. I didn't need her death on my hands too. And Barbara and Gordon Pelt were grateful that they were not going to lose another daughter.

And I was also very grateful to Bill for saving my life—*again*.

What I wasn't grateful for was the fact that I could seemingly sense Bill's emotions now. I prayed to God that this was a side-effect of having more of his blood and that it would wear off quickly.

Chapter 04: He Moves On

SOOKIE POV, CONTINUED

I was brought out of my thoughts concerning my most recent near-death experience when the limo stopped outside of a former monastery, which was where Queen Sophie-Anne's ball was to be held.

The queen had asked that I attend that night as the first of my "training exercises." I was to listen in to the thoughts of the humans with the Arkansas delegation. But as Quinn escorted me into the large ballroom full of mostly vampires, I chuckled ruefully.

"What could go wrong?" I asked myself sarcastically.

"Don't worry. I'll protect you, babe," Quinn assured, probably thinking that I'd been talking to him.

I clutched my clutch a little tighter. "Remember—I need to speak to Sophie-Anne ASAP," I whispered.

And give her the bracelet Hadley had stolen so that the queen could avoid an "incident" with her fiancé or—uh—betrothed, King Peter Threadgill of Arkansas. Honestly, I wasn't sure what the two monarchs were calling each other—or even whether vampires had a different name for their marriages.

Knowing of my errand, Quinn guided me toward Andre since Sophie-Anne had apparently not made her grand entrance yet.

I held out my clutch to Andre, wondering if it would be returned to me; the clutch wasn't anything special. I'd bought it on sale at Walmart a few years before, but—still—I'd always liked it.

"I wanted to return the bag that the queen was kind enough to let me borrow," I said to Andre.

Even though he had to have guessed what was inside the clutch, Andre frowned when he took the object. Apparently, my bag wasn't up to his high standards—even as a mere carrying case for his queen's missing jewelry.

Only with difficulty did I refrain from rolling my eyes; needless to say, I wasn't a big Andre fan.

Without even a thank you, Andre quickly left the room, presumably to give his maker the bracelet.

I shouldn't have been surprised; vampires weren't really known for their politeness.

“Well—look what the *cat* dragged in,” a familiar voice said from behind me. “Sookie Stackhouse.”

Quinn hissed quietly as we turned around to face the voice.

“Hi, Pam,” I said with a sincere smile on my face. A part of me had missed the acerbic vampiress.

“Eric said that you might be here,” she grinned, looking me up and down with appreciation in her eyes. As immodest as it made me feel, I had to agree with her to a certain extent. The dress I'd borrowed from Amelia was lovely, and—luckily—just stretchy enough to work with my curves.

“How did he know?” I asked, sounding a little defensive to my own ears. I'd not heard from Eric since his exit from my life more than a month before. To say that my feelings were still all jumbled together where Eric was concerned would have been an understatement. I continued to miss “my Eric,” though I was trying to look at our short time together with gratitude, rather than just sorrow. I figured that a lot of people never got to experience what I'd found with “my” Eric.

Not even for four nights.

And—as for the “real” Eric? Well—I regretted losing him as a friend. Once upon a time, I had enjoyed his company, especially his sense of humor. I might have tried to reestablish that aspect

of our relationship if I hadn't been aware of just how difficult it would be to see someone with "my" Eric's face.

I learned that I was right about that difficulty when I heard a familiar, deep voice from beside me.

"Hello, Sookie. I take it the demon received the details of our contract."

Eric.

As Eric moved to stand next to Pam, my breath seemed to catch in my lungs. Eric was physically striking in anything he wore—or didn't wear. But in a tux, he was drool-worthy. I'm sure that Quinn noted my increased heartrate and my decreased breathing rate—just as the vampires did.

To make the situation even more awkward, Bill zoomed over to join the "party."

"Eric, what are you doing here?" Bill asked.

Eric regarded Bill for only a moment before rolling his eyes. "I don't know, Bill. The queen is throwing a ball to announce her upcoming pledging with the King of Arkansas. What would a sheriff of Louisiana be doing at such a function?" he asked, his voice laced with sarcasm. "I suppose I could ask why the investigator of Area 5 has left his post without contacting his sheriff, but" He paused, waving his hand dismissively. "But I honestly don't give a fuck," he finished.

The tall Viking looked me in the eye for the first time. "I take it that your contract negotiations with the queen were successful?"

"Yes," I responded somewhat breathlessly, feeling even more awkward as the only three men I'd ever had sex with seemed to be closing in on me. But then Eric took a step back from me.

"Good," he said, even as he looked past me. "Well—I will take my leave." I couldn't help but to follow Eric's exit from the little group with my gaze. He walked toward a beautiful woman who was carrying a glass of champagne in one hand and a glass of blood in the other. Eric took the

drink she'd brought for him and smiled at her before taking her arm and disappearing with her into the crowd.

"Beautiful—isn't she? Her name is Olivia, and she's with the new accounting firm we just hired." Pam commented, clearly amused at my discomfort.

While I'd expected to feel awkward when/if I ever saw Eric again, I didn't expect that I would feel jealous. But the green-eyed monster reared its ugly head, nonetheless.

"I didn't notice," I lied. Making things worse, everyone still gathered around me *knew* that I'd lied. And—immediately—I felt guilty. After all, I didn't have the right to my jealousy. And I didn't have the right to care about whether or not Eric had moved on! I certainly had.

I looked up at Quinn and smiled. "Okay—I *did* notice. Eric's date *is* very pretty. And I really do hope Eric's happy because that's what I'm looking for myself."

Quinn beamed down at me.

Thankfully, after my confession, Bill and Pam went off in different directions to mingle—or to do whatever the vampire version of mingling was.

"Well—I guess I'd better get to work," I said to my date.

Quinn looked a little nonplussed (thank you Word-of-the-Day Calendar) when I told him that I needed to *not* be touching him in order to drop my shields and listen to everyone else. I figured he had the right to feel a little possessive. It was quite evident that he hated the fact that I'd had to take Bill's blood the day before. And I hadn't even told him that I could now "feel" Bill's emotions to a certain extent.

But—then again—I hadn't told Bill about my new ability either. Similarly, I had hidden my very rare forays into vampires' minds. So it seemed logical to hide my knowledge of Bill's emotions.

I'd just dropped my shields when all hell broke loose!

Screaming from voices and from minds!

There was a sudden frenzy in the room, along with cries of violence and of fear. And there was blood, seemingly floating in the air!

“Was that a head?” I gasped in surreal disbelief as I watched something fly by me.

Quinn didn’t answer me, but—then again—he was busy shifting into his tiger form. With a loud roar, he jumped into the melee. At the same time, I ducked behind one of the columns in the large room in order to avoid a sword strike and tried to figure out an escape route. From my crouched position, I noticed that most of the fighting had—thankfully—broken out on the other side of the room, and I carefully made my way toward the nearest wall in the opposite direction, hoping that I could hover against that wall until I could reach the nearest exit.

I felt a swish of air nearby and noticed that Eric had zipped his date over to the same door that I was looking to get to. After speaking words I was too far away to hear, Eric bent down quickly to kiss her forehead, and I felt a pang in my heart. He watched her retreating figure for a moment—obviously making sure that she got away safely—and then he literally flew into the battle. I couldn’t take my eyes off of him for a moment. With a kind of brutality that I didn’t have the ability to describe—let alone to understand—he ripped off the head of a vampire and threw it toward another—as if he’d invented a new kind of bowling. I wondered briefly if he’d also been responsible for the first head I’d seen flying through the room. I cringed and refocused on the wall and my exit, being careful to avoid the various fights that had broken out in my path.

I noted that Desmond Cataliades seemed to have ripped the leg off of Jade Flower’s body. And he was hitting her with it. I had to alter my escape path in order to avoid them, but I eventually got to the wall and began to inch my way toward the door.

That’s when I saw a flash of dark hair; moments later, a lethal-looking vampire appeared between me and the door.

Before I could even scream for help, however, another vampire flashed to my side and killed my would-be attacker, who'd apparently decided that I would be a tasty mid-battle meal.

Eric.

"Eric," I whispered as he dropped his foe's quickly dissipating body onto the floor. For a moment, his eyes seemed to shine as they scrutinized me. And then he was gone again. Almost immediately, Pam appeared in his place.

"Pam?" I asked, my brain not quite caught up with the quick switching of blond vampires in front of me.

"Why Ms. Stackhouse," she said almost casually—despite the fact that her gorgeous white pantsuit now looked like a Jackson Pollock piece. "I see that you have attracted trouble—just like always."

"I'm trying to get out of here," I returned with a hiss.

"Well—in that case—then let me help you," she grinned. I noticed that her fangs were stained red with blood, and she looked terrifying.

But I was still happy she was there.

"Thank you," I said sincerely as she took me by the arm and led me to the door to the ballroom.

"Where's your tiger? Where's Bill?" she asked.

"Fighting," I said with a frown. "Why?"

She sighed and shook her head a little. "No reason. Look—the kitchen it down that corridor and to the left," she explained as she pointed. "Get there, and you will be safe."

And, with that, she was gone.

I followed Pam's directions and quickly made my way to the kitchen, but the door was locked—not to mention the fact that it seemed to be made of steel and/or silver. I was just getting

ready to head elsewhere when the door opened and I was pulled inside by a man in a chef's uniform. Quickly, the door was shut behind me, and I noticed that there was a camera feed showing the corridor outside. Looking around, I saw about a dozen humans, including Olivia, hunkered down.

“What’s going on out there?” the man in the chef’s uniform asked me.

I looked at him with confusion.

“With the battle,” he clarified.

“Oh—uh—lots of killing,” I stammered.

“Of course! But is our side winning at least?” the chef asked with impatience.

“Uh—yeah—I think so,” I said, even though I wasn’t sure. I lowered my shields to make sure that everyone in the room was, indeed, on the queen’s side. They were—thankfully—but the fear, anxiety, and excitement in their thoughts quickly overwhelmed me.

I’m certain that crushing feeling showed on my face before I was able to put my shields back in place.

“Don’t worry about anything,” another man said. “That door is steel with a silver coating. We’ll be fine in here until the battle’s over. Queen Sophie-Anne takes care of her humans,” he added, motioning to the monitor.

I could see that there was another human outside.

“Is he one of ours?” a woman asked.

“Yeah, that’s Michael, Rasul’s companion tonight,” Olivia said. “Eric introduced us.”

Quickly, the door was opened, and Rasul’s date joined us inside.

He was gasping for breath.

“You okay?” Olivia asked with concern as she went over to Michael and placed her arm around him as if to help to steady him.

“Yeah—but it took some doing for Rasul to get me safely out of there! We were right in the middle of things when the fight broke out.”

The chef brought him some water. “Is our side winning?” he asked.

Michael nodded. “The Arkansas bunch is fighting hard, but last I saw, Sheriff Northman had captured King Threadgill, so it will be over very soon.

I noticed that Olivia smiled softly—proudly—as she led Michael to where she’d been sitting and got him settled.

I couldn’t help but to study her for a moment. She truly was lovely. She had brown hair, which seemed to shine. Her eyes were hazel—the kind of eyes that would change color depending on what a person wore. Her impeccable strapless black dress brought out the green and the blue flecks in them. She was likely about an inch shorter than I was, but she seemed taller, given the height of her heels and posture that Gran would have celebrated.

She’d certainly never celebrated mine, always having to remind me to stand up straight and tall when I would slouch. Even at that moment, I realized that my shoulders were slumped as the anxiety of the thoughts in the room was beginning to bear weight against my shields.

Quickly, I tried to straighten my back, but I could easily see that, even then, I compared unfavorably to Olivia. She had a natural grace about her, and she seemed a perfect representation of what society would think of as beautiful—without being too skinny. She was also clearly compassionate and her eyes seemed kind as she looked after Michael. And Pam had said that she was an accountant too, so that meant she was smart.

She was the kind of woman that women like me often hated, but I found myself unable to do that as she continued to fuss over Michael, bringing him another glass of water before talking to him quietly until he had calmed down. I still felt a little jealousy when I looked at her, but I wasn’t petty enough to ignore the fact that she was clearly better for Eric than I was.

Hell—she'd likely be better for anyone than I was!

My thoughts were interrupted as a vampire suddenly appeared in front of the monitor.

My heart skipped when I saw that it was Eric.

However, when the door opened, he didn't come to me. He zipped to Olivia.

"Is it over?" she asked as he embraced her.

"Yes. You are alright?"

She nodded.

"Good," Eric said warmly.

"Did we win?" the chef asked.

"Oh—yes!" the vampire said with an almost sinister smirk on his face. Clearly, he'd enjoyed the battle. "If there are any willing donors in here, please meet with Rasul and my child, Pam, outside the ballroom. They will ensure your safety as you feed the wounded."

Quickly, every human except for Olivia and I had left to help.

I would have too, but I worried that my blood might cause another battle.

Surprisingly, Eric shut the door behind the humans quickly, though he was careful not to touch the silver.

"Do you need to feed?" Olivia asked him.

Eric shook his head. "No thank you. What I took earlier has sufficed."

Olivia blushed a little, and I felt my jealousy spike again.

"I do, however, wish to ask you a favor," he said to Olivia as I stood there watching them. I wanted to turn away, but I couldn't.

"Of course," she said.

"I need to speak with this woman for a moment," he said, gesturing slightly in my direction, "and I need to do it in private; however, I don't want you to be alone out there," he explained.

“You want to glamour me—so I don’t remember what I’m about to hear?” she asked.

“Yes,” he answered.

“Okay. I trust you,” she responded quickly and assuredly, even as my jealousy turned to shame.

Yes—Olivia put me to shame in a lot of ways. And she was *certainly* better for Eric, a fact which bit into me with the venom of a snake bite.

“Thank you,” Eric said before capturing Olivia with his glamour. “You will sit quietly and not remember anything else which occurs in this room.”

“Sure,” Olivia said in the dreamy tone that humans under the influence of glamour adopted.

My heart skipped as Eric turned to look at me for the first time since he’d come into the room.

He looked angry. And his tone conveyed that anger. “I thought you craved a normal life, Sookie.”

“What—uh—I do,” I responded, my own hackles immediately rising.

“Then why pick the weretiger? Why complete a bond with Bill?” he yelled.

“Quinn is normal—*for me!*” I yelled back.

“Quinn runs a company catering to *Supernaturals*. And he works for the King of Nevada—likely as a fucking spy!”

“Well—I don’t care what his job is or whom he works for. He’s not spying on me!” I said insistently, my hands going to my hips. “And what do you mean by completing a bond with Bill?”

“Tell me—do you feel Bill’s emotions?” Eric asked bitterly.

“Yeah, but that’s just because I had to take a lot of his blood yesterday,” I returned, immediately worried that I shouldn’t have admitted feeling Bill’s emotions at all—let alone to Eric.

“I felt your anxiety,” Eric frowned.

“Huh?” I asked, not quite following the turn in the conversation.

“Yesterday night and two nights before that,” he clarified, “I felt your fear.”

“Yet you didn’t come,” I said bitterly.

He pinched the bridge of his nose. “You calmed relatively quickly both times. Plus, I was in Shreveport when I felt your distress.”

“Oh,” I responded, my anger deflating a little.

He looked frustrated. “You know—you *don’t* get to have it both ways, Sookie. You cannot be angry at me for not coming to your rescue when you don’t want me in your life.”

“I never said I didn’t want you in my life,” I whispered.

He didn’t respond to that declaration. And---honestly—I was a little surprised that I’d made it, but I knew it was true.

“I miss you, Eric,” I admitted before shaking my head. “I know that’s not fair of me to say. But I do. I miss you. And I miss *him*. I wrung my hands as a tear swept down my cheek. I’m sorry. Everything’s just so confusing.”

“I can feel your confusion,” he said softly.

I sighed and looked over at Olivia. “She seems like a good person.”

“She is,” he responded.

“And does she make you happy?” I asked, trying not to sound like a jealous twit.

And trying to remind myself that the Eric I was looking at wasn’t the man who’d once fallen in love with me—trying to keep myself from grieving over the loss of him yet again.

“Olivia is a good companion for me,” he answered. “And she is not a trouble magnet,” he added with a slight smirk.

“Well, thank God for that!” I chuckled, wishing that I could laugh away the awkwardness that had settled into the room. But I couldn’t.

“Did Bill—*at least*—tell you that your blood bond with him was permanent now?” he asked after a moment, his shoulders slumping a little.

“Permanent? What do you mean?”

He shook his head and frowned. “Of course, he didn’t. Bill is too much of a fool to be upfront with you.”

“Wait a minute. He saved my life,” I defended. “And—uh—what do you mean about being upfront?”

“I mean that Bill is not as he seems,” he said, his voice sounding far away for a moment.

I sighed with exasperation. “Eric, is this really the time to talk about all this?”

“I suppose not,” he returned, his expression hardening. “And, even if I told you what I know, you would not believe me,” he added bitterly. “However—remember this: Sophie-Anne now owes you a favor.”

“A favor?”

“The bracelet,” he responded. “I was told to bring several in my retinue to the ball because the queen knew that there would be a fight if it couldn’t be recovered. But—as it turned out—it didn’t matter that she had the bracelet. Peter Threadgill was just looking for an excuse to try to take over Louisiana. Luckily, we were ready for battle anyway.”

“Why did the queen make an arrangement with him to begin with?” I asked. “I mean—Arkansas can’t be that rich of a state.”

“Arkansas is a good investment,” Eric informed. “Vampires now own several casinos along the Mississippi. Plus, Arkansas is a bordering state, and that is usually best when forming alliances.”

“Why not go for Texas or Mississippi then?” I asked, even as I found it somewhat odd that Eric was talking politics with me. However, politics was certainly an easier topic to deal with than the ‘personal.’

“Stan and Sophie-Anne are already committed allies, so a marriage would do little for either of them. And Mississippi will soon be marrying the King of Indiana,” the vampire informed. “I advocated Tennessee—for Bubba’s sake, really. But the king of that state is boorish, and Sophie-Anne couldn’t abide him. At least, she didn’t go for Oklahoma,” he said with a look of distaste.

“Oh?” I asked, not knowing what other reaction to make, given the fact that this was my first lesson in the region’s monarchs.

“She’s an unimaginable bitch,” Eric clarified.

“Um—okay. So—uh—the queen picked Arkansas. What’ll happen now?” I asked.

“Threadgill has been captured. There will be a trial. He will likely lose his head, and the queen will get Arkansas through,” he paused, “legal means.”

“Oh,” I said. I figured that the “legal means” Eric was talking about didn’t refer to human laws.

The Viking seemed to be considering his words for a moment. “You should use your favor with the queen to find out about Bill.”

I sighed, wishing that the conversation hadn’t veered back to that topic. “Why?” I asked, trying to keep my frustration from bubbling over.

“Earlier tonight I learned something regarding Bill’s assignments,” Eric said enigmatically.

“His database?” I asked.

“That and *more*,” he emphasized. “I think you have a right to know about the reasons why he left Sophie-Anne’s court, and she could tell you the whole story. And you would believe her.”

Suddenly, I felt frustration that wasn’t mine, and I noticed Bill in the monitor.

Eric noticed him too and looked torn. He went to take Olivia’s arm and moved toward the door, but he paused there, looking at Bill in the monitor. “You should not trust Bill to tell you about the bond, but learn about it where you can. And—if you ever want to learn more about,” he

paused, “*everything*, then call in your favor with the queen.” He looked at me even as he raised his hand toward the door handle, which obviously had no silver in it. “But make sure that you truly want to know before you ask.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

He didn’t answer that. He just looked at me for a moment, his eyes momentarily seeming so much like “my” Eric’s eyes that my heart ached. And then he opened the door to Bill.

Chapter 05: Devoured

“An infallible method of conciliating a tiger is to allow oneself to be devoured.”

—Konrad Adenauer

Bill hurried into the kitchen/bunker, glaring at Eric as he did. But the Viking vampire didn't even look at him as he made his exit with Olivia. Once in front of me, Bill looked me over very carefully—likely to check for wounds.

“You are uninjured?” he asked.

“I'm fine,” I responded.

“Do you require any blood?” he asked, bringing his wrist toward his mouth.

I shook my head. “No! Like I said, I'm fine,” I responded firmly, wondering why Bill was offering when—for once—I hadn't been hurt. However, just as I was getting ready to ask him about that and about the most recent effects of his blood, I noticed Quinn at the door and immediately opened it to him.

Quinn was dressed only in his suit pants and a wife beater shirt. He looked between Bill and me with suspicion—as if he'd caught us with our figurative pants down—even though my dress was right where it had been since I left Hadley's apartment, though it was a bit worse for wear.

For several moments, I worried that the two were going to fight over me like I was a nice, juicy bone, but they didn't.

Thankfully.

“I will escort you back to your cousin’s apartment,” Bill said as if daring Quinn to argue with him.

However, before Quinn could say anything, I made my own feelings about Bill’s out-of-line posturing be known. “No thank you, Bill,” I said firmly. “I’ll be leaving with Quinn.”

“But Sookie,” Bill implored, his accent thick, “there could be more trouble.”

“And I will be safe with my date,” I emphasized, hoping to placate Quinn with my words as well as to discourage Bill.

Honestly, the testosterone in the room was getting suffocating.

Once we were in the limo, Quinn said that he’d be driving me to Bon Temps that very night.

Wanting to get home, I didn’t argue.

Quinn waited for me at Hadley’s apartment as I collected my things before saying goodbye to Amelia and arranging for Hadley’s packed-up items to be given to charity.

Very little was said between us during the trip north. It was clear that Quinn was frustrated by the whole situation—but especially about finding Bill and me together, though nothing had been happening between us. Not that Quinn asked.

Honestly, I didn’t have the energy to proclaim my innocence to the brooding weretiger. I was bone-tired and fell asleep quickly once it became clear that Quinn’s responses to the questions I asked him about the battle would be one word answers—or grunts.

I woke up to Quinn carrying me inside my house to my bed and woke up even more when he started kissing my lips and then my neck. My body was returning his attentions even before my mind was fully aware.

I knew that Quinn and I had some things to talk about; for one, I really didn’t appreciate his attitude since Bill had given me his blood. I felt as if Quinn had been trying to “punish me” for crimes that I’d not committed.

However—perhaps, to my shame—I wasn’t adverse to his attentions as he took off my clothing. In truth, I wanted to feel good in that moment. I wanted to forget the blood I’d seen at the ball. I wanted to forget the Pelts and Bill and mysterious bonds and Eric and Olivia.

The colors of Quinn’s mind were deep oranges and reds as he plunged into me. I groaned from both pleasure and a little discomfort. I hadn’t been as aroused as I probably needed to be in order to take someone of Quinn’s size. My mind flashed to Eric for a moment. Though longer than Quinn—and thicker too—I’d never felt discomfort with him. Quickly, I focused my thoughts back upon the man I was with. After all, I’d once hated the idea that men’s thoughts might turn to other women when they were with me in an intimate setting.

And though I was beginning to understand how I’d been hypocritical about quite a few things during the past year, I didn’t want to be that way. So focus on Quinn I did.

Thankfully, my body quickly responded to his thrusts and caught up in the lubrication department. So I was soon feeling only pleasure as Quinn moved in and out of me again and again. I gripped his forearms in order to keep up and anchor myself so that I could give back too, and I marveled at the muscles I found in my hands.

However, just as I was about to reach my completion, I heard a thought propel its way through the hues of his mind: *“Claim. Claim. Claim. Claim.”*

At first, I just thought it was the normal “Supe” refrain, but then more formed thoughts broke through the oranges and reds.

“If I get her pregnant, de Castro will consider my debt paid. Please—let this work. Please let the brat be a telepath. I have to protect my mother. Sister. Even if I have to screw this fang-whore to do it. Take it, slut! Take it!” his thoughts yelled. *“Take a live man’s load, you dirty fangbanging slut!”*

I froze, but Quinn didn’t seem to notice as he pounded into me twice more and then came—hard.

Oh no! Oh God!

In the next moment, his body landed on top of mine uncomfortably. Quinn was a large man, after all, and—for several seconds—I felt trapped.

I was trapped.

And suffocating.

And devastated.

And stupid.

I felt used.

Like a whore.

I wanted to cry. To scream. To hit. To deny.

To curl up and die.

But I knew none of those things would help me. So I just lay there, trying to breathe through my nose—trying to pretend that Quinn hadn't just thought about me as a brood mare.

Trying to pretend that he'd not thought of me as a slut.

“That was great, babe,” he panted when he finally moved off of me.

“Crazy Sookie” came to my rescue, and I mustered a smile. “Yeah—perfect. I'll just—uh—go to the bathroom and clean up. Okay?”

He seemed to half grunt in agreement and half snore, and when I returned to the bedroom after scrubbing between my legs with a scalding cloth as best I could, he was snoring.

I was grateful for that. I grabbed some clean clothes and returned to the bathroom. I felt numb as I took a shower, scrubbing my body even more—until it was beet red.

One name kept going through my mind: de Castro. Who was he?

After I got out of the shower, I stared into the mirror for what seemed like hours. I'd always avoided looking into mirrors for too long. Seeing the unflattering side of oneself from people's

thoughts was already bad enough. But I forced myself to stand there—finding all of my flaws until they were the only thing I could see.

The only thing left of me.

Finally, I became disgusted with my image, quietly left the bathroom, tiptoed to the kitchen, and made coffee.

I closed my eyes tightly as the beverage brewed. I was naïve and inexperienced when it came to sex. And my previous encounters had been with vampires. Still—how had I not thought about birth control before I had sex with Quinn?!?

How fucking stupid was I?

And then the horror of mathematics hit me: it was a week and a half past my last period.

Prime time for getting pregnant.

I poured myself a cup of coffee and sat down numbly at the table; however, after a single drink, I felt guilty.

So I poured out my cup and made herbal tea.

A couple of hours later, my thoughts were still spinning as I rocked on the porch swing.

“Thanks for making coffee, babe,” Quinn smiled as he stepped out onto the porch with a large mug of the beverage I refused to drink.

Just in case.

“Sure,” I said, trying to smile back.

“You okay?” he asked.

“Still processing last night.”

“Well vamps are bad news,” he said with a hint of disgust.

“You’re right,” I agreed, trying to keep my voice calm and even.

He came to sit next to me, his eyes telling me that he was up for another round of sex.

I doubt if my body language demonstrated that I was up for that idea, but Quinn still leaned toward me and kissed my neck.

I'd not eaten a thing in almost a day, yet my stomach turned, and bile rose to my throat.

"I'm—uh—sore," I said as Quinn continued to kiss toward my collarbone and took a breast in his hand.

"Sore?" he asked.

"Down there," I said, trying to sound shy and apologetic. "You're large."

I almost laughed at Quinn's expression, which was a mixture of pride and disappointment.

"I can go slowly," he purred seductively, even as he put his cup down so that he could fondle my other breast as well.

Trying to act disappointed, I gently pushed his hands away. "I really am sore, Quinn."

He stood up abruptly and huffed out a curse.

"I'm sorry, Quinn," I found myself saying as I drew my legs up toward my body. In truth, I felt a little scared of him just then.

"No—I'm sorry," he said, turning around and thrusting his hands into his pockets. He looked truly contrite. "I really am. It's just that I want you, and I need to remember that you're only . . ." He stopped midsentence.

"Human," I completed for him as he moved back toward me.

I could tell that he really was contrite at the thought that he may have taken me too hard earlier that morning. And, for the first time, I dropped my shields completely and "listened" to him as I reached out for his hand as if trying to soothe his ruffled feathers—or fur in this case.

He sat back next to me and picked up his coffee, though he didn't drop my hand. I swallowed my bile and pride as I leaned against him in order to gain even better access to his thoughts.

I sighed as if contented by our cuddle—when all I wanted to do was pull away. But pulling away—being ignorant—had gotten me into my current mess.

So I listened as hard as I could—though he was difficult to hear.

Quinn was thinking about how he truly hadn't wanted to hurt me physically, and then some horribly graphic thoughts about finding his mother after she'd been raped entered his mind before he could push them back into the recesses of his subconscious. After that, he thought about how he wanted to leave my house as soon as possible, despite the fact that he felt he should fuck me one more time so that I'd be more likely to get pregnant. His distaste at that idea was accompanied by thoughts of Bill and Eric—as well as more labeling of me as a “fang-whore.”

He thought about how he didn't want to have a child with a “freak” like me, though de Castro felt it would be the best way to get me to move to Nevada. Quinn was supposed to “romance me,” impregnate me, and then bring me to Nevada as his blushing bride. In return, the weretiger would earn freedom for his family.

Unsurprisingly, given his other thoughts, Quinn didn't want me to be his bride for long. He was hoping that de Castro would let him divorce me once I was officially a resident of Nevada.

He thought about how I'd “voluntarily opened my legs for corpses.” He figured I'd do the same for de Castro and any other vamps that asked. He was truly disgusted by me.

Again, I swallowed hard to keep from vomiting as I kept listening.

Quinn's next thoughts went to the upcoming job he had in Dallas, and he knew that—if he was able to scope out the event site before dark—he would have time to visit a “booty call” in Ft. Worth before he had to catch a plane back to Las Vegas.

He thought about the woman he was going to see and wondered if her bout with chlamydia had been dealt with before deciding that he would use a condom regardless. He didn't want to have to go through taking the antibiotics again.

My stomach turned once more, but as it did my mind clicked upon a way that I could use my nausea in my favor.

I decided to run for the nearest toilet. However, I didn't even make it off the porch before I was spilling all of the contents of my stomach.

“Hey—are you alright, babe?” Quinn asked as he walked to my side and then backed off a bit as I continued to dry heave. The bastard didn't even have the decency to hold my hair!

However, during the minutes that I couldn't stop myself from heaving until there was no longer even any stomach acid for me to cough up, I crafted a lie the likes of which even a professional conman would be proud of. And then I rose and excused myself to go to the bathroom.

I exited a few minutes later with minty breath and a forlorn look.

“You okay?” Quinn asked, his own face etched with concern, but not because I was sick. No—he was concerned because he wouldn't be able to fuck me again.

My stomach almost found more to heave up, but it settled for a slight wretch.

Quinn backed up a little.

“No, I'm not okay,” I finally said. “Quinn, I have something I need to tell you,” I whispered, trying to look both ashamed and contrite.

“Okay,” the weretiger said, looking almost as sick as I did when I couldn't help but to wretch again. Luckily, nothing was expelled from my body beyond a burp.

I led the weretiger to the couch and began crying tears of shame.

They weren't even crocodile tears. I *was* ashamed of myself. I was ashamed that I'd trusted Quinn—that I'd not listened to him with all of my might from the very start.

In that moment, I knew two things for certain. I was alone. And that was what I deserved.

“My” Eric’s face jumped into my mind as fresh tears came to me. But I pushed back thoughts of him as I forced myself to begin my tall tale.

“Four weeks ago,” I whimpered, “I—uh—went with my friend, Claudine, to her brother’s strip club. I—uh—got a little drunk—actually a lot drunk—and I hooked up with a guy there.”

Quinn’s mind screamed a single word, “Whore!”

But his mouth was silent, and I didn’t let myself react to his unspoken thought.

Instead, I plowed through my story. “It was a one-time thing, Quinn. I promise. And I’d never done anything like that before,” I whimpered. “I don’t even know the man’s name. And Claudine didn’t know him either.” I sniffled. “And now I’m afraid—after what just happened—that I might have gotten pregnant by him.”

“What?” Quinn yelled.

“You see—I’m never sick. But I am today, and I was nauseated yesterday morning too. And when I told you I was sore earlier, it’s not just my . . .” I stopped midsentence and let shame overtake me. “It’s not just down there,” I emphasized. “My breasts have been sore too. I didn’t really think anything of it—until I threw up again. And now I’m just so . . .” I stopped again and cried. “I’m just so worried I’ll lose you if I’m pregnant with another man’s child!” I lied.

My shields were down and I was listening for his reaction.

Immediately, Quinn’s mind flew to what de Castro’s reaction would be when he learned that he’d failed in his mission to impregnate me himself. This time when he thought of de Castro, I caught an image of a vampire dressed in a cape and wearing a crown.

Quinn began to consider ways that he could spin the situation for his benefit. After all, if I was already pregnant, de Castro certainly couldn't hold him accountable—right? Quinn also felt that de Castro would “let him off the hook” as far as I was concerned. And that was just fine by him. And—certainly—okay by me. But I still needed to play my part.

I shook my head contritely. “I'm so sorry, Quinn! I really am. I just—I made a mistake with that guy. I truly did—*do*—like you.”

“Who was he?” Quinn asked, his eyes glowing yellow.

“Like I said, I don't even know his name,” I cried. “I don't know anything about him except that he was from out of town.” I shook my head in shame. “I can't even remember much about that night—except that I woke up naked in an otherwise empty bed the next morning.” I let out another cry. “He didn't even leave a note.”

“Whore!” Quinn's thoughts shouted again, even though his mouth remained tightly shut. He was still incredibly difficult for me to read, especially now that I wasn't touching him, but when he thought “at” me, I found that I could hear him as long as my shields were down and I was concentrating on his thoughts.

In that moment, he was thinking about needing confirmation—so that de Castro would be satisfied.

Uh-Oh.

Quinn got up abruptly and grabbed his keys from the table near the entryway.

“Are you leaving?” I hiccupped.

“I'm going to get a pregnancy test for you,” he gruffed. And, with that, he was out the door.

I harnessed all of the strength I could in order to try to follow his thoughts as he went to his car.

They were fragmented.

However, I could pick up that he was worried. He was wondering if he should try to convince me that an abortion was my best option or if he should count his lucky stars if I'd already been knocked up by some anonymous dick. He was leaning toward the latter option.

Once he was gone, I picked up the phone and called the only person I thought could give me any kind of answer—at least, during the daytime—to the biggest question on my mind.

“This is Desmond Cataliades,” the voice said.

“Hi. It’s Sookie Stackhouse,” I returned.

“Ah—Miss Stackhouse. I am glad to hear that you are safe.”

My mind fluttered to the image of the demon lawyer beating a vampire with her own leg.

“You—uh—too,” I said. “I am calling with a question.”

“About your payment? No need to worry. Even though you were unable to warn us of trouble using your gift last night, the fact that you returned the bracelet was worthy of your fee. Plus, the queen understands that you wouldn’t have had time to learn of Threadgill’s impromptu attack anyway. It’s clear the humans in his group had no idea!”

“Uh—that’s good. But that’s not why I’m calling.”

“Oh?” he asked.

“Who is de Castro?”

“Felipe de Castro is the vampire king of Nevada,” he confirmed. “Why? How do you know that name?”

I took a deep breath. “Quinn works for him,” I sighed.

“Yes. Well—he used to. He was once a star in the Vegas pits.”

“Pits?”

“Fighting rings,” the demon lawyer clarified. “Like human cage matches but with higher stakes.”

I couldn't help but to wonder if Mr. Cataliades had meant the word "stakes" as an intentional pun.

I closed my eyes. "Okay, but Quinn is *still* working for de Castro—as a spy. He got—uh—*close* to me because de Castro wanted him to."

"What more did you hear from him?" Mr. Cataliades asked.

"That he was sent to impregnate me so that I'd go with him to Las Vegas. It seems clear that de Castro knows I'm a telepath and wants me to be in his territory," I added flatly, "preferably knocked up with a telepathic child."

"Are you—pregnant?" he asked tentatively.

"I don't know," I said, my voice shaking. "It's too soon to know. Um—I need to go," I said, wiping tears from my eyes. After hanging up without a goodbye and chastising myself for my rudeness, I went into the kitchen, opened the "junk drawer," and grabbed the little box holding a variety of colored pencils, pens, and highlighters that Gran had accumulated over the years. Then I took those supplies into the bathroom before stowing them under the counter.

After that, I walked over to the fireplace mantle; however, I could look at the picture of Gran only for a few moments before I had to turn away. I fell to my knees and stared at the ashes in the fireplace.

I cried as I thought about the last time there had been a fire lit in my home. Eric had lit it.

Given the fact that March had brought warm weather with it, there was no need for a fire, but I found myself stacking wood into a pyramid shape, nonetheless. I added newspaper under the wood and then struck a match. And then I grabbed the afghan and wrapped myself inside of it, shivering as I did so.

I found that I couldn't get warm.

I sat in front of the fire, rocking my body as more tears fell.

And I waited for Quinn to return.

Chapter 06: A Delicate Position, Part 1

JUNE 1, 2005

SOPHIE-ANNE POV

God—I was tired of listening to Bill Compton!

Not only did he tend to repeat himself—making me wonder if he considered me devoid of perfect recall, a talent that even Bubba enjoyed—but also his accent was grating.

Very, very grating.

“Why did I ever allow him to live at court?” I sent to Andre telepathically.

“He *used* to be a good procurer,” he sent back.

“Good thing procurers are a need of the past,” I sent.

“In that case, please allow me to stake him before he bores us to death,” my eldest child deadpanned.

Out loud!

Naughty boy.

I couldn’t help but to laugh as Bill turned to my child with a contorted and confused look on his face.

Seriously! How could a vampire look constipated?

“Now be nice, Andre,” I chastised telepathically.

His leering stare at Bill was anything but nice.

“Sookeh is my bonded!” Bill said. “And, by right, I should earn a part of anything she makes working for you.”

“Is she?” I asked with a smirk. “Is she truly your bonded? Your scent *is* strong in her—I admit—but I have my doubts, considering her lack of acknowledgment of you. Why—she doesn’t

seem to heel at all! And she told me on the phone just the other day that she belonged to only one person.”

“Who?” Bill demanded. His eyes looked desperate.

Pathetic.

“Herself,” I returned calmly.

“But she’s my bonded!” he insisted again. “She doesn’t have a choice.”

“Andre?” I asked, looking at my child. “Explain it to Bill—*again*.”

“Miss Stackhouse is part Fae, so even if we still operated in the old ways—which we no longer do now that we are known to humans—she couldn’t be claimed without her consent,” Andre elucidated.

“Why not?” Bill challenged. “She is *mostly* human and none of her fairy kin has done anything to claim or support her—as I have.”

I rolled my eyes. Claim? Yes. Support? Clearly not!

“Bill, didn’t you tell me—just last January—that a fairy named Claudine had made contact with Sookie?”

Bill frowned. “That doesn’t mean anything.”

“It means *everything*,” Andre said with annoyance.

“Claudine Crane is not just any fairy,” I explained. “And—even if her presence didn’t *most certainly* mean that Sookie was being watched over by the fairies—I am not going against the treaties forged between the Fae and our kind centuries ago!” I emphasized.

“But *you* are the one who sent me for her to start with!” Bill pouted.

Fucking infant!

“When my dearest Hadley told me about her *gifted* cousin, I did send you, Bill. Do you recall my exact orders?” I asked, keeping my tone a steely calm.

Bill's constipated look became even more grotesque.

"Remind him Andre," I said.

My child smirked. He was enjoying himself.

"Assess whether Miss Stackhouse truly is a telepath. Assess her level of control. Help her with her gift if possible. Make sure she stays safe. And—when she seems comfortable around vampires—explain Hadley's situation and the employment opportunity the queen could offer her. Finally, arrange for a meeting between Miss Stackhouse and the queen—either here or in Bon Temps."

"I tried to follow your orders to the letter!" Bill insisted.

Andre scoffed.

"It was *Eric* who interfered," Bill tried.

I sighed. "Yes—you've said that. *A lot!* But it was *Eric's* contract template which helped to expedite Sookie's employment with me. Moreover, she's been in so much danger around you that the odor of your blood practically wafts from her."

"Exactly!" Bill said almost triumphantly. "That proves we are bonded."

"No—it doesn't," I replied. "Remember, Bill, it's not *quantity* that determines whether a bond has formed."

"It's quality," Andre muttered.

"Anyway," I continued, outwardly ignoring Andre's snide comment even as I was amused by it, "Dr. Ludwig's interesting report on the Maenad matter indicated that 'any blood ties Sookie had before then were likely altered and/or weakened significantly.' I believe those were her exact words. Andre?"

"Verbatim," he confirmed with a smirk.

I smiled at him. "Such a good memory," I praised.

“Wait! What? Ludwig gave you a report on the—uh—Maenad attack?” Bill stammered.

“Odd that you didn’t,” Andre muttered.

“So you see, you likely do *not* have a bond with Miss Stackhouse,” I said, pretending to overlook Bill’s past attempt at either trying to cover his own ass or trying to mislead me regarding Sookie. Probably, he’d been attempting to do both.

Bill looked agitated for a moment—and then unsure. “I have had her blood many times, and she’s had mine more than the three times required.”

“Before or after the Maenad incident?” I asked, causing him to look even more unsure.

It was then that Andre decided to twist the knife I’d slowly inserted.

“And recall that it *does* take more exchanges for the less potent of us, Billy boy,” Andre said sarcastically.

“Now, now, Andre,” I pretended to chastise. “I imagine that Bill’s blood is perfectly—*adequate*.” I sat forward in my throne. “Tell me—what does Sookie think about your so-called bond? And about your trying to take some of her payment as your own?”

“Sookeh is in a,” he paused, “delicate position at the moment. I wouldn’t want to add to her stress by speaking of such matters with her. But Sookeh *is* mine!” he emphasized.

“Then you should learn to say her goddamned name correctly,” Andre intoned under his breath. Of course, Bill and I could hear him perfectly.

Bill turned to glare at him.

“You *do* tend to pronounce something resembling ‘Sookeh’ rather than ‘Sookie,’ which is an unusual, but not particularly difficult name to say,” I teased, enjoying Bill’s discomfort immensely.

“Can you say Cookie, Bill?” Andre asked.

I giggled as Bill seethed, though he didn’t dare drop fang.

“So—back to the topic,” I said, drumming my fingernails onto the arms of my chair. “I have heard that Sookie is pregnant.”

“How?” he asked me as if affronted.

Idiot. If he were the loyal subject he claimed to be, he would have been the one to tell me.

I scoffed. “Well—like I said—I spoke to Miss Stackhouse on the phone when we arranged her work schedule, and the matter came up in regards to her security. Plus, Quinn has been anything but,” I paused, “discreet. In fact, he has let it be clearly known that Miss Stackhouse was pregnant *before* they got together. Apparently, he wants no one to accuse him of being the child’s sire.”

“*And* he is blaming Miss Stackhouse for a bout of chlamydia,” Andre added with a chuckle.

“Do not speak of Sookie like that!” Bill yelled.

“*Sookie*, Bill!” I corrected. “And he was speaking of *Quinn*,” I said, my fangs popping downward. “And you are trying my patience! Sookie signed her contract with me *before* you finished your *maybe* bond with her—*if* there even is one! So I find that your claim on her is not outweighed by my own!”

Bill growled.

I smirked. “Oh, Bill. You *have* been so annoying lately—so fucking full of yourself. And, though your work on the database *is* valuable, there are other tech savvy vampires in the world.”

“None could have accomplished what I have,” he said arrogantly.

“Let’s see what you can accomplish while spending a week in my dungeon,” I smiled.

Andre’s grin was much more feral than mine as he took Bill into custody.

“Just put him in a cell. Do *not* chain him in silver,” I told him telepathically.

“Why not?” Andre pouted back to me in the same way.

I continued telepathically. “Whether I like it or not, Bill actually does *seem* to have a bond with Sookie, and harming him would potentially harm her. And I think she’s been harmed enough—don’t you?”

Andre nodded almost imperceptively and then hauled Compton out of my receiving room. I pulled my phone out of my bodice and dialed.

“Pamela,” I purred at Northman’s child. “How is my favorite cunnilinguist?” I asked, making up a new word for her.

Indeed, Pam deserved to have a word coined after her skills of cunnilingus, for she truly was the best when it came to making a woman cum.

“Just fine, your majesty,” she responded. I could hear her leer through the phone, and I felt myself getting wet. After the “engagement” ball, she and I had spent some quality time together—eliminating our bloodlust.

“Any problems in Area 5—problems with Arkansas?” I asked. I’d been seconds away from killing Peter Threadgill during the party when Eric had stopped me, reminding me that to kill a monarch would mean that I would automatically face a tribunal. However, capturing, questioning, and then “mercifully” transferring Threadgill to the custody of the current Vampire Council would ensure that *he* would be the one on trial during the Rhodes summit.

And that’s why Eric was my best sheriff. He knew how to play the long-game.

I chastised myself for the hundredth time for not just having Eric secure Miss Stackhouse’s services. As it was, it was Eric’s contract which had proven to be the model for my own, and—though I might have preferred for Sookie to live in New Orleans—I wouldn’t have held her here against her will. It seemed clear that she preferred to live in Bon Temps. And—as long as she was willing to work with me periodically—I was satisfied.

Of course, it seemed as if the shifter she worked for was trying to interfere. Merlotte's "hesitance" in giving Sookie adequate time off had led to delays in scheduling. Moreover, I'd been quite busy since the skirmish with Arkansas, so that had caused delays too. However, Sookie would finally be coming within the next few days.

Another good reason to lock Bill up for a while.

"Oh—we've had to kill a few spies here and there," Pam reported casually.

I chuckled. "I hope you and your maker weren't put out."

"Of course not," Pam chuckled. "We were moderately diverted by the so-called threats."

"You will keep the northern border of my state safe then?" I asked.

"We relish the task, your majesty," she replied.

I giggled. "I wish I could be with you right now. I do *so* miss getting my hands dirty."

"You are welcome any time," she said suggestively.

I shook myself out of my own lust to ask her about what I'd called to ask about.

"What of Miss Stackhouse?"

Pam was silent for a moment.

"She is being guarded—as always—though she doesn't know about her shadows—beyond Bubba," she reported.

"Bubba?" I asked.

"Yes."

"Is Bubba enough?" I asked significantly. I knew that Bubba meant well, and I'd heard that he had a soft spot for Miss Stackhouse. But he was relatively young and not the warrior type, though he was purported to be a good tracker.

"No. He is not. But Sookie accepts his presence in her life without argument, and Thalia is always nearby as his back-up."

“Thalia agreed to that?” I asked incredulously. I had been reluctant to accept the unpleasant vampiress in my state, but Eric had vouched for her, and I’d gotten the impression that there was some kind of history between my sheriff and her—though I’d been smart enough not to ask any questions about it.

“Yes—Thalia is no longer required to put in time at Fangtasia, so she is well-pleased with her new work. And she likes the isolation of the woods around Sookie’s home.”

“What about during the day? Is Sookie looked after?” I asked.

“Weres,” Pam said.

“Ah—that is right. I’d heard that she was a friend of the pack in Shreveport.”

Pam scoffed.

“What is it?” I asked.

“Now that Colonel Flood is dead, Eric has very little trust in the Longtooth pack. But there are enough lone wolves in the area to keep an eye on Sookie,” Pam informed.

“And how is she?” I asked, no longer referring to just her security.

“Ludwig has her on antibiotics, and she is confident that Sookie will be disease-free before she gives birth; thus, the child will likely not be afflicted by the human sexually transmitted disease,” Pam informed, her tone tense as if she were trying to hide her anger.

“And how is Sookie dealing with the rumors?”

Pam scoffed. “Which ones? The humans paint her as a whore because she is pregnant without a ring on her finger. And Supe rumors paint her as a whore because she allegedly passed along a venereal disease to the poor pussy cat.”

“Did she?” I asked. “Did she pass it on?”

Pam sighed. “Sookie is the only one who can answer that question, and she’s not talking. Neither is Ludwig.”

I frowned. “Stupid patient-doctor confidence.”

We were silent for a moment.

“That being said,” Pam sighed, “there’s *no way in hell* that Sookie had a hook-up at Hooligans with some random man! I’ve seen her at Fangtasia, and she doesn’t even allow herself to get tipsy—let alone drunk. Plus, even if she did, she is friends with Claudine Crane, who would never have allowed Sookie to fuck a guy whose name she didn’t even know! I’d bet my entire shoe collection that Quinn was the disease incubator. That bald, purple-eyed fucker!” she growled murderously.

“So Quinn *is* the child’s father,” I observed.

“Sookie has done *everything* that she can do—at the cost of her reputation and any peace of mind she might have enjoyed—to lead people to believe that Quinn is *not* the father. So—officially—I believe there is *no way* that Quinn could be the father. Sookie was pregnant *before* she got intimately involved with Quinn,” Pam said firmly. “That is the story I have heard, and there is no reason not to believe it. So Sookie is a whore. Yadda, yadda, yadda. And the weretiger is *not* the sperm donor!”

“If Quinn ever decided to claim the child, a simple DNA test could do it in the eyes of the human world,” I observed. “And what if the child turns out to be a weretiger? And what of his or her scent? Hiding paternity when Supernaturals are in the equation is a difficult proposition.”

“I believe that Sookie has her new witch friend working on some of those issues.”

“And your master?” I asked. “What is he doing?”

Pam’s tone changed to its most “professional” incarnation. “As you instructed, Eric ensures that Sookie is guarded. And he pays Ludwig.”

“Nothing more?” I asked.

“Nothing,” she said with a hint of regret in her tone.

“Compton led me to believe that Eric’s interest in Sookie was substantial,” I commented, keeping my tone even.

“It is not,” she relayed, just as evenly.

“Speaking of Compton—he will be spending the week here,” I informed.

“We will all be so heartbroken,” she said flatly.

I chuckled. “You really should visit soon, Pamela,” I purred.

“It will be my *pleasure*,” she responded.

I hung up on her, leaving myself wanting more.

Chapter 07: A Delicate Position, Part 2

JUNE 3, 2005

SOOKIE POV

“Here you are Mrs. Fortenberry?” I smiled as I set down my Gran’s friend’s order.

Of course, that smile was forced—as were most of my smiles nowadays.

As Maxine sneered at me, I read from her mind that she’d sat in my section only to get a better look at my midsection, which had, thankfully, begun to “show.” Considering that I was trying to make people believe that I was a month further along in my pregnancy than I actually was, my increasing waistline and bust-size were welcome. As always, Mrs. Fortenberry’s judgment of my “loose moral character” flowed as if through a sieve in her brain—a sieve that filtered out anything good related to me. Her more innocuous thoughts denounced me as a slut. The truly hurtful ones related to being glad that Gran hadn’t lived long enough to see what I’d turned into.

Sadly, a part of me agreed with her.

For about five seconds back in March—right after Quinn had left my home—I’d hoped to keep my “maybe” pregnancy to myself—at least for a while. But Quinn had informed the people of Bon Temps about my “whorish ways” before I’d actually known if I was carrying a child or not. On the very day that I’d lied to him about my mythical anonymous one-night stand, he’d stopped at Merlotte’s on his way out of town.

Apparently, he’d said some disparaging things about me in front of Sam, who decided to defend me by getting into a fight with Quinn. By the time the altercation was over, several tables had been smashed, and Quinn had yelled out a variety of “facts” about my character.

I honestly hadn't been surprised to learn that the rumor mill had been stirred up by Quinn. But a part of me had been startled by just how far he'd been willing to smother my reputation into the mud.

I closed my eyes for a moment. That day last March, Quinn had followed through with his errand of getting me a pregnancy test. Luckily, I'd been able to use a blue highlighter to create a plus sign that Quinn accepted with only a glance in its direction.

Clear, blue, and easy—indeed.

Not surprisingly, Quinn didn't want to stick around after the stick had proclaimed me to be pregnant with a child that couldn't mathematically be his—thanks to a blue highlighter.

After the positive result, Quinn's mind had been full of a torrent of slurs about me. And he had decided right then and there to paint me in the worst light possible for de Castro and throughout the Supe community. He figured that if he portrayed me as a slut who moved from one man to the next, then de Castro would understand why he couldn't fulfill his mission. After all, how could *poor* Quinn be expected to knock up a woman who had already been knocked up with an anonymous man's baby?

Poor Quinn, indeed!

Clearly, *I'd* used the victimized weretiger for his body and then had immediately moved on to the very next “dick” that I came across.

After I'd given him chlamydia, of course.

I shuddered when I thought about getting the results of the STD test Dr. Ludwig had performed on me. Luckily the disease Quinn had given me was treatable and likely wouldn't be passed along to my child. I took a deep breath and said a prayer, knowing that things could have been so much worse.

Not surprisingly, Quinn had shouted from the Supernatural rooftops that I was the one who had passed the venereal disease along to him. Luckily, that particular rumor hadn't reached human ears.

But that didn't mean that the residents of Bon Temps didn't have plenty of bad things to believe about me.

It was funny—and not in a good way—how everyone in the town I'd spent my whole life in had so quickly bought Quinn's rant about me. Hell! Even my own brother, who had slept with more women than I cared to imagine, had come to Merlotte's during my very next shift after Quinn's exit from my life in order to confront me. He'd slapped me as hard as I'd ever been slapped.

It was funnier still—and still not in a good way—when Jason had called me a “slut” and told me that Gran would have been ashamed of me.

I figured it was better to know who had my back and who was ready to stab it.

As it turned out, it was really difficult for me to find people in the first category.

It also turned out that I didn't even need a real pregnancy test. After Quinn had gone, Bill “visited” my home almost every night—despite what he referred to as the “disparaging remarks about my reputation.” A few days into April—right around the time I was hoping that my period would begin—Bill took a deep whiff of me and made a horrifying discovery.

“So it's true!” he'd said. “Quinn was telling the truth about you!”

Sure—why not. I had been ready to admit anything at that point—as long as no one knew my child's real paternity.

Of course, it was also true that Bill hadn't mentioned the whole bonding thing—though I could certainly still feel his emotions. He was disgusted by my loose morals.

He felt as if I'd been ruined somehow.

But he still seemed to haunt me, and I felt his desire to possess me.

I also felt some true affection from him.

And guilt.

However, since Bill refused to be upfront about the bond, I didn't let on that it had "taken" effect. And I'd chosen not to accept his "social calls" anymore. Pregnancy was a funny thing—"convenient" in unexpected ways. And I quickly learned that it could be used as an excuse to get out of almost anything. Pretending that my morning sickness came on at night had been enough to discourage Bill's visits.

Meanwhile, I chose to inform myself about bonds. A call to Amelia had yielded some information, and she promised to do additional research for me. But vampires were a secretive bunch. I'd thought about calling Eric, but I knew that wouldn't be fair to him.

He'd moved on. And I didn't blame him.

I blinked a few times so that the tears threatening to fall from my eyes would be stopped. I bit my bottom lip and hurried to grab a glass of wine for Selah Pumphrey, who had just sat down in my section. She'd been into the bar enough times with Bill during the past months that I knew her drink order without asking.

Of course, I avoided the mirror behind the bar as I got the drink. I'd stopped looking in mirrors since the morning after Quinn and I'd had our final sexual encounter. That morning, I'd driven to Monroe and purchased the morning-after pill, though I knew that Gran would have disapproved of such a thing.

But I'd taken it, praying that I would stop a life from happening. However, the life had already taken hold within me; obviously, just one time with Quinn had been enough.

I'd contemplated abortion. I'd even gone to a clinic in Shreveport that performed abortions. In fact, I'd gone there twice! The first time, I managed to make it to the lobby before turning around and running back to my car. The second time, I couldn't even pry myself from the car.

After hours of gripping my steering wheel and weeping in the parking lot of the gray building where the tiny embryo within me could be eliminated, I made the choice to keep my child—and to keep his or her paternity a secret. No matter what I had to do!

The child inside of me was innocent—conceived because I'd been too stupid to think about needing a condom.

Too stupid to use my telepathy to listen into Quinn's thoughts from the start.

"Have you seen Bill?" Selah asked as I delivered her wine. "I was supposed to meet him here."

I now cringed at the mention of his name—and at the sight of him.

"No. Sorry. I haven't seen him in several days," I reported. "Can I get you something to eat?"

"Is there gumbo tonight?" she asked.

Honestly, Selah had turned out to be really nice to me—after a couple of awkward weeks right after she and Bill had started dating. Her thoughts about me were generally compassionate, though they sometimes skewed toward pity. Still—her musings were better than I got from most people in town.

She certainly wasn't a back stabber.

"Terry made shrimp gumbo," I conveyed with a sincere smile. The veteran knew that I'd been craving shrimp during my pregnancy, and in the gumbo, the little shellfishes were thoroughly cooked, so they weren't dangerous to me or the baby. Terry made a point to cook his gumbo at least once a week—and always when I was working.

“Can I get a bowl of that? And cornbread?” she asked.

“Coming right up,” I said before hurrying toward the kitchen window so that I could put in the order. As I waited for it, I made a quick round of my tables.

“You look tired,” Sam said as I went to the bar to get a second pitcher of beer for a man who seemed hell-bent on conducting a study of my ever-growing boobs.

I shrugged off Sam’s concern with a smile. “Well—I’ve got my little vacation starting tomorrow. I’ll be right as rain when I get back.”

I’d finally lied to Sam about my plans for my days off—since, during the previous weeks, he’d made excuses why he couldn’t give me three days off in a row when I told him that the queen wanted me to work for her. Thus, I’d invented the “vacation” with Claudine at a hotel/spa in Dallas. Claudine had even come into Merlotte’s to “confirm” the lie so that Sam would give me the days.

I sighed. I was tired of lies.

And even more tired of people trying to control my life.

Still looking concerned, Sam put a full pitcher onto my tray. I offered him a little smile. Other than the days off thing, he had been really decent to me when it came to scheduling. He had given me a lot of shifts during the past few months so that I could save money for the inevitable time when I wouldn’t be able to take any.

And I was appreciative for that.

But I wasn’t appreciative of his “disappointment” in me. He’d believed Quinn, and he judged me—even more harshly than the rest of the people in town in some ways—for being impregnated by an “anonymous” man. I suppose the pedestal he’d had me on caused me to topple a long way in his eyes!

Oh—and Sam also believed the rumors about my giving Quinn chlamydia!

And those things had made me disappointed in him!

Initially, I'd contemplated telling him the truth about the baby. But the nature of his thoughts had stopped me.

Yep. I'd finally *become* a telepath—after simply being one all my life. The Quinn lesson had been too hard of one to ignore, so I was listening to everyone nowadays. And—since Sam's thoughts hadn't been supportive from the start—I wasn't about to confide in him!

It was just that simple.

In fact, I'd told only three people the truth about my child's true paternity: Dr. Ludwig, Claudine, and Amelia. All of them had been enlisted in what I now knew was my most important job: making sure that John Quinn never found out that he was my child's father.

Maybe I should have been ashamed of myself for my duplicity. But I wasn't.

I'd learned that King Felipe de Castro was ambitious, and he clearly wanted me tied to Quinn—and thereby him—*for life*. And if I had never heard Quinn's thoughts, I would have fallen nicely into the trap that had been set for me.

I'd liked Quinn—clearly showing that I was a horrible judge of character. I chuckled ruefully as I went to collect Selah's food. Eric had been right. I really *had* needed to rethink all of the judgments that I'd made about people.

And, during the past months, I'd followed his advice.

Almost all of my “friends” had turned their backs on me when I became an unwed pregnant woman. Tara, whom I'd helped out with the Mickey situation only a few months before, wanted to distance herself from me because she was hoping to begin a relationship with JB du Rone, who was very conservative. Arlene had only horrible things to think about me nowadays. And Sam's thoughts ranged from distaste to desire—the desire to *possess* me.

And those were my so-called *friends*.

Yes—Eric had been right. I really had been a simpleton when it came to choosing my relationships.

I took a deep breath as I delivered Selah’s order. “You need anything else right now?”

“No thank you,” she said, giving me a kind smile. “I’m driving, so I shouldn’t have a second glass of wine.” I listened to her thoughts. She was planning to leave me a big tip. Bill usually paid and was a strictly 10% tip man. Selah thought that was a little stingy and preferred 15% as her starting point for good service.

“Then I’ll bring you some water,” I smiled at her. I made sure to give her a slice of lime too—since she preferred that to lemon.

I sighed. Yep. Selah was proof positive that my initial reactions to people weren’t always right, and that’s why I no longer shied away from using my telepathy.

I had realized—*finally*—that it wasn’t a curse; it was a defense.

Undeniably, if I’d missed Quinn’s thoughts as he’d screwed me on that March morning, I would have remained ignorant about him.

It had only been my exhaustion—my inability to even try with my shields—which had given me insight into his mind. Had I learned of an “accidental” pregnancy with Quinn, I would have told him, and then he would have “done the right thing” by asking me to marry him. With Gran in mind, I would have “done the right thing” by accepting. I would have moved to Nevada. And de Castro would have been able to use me from then on.

And my child—if he or she was a telepath too.

As I completed another round of my tables on autopilot, I once again went over my plan for my time in New Orleans. After all, thinking about that helped me to focus on something other than all the unpleasant thoughts that I was being riddled with.

After three straight double shifts, my shields were non-existent—not that I was using them much anyway. Nowadays, I was too afraid to miss something to put them up most of the time. I was just glad that my baby hadn't given me any morning sickness for the past week—though I'd quickly learned that pregnant feet were just going to be swollen feet—no matter what I did.

I looked around to see if any of my customers needed a refill, even though I knew that—except in Selah's case—my attention to them wouldn't affect the size of my tips, which had become “lesser” since my reputation had been ruined. It seemed that “pregnant crazy Sookie” was worth even less than plain old “crazy Sookie.”

Of course, as per my contract with Sophie-Anne, I had already been given ten thousand dollars for my upcoming job with her. And I would be working for her for three nights, so that meant fifteen thousand more once the job was done. Sadly, my bank account didn't show the effects of my latest check—or my check from my work for Sophie-Anne the previous March. No. All that money had been immediately “eaten up” by unpaid back taxes and mortgage payments.

I hustled to refill Mrs. Fortenberry's tea so she wouldn't stiff me even the measly two quarters she usually left.

I'd known that Gran had taken out a partial mortgage on the farmhouse even before she'd passed away, and I'd managed to keep up the payments on it. However, after I'd deposited my check from my employment at the queen's ball, I'd been visited by the bank manager. Since he had known and liked Gran, he'd let her get away with paying less than the full payments of the mortgage for years. However, that same deal was no longer being extended to me—especially given my apparent windfall. In fact, the bank manager had given me a deadline of December 1 to make up *all* of Gran's owed payments and had ordered that I begin making the full monthly payments as well.

I'd learned from his head that his wife had convinced him that he shouldn't continue to offer charity to a “sinful fangbanging whore” like me.

Needless to say, the next check I got would be absorbed by the bank too.

And the one after that.

And the one after that.

In truth, I'd thought a lot about just leaving Bon Temps. However—honestly—I didn't have anywhere else to go. And it wasn't as if I could sell the farmhouse in order to have start-up money in a new place. Too much was still owed on it. Plus, I was afraid that my baby would be telepathic. And I didn't want to subject him or her to a larger city—where most of the jobs could be found—at least not until I could teach him or her to shield.

And then there was one more factor keeping me where I was: Eric.

Yes—because of Eric—I'd reexamined every choice I'd ever made and every relationship I'd ever had.

And I was now absolutely sure that I'd fucked up royally when it came to him.

I'd been unfair to him. I'd been hypocritical. I'd been untrusting.

I'd misjudged him.

I'd been a fucking fool.

And I'd been scared—frightened of every feeling he'd awakened inside of me.

So I'd lost him.

In the end, I'd deserved to lose him.

Again, I blinked away my tears by busying myself with my work, even though I was certain that I would never be busy enough to forget the loss of him.

However, I was also certain that Area 5 would be the safest place for me and my child—just as long as Eric was the sheriff of it.

I didn't want to call upon him. I didn't want to ask him for help. I didn't think it was fair to do so. But I knew that—if I ever did call—Eric *would* help.

I knew that because I'd come to acknowledge a simple truth: he *had* truly loved me.

And not just “my Eric” either.

And—given that—I knew that Eric wouldn't abandon me if I called him. He had too much honor for that.

However, despite my epiphany, I didn't want to have to call Eric. I didn't want to disrupt his life again. From what I could tell from the society pages, he and Olivia were still going strong.

And I couldn't—*wouldn't*—do anything to fuck up his life more than I already had.

He was better off without me.

Chapter 08: Understanding, Part 1

“A beautiful woman delights the eye; a wise woman, the understanding; a pure one, the soul.”—Minna Antrim

ERIC POV

“I understand—you know?” Olivia said, her eyes seeming almost emerald green because of the wintergreen dress she wore.

“Understand?” I asked.

“You hold back,” she said, “from our relationship—from us. I get it.”

“What do you get?” I asked. Olivia was intelligent—one of the most book-smart people I’d ever met. So maybe she had the answer for why I felt listless.

I’d been tired of dealing with fangbangers when I’d met Olivia. And I’d been left raw from Sookie’s presence in my life.

Olivia hadn’t been a revelation in my world as Sookie had been. She’d not made me want to kill people or tear my hair out. No—Olivia was steady. She was Ivy League and pedigreed. However, she wasn’t vain. Even Pam admitted that she was “likeable” and “hot.”

Olivia was—quite frankly—the ideal vampire companion. She could hold a conversation about politics, history, literature, art, or pop culture. And she had opinions about all of them. She was progressive, meaning that she resisted prejudices against those who were not like her, including vampires. She was undeniably beautiful. And she had a ready laugh.

She was also insightful—sometimes uncomfortably so.

“I get that you still love her,” she said knowingly.

“Her? Who?” I asked.

She shook her head. “I don’t know. And I don’t need to. Not now. Not yet.” Her eyes pierced me. “But one day, I’m going to truly fall for you, Eric Northman. I’m going to be in love with you. And—then—when that happens, I’m going to need you to” She stopped for a moment.

“Need me to do what?” I finally asked.

She sighed. “A person cannot make another person love him or her.”

“No he or she cannot,” I agreed.

She smiled softly. “I can’t make you love me, Eric. But I hope you will—one day.”

I took her hand and kissed it. “I hope I will too.”

JUNE 4, 2005

SOOKIE POV

Surprisingly, I had the feeling that I could really like Queen Sophie-Anne Leclercq, though I could have done without Andre. His narrow eyes seemed to study me a little too much. And—frankly—he was a little creepy.

I rolled my eyes at him as he showed me his fangs and then focused back onto my hostess.

Though my official work would not begin until the next night, Sophie-Anne had invited me for “tea,” saying that she wanted to get to know me better.

Of course, “tea” in her case was blood.

But I wasn’t one to judge. Plus, my tea was amazing—an herbal blend that the queen had already promised to give me a box of.

In fact, all things considered, it had been a very pleasant evening thus far. Sophie-Anne had told me about my upcoming assignment, which was to read her current employees. She also asked if I could come back the next month to sit in on some interviews for potential workers. Knowing how much I needed the money so that I could keep Gran's home, I was happy to say yes.

The queen also seemed very concerned with my role in the September Rhodes summit now that I was pregnant. Unbidden, she promised that I'd be "kept away from the action" as much as possible, which I appreciated very much.

In fact, it was her amiability that convinced me to go ahead and ask if I could cash in on the favor she owed me.

"Your majesty?" I started after taking a deep breath.

"Just call my Sophie, my dear," she said, sounding sincere.

I relaxed a little.

"Okay—um—Sophie—uh—Eric—uh—I mean the Sheriff of Ara 5—um—well . . ."

"Spit it out, dear," the queen said indulgently.

"He—uh—said you owed me a favor," I whispered.

"What favor?" Andre growled.

"Oh!" I exclaimed, feeling a mixture of embarrassment and disappointment. I sighed. "I thought that—uh—the bracelet—um . . ." I stopped, finding that I didn't know how to complete my sentence.

"You thought *correctly*," Sophie-Anne said, giving her child an admonishing look. "Go check on our guest," she instructed him, "*after* you make sure that no one is within hearing distance of this room except for Sigebert and Wybert." She paused and glared at him. "Not even you."

Andre pouted but nodded in agreement.

I few moments later, Sophie-Anne closed her eyes tightly as if she needed to concentrate on something.

“I don’t mean to cause trouble—especially not between you and your—uh—child,” I said.

“You have not. Andre means well, and he’s very protective of me,” she said with a soft smile as she opened her eyes. “He has been my companion for a very long time, and I love him more than any other, but there are some things that he cannot understand.”

“Like what?” I asked curiously.

“Like what it is like to be a woman,” she shook her head. “Years ago—even before the Viking was born—I was forced by a human man to be a prostitute, and trust me when I say that he didn’t ensure that I was well-treated by the men who paid him for my time.” Her eyes seemed to glow with remembered hate. “When a vampire named Alain killed that man, he took over as my,” she paused, “pimp—as today’s humans would say. But he was no kinder than my human master had been. Alain said that he would turn me, but my profitability kept him from following through. By lucky happenstance, he was captured by humans who knew of his true nature. I blackmailed him into turning me—telling him that I would help him to escape, but only if he made me a vampire—made me *powerful*. I sold myself one last time to one of Alain’s jailers so that he would bury me after Alain drained me and fed me his blood.”

Her fangs now down, the queen smiled as if recounting a pleasant tale. “Alain had been staked before I rose, and—though I had to learn on my own—at least I was free. I found Andre when I was still a young vampire; he had been abused too. But his abuse was not sexual in nature.” She shook her head. “Of course, males—too—can be abused in a sexual way, but that kind of abuse does not seem to be as common as with females. And—even after so many years—there are still *many* double standards related to gender. Are there not?”

I nodded in agreement. To the people of Bon Temps, I was a whore because I was pregnant out of wedlock. By contrast, Jason was either celebrated or viewed indulgently for his “man-whore” ways.

Even Gran had been indulgent of her grandson, while she’d been “proud” of me for “saving myself” for someone special—which reminded me of my purpose.

“Bill,” I said.

Sophie-Anne rolled her eyes. “Surely you are not going to waste your favor by exchanging it for *his* freedom.”

“Freedom?” I asked. “Is he—uh—in jail?”

Sophie-Anne giggled. “In a manner of speaking—yes. He disrespected me, but—rest assured—he is unharmed and due to be released soon.”

In truth, I had mixed feelings about hearing that Bill was in Sophie-Anne’s custody for the time being. Mostly, I felt guilty for not feeling guiltier.

“The favor I want to request isn’t to free Bill, but it does relate to him,” I said after taking another deep breath. “I was hoping that you would tell me . . .” I paused, trying to remember the exact wording I’d practiced earlier. “I was hoping you would tell me any information you think would be relevant for me to know about Bill Compton.”

The queen smirked as if amused by my phrasing, but she nodded in consent nonetheless.

“Have you ever heard of a procurer?” she asked.

“No,” I said, shaking my head. That particular word hadn’t come up on one of my calendars yet, nor had I seen it in any of the books I’d been reading lately, though I’d replaced romance novels with books of a more “academic” variety since I’d learned that I really was pregnant.

I hoped that—once I caught up on my mortgage payments—I could take an online class or two, though I had no idea what someone like me could *be* beyond a court telepath or a barmaid.

“In vampire culture, a procurer is someone tasked with getting things for a monarch.”

“Things?” I asked, feeling the hairs on the back of my neck rise.

“Yes—things like humans to feed upon or others with useful talents,” she said. “Effective procurers are known for two things: their ability to spot “talent” and their ability to glamour almost anything. Bill was my procurer for about a decade. But the Great Revelation greatly lessened the need for one of his profession. You see—now, there are humans literally throwing themselves at vampires, begging to feed us their blood. And that is why I changed Bill’s role to working on the database, though I *did* give him one last task.”

My hands had started shaking, so I carefully set down the dainty cup I’d been served my tea in.

Dots had been connecting in my head for months—dots that seemed to darken for me every night.

“Did you send Bill to,” I paused, “procure me?”

“Hadley told me about her remarkable cousin,” she said. “Of course, I wanted to learn about her.”

I closed my eyes tightly. “What were his instructions?”

“He was to find out if you truly were a telepath and assess your skill-level before bringing you here to arrange an introduction between us.”

“Did you order him to seduce me?” I asked.

She sat forward a little. “No. Nor did I order him to give you his blood.”

I was thoughtful for a moment. “What’s a bond?”

She narrowed her eyes, studying me. “When a vampire gives blood to a human, a blood tie is formed. An *exchange* of blood solidifies the tie. Three exchanges is generally enough to ensure

that the tie is permanent when the vampire is older. But often four or more exchanges is needed for a permanent tie—commonly referred to as a bond—to form when the vampire is younger.”

“Younger like Bill?”

“Yes.”

“Do Bill and I have a bond?” I asked. “Eric said we did.”

“Sheriff Northman would be the one who could tell,” the queen sighed. “His sense of smell is legendary. And he has blood in you too, so he would have been able to discern a difference if your tie with Bill had become a bond.”

“Is it possible that Bill doesn’t know about the bond?” I asked.

“It is conceivable—given his young age and lack of experience,” Sophie-Anne said. “And his maker isn’t around to confirm the bond. Tell me—can you feel Bill’s emotions?”

I nodded in confirmation. “A little, but I am learning to block them when I want to.”

She smirked. “Fascinating. Have you told him that you can do this?” she asked.

“Feel his emotions or block them?” I asked.

“Both,” she responded.

“No. Neither.”

She looked at me through narrowed, studying eyes. “I think that your behavior has made Bill uncertain—though he is still trying to insist that he has a solid claim to you, and he’s told me that you are bonded to him.”

“He has?” I asked with surprise.

“Yes,” she confirmed. “He wanted a portion of your payment.”

“That bastard!” I growled.

“I take it he hasn’t told you anything about bonds?”

“No—he hasn’t,” I seethed. “Can a bond be eliminated?”

She smirked. “Why—*yes*—it can be.”

“*Without* hurting my baby?” I asked.

Her expression sobered. “Yes, Miss Stackhouse; however, I would ask that you think something through.”

“What?” I asked.

“I am a *very* old vampire,” she said, “older than most in this country, in fact. And though my nose isn’t as acute as Eric’s, I can *certainly* smell Bill’s blood in you. But—to be honest—I wasn’t sure whether or not there was a bond between you and Bill until you told me that you could feel his emotions. In fact, I’m *still* not entirely sure.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“You are part fairy, so I expect the rules are different for you. Perhaps your Fae blood has given you the ability to partially feel Bill’s emotions before a full bond is formed. Or, perhaps, your Fae blood has fought the bond, leaving it weak. I cannot know for sure, but I’d bet all of Pamela’s shoes that Bill has tried to offer you more blood.”

I nodded. “Yeah—just a week ago, he said it would help with my morning sickness.”

“But you wouldn’t take more of his blood?” she asked.

“No.”

She smiled at me. “Good girl. Still—the fact remains that Bill’s scent is strong enough to let other vampires know that you belong to another. And it is also strong enough to cover up the scent of the child growing inside of you,” she added significantly.

I gasped. “So—if I got rid of Bill’s blood inside of me—Supes would be able to smell my baby better?”

“That is correct,” she said.

I tensed. “But you cannot smell the baby now?”

“I cannot; I doubt that even one with Eric’s acute sense of smell could.”

“So—until the baby’s born, it might be best to keep the bond,” I mused, almost to myself.

“I think that would be wise, considering you don’t want others to learn that the weretiger is your child’s father,” Sophie-Anne said.

“He’s not!” I cried out defensively.

Sophie-Anne smirked. “Do not worry. I will tell no one of my theory of the child’s paternity—not even Andre. But you must know that—once the child is born—no bond that you have will hide his or her scent from Supernaturals.

“I know,” I said.

“You have help from an interesting triad of woman—I think,” she smirked, changing the topic.

“Huh?” I played dumb.

“The witch, a fairy, and Ludwig,” she chuckled. “If any can come up with a way to cover the scent of a child, it is they.”

I shook my head and sighed. “I think I need to add *you* to the number of women helping me.”

“I hope that you will,” she said with a smile. “Now—do you have additional questions for me?”

I nodded. “Yes. But they are the kind with answers that are guaranteed to hurt, so I’m not sure I wanna ask them.”

“I didn’t get the impression that you are a coward, Sookie,” she smirked.

“I have been,” I whispered, as I thought about Eric. “I’ve been a coward about the worst thing I could be.”

“Eric,” she said astutely.

“I let him get away,” I admitted.

“And did that mistake make you want to be braver?” she asked.

“Yes.”

“Then you are getting somewhere,” she smiled sincerely. “Tell me—what more do you want to know.”

I took a deep breath. “In all of the years you’ve known Bill, has he ever been late for anything?” I finally asked, as more dots darkened in my mind.

She shook her head. “Bill is anal about being on time. I believe he’d rather lose a fang than be tardy for anything.”

I closed my eyes and nodded. “Then he set me up,” I said, as the dots became a clear image. “The very night I met Bill, I saved his life from drainers—or so I thought.”

“What?” Sophie-Anne asked, sounding truly surprised and angry.

Her reaction comforted me.

“Drainers got him, but I’ve been wondering more and more just *how* that happened. I mean—it’s not as if the Rattrays hid the fact that they were redneck trash, and Bill has—since then—demonstrated that he has a distaste for such people. So why did he just leave with them?”

“A plan to test your skill,” Sophie-Anne guessed.

“Yeah. Bill is too,” I paused, “*methodical* to put himself into danger like that.”

“I agree,” Sophie-Anne said.

I closed my eyes tightly, though I refused to close them to the truth I was just now seeing. “I think Bill manipulated me from night one. And he misled *you*, too. I told him about my telepathy early on. Hell!” I exclaimed ruefully. “I was happy there was someone else ‘different’ in that little small-minded town with me, and I was ecstatic when I couldn’t hear his thoughts! If he would have just told me about you and Hadley, I would have come here straight away—*with Gran.*”

“And I would have offered you payment for your services,” Sophie-Anne said.

“Would you have?” I asked opening my eyes to gauge her expression.

She nodded. “Yes. As I indicated earlier, I have good reason to abhor when women are exploited.”

“I believe you,” I said.

And I did.

Chapter 09: Understanding, Part 2

Sophie-Anne looked at me thoughtfully for a moment.

“Tell me about the times Bill gave you his blood. Were they,” she paused, “loving?”

I scoffed.

“The first was when these drainers, the Rattrays, beat me to within an inch of my life when Bill was late meeting me.”

“That is revealing,” she said.

“Yeah. Then he wanted to give me blood before I used my telepathy to help Eric the first time.”

“What was the circumstance?” she asked.

“Someone was stealing from Eric; it turned out to be Longshadow, but Eric had thought that it was a human. Bill seemed to think that I needed his blood to make me stronger that night.”

“Did Eric *really* kill Longshadow when he attacked you?” the queen asked sounding very much the gossip in that moment.

I rolled my eyes—though, in truth, it felt nice to have a *girlfriend*. “Yes he did,” I confirmed.

“Had you any reason to doubt Eric’s intentions or to fear him before you worked for him?” she followed up.

I shook my head. “No. Can I ask you something that’s not *directly* related to Bill?”

She nodded her permission.

“Why didn’t you ask Eric to approach me?”

She sighed. “In truth, I was tired of Bill at court. As I said, his role became virtually obsolete after the Great Revelation, and he mentioned that he had a relative—his last known

relative—die in Bon Temps. I figured he would approach you, assess you, and then bring you for a visit in short order. But he soon told me that Eric was getting in his way.”

“How?” I asked.

“By insisting that he utilize your gift several times a week,” Sophie-Anne said. “Politically speaking, the situation became difficult for me since I’d not yet mentioned you to Eric by the time he’d discovered that you were a telepath.”

“Had you intended to?” I asked her. “And—by the way—Eric never used me several times a week.”

She chuckled. “Interesting. And—as for whether or not I would have told Eric? Well—that depended upon how our first meeting went, Sookie. If you were agreeable to using your gift to help me, then—yes—I would have consulted with Eric, giving him a tax break for your periodic service to me.”

I shook my head. “Vampires have some fucked up politics.”

“No more than humans,” she returned with a smirk.

“What if I wasn’t agreeable to using my telepathy to help you?” I asked her.

“Then I would have let you return home and told you to keep your gift a secret—for your own good.”

I saw the truth in her eyes. “You would have,” I stated with some surprise.

She nodded in confirmation. “Was the situation with Sandra Pelt the third time that Bill gave you blood?” she asked, refocusing us onto our previous topic.

“No—the fourth. I was attacked by a Maenad, who wanted to leave a message for Eric. But it took the blood of several vampires to heal me,” I added.

She rolled her eyes. “It would have. Maenads are a horribly complicated bunch. I’m glad she didn’t target my part of the state.”

I chuckled. Sophie-Anne seemed almost “human” to me. She reminded me of Pam—and was likely just as deadly.

“Who secured Sandra Pelt’s bindings?” she asked out of the blue.

I gasped in understanding and revelation. “Bill!”

“Magic *can* undo a bond, Sookie,” the queen said, her eyes having lost all of their earlier humor. “But a faster method is the death of one of the two who are bonded. Tell me, Sookie, would you like me to kill Bill for you?”

I felt tears escaping my eyes and brushed them away. I was tired of crying over Bill. It had become clear to me that Bill was willing to manufacture situations where I’d be hurt—just so that he could get his blood into me. I thought back to all of the times he’d offered his blood when I’d not taken it—especially the times after Jackson when we were certainly not a couple any longer. Still—asking Sophie-Anne to kill Bill went against my grain.

“He was my first love,” I whispered to the queen.

“No,” she said firmly. “He was the first man to lie to you. He was the first man to use you.” She shook her head contritely. “And I am ultimately to blame because Bill is my subject. You *must* believe that I never intended for him to do as he has done.”

“You’re going to kill him?” I asked.

“Unless you *still* love him. Unless you want to be *his*,” she said, sitting forward in her chair. “Unless you tell me not to.”

“I feel like a fool,” I said honestly.

“And fooled you were,” Sophie-Anne said.

“I’m not a fool anymore,” I sighed, “not where Bill Compton is concerned. But I need the bond for now. Amelia and Claudine think they can make a potion to cover up the baby’s scent, but

it's not ready. Plus, who knows if it would work while the baby is inside of me." I paused. "And—to be honest—I don't know if I have it in me to tell you to kill him."

Sophie-Anne narrowed her eyes. "You are an odd creature, Sookie Stackhouse, but I find myself liking you. Pam was right. There is *something* about you."

I chuckled. "My fairy blood."

She shook her head. "No. I don't think that's it. It is how you are with us."

"Huh?" I asked inelegantly as the queen reached forward to refresh my tea for me.

"You know we are vampires, yet you treat me as you would any other." She frowned, creating a momentary crease on her perfect face. "When vampires revealed ourselves to the world, I envisioned the practical benefits to us. I also foresaw the fight we would have to endure in order to be citizens with full rights. And I knew that we vampires would have to change *some* of our ways. Hell! I even figured that many humans would fetishize us—though I never guessed at the extent." She shrugged. "But I never imagined a situation when I would be pleased to welcome a human as a friend." She smirked. "Especially since vampires do not have traditional friendships—even with each other."

"Is that what we are? Friends?" I asked.

"I hope so, Sookie," she smiled sincerely. "And—in the spirit of that friendship, I have a plan to solve your Bill problem."

"What's that?"

"The database," she said, her smile turning almost sinister as she plotted. "I foresee needing to send him all over the world in order to augment it."

I smirked. "It *was* somewhat easier when he was in Peru."

“I think India would be a good starting point,” she commented. “And I’ll send someone with him for his protection.” She winked at me. “And to make sure that he stays where he’s supposed to be.”

“Thank you,” I said. “And after the baby’s born?”

“Up to you,” she replied.

“I want the bond broken,” I said immediately.

“Done,” she said.

“Can you keep him away from me after that?” I asked.

“I can order him to stay away and claim you as my own human.”

“Would I have to take your blood?” I asked.

“It would be best, but since I am queen, a verbal claim should be enough. However, a blood claim would add to your protection. One exchange would be enough. However, you could think about it before the time comes.”

“Thank you,” I said sincerely.

We were silent for a moment, each sipping our respective beverages. She had an electric kettle of sorts, keeping her blood warm.

“What have you done about de Castro?” I asked.

“I’m keeping more eyes on him,” she answered with a nod, “thanks to you.”

I’d assumed that Mr. Cataliades would tell his employer all about my call the previous March, but then I’d remembered an old saying about assuming, so I’d called him again to make sure. Thankfully, he’d already told the queen all about Quinn’s mission and de Castro’s interest in me. In fact, that’s how I’d gotten Bubba as a permanent “guest” on my property. I had to admit that his presence made me feel safer.

“What about Arkansas?” I asked, biting my lower lip. “Is Eric safe? Pam?”

She smirked. “They can hold their own.” She paused. “Sookie, after Bill is completely out of your system, you might choose to tie yourself to someone other than me—say a sheriff of mine?” she said incisively.

“I couldn’t do that to him,” I said with a sigh. “I messed things up with him so badly—even from our first meeting,” I added resignedly.

“How?”

“Most of all, I made the mistake of listening to Bill about Eric, and—after that—I judged everything he did through Bill-colored glasses.” I chuckled ruefully. “Eric tried for so long with me, but I finally used up all my chances with him.” I sighed. “Your majesty, will you tell me the things that a vampire can do through a blood tie? And—a—uh—bond?” I asked.

She looked a little taken-aback by my *non sequitur*, but nodded in agreement nonetheless. “Don’t forget. It is Sophie,” she chastised gently.

“Not Sophie-Anne?” I asked.

“Not to those closest to me,” she said kindly.

“I don’t have many people close to me anymore,” I said, unconsciously stroking my belly. “But a few people call me Sook. I like it,” I said, feeling my heart constrict. “I always thought that having a nickname meant people really did like you.” I frowned. Not many people had ever called me “Sook”—and, of them, even fewer were still in my life.

Sophie’s look turned mischievous. “You should have asked Bill to call you that. It *may* have helped with his pronunciation”

I snorted out a morbid laugh. “He really does butcher my name—doesn’t he?”

Sophie turned serious immediately. “But he will *never* butcher any other part of you, my dear, Sook—not while I’m on watch,” she said sincerely.

A tear fell from my eye—this one spurred by my gratefulness. “I don’t even know how to start thanking you.”

She shrugged. “You’ve given me an excuse to ship Bill to Asia. No thanks are needed.”

I chuckled. “So—will you tell me about blood ties and bonds?”

“Because Bill didn’t tell you anything?” she asked.

“He told me some—I think. But I don’t trust what he said to me. Not anymore,” I sighed.

She smiled at me, looking almost proud for a moment. “A vampire with a blood tie has four main advantages over a human. Number one—he can track you; number two—he can monitor your emotions; number three—he can influence your dreams by placing himself into them; and number four—he can influence your baser emotions.”

“Baser?” I asked.

“Lust. Anger. Fear,” she informed.

“Love?” I asked, biting my bottom lip nervously.

She shook her head. “No. Love is too sacred for any kind of magic to create—though many have tried, especially witches,” she said, rolling her eyes and smirking as if telling an inside joke. “The best that magic can do is create a *false* love, which would very soon disappear.”

I contemplated for a moment, trying to understand all the ways that Bill had influenced me.

“My level of attraction for Bill *definitely* increased after I had his blood for the first time. And—looking back—I can see how he played with my fears.”

“How?” the queen asked, looking truly intrigued.

“Eric—for one. In fact, Bill did everything he could to make me afraid of Eric, and I’m ashamed to say that I let Bill’s words mold my perception—and my paranoia.” I shook my head.

“And Eric didn’t deserve that. On the contrary, in fact.” I paused for a moment, and Sophie seemed content to let me unravel my thoughts on my own.

“I *really* did love Bill,” I finally deduced.

“Did?” Sophie-Anne asked.

“*Did,*” I clarified. “I was so lonely when Bill came into my life—with his silent mind and his ‘otherness.’ And then there was the very real attraction I felt for him.” I shrugged. “Compared to the other men in Bon Temps, he was quite a catch.”

“I can’t imagine,” Sophie said under her breath. I chose not to comment on it, however.

“Gran really liked Bill, too,” I continued. “He seemed so gentlemanly—at least, *some* of the time. But I think I was more in love with being in love than I was with Bill specifically.” I paused. “Frankly, Bill is creepy at times. And patronizing. And it wasn’t long before he started ignoring me *a lot* of the time—except when he wanted sex and blood. And then he went to Lorena without even telling me what was going on!” Having a revelation, I closed my eyes. “I transferred *all* of my feelings of inadequacy—the ones I had both before and after my relationship with Bill—onto Eric. And I lost him because of my fears.”

“You *are* still in love with my sheriff,” Sophie-Anne said knowingly.

“Now that I know I love him—know it with my whole heart—I’ll never let myself hide from it again,” I vowed, a tear slipping from my eye.

“Given what Eric went through in order to make sure that I treated you well in the contract we made, I would say that he loves you, too,” Sophie said somewhat tentatively.

“Maybe he did love me—once. But—like I said—he’s moved on,” I responded sadly, picturing the beautiful Olivia. “And—even if he hadn’t—it’s not like I could go to him now. I’m pregnant with another man’s child.”

Sophie got a faraway look in her eyes. “You know, Sook, Eric has been my sheriff for decades. At first I was suspicious that one so old and formidable would settle for such a post, but

I've come to understand that Eric is still very much the Viking. Did you know that during the days of his humanity, Eric's father was a chieftain?"

"Like a king?" I asked.

"Yes—but of a relatively small people group. He would have overseen a few villages and a market. He would have promoted trade with other areas. He would have ensured that his lands had defenses," she said. "And he would have known that expanding his resources too much would have thinned them out."

I found myself smiling. "That's what Eric does now—in Area 5."

"Yes," Sophie agreed. "He likes his autonomy, and he was born to be a leader. I have no more formidable warrior in my state—and that is saying something since both Andre and I are older than Eric is. And the Berts are," she paused, "the Berts!" She snickered. "But Eric wants no part of my job. It requires a kind of political posturing that he would find frustrating—to say the least. Eric's brand of running an area is efficient and pragmatic." She giggled. "He would—among other things—despise all the extra paperwork and the schmoozing that a monarch must now do with the human authorities."

"You're right," I said with a chuckle.

"And that being said, once I realized that Eric had no ambition to take over Louisiana, he and I became friends." She winked at me. "At least the *vampire* version of friends."

"You—uh—had sex?" I asked, feeling my old friend, Jealousy, rearing its ugly head again.

"Once—many years ago," she smirked. "But he prefers women who prefer men. And I just prefer women," she giggled.

I couldn't help but to laugh with her. Sophie truly did have an infectious personality.

"Eric and I have also talked—quite a bit over the years—about our pasts. He knows how misused I was."

I found myself growling. It was a feral sound.

“Did he tell you about his maker?” Sophie asked knowingly.

“A little,” I shared.

“Did he tell you about his human wife and children?”

I shook my head. “No.”

“His wife was originally wed to his brother, but when Leif died, Eric was expected to marry her. And to become the father of Leif’s children.”

“Leif,” I said, smiling a little. Eric’s fake name.

I wasn’t blind to why the queen had told me about Eric’s past. “You think he’d accept my child—just like he accepted his brother’s children,” I commented.

“I am not sure, but I think you should fight for him and find out,” Sophie said.

“I *am* fighting for him,” I whimpered. “He’s better off without me, so I’m fighting to stay away.”

Chapter 10: A Handsome Woman

SEPTEMBER 1, 2005 (ALMOST 3 MONTHS LATER)

PAM POV

My maker strode toward his throne.

As always, as soon as the vermin in Fangtasia noticed Eric Northman, their eyes locked onto him. And as always, I heard several humans begging for his attentions as he passed by them. But Eric was not one to give notice to humans who begged—unless it was to kick them across the room.

I studied the club’s clientele and saw that we had some very attractive humans—of the *non*-begging variety—in attendance as well. But I knew that Eric wouldn’t be selecting any of the slightly less “verminish vermin” for his attentions either.

I rolled my eyes. Eric’s choice of companions might have left a little to be desired in certain ways, but I was well aware that he was “all in” when it came to trying to maintain a monogamous relationship with Olivia.

In truth, I blamed Sookie Stackhouse for Eric’s foray into the world of romantic relationships—which I judged as “human foibles”—though Sookie was not currently available for me to tease or torment about the situation.

In fact, I’d not seen the blonde since the previous March, though I was kept somewhat abreast of her “condition” by Doctor Ludwig.

At times, I found myself missing the telepath. She certainly had the ability to make things more interesting in my life. Olivia didn’t share in this talent.

“How’s Olivia?” I drawled as I stepped onto the dais and then leaned against Eric’s throne. He looked up at me and then back at his blackberry without answering my question—not that he needed to. How many different ways were there to say “fine?”

I looked toward the front entrance and saw that Maxwell Lee was escorting Olivia Miles to the dais even then. I could tell by Eric’s emotions in our maker-child bond that he was pleased that she was present. However, his reaction to her was nothing like his reactions had been to a certain buxom blonde.

Still, I took in Olivia’s appearance with appreciation. She was what the people of my time would have called a “handsome woman.” At 31 years of age, she was several years older than Sookie. And, clearly, those years had brought confidence with them, but—then again—she’d lived a charmed life compared to the telepath’s.

Of course, I’d investigated Olivia when my maker had taken an interest in her—just as I’d investigated Sookie the year before. One would be amazed by the amount of information that a little strategic glamouring could yield.

And—what Eric didn’t know wouldn’t hurt *me*.

Whereas Sookie was born into a family that would have been charitably described as at the lower end of the middle class, Olivia’s family was at the lower end of the upper class.

Literally a world of difference!

While Sookie was being dragged to various doctors from around the time she was five years old by a mother who wanted to “cure” what should have been seen as a gift, Olivia was being driven to ballet lessons or violin lessons or horseback riding lessons—depending on the day of the week.

When Sookie was seven years old, both of her parents died, and she went to live with her grandmother. Her father, whose main talent seemed to be inspiring his wife’s undivided attention, hadn’t been capable enough to have much of a job, but his work at a saw mill had enabled him to

adequately care for his family in the rural community of Bon Temps. Once he was gone, however, that income was gone too. And the grandmother's income was limited to social security and a small pension from her deceased husband. Regrettably, Corbett Stackhouse hadn't seen the need to have life insurance. Needless to say, Sookie's class status quickly changed from relatively comfortable to downright poor.

By contrast, when Olivia was seven years old, her grandfather died, leaving her a trust fund large enough to cover her college expenses—not that she needed it, given the income earned by her father and mother in their successful law practice.

While Sookie struggled to earn passing grades in school—likely because of her telepathy interfering with her ability to learn—Olivia earned top marks.

At sixteen years of age, Sookie got her first job, and she'd worked steadily from that time—though she switched jobs often until the shifter hired her. As far as I could tell from my research, Sookie had never gotten a paycheck that didn't find its way into Adele Stackhouse's budget.

By contrast, Olivia was able to work at her parents' law practice during summers and on weekends, and the money she made was put into an account for her own use.

When Sookie graduated from high school, she did so by the skin of her teeth, and—to celebrate—Adele Stackhouse had passed down her “hope chest” to her granddaughter. Having grown up during a time and in a place where similar traditions existed, I recognized that Sookie would have been thankful for the gift. But—later—as I'd got to know Sookie better, I wondered what she actually thought about having a “hope chest.” After all, my investigation had shown me that she'd had very few dates in her life before Bill Compton. And, from off-handed comments she'd made, I knew that being with a human man was impossible for her. I doubted she'd found much “hope” in that, which was likely why she'd been willing to give a douchebag like Compton the time of day.

On the other hand, when Olivia graduated from high school, her parents sprang for a two-month trip to Europe for her and her three closest friends.

After graduation, Sookie doubled the hours she worked each week, eventually working forty to fifty hours a week at Merlotte's for \$2.13 an hour plus tips.

After her summer European trip, Olivia started college at Yale University. When she decided that she preferred numbers to the law, her parents encouraged her to pursue whatever profession she wanted. Undeniably hardworking and driven, she eventually studied abroad, learning about international finance. She spent the summers of her junior and senior years of college interning with huge accounting firms in Manhattan and Boston. And then she went on to get her Master's degree before wading through an avalanche of job offers all over the globe.

However, she was neither greedy nor overly ambitious. And, clearly, she craved her roots.

Thus, she chose a job at an up-and-coming accounting firm that would return her close to her family home where her parents still lived and thrived.

She had lunch with them each Sunday.

During my initial investigation, I'd learned that Sookie, too, enjoyed a Sunday meal with her family.

So they'd had that in common—until Sookie's grandmother had been murdered.

It was a stretch to find other things they had in common, however.

For example, my investigation had found only one leisure activity that Sookie indulged in: a cheap one.

Sunbathing.

Not surprisingly, Olivia's list of leisure activities was quite long, and they included socializing with a large group of friends. She was especially fond of the opera and the symphony. And her charity work included raising funds for both.

Sookie's "charity" work included babysitting Arlene Fowler's children for free and helping her grandmother bake pies for various church fundraisers.

In my earliest investigations of Sookie, I found that she had only a handful of friends: Tara Thornton, Ms. Fowler, Lafayette Reynolds, and the shifter. And then there were her grandmother and brother.

Glamouring Ms. Thornton showed me that she was a legitimate friend to Sookie, sometimes even putting back items in her small clothing store for her friend and calling her when the items went on sale. However, part of Tara thought of this as "charity," and I couldn't help but to wonder if Sookie had picked up on those thoughts. It was also clear to me that Tara and Sookie didn't "hang out" often. Tara liked crowded clubs and dancing, and—although Sookie enjoyed dancing—she wasn't comfortable in crowds, nor did she have the money to go to them often.

A quick glamour-job of Ms. Fowler had shown me that she was more of a user than a friend. She often asked Sookie to babysit her kids—since she didn't want to pay a babysitter and Sookie would do it for free. In my estimation Arlene was a "bought" friend, but it seemed apparent that Sookie didn't mind doing the "buying" since there were so few people in her life.

Hell! I was a vampire—and a "Pam" (a unique sub-species, no doubt)—and I had more friends than Sookie Stackhouse did!

That point was brought home even more so when my investigation into Mr. Reynolds ended before I could even glamour him! He was murdered.

Not long after Adele Stackhouse was murdered.

As for Sookie's brother? Well—I found him to be a waste of space and a simpleton. Unlike his sister, he was easily glamourised. I quickly learned that he resented his sister more than he loved her. In fact, the best thing that could be said for him was that he liked her cooking.

And—as for the shifter? Well—sadly—I couldn’t risk trying to glamour him, but it quickly became clear to me that he wanted Sookie for himself. It was also clear just how critical he would be of her when she didn’t fall in line with his narrow, vampire-hating point of view.

I held in a sigh because—really—I didn’t think that vampires should indulge in such useless human behaviors. Indeed, the lives of Olivia Miles and Sookie Stackhouse couldn’t have been more divergent.

And that was brought home yet again by Olivia’s appearance as she stepped gracefully onto the dais and curved up a smile for my maker. Eric stood up, took her hand, kissed it, and then helped her get seated in the chair he’d placed next to his throne.

Just for his boring human.

I knew a certain telepath who would have slapped him for even daring to suggest that she be “shown off” in such a way.

Olivia’s blood-red outfit was impeccable, and my trained eye immediately recognized it to be Oscar de la Renta from head to toe. And—though Olivia would never be accused of having voluptuous curves, the ones she had were certainly better than the norm and were well-presented in her perfectly-fit dress. Against the red lace and silk, her skin was a milky white that most vampires would have envied. Her eyes were a kaleidoscope of hues, and her Brunette hair looked like it would have the texture of spun silk—though Eric wouldn’t share her.

Thus, I’d never gotten to touch it. Or any other part of her.

I suddenly felt sulky.

Eric truly was selfish at times!

In addition to being beautiful, Olivia was intelligent, and I knew that my maker was well-pleased with the work her company was doing for him. She was 5’4”, slightly taller than I was—but she could rock a pair of Jimmy Choo’s like no one’s business.

A woman after my own heart.

Indeed, in a lot of ways Olivia was the perfect woman for a vampire who wanted to “settle down” for a while. And she smelled quite pleasant too, having B-positive blood. She had what humans thought of as a “good job” and had already been made a full partner in the accounting firm where she was employed. She wasn’t a fangbanger, nor was she addicted to anything.

Except maybe Eric’s cock.

And I had to own that she was pleasant to be around. And no one had tried to kill her since she’d been with my maker.

In short, she was *boring*.

Olivia could match Eric when conversing about almost any topic, but I’d yet to hear her sass him.

Olivia always looked flawless and dressed in clothing that even I would have worn, but I missed the charm of a simple sundress.

Olivia was mouth-watering to look at, but I’d never seen her hands fly to her hips in frustration.

I couldn’t help myself. I missed Eric’s most effective chain-yanker!

Olivia wasn’t nearly as fun in providing material that could be used to tease my maker. But, at least, he seemed “steadier” with her than Sookie. However, I wasn’t sure that was a positive, for Eric was now as boring as hell too!

But I had hope that he would end the relationship soon.

I could feel that he was just as bored with Olivia as I was—despite how “perfect” she was. In fact, he’d been bored with her since nearly the beginning of their association, though I could tell that he was truly “trying” to remain interested in her.

He’d never had to *try* with a certain woman.

But I didn't mention Sookie Stackhouse to Eric anymore, nor did I give Eric too hard of a time about Olivia. If he needed Olivia in order to heal what had clearly been a broken heart, then who was I to interfere?

Still—the overall boredom of the current situation was grating.

Case in point: as Olivia sat next to my maker, I felt his boredom hit him—and me—like a thick wave, though he hid it well as he tried to show interest in a story she was telling about one of her work colleagues.

As if Mary's "snafu with the Peterson account" could be interesting!

But then I suddenly *did* sense something *very* interesting coming from my maker: anxiety of a particular brand that I'd only ever discerned from one source.

Sookie Stackhouse.

Though Eric was currently stuck on stage with Olivia, I certainly wasn't, and—as I got to the front door of the club—I could hear Sookie's rust-bucket choking its way into the parking lot.

About a minute later, she exited her vehicle ungracefully.

One thing was for certain: she was *much* fatter than she'd been the last time I saw her.

But then again, she was well on her way to growing a child.

SOOKIE POV

I doubted I'd go down in the history books for *not* being selfish. In fact, sometimes I felt like the most selfish person in the world—mostly because it was difficult for me to figure out how I'd done much "good" in the world.

I mean—I'd helped out Sophie—at least a little. I'd found some Fellowship members in her court, and I'd told her when her potential business partners weren't exactly being honest.

And I really did try to be a good waitress. But that certainly wasn't helping out society or anything.

And I was paid for my work, so it wasn't as if I were being unselfish about it.

I'd let Amelia come stay with me as Hurricane Katrina had borne down on New Orleans.

But who wouldn't have? Plus, she'd insisted upon paying rent, so there was that too.

Still, I figured that I was doing "good" when it came to Eric. For months, I'd stayed away from him, despite my desire to see and be with him. Once I realized just how much I loved *all* of him—and how I'd fucked things up so royally—I had wanted to head straight for Fangtasia. I'd wanted to beg him to give me another chance. But I hadn't been willing to disrupt his life—not when he'd so clearly found someone *a lot* more worthy than me to share that life with!

Indeed, whenever I would allow myself to fantasize about going to Eric—fantasize that he would tell me that he loved me—I would always be met by a swift burst of reality. In truth, I couldn't think of a single bit of "good" I could bring to his life. So I'd stayed away from him.

And I'd focused on getting my own life in order.

But I'd received a call from Sophie the night before. She had evidence that Arkansas was sending spies into Fangtasia, and she wanted me to use my skill to try to find them.

So, after months of not seeing Eric, I walked toward the entrance of Fangtasia. I was nervous to see him—anxious to see him.

"Look at what the cat *didn't* drag in," Pam drawled as I approached the door.

Her humor had never been "kind," but I'd missed her nonetheless.

"I think Bubba's eaten all the cats in Area 5," I answered just as dryly.

"*Please* tell me that your life is in danger. If you are here to invite me to an insipid human ceremony to honor your unborn child, I will be devastated."

I couldn't help but to let out a soft laugh.

“You are in fine form—I see.”

“And your form has widened—I see,” Pam returned with a frown before looking down at her own narrow hips. “You see—*this* is why I am glad I never spawned. I would likely have died in childbirth.”

I shook my head. “No—you were killed *before* you could have any children,” I deadpanned.

She looked pleased. “Yes!” she agreed.

I rolled my eyes. Pam was certainly one of a kind.

“Nice dress,” she grinned, taking in my simple dark blue maternity sundress. I wondered for a moment if she was being sincere or teasing me. I suppose it didn’t matter much.

“Thank you,” I smiled. Regardless of her true meaning, I’d received very few compliments as of late, and I was grateful for her kind words.

As a matter of fact, the garment was the nicest I owned—at least the nicest that I could fit into. Tara didn’t carry maternity clothing at her store, so Walmart and secondhand stores had needed to do when it came to my current wardrobe. Generally, I was in maternity yoga pants and T-shirts when I wasn’t working, but I’d needed a few nicer things for my trips to New Orleans. And—though a clothing budget was included in my pay—I couldn’t bring myself to shop at stores which would generally be out of my price range.

“So—*are* you in mortal danger tonight?” she asked eagerly. “*Please?*”

“Not tonight. Not that I know of. Not yet,” I chuckled.

I tried to see further inside the club. I couldn’t yet see the stage since Pam and I were still by the entrance and the expanded gift shop obstructed the view. “Is he here?” I asked.

“Yes,” she returned, though her smile left her eyes.

“Has Sophie called yet?” I asked.

“The queen is allowing you to call her that?” Pam asked, somewhat surprised.

“Yeah—um—we’re friends. And she’s found several jobs for me over the last few months. We’ve—uh—hung out a bit,” I added by way of explanation.

“If she’s given you work, then why are you still driving that piece of shit?” she frowned.

I rolled my eyes. “House first. Then car.” I sighed. “Anyway, I almost have enough saved up to buy a car free and clear. I don’t want to owe any debt if I can help it. And—since I’m working tonight—the next time you see me, I should be driving that new Ford Focus I’ve had my eye on.”

She rolled her eyes. “That sounds so *exciting*. So—you are here to *work*?”

I bit my lower lip, suddenly much more nervous than before. “Uh—yeah. Um—Sophie sent me. With her focusing so much energy on dealing with the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, she’s worried that Arkansas might try something. She wanted me to ‘listen’ here tonight.”

Pam’s expression sobered. “Many good vampires were lost because of that fucking hurricane,” she seethed.

“And lots of humans too,” I sighed as we shared of moment of commiseration. “Uh—could you tell Eric why I’m here? I don’t wanna ruin his evening.”

“Why do you think you’d ruin it?” Pam asked.

“Um—old habits—I guess,” I said tentatively. “And I can see that he’s busy.”

“How so?”

“I’ve—uh—already started scanning the humans inside. I can see Olivia in their thoughts. They are jealous of her.”

“And you—Sookie? Are *you* jealous?” Pam asked knowingly.

“I don’t have a right to be,” I said, rather than offering a direct response to her question.

Clearly, I'd been hanging around Sophie too much. She was the Queen of Louisiana *and* the queen of giving vague responses—at least to most people. That she'd been straightforward with me still never failed to amaze me.

“It’s a pity that our one-time Area 5 investigator had to resign,” Pam said with a smirk.

“Have you found a replacement for Bill?” I asked evenly.

“It seems that *you* are the replacement—at least for tonight,” she returned.

I nodded. After all, I couldn’t very well deny it. I was there to investigate.

“Will you tell Eric why I’m here?” I asked her again. “Sophie said that she’d call him, but I don’t know if she did. And I don’t want him to have to wonder—okay? And—uh—please ask him if he can spare five minutes for me at some point during the night?” I added, knowing that my request sounded like a question.

Pam looked at me through narrowed, questioning eyes, but then simply nodded in agreement.

“Come,” she said, before leading me toward Eric’s booth.

“I can’t sit here,” I said, stopping in my tracks before we’d reached it.

“He’s not using it at the moment,” she smirked.

I couldn’t keep myself from glancing at the dais.

He was on his throne, looking as gorgeous as ever. A smaller chair had been placed next to the throne, and Olivia sat there. She looked beautiful in a red cocktail dress that made her skin seem almost as white as a vampire’s. The couple looked to be having an animated conversation. Olivia giggled and Eric smiled widely.

They looked beautiful together—and happy.

The Viking had no glance to spare for me.

But—then again—why would he?

Even if I hadn't been an idiot when it came to *us*.

Even if he wasn't clearly in a relationship with a woman who *so clearly* outclassed me in every way—a relationship that had outlasted anything he and I'd had by months!

Even if I'd been as selfish as I wanted to be.

Even if I desperately wanted him to be in my life.

My desires were now fruitless.

After all, I would never attract him now.

I looked down at my ever-expanding body. It appeared that my unborn child—a daughter, as I'd discovered a few days before—was taking after her biological father when it came to size. But—thankfully—Dr. Ludwig had determined that she would likely *not* be able to shift. It looked as if I wasn't Supe enough to help her along in that way. I sighed and settled one hand over my daughter. Though I didn't want to limit her—*never* wanted to limit her—I was glad she wouldn't become a weretiger because I knew that I couldn't hide her paternity if she did.

I was also praying that she wouldn't have purple eyes.

But the tiny doctor couldn't predict her eye color, nor did she have any idea of whether or not she would inherit my telepathy.

I'd started to feel my daughter kicking only the week before—light fluttering thumps that made me realize that I no longer mattered. I knew with certainty that I would die for her. But I hoped to live for her instead—to be the sort of mom my own couldn't manage to be.

To *never* make her feel unloved.

To *never* make her feel unwanted.

Gracelessly, I sat down and scooted into the booth. No—Eric would no longer find me attractive. I was certain of it. Not only was my “much fuller” form a sign that I'd had sex with someone other than him, but also, I was just “big.”

Arm flaps? I'd gotten them.

Wider hips? Check.

Swelling ankles? You betcha!

Bigger boobs? Oh, yeah.

But they came with side and back fat, too—so it wasn't as if they made me more attractive.

Heck! Everything from my forehead to my toes felt bigger. And—admittedly—some of that was my fault. I'd wanted—*needed*—to look a month further along than I was. So I'd not exactly watched my weight. Plus, after my first trimester, my morning sickness had mostly ended, and my cravings for gravy and ice cream—though thankfully not at the same time—had increased exponentially.

And Gran's pecan pie—with ice cream. Not gravy.

Thank God!

I made and devoured about three of those pies a week!

Not that I could make them as well as she had.

"I guess a gin and tonic is out of the question?" Pam snarked, breaking me from my reverie.

"Water?" I asked.

Pam nodded and a waitress approached moments later to take my order. She was frustrated that I wasn't placing an order that would guarantee her a tip, so I vowed to leave her the five dollar bill I knew I had in my wallet.

After she returned with my glass of water, Pam left to speak to Eric. I'd purposely sat so that my back was to him and Olivia.

There were just some sights that I didn't need to torture myself with.

I pulled out a pad of paper and got to work.

Chapter 11: Painting

SOOKIE POV, CONTINUED

Four hours later, I was tired, and I'd had to visit the bathroom eight times.

At least the facilities were kept very clean, and I didn't have to be the cleaner as I did at Merlotte's most nights that I worked.

Apparently, Arlene had an "allergy" to toilet bowl cleaner.

Whatever.

From the thoughts of the patrons I'd been listening to in Fangtasia, I knew that Eric had sat on the dais with Olivia for about half an hour after I'd arrived before escorting her from the club through the rear exit.

At least that had been *before* my first bathroom visit.

Other thoughts had told me that he'd whisked her away in his corvette after giving her a "thorough" kiss in the parking lot.

Most of the fangbangers speculated that Olivia and Eric were off somewhere "fucking." I tried not to speculate. After all, I had no right to be jealous of anything they might have been doing, though my green foe had poked his way into my brain several times that night.

After they'd left, Pam told me that Eric had "stepped out" of the bar for a while, but would return near closing time in order to give me the five minutes I'd requested.

And as for myself? I'd kept busy between my bathroom breaks by pushing my telepathy as far as I could in order to hear more and more people. For the last several months, I'd been trying to craft my shields so that they'd be suppler—letting me hear only certain people at a time. It was a tough process, and I already knew I'd have a headache resembling a hangover symptom the next

morning, but I was determined to become stronger—if only to be able to pass along my knowledge to my child.

If she, too, was a telepath.

I'd been concentrating so hard on the people left in the bar that I hadn't noticed the void coming.

"Did you discover anything of importance?" Eric asked as he glided into the booth gracefully. My breath caught as I took my first sustained look at him for months.

He was so much more beautiful than I'd recalled.

But somehow I held my composure and slid him my notepad.

"No immediate threats, but a few Fellowship spies. And one spy from Arkansas. I have written down their assignments as well as where you can find them," I relayed.

He looked at the piece of paper. "This is quite detailed."

"I—uh—pushed in," I said, not knowing how else to describe what I'd done.

"You have been practicing," Eric said with a little smile.

I nodded. "As much as I can."

"It has been a while. You look," he paused, "*fatigued*."

"Just a full day," I said, shrugging off his comment and trying not to imagine just how bad I must have looked to his eyes—especially in comparison to the beauty he'd spent much of his night with. "You look well," I said, shifting the topic away from me.

"I look the same as always."

"Of course," I responded, my heart sinking a little more with each moment. Eric's tone wasn't cold, but it certainly wasn't warm either—not that I should have expected a warm welcome from him.

"How is Bill doing?" he asked. There was a bite in his question.

“I don’t know,” I said.

“I figured you would,” he returned significantly.

“I can’t feel his emotions right now,” I whispered. “Sophie has him working in China right now.”

His eyebrow rose. “I’d heard that you’d become friendly with the queen. And I’d heard that she was sending Bill to all corners of the globe—*for the database*.”

“Yes,” I said. “It’s a good thing, I think. *For the database*.”

He inhaled. “His blood still dominates your scent,” he informed.

“It still has a purpose,” I responded.

Looking into his eyes, I could tell that many thoughts were pummeling through the vampire’s mind.

“So you spoke with the queen?” he finally asked.

“Yes—I cashed in my favor, and she told me about Bill.”

We were quiet for a moment as he seemed to be studying the notes I’d written for him again. Suddenly, I worried that I’d doodled “Sookie loves Eric” on them and I anxiously glanced down at the yellow pad.

“I didn’t know why Compton came to my area,” he said, catching my eye.

“I know you didn’t.”

“I’m sorry he couldn’t be stopped from . . .”

He stopped midsentence.

“Sophie wanted to kill him for what he did,” I volunteered, hoping to avoid an awkward silence.

However, his response created even more awkwardness in the air between us.

He chuckled ruefully. “But you protested.”

In the past I would have yelled at Eric for his callousness, but that was the past. Now I only nodded. “Yeah. Uh—you know me—a bleeding heart.” Eric had no idea that I needed for Bill to stay alive so that the scent of my unborn child could stay covered up.

“At least he’s out of Area 5,” Eric commented.

“Yeah. Did you hear his old house burned down?” I asked.

“Bubba mentioned something. Damned pity,” he smirked.

God—I had missed that smirk.

“I miss you,” I said before I could stop the words from falling from my lips.

Fuck!

He tensed. “Miss me?”

I sighed. “I’m sorry. I got smart a little too late.”

“Smart how?” he asked.

“Sophie told me what blood ties could do—how they could affect emotions. Did you know that Bill did his level best to make me fear you? To make me be suspicious of everything you did?”

“You don’t say?” he joked, though the edge to his tone was anything but light-hearted.

I took a breath. “The thing is: when I stopped being afraid, I wrote down a list of every time you and I had ever seen each other. And there wasn’t a single one of those times when you intentionally hurt or mislead me.”

He blinked noticeably—as if surprised. “That is true.”

“Like I said,” I shrugged. “Smart. Too. Late. So—yeah—I owe you a ‘thank you’—actually a lot of them. So—uh—thank you.”

He seemed as if he wanted to say a thousand things, but he was silent for a while.

So was I.

Finally he shifted in his seat uncomfortably. “The five minutes are over.”

“Rhodes,” I said hurriedly. “Sophie said I should ask you about it.”

“Rhodes?” he asked.

“Because of Hurricane Katrina, Sophie is no longer going to the summit—except for the night of Peter Threadgill’s trial. She told me that you would be leading the Louisiana contingency.”

“Yes,” he said. “She has made me aware.”

“Well—uh—she wanted me to—uh—coordinate with you. About the trip,” I stammered. “I mean—she—uh—said it would be your choice of whether or not to—uh—still take me. She sent me here to ask if you’d—um—made your decision or not. This is my audition,” I said, pointing to the pad of paper before him.

“I know of your qualifications,” he said, a little affronted.

“I know,” I whispered. “But Sophie thought I should listen here, nonetheless—to—uh—reprove that I could be useful to you.”

Silence arose between us again, this time for even longer than before.

“I have not yet decided whether or not I want you in Rhodes,” he finally said.

“Oh—okay then,” I responded, standing up clumsily. I suddenly felt the need to leave quickly—before tears could fall from my eyes.

Rejection was a cold dish. But I was no longer a hypocrite; at least, I hoped I wasn’t. I knew that I deserved to eat that icy—and salt-filled—dish.

And I would. I just preferred to do it in private.

“Just let me know when you decide,” I said, readying my feet to move as fast as they could in the pumps I never should have worn.

Damn my vanity! And damn Walmart for making shoes with very little padding, especially for pregnant feet!

But Eric’s voice stopped me in my tracks.

“Your child is well?” he asked, his eyes focusing on my belly.

“Uh—yeah,” I said, my hands automatically resting over the area he was focused on. “She’s kicking now.”

“Now?” he asked, his eyes flaring with interest.

“Uh—not right at the moment. She’s asleep—I think. What I meant is that I’ve started to feel her kick—uh—periodically,” I finished awkwardly.

“I heard that Octavia Fant’s apprentice is now your roommate,” Eric said.

“Yeah. She and I have become friends during my visits to New Orleans,” I relayed, taking a half-step away from the table. “The apartment building she ran in New Orleans was damaged quite a bit during Hurricane Katrina, and Amelia didn’t want to move in with her dad. She actually drove up before the mandatory evacuations started because she’s scared of storms; now she’s waiting to go back down until the area around her complex has power again,” I rambled. “But that might be a while. Sophie sent one of the Berts to check out her apartments, and it looks like Amelia’s place is actually in pretty good shape, but Hadley’s old apartment will need extensive repair, and its new tenant is somewhere in Houston.” I saw that Eric’s eyes were still focused upon my midsection, but I just kept right on spilling information that he obviously wasn’t interested in. “You know—funnily enough—Amelia was gonna move up here last spring. ‘Cause she—uh—turned her boyfriend, Bob, into a cat, but I thought that would be a really bad idea with Bubba and all. You see—she was gonna bring him. I mean—Bob. Uh—anyway, Amelia was trying to avoid dealing with the consequences of transforming Bob—you know by telling Octavia? Amelia thought that she could—uh—figure it out herself, but I suggested it’d be better if she just went to Octavia right away. And she did, so Bob’s not a cat anymore. Still—part of me misses having a cat. Did you know that I used to have one? Tina was her name,” I shook my head, unable to stop my verbal diarrhea. “She was really sweet—uh—a real friend. Um—do vampires have pets? Uh—I mean pets that aren’t

humans? Anyway, Tina was killed by the same person that killed Gran. She was strangled and left on my front porch,” I reported morbidly, even as I had to stop talking in order to catch my breath.

Finally.

“I did not know that,” Eric said evenly—likely just indulging me at this point. I took another half-step away from the table.

“Yep. But—can you imagine if she’d still been alive when Bubba came over for the first time?” I cringed at that thought. “I would get another one—you know. Another cat? And I’m sure if I asked Bubba, he wouldn’t drain it. But I’ve decided to go with a puppy instead. A real dog—of course—not a shifter,” I added, even though I realized that I was sounding ridiculous now. “I have—uh—read that puppies who grow up with kids are usually really protective of them. And it couldn’t hurt—right? Uh—Terry Bellefleur—uh do you know him?”

“No,” Eric responded.

“Well—uh—why would you? Anyway, he’s gotta litter of puppies. After Rhodes—if I go, that is—he’s gonna give me one. Um—and—if I don’t go, I’ll just pick up the puppy once he’s weaned. Or she—if it’s a girl. I’m—uh—supposed to go tomorrow morning to pick the one I want, so I don’t know if it’ll be a boy or a girl. But he’s not charging me. Isn’t that nice of him? I mean—I think he could charge hundreds of dollars for one of his pups! Anyway, I’m gonna research it before I pick up the puppy, and I’ll give him the money anyway. I’ll just tell him that it’s to put toward his next litter,” I added—really wishing that my mouth would just close and that my feet would just move.

Eric brought his eyes up to mine again, and we were silent for a moment—me because I’d literally run out of anything to say, beyond telling him about my trip to the hardware store to get paint for the baby’s room.

However, when the silence dragged on, I took another half-step from the table and found myself bringing up that paint. “Well—I’d better go. I—uh—have to paint.”

“Paint?” he asked.

“The baby’s room. I was gonna go with pink, but that just seems too cliché. And I really don’t like pink; don’t tell Pam that though.” Yep, my stream of conscience spiel was clearly back! “And then I thought blue because I like blue, but the hardware store clerk thought I was even weirder than ever because she’d heard the rumor that the baby’s a girl. So I looked at shades of yellow, but my room growing up was yellow, and I wanted something different for her—you know? I’m mean—they say that yellow’s a happy color, but I don’t really think so. I mean—how can a color be happy? So I looked at greens. There was this light green that I almost went with because it had some blue in it, but then I just got blue. I mean—why should I let a clerk’s thoughts change my mind—right? So what if she thinks I’m weirder than ever because I picked a so-called boy’s color? Who says that girls can’t like blue—right? Of course, I’ll repaint if she ends up hating it,” I ended, now out of breath again because the rapidity of my talking.

There was another moment of uncomfortable silence between Eric and me.

And that’s when I realized that the awkwardness was all my fault. Eric had given me my five minutes—more than that even! And he was waiting for me to leave—probably anxious for it. But I hadn’t left yet. In fact, other than the couple of half-steps I’d shuffled, my feet seemed fixed in place.

Why?

Oh—I knew the answer. I *liked* seeing Eric again. I really had missed him. And—if anything—the affection I’d once felt for him had grown as I’d thought about all of our encounters without the taint of Bill’s prejudice.

And I was afraid I’d never see him again.

“You are having a daughter,” he finally said.

“Yeah,” I smiled.

“Will you name her for your grandmother?” he asked.

I couldn’t help but to tense up. “No,” I responded.

“I would have thought you would,” he commented.

“It’s complicated.”

I almost launched into the story of why the name of my child wasn’t going to be “Adele,” but I refrained. Just barely.

“Pam will escort you to your car,” Eric said, and in the next moment the blond vampiress was by my side. “I have somewhere else I need to be,” he added.

Without another word—and before I could even blink or say goodbye—he was out of his seat and out of the club.

Pam took my arm, which I was happy about. Her presence helped me to move, rather than to stay staring at the spot Eric had been in and succumb to my tears.

I noticed that my waitress was wiping down tables close by and impatiently waiting for the few bar stragglers to leave. I could empathize with her. While last call might have come at 2:00 a.m. at Merlotte’s—just as it did at Fangtasia—people would often nurse their final drinks to the bitter end, though Sam always herded them out by 3:00 a.m. I found myself wondering how the lingering “cattle” at Fangtasia were “herded” away—since the vampires literally saw most of them as *cattle*.

I figured Pam would be especially effective as a “wrangler” for the stragglers.

I stopped in my tracks, bringing Pam to a halt with me, and I dug into my purse, pulling out the only bill in my wallet—the five dollar note I’d planned to offer to my waitress. As Pam looked on, I handed it to the waitress, whose name I’d discovered was Stacy.

“Thanks for bringing me water all night,” I said, even as I attempted to give her a sincere smile.

Stacy looked at Pam cautiously and then took the bill.

“Thank you,” she said, even though she still thought that taking care of me had been a waste of her time. Apparently when Eric and Olivia moved to the booth after spending time on the dais, Stacy was given a bonus of at least a hundred dollars if she took good care of her master’s date.

Before I could think any further about that, however, Pam and I were at my car.

“Thanks, Pam,” I said, turning to smile at her. She looked ready to say something, but she seemed to suddenly decide not to. Instead, she rolled her eyes in the direction of my car and scoffed—as if deciding to judge it instead of me.

For that, I was grateful.

I unlocked my door and was just about to get inside, when Pam seemed to decide to judge me after all.

“Did you *ever* love him?” she asked in a low voice.

I closed my eyes. “Yes. I do.”

“*Do?* Even now?”

I opened my eyes and nodded—before chuckling ruefully. “It might have taken me a while to catch up, but—yes—I love him. At first, I thought it was just the version of him that lived with me—the one that didn’t remember who he was. And after he was gone, I grieved for him. And,” I paused, “in my grief, I refused to do what I should have done when it came to Eric.”

“And what was that?”

“Fight for him,” I said simply. “Push my way into Fangtasia the very night he left my house and tell him about what we’d been like when we were together. And then let him choose whether he wanted to try for an *us*.”

“He was never whole again—after the witch’s curse,” Pam said, her voice sounding hollow.

“Neither was I,” I sighed. “But I also wasn’t smart enough—or maybe confident enough—to think that I could ever be whole.

“What about now?” she asked.

“What about now?” I repeated. “Eric has moved on, and he seems happy. And I’m still fucked up. I *won’t* mess things up for him.”

“What if a good ‘mess-up’ would do him good?” Pam asked.

I shook my head. “Sophie says the same thing. But that doesn’t change certain realities,” I added, putting my hand over the evidence of my child.

Pam looked at my ballooned belly.

“You should name her Pam,” she offered.

I chuckled. “Hell no.”

“Why can’t you name her after your grandmother?”

Obviously she’d heard me say as much to Eric.

I touched Pam’s hand and got into my car. “It was really nice to see you, Pam.”

“Promise to call me when someone tries to kill you,” she said.

“You’ll be the first on my list,” I chuckled as I turned my key and prayed my engine would start. Asking Pam for a jump would have been humiliating.

Luckily, however, the old yellow car rattled to life.

Pam stepped back and watched me as I left the parking lot.

I held out for five minutes before I had to pull over and cry my eyes out.

Fucking pregnancy hormones.

But eventually the tears stopped, and I finished my trip home.

Amelia was asleep, so I was extra quiet as I changed into some shorts and a T-shirt.

And—for the rest of the night—I painted.

Chapter 12: One Too Many Times

SEPTEMBER 3, 2005

I opened my eyes to the sun streaming into my room. I waited for a few moments and then reached for the saltine crackers on my nightstand. I sat up carefully and ate three of them before sipping a warm ginger ale.

It was a remedy to morning sickness that Arlene had shared with me during one of the rare occasions when she'd been kind to me since learning that I was to be an unwed mother.

Never mind that Arlene had given birth to one of her children when she wasn't married.

Never mind that I'd supported her—even when her fiancé had tried to kill me.

Never mind that I'd always tried to be a good friend to her—that I'd never judged her.

Never mind that I'd offered countless hours of free babysitting—and given countless shift changes over the years.

All that mattered to Arlene now was that her new boyfriend was a Fellowship member. And—while she was “born again”—she'd obviously not been born with the charity spoken of in the bible.

Or the acceptance.

Or the love.

The Fellowship seemed to somehow find only hate in that book.

And intolerance for anyone who didn't share their beliefs *exactly*.

In Arlene's mind, I was a “daughter of Sodom—or Gomora”—depending on the day. And I'd befouled myself with vampires even before whoring myself to “others.” In fact, according to Arlene's thoughts, I was the very definition of what was wrong in the world.

Plus, she was afraid of me—but not because I was Eve reincarnated or anything. No—she was afraid of me because I knew all of her own dirty little secrets.

For example, Arlene couldn't count her sexual partners on both of her hands—and her feet. I know. She'd tried during a shift just last week! Also, she'd had two abortions—one when she was fourteen and had seduced her mother's twenty-six-year-old boyfriend and one within the last year when she'd learned that she was carrying Rene's child. Of course, publically, Arlene judged every woman who committed “murder” by “abortin' an innocent child”—even if the woman was raped!

In addition, Arlene had never had a boyfriend or a husband that she'd not cheated on—including her current boyfriend, the Fellowship nut. In fact, she was sleeping with the minister of the Fellowship church, too! Whenever she was short on cigarette money, she would sneak some of the tips off of other waitresses' tables. She thought that Terry was retarded because of his PTSD, but she preferred him to Lafayette, who she thought had gotten “what he deserved” when he was killed. She still called him “that faggot” in her mind. Of course, I'd never known about the true venom of her thoughts or the darkness of her spirit before—because I'd thought that being a good friend to her included staying out of her head.

So—yeah—she had every right to be scared that I would spew her secrets. After all, as a spiteful person, she expected others to be the same. But I wasn't spiteful—though I was tempted at times—and I now watched her like a hawk to make sure she didn't steal my meagre tips. But the truth was that I felt guilty any time I even thought about sharing Arlene's secrets because doing so would hurt Coby and Lisa too. I just prayed that they didn't turn out like their mother.

At least, Sam didn't put Arlene and me on the same shift very often, though I was working a lot of doubles and couldn't always avoid her.

Speaking of Arlene—she accosted me almost as soon as I walked into work. Hell! I'd not even gotten my apron on yet!

“So—can you take my Friday night shift or not?” Arlene asked from behind me. I wanted to say no, but Fridays were one of the best tip nights.

“Sure,” I responded, trying to sound amiable as I turned around. “Can you do my Friday day-shift? Or do you need the whole day off?”

“The whole day,” she smirked. “I’ve gotta Fellowship event to attend in Monroe—with Whit,” she added triumphantly—as if emphasizing the fact that I didn’t have anyone in the world to attend any events with.

Not that she was wrong. But I’d much rather be alone than with someone of Whit’s “character.”

Whit Spradlin, Arlene’s current flame, was about the most prejudiced person I’d ever come across—at least ten times worse than Arlene. And that was saying a lot!

“That’s nice,” I lied in response to my erstwhile friend’s comment.

“You know, Sookie,” Arlene said, looking at me judgmentally, “it’s not too late for you. You could come to the meetin’—maybe even get saved from your sins.”

“But then who would cover your shift?” I asked with mock innocence before turning away from her so that I could collect an order from Terry. Truth be told, he was the only person at Merlotte’s that I was truly comfortable around anymore. Another truth was that Sophie and I had asked Mr. Cataliades to make up a long-term contract for us, one which would kick in after Rhodes.

If Eric decided he wanted me to go.

In exchange for one week a month spent in New Orleans, using my telepathy to help Sophie, I would receive \$5,000 per month and a furnished home to live in while I was there. I

would also be provided with a nanny to take care of my daughter while I was working—as well as guards for my baby. Finally, the contract would provide healthcare for me and my child.

Better yet, it would give me options. Because of the jobs I'd already done for Sophie, the mortgage on the house—the whole thing, not just the part that I'd been behind in paying—was almost paid off.

After that mortgage was gone, I would own the farmhouse free and clear! No debt at all!

Beyond the mortgage, my monthly expenses were not great, so \$5,000 a month would be more than enough to see to my child's and my needs—especially since I was used to operating on less than \$1,000 per month.

I'd already made a savings account for my child, though it currently boasted only \$53. But I knew it would, one day, have a lot more in it. I planned to begin putting \$500 dollars into it each month as soon as the new contract with Sophie kicked in.

I never wanted for my child to want for anything.

Because of my employment with Sophie, I would also have the option of where to live. I'd seen the home that Sophie had bought for me, a cute little place that was actually a bit out of New Orleans, which was what I'd requested so that my telepathy could “rest” there. Of course, the unspoken thought Sophie and I shared was that my child might, like me, be a telepath; thus, she, too, would need to “rest.”

Sophie had surprised me when she told me that Hadley had actually had a child several years before: a little boy named Hunter. He, too, was a telepath. I'd met Hunter twice now, and he was a sweet little boy. Thankfully, his father was a good man, who loved Hunter no matter what. I'd already agreed to help Hunter with his telepathy so that it wouldn't turn out to be a curse to him—as mine had been to me.

Sophie had promised me that she would wait to approach Hunter for what she termed “employment opportunities” until he was 21 years old. And I trusted in her sincerity. Despite the circumstances under which I had met Bill, I believed that Sophie’s ideas of his procurement of me had been much different from what he actually perpetrated against me once he decided that he wanted me for himself.

“Here you go, Sook,” Terry said with a crooked grin as he handed me two chicken baskets.

“Thanks, Terry.”

“Your pup will be ready for you around October 1,” he declared. It was clear that he was proud of his dogs, and raising them helped him to cope with his PTSD.

I smiled at him. “I can’t wait. Would it be okay if I came by again when we both have the lunch shift off? I’d love to see him again,” I said of the puppy I’d picked out the morning before.

“How about the day after tomorrow?” he asked.

“Perfect!” I enthused.

“Better get those baskets out before they get cold, cher,” Sam said from behind me.

I turned with the food in hand and smiled at my boss; sadly, it was my “crazy Sookie” grin. “Sure thing, Sam!”

Sam had—more than once during the past few months—tried to convince me that I ought to marry him. And those proposals had made things awkward between us—to say the least. Oh—I could tell that Sam’s offers were meant well. He’d always had a thing for me, though he’d neglected to act upon that thing until Bill was in the picture. Maybe if he’d asked before I’d learned certain truths about Bill and realized even more important things about Eric—and how I felt about him—I would have considered Sam’s offer.

But it was no good. A marriage wouldn’t work between Sam and me. I viewed him as a friend only, and I hoped we’d stay that way. But I wasn’t sure I’d be getting that wish, considering

how Sam had reacted when I told him that I'd be needing the first week of every month off—beginning in October.

I'd been hoping to keep my job at Merlotte's for at least a couple of months longer. Even if I had steady money coming in from my work for Sophie, I wasn't sure I'd ever really feel “comfortable” where money was concerned.

Old habits. They seemed to have more lives than I did.

After delivering the chicken baskets, I did a quick circuit of my tables, with a tea pitcher in one hand and a *sweet* tea pitcher in the other. While I was doing that, I mentally listed other things my customers needed—or would be needing soon. I used their thoughts as well as my years of experience to anticipate them.

In fact, I now used their thoughts as my “practice”—as I tried to improve my telepathic skills.

After all, my customers were good for little else nowadays.

I was now quite used to the fact that the “regulars” would under-tip me—for no other reason than that they viewed me as a whore who didn't deserve their “hard-earned” money.

As if whores should make *less* money? It was the oldest profession according to some! Wouldn't it stand to reason that they'd make more?

I stifled a grin at that thought, knowing that I wouldn't be bothering to argue philosophy with the bar's patrons.

My hourly rate at Merlotte's was only \$2.13, and—for months—I'd had to hustle just to make minimum wage, though during some day-shifts, I made even less than that.

I just thanked God that I had another source of income because of the work I did for Sophie, not that Sam made it easy for me when I requested days off. Hell! According to him, any two days off I had in a row were a “hardship” to him—even when I asked for a Tuesday and

Wednesday, Merlotte's slowest days. In fact, when I'd asked for those days, he said it wasn't fair for the other waitresses that I was trying to avoid the least profitable shifts. When I'd asked for weekend days off, he chastised me for not working during the busiest times when he "needed me the most." When I asked him to just give me *any* two days in a row off—*whenever* he could easiest spare me—he complained that I wasn't being "grateful," even after all the shifts he'd given me.

Of course, ever since I'd been at Merlotte's, Sam had been in the practice of giving all of his waitresses two days off in a row, though he'd always rotated those days. It was only after I'd started taking those days to go to New Orleans to work for Sophie that they became an issue for Sam.

Nope—it was safe to say that I wasn't that comfortable around Sam anymore because every time he talked to me, he tried to talk me *out* of working for Sophie.

I sighed as I cleaned off one of my tables. The bill had been \$39.12. The tip was 70 cents—all in dimes.

My night went from bad to worse as Jason entered the bar with Hoyt and other members of the road crew. Hoyt looked at me apologetically as Jason glared at me.

Worst of all, many people's memories leapt to the last time Jason had come into Merlotte's when I was working.

I couldn't blame them. My memory jumped there too.

Because the universe seemed happy to torment me at times, Jason sat in my section—with an arrogant smile on his face. Anticipating what Jason and his crew would want, I got two pitchers of Bud and enough mugs to go around before going over to their table.

"I'm gettin' married on the 11th," Jason said with no preamble.

"Congratulations," I responded. Jason had been with Crystal Norris for months, so I wasn't surprised by the news. Crystal had miscarried Jason's child back in March, but Jason didn't seem to think there was anything wrong with her having been pregnant out of wedlock.

Of course, he thought that *everything* was wrong with my pregnancy.

“You’re not invited to the weddin’,” he said, glaring at me.

“I wouldn’t have expected to be,” I responded quietly, trying to keep the hurt out of my voice.

“Missy at the bank told me that you made another big payment toward *Gran’s* house.

Whatcha doin’ for the vamps to earn all that money, Sookie?” Jason asked, his voice raised enough for everyone in the vicinity to hear him.

Missy Jenkins had given Jason information about my bank account before. Pillow talk. But she was one of the only tellers at the bank, so I couldn’t exactly avoid her. And she had a young child at home, so I wasn’t prepared to get her into trouble for her gossip mongering either.

I knew from Jason’s head that he thought I ought to offer him some of my windfall, proving that he didn’t really care about *how* I’d actually earned the money for the back payments on Gran’s mortgage. He just thought that he deserved some of what I made to make up for all he “had to put up with”—just for being my brother.

Of course, he’d certainly never offered to help me *or* Gran financially. The most Gran had been able to get out of him was a chore or two in exchange for a meal.

I didn’t answer Jason’s question, though almost everyone within earshot assumed that I was selling one of two things to vampires: sex or blood. One or two people even speculated that I was going to sell them my child. They wondered if babies had tastier blood—since veal was better than a mature cow. I cringed and shut them out.

“So—can I get y’all any food tonight?” I asked the table.

“Three orders of bacon/cheese fries,” Hoyt said with a polite smile. “And another pitcher— when you get the chance.”

“Have Arlene bring it,” Jason said with a sneer. “I don’t think I can eat if you’re our waitress.”

“Of course!” I said with a very wide and a very fake smile.

I quickly put in their order with a sympathetic-looking Terry before asking Arlene to cover Jason’s table. When she looked put-out, I offered to take over her six-top, but to leave the tip for her.

She agreed.

I looked at Sam and motioned toward the bathroom. Pregnancy made me need to pee at least once an hour, but I needed the bathroom for more than just bladder relief. I figured that I deserved a splash of water on my face after my encounter with my brother. I honestly didn’t know why Jason seemed to despise me so much nowadays. But—after our encounter the week before—I could safely say that I was pretty much done with him.

Clearly, however, he wasn’t done with me.

I wet a paper towel and held it against my forehead as I recalled Jason’s tirade from the previous week.

He’d heard that I was having a girl—something I’d told Terry. Arlene had overheard us talking and had spread the gossip. In truth, however, I didn’t care if people knew the gender of my baby.

I had been happy about my news—pleased to learn that cute little dresses were in my future.

Jason had burst into Merlotte’s that same night, and he’d said more than one thing that had been fueling my nightmares.

Actually, he’d *yelled* those things for all to hear.

I closed my eyes tightly as his words bit me again.

“I heard you was havin’ a daughter! Too bad she’ll have a whore for a momma as a role model!”

I shook my head at the memory of Jason’s words.

But those hadn’t been his worst.

“You’d better not desecrate Gran’s memory by naming your whore in trainin’ *Adele!* I’m gonna name my own girl after her—you hear!”

He’d shaken me as he’d said that. Shaken me hard enough so that the bruises were still on my upper arms.

I’d lifted my chin in defiance to him and had pronounced that I was—indeed—going to name my baby after Gran.

He’d shoved me down, and Sam had gotten between us while Terry had called Bud.

I wet the towel again.

Bud had hauled off Jason, but I’d been left with a sobering realization as I’d been bombarded by the thoughts of those at Merlotte’s.

I could defy a hardware store clerk and paint my daughter’s room blue, but I wasn’t going to name my daughter “Adele.”

Gran’s name elicited a lot of thoughts from the people in Merlotte’s, but they all strayed to my “sins” and how Gran would hate them.

Hate me!

Honestly, I didn’t want my daughter to have to hear those thoughts every time someone called her name.

I rewet my towel and dragged it along the back of my neck.

A big part of me hoped that living in New Orleans would become a permanent thing—though I hated the thought of leaving the farmhouse. But I didn’t want to subject my daughter to

the thoughts of the people of Bon Temps either—not if those thoughts would be even more negative than the ones they’d had about me when I was a child. After all, I was just “crazy”—a “freak.” But my daughter would also be thought of as the child of a “whore.”

I glanced at myself in the mirror before lowering my eyes to the sink basin. Three fingers! I could count the men I’d slept with on only three fingers, but the thoughts around me were sometimes so fervid that I almost believed I’d fucked hundreds of men.

I took a long breath, threw away my used paper towel, and turned to leave the bathroom—only to be confronted by Sam, who was entering the room.

He locked the door behind him, and I tensed.

“You okay, cher?” he asked.

“Yeah. Just a little bloating and overheating,” I lied. “Pregnancy stuff.”

He nodded. “I heard what Jason said.”

“Most of the people in Merlotte’s did,” I commented.

He took a step toward me.

Oh-uh.

“You could silence him and most of the others out there if you just married me. I’d even adopt your child. Hell you could put my name on the birth certificate—pretend that she was mine all along! I’d be happy to claim her. *And you.*”

The intensity in his eyes made them almost yellow.

I took a deep breath. “I appreciate the offer, Sam. I really do. But I can’t take you up on it.”

“Why not?!?” he yelled angrily. “Is it because of the vamps?”

I closed my eyes and hoped that Sam would soon calm down. “No. I need to concentrate on my daughter right now. And on myself.” I paused. “You are a real good friend, Sam. But that’s all we’re ever gonna be—okay?”

“Dammit, cher, I could be good for you! *Will* be good for you!”

I’d stopped stifling my telepathy when I could be in danger—a lesson hard learned. So I heard that Sam thought that I would accept him—*finally*—if we just had sex. And—as he took another step toward me—I wondered if he might try to force the issue.

“It would be rape, Sam, and I’d hate you for it,” I said as I took a step away from him.

I was ready to scream and to fight, but my words were enough to pour a cold bucket of reality over Sam’s thoughts.

Thank God!

He took a step away from me. “Rape? I would never force you! Never!” he said insistently.

Better than anyone, I knew that people often didn’t follow through with their thoughts. And Sam was a good man—in most ways. But his idea that we should get married was only becoming more forceful in his mind, and his pursuit of me *had* to stop—before he did follow through with his desire to “claim” me.

“Sam, I’ve told you more than once that I’m not gonna marry you. I don’t love you like I should love a husband.”

“But you *could*, cher. If you tried. If you gave us a chance. You could grow to love me. I know it!”

I sighed. “No, Sam. I would be settling for you. And that wouldn’t be fair to either one of us.”

“Settling?” he growled. “This is about the vampires—*isn’t it?* I can protect you from them!” he promised.

“That’s just it. I don’t need your protection,” I sighed.

“You are naïve if you think you’re safe with them,” he returned.

“The only vampire who has truly harmed me is in Asia right now,” I said, thinking of Bill’s latest assignment from Sophie.

Sam scoffed. “I have a good memory, cher, and I think you are tryin’ to revise history.”

“No—I’m getting my facts straight—*finally*,” I said with frustration. “Who’s hurt me? Rene Lenier—human. Your friend, Callisto—Maenad. Steve Newlin—human. A whole bunch of other Fellowship members—all human. Marnie Stonebrook—Were witch. Other witches—all humans or Weres. The Pelts—Weres. Quinn—weretiger. Yes—I was sometimes in positions where I could get hurt because I was working for vampires. But blaming the vampires would be like blaming the police for not being able to stop every criminal before the fact. Heck! I’m more qualified to stop most bad things from happenin’ than they are!”

“Is that how they’re *using* you?” Sam asked, sarcasm lacing his tone.

“It’s how the queen is *employing* me,” I corrected.

He rolled his eyes. “And I’m sure that all the information they get out of you is for the greater good.”

I shrugged. “Part of my agreement with all the vampires I’ve ever worked with is that guilty humans are turned into the human police when possible. And, honestly, I’ve never been asked to do anything that would hurt an innocent person.”

“Yet!” he said skeptically.

“Why do you insist upon seeing the worst in vampires, Sam?” I asked, truly curious.

“They are selfish, evil creatures,” he returned.

I sighed. “Now you sound like Arlene: prejudice without proof. Not all vampires are bad, Sam.”

“They’re killers!”

“So are some humans,” I responded. “And some of the two-natured.”

Sam frowned. “Cher, you *need* to stay away from them!” he growled, his thoughts darkening again.

“No, Sam,” I said. “You need to stop trying to interfere in my life.”

“Interfere?” he asked incredulously. “I love you! I want to marry you. And I’m even willing to take on a bastard child for you!”

It felt like Sam had hit me in my gut, but there was no way I’d allow him to harm the child resting near that gut.

I noticed his hands forming into balls of tension. “If I wanted to interfere, I’d tell you that you can’t keep your job here if you expect to be left off the schedule one week per month,” he said triumphantly, thinking I’d choose Merlotte’s over my job with Sophie.

He was dead wrong about that.

I squared my shoulders. “Okay, Sam.”

For a moment, he looked even more triumphant.

“You no longer have to put me on the schedule at all,” I said. “Do you want me to work out the night—and this week? Or would you prefer me to leave now?”

“Cher, I didn’t mean for you to quit!” Sam backpedaled, his eyes immediately showing a mixture of desperation and contrition.

“No more ‘chers,’” I said quietly. “No more marriage proposals. No more attempts to manipulate me into acting how *you* want.”

“If you think I’m the one manipulating you, you’re stupider than I thought!” he said angrily.

I sighed. “Okay then. I guess I’ll leave *now*.” I shrugged. “Truth be told, leaving Arlene in the lurch for Friday doesn’t sound half bad right now—considering what her mind is telling me.”

“What’s that?” Sam asked, clearly a little taken aback.

“She thinks I’m seducing you,” I conveyed.

I moved toward the door.

“Cher, I”

I gave Sam a warning look. I’d had one too many endearments from people who weren’t actually on my side.

One more “babe” or “cher” and I was likely to show my pregnancy hormones in full!

But then I remembered that Sam had once helped me when I couldn’t find another job, and I found that I couldn’t leave on such a bitter note.

“I will never be able to thank you enough for giving me a job in this town when all the other job-wells had dried up for me,” I said sincerely. “I don’t know how Gran and I would have made it all those years without the money I earned here. I’ll always be a friend to you, Sam Merlotte, but you aren’t being one to me right now.” He didn’t stop me as I unlocked and opened the door. “When you decide to be my friend again—if you ever do—give me a call.”

As I left the bathroom, I was face-to-face with Jason. “You marrying Sam like you should?” he asked.

Seeing into Jason’s thoughts in that moment, I saw that Sam had visited him weeks before—asking for his permission to marry me.

The only problem? Jason and I had already been estranged by then—which Sam had known very well.

On his *best* day, Jason wouldn’t have been a very good steward of my life. But, lately, he had no right to be involved at all! And the fact that Sam did involve him spoke volumes!

“Ask Sam,” I said before moving past Jason towards Sam’s office. Quickly, I took my measly tips from my apron and placed it and my order pad onto Sam’s desk before grabbing my purse from its usual spot.

And then I walked out the back door—not bothering to look back.

ERIC POV

Before I’d invited Olivia into my home, I’d decorated the second largest bedroom with her tastes in mind. The walls were a silver blue, and the furniture was a rich reddish brown. The textiles in the room were deep blue and cream.

The bedroom was a study in elegance, just like the woman now sleeping in the bed.

I got up and put on my robe before making my way downstairs to my day-chamber, a place where Olivia had still not been. I’d only ever contemplated letting one human into that place.

I tried to close my mind to thoughts of that person, however.

Instead, I refocused on Olivia. She *should* have been perfect for me. She was intelligent. Hell! She’d even taught me a thing or two about the evolving stock exchanges around the world. And I’d profited from her guidance in that arena.

But money wasn’t everything.

I lay down in my lonely bed. When Olivia had asked if she could stay with me during the day, I’d explained to her that vampires simply didn’t rest next to humans. And—I could honestly say that I never had. But I couldn’t honestly say that I’d never wanted to.

I didn’t need such a big bed. Hell! I didn’t need a bed at all, for I had been “born” from the dirt and had rested there for centuries.

“*Her* half,” I said, looking at the empty part of the bed.

I turned away from that half.

I'd ordered the bed on January 10—right after my time as an amnesiac. I knew that I'd spent my days with Sookie in the cramped “cubby” in her closet, but I'd been practically driven to buy a bed we could *both* fit into.

And that bed had taunted me ever since.

Because it had stayed half empty.

But I couldn't get rid of it.

And I didn't want to rest anywhere else.

“Fuck you, Sookie Stackhouse!” I whispered into the dark room.

Once again, I tried to focus on the litany of Olivia's qualities.

But I couldn't prevent comparisons from forming.

Most people in the world would label Olivia as being more beautiful than Sookie Stackhouse.

But it was a blond head and a set of teeth with a gap that met me when I closed my eyes.

Most people in the world would find Olivia to be more intellectual company.

But I missed Sookie's innate cleverness and wisdom—the way that she seemed to view the world as no one else could have.

The way she challenged me at every turn.

Or—at least—she *used* to.

Most people in the world would prefer Olivia in bed—given her perfect mixture of natural grace and eagerness. *And* her lack of a gag reflex.

But I found myself aching for a body I couldn't quite remember, but one that I somehow knew fit me better than any other ever had.

I *should* have preferred Olivia because she'd preferred me from the start. There had been no drama. No second guessing. *And no Bill Compton!*

But none of that mattered.

Olivia was someone I *wanted* to prefer. She was the ideal companion for a vampire who wanted a companion.

However

However.

She wasn't the woman I loved.

She was not my heart's desire.

I closed my eyes and recalled the details of the curse Hallow had unleashed against me. It was supposed to have made me view her as my heart's desire—to have made me go to her without my memories. Hallow had planned to use me for sex and to take my blood.

But—as I'd learned during my thousand years—"love spells" often didn't work out as planned. And—though Hallow was a strong witch—she wasn't a particularly educated one. Thus, only part of her spell had worked. She didn't count on the fact that I was already in love with someone else when her spell was activated, and her curse couldn't touch that authentic love.

As a matter of fact, I *did* rush to my heart's desire without my memories intact.

But that beloved was Sookie Stackhouse.

Time apart. Distance between us. Our weakening blood tie. The hurt I felt when I thought about her. Her short relationship with Quinn. Her pregnancy.

None of those things were capable of changing a certain truth: Sookie Stackhouse was *still* my heart's desire.

But that didn't mean I was willing to risk my heart again. It had already been demolished by her—one too many times.

Chapter 13: Ghosts of Boyfriends Past

SEPTEMBER 24, 11:00 P.M., RHODES

SOOKIE POV

Peter Threadgill's trial had been held the night before. As she'd said she would, Sophie—along with both Berts—had jetted in for the hearing, and then they'd left immediately thereafter. Andre had stayed in New Orleans with Rasul in order to—in Sophie's words—"keep an eye out for trespassers."

I couldn't really blame Sophie. Apparently, Louisiana was wounded enough that the sharks were swirling around her. But the queen also had many allies, including King Stan of Texas. In fact, Stan had foregone attending the summit so that he could "watch Louisiana's back" while Sophie was out of the state for much of the night. I knew that Pam, too, was vigilantly monitoring the northern border.

And, though Eric hadn't interacted with me much since we'd arrived in Rhodes, I could sense the tension in his body as he watched the goings-on around him with the eyes of an eagle.

No—with the eyes of a Viking ready to lay waste to anyone that threatened himself, his people, or the lovely Olivia.

In truth, I'd been more surprised that he'd allowed me along than that he'd brought Olivia with him. After all, it seemed from the rumors that abounded around Sophie's court that Eric fed exclusively from Olivia. And he apparently didn't have any other kinds of carnal relationships with anyone else either.

I kept my eyes down so that I wouldn't have to see myself in the mirrored glass of the elevator. Thalia was with me—my constant guard during my nights in Rhodes since Bubba was too conspicuous. But she wasn't interested in speaking with me.

My Were guard, a woman named Hennesy, didn't speak to me much either. In fact, the only time I'd spoken that day had been to Amelia, who had called in the late afternoon to check up on me.

My work for the Louisiana vampires was—Amelia knew—exhausting me. Each night, I pulled out all the stops to hear what was going on around me. From human donors and pets, I'd learned about more petty backstabbing between the monarchs in attendance at the summit than I'd thought could be possible. Pushing myself even more in order to hear the Weres and other two-natured creatures on the various vampires' staffs, I had discovered other petty squabbles.

But I'd been of little help to Sophie or to Eric. Even I knew that. In fact, I'd only actually helped them once thus far.

By listening into a maid's thoughts, I'd discovered a group of Weres who were planning to kill Jennifer Cater, Peter Threadgill's second, two nights before. I'd told Eric about them.

Apparently, King Peter wanted to have his own second killed in order to frame Sophie. I didn't know much about what had happened after that—besides the fact that Hennesy had kept me in my room for the rest of the night, while Thalia had gone off to help Eric.

From what I could guess, Eric had saved Jennifer, and her attempted murder was added to the list of Peter's crimes.

The only other "help" I'd been was to tell one of the hotel managers, a Were named Matthew, about a bomb in a soda can that I'd heard a human planting on one of the vampire floors.

Eric had been none too pleased that I'd "outed" my telepathy to Matthew, but the little bomb had been planted during the day, and I didn't want to risk its going off—even if it was small.

After all, Eric's floor was only two away from the device.

I was taken out of my thoughts as the elevator doors opened.

Thalia made a noise that I knew meant that she wanted me to move, so I did, though I steeled my emotions first. I was to attend a trade meeting, which would likely go on for most of the night. The meeting was Eric's last "state" commitment at the summit—though he would be attending the closing ball the next night.

With Olivia, of course.

I would be expected to attend too—to listen. I was already dreading the event.

I looked at my vampire guard and then at that ladies' room I saw in the lobby.

Even looking at a restroom made me need to pee nowadays.

Thalia shook her head, but still led me over to it. I knew by now that she would come right into the bathroom with me. Hennesy did the same when she was my guard. I wondered if they compared notes.

I realized the folly of wearing the pregnancy version of control tops as soon as I tried to pull them down for the first time.

I frowned at my vanity. God! Had I really been hoping to look slimmer? When that *clearly* wasn't possible!?!? I struggled with the nylon. After I *finally* got the hose down and my skirt up, I sat heavily onto the toilet and told myself—in no uncertain terms—that I was *not* going to cry!

But my pregnancy hormones assaulted me, and I found myself sniffing.

"Stop! Now!" Thalia ordered gruffly. "There is no time for you to return to your room to fix yourself—*again*."

A handkerchief was passed under the stall.

"Thanks," I whimpered.

I heard a scoff and concentrated on dabbing the corners of my eyes. I'd stopped wearing mascara altogether because of my hormones. I couldn't—*wouldn't*—buy the expensive waterproof

stuff. And the cheap waterproof stuff had practically “de-lashed” me when I’d used it. I could just hear Pam chastising me now: “*That* was the price of cheap makeup!”

“We must be in the conference room in five minutes,” Thalia said unpityingly. Unrelentingly.

“Sure,” I responded, even as I multitasked by getting both my cry and my pee “on” at the same time. Knowing that Thalia wouldn’t want to see the handkerchief again, I pushed it into my suit pocket before wiping, navigating back into my hose, and trying to smooth out my skirt.

I’d opted for a maternity suit in black—because it was a “minimizing” color. When I’d gotten it two weeks before, the button on the jacket had fastened, but it didn’t anymore. So the jacket actually just functioned to frame my burgeoning belly.

Thalia cleared her throat—which I’m certain hadn’t needed to be cleared for at least a thousand years.

“Coming!” I said with false brightness, as I exited the stall, keeping my head down so that I didn’t have to see myself in the mirror. In truth, I’d started looking into mirrors again, but only to gaze at my alien-like tummy as I contemplated baby names.

After washing my hands, I followed Thalia out of the restroom.

“You must try to hold your bladder,” she said brusquely. “Breaks are *not* given at vampire meetings.”

Why did that statement make me need to immediately pee again? It was the same phenomenon as when the “fasten seat belt” sign had come on during my trip to Rhodes. I’d been perfectly fine before it had, but—after that—I’d had to cross my legs (a difficult thing nowadays) and pray to God that I wouldn’t wet myself.

Instead of sharing my fears with Thalia, I simply nodded and obediently followed her into the large conference room where the meeting was to be held. My guard led me to our seats,

straight-backed chairs with very little padding or comfort. But, at least, I could sit. We were among a group of “underlings” seated along the walls of the room, most of them taking minutes for their masters. I took out my yellow pad and a pencil and tried to look as if I belonged.

The good news was that not many of the people I could “hear” in the room knew anything about my telepathy, though most of the two-natured folks in attendance recognized me as the “whore” who’d given Quinn an STD.

I wished!

I had no idea if the vampires knew about my telepathy or not.

Had it been possible, my belly would have dropped as three males entered the three different doors of the conference room as if they’d choreographed their entrance. Maybe they had.

Or maybe I’d committed even more sins than I’d been aware of—sins that I needed to be punished for.

Either way, I felt my “punishment” acutely as Quinn walked in one door, Bill walked in a second, and Eric escorted Olivia through the third.

As if adding insult to injury, all three men I’d ever “been with” focused on Olivia at first.

I couldn’t blame them. Olivia looked stunning.

“So that’s a power suit,” I whispered in awe. Olivia certainly looked powerful as Eric led her to a place at the table. In addition to being his “date” for the summit, Olivia was acting as a financial consultant for Louisiana. Her role was *important*, so her seat got to be comfortable.

For all the reasons I could have envied her in that moment, it was that chair that I coveted the most.

After their attention was taken from Olivia, I felt the eyes of both Bill and Quinn come to rest upon me, but I kept my own eyes focused on my yellow pad in what passed for my “lap” these days.

I'm sure that at least two vampires in the room felt my growing desire to giggle maniacally at the irony of the situation.

But it was funny!

Bill's blood—put into my body during his systematic attempt to bind me to him—was currently covering up the scent of Quinn's child. Quinn—who had put his seed into me during his systematic attempt to bind me to de Castro—was currently sneering at the fact that I smelled so much like Bill!

I snorted out a laugh and covered it up with coughing as Eric turned to join the other two in staring at me.

It was Eric's gaze that hurt the most, and suddenly my desire to laugh was gone, as—seemingly—was most of the air in the room.

Thankfully, he didn't look at me for long.

I was happy that Quinn left after making a couple of announcements about the pledging between Russell Edgington and Bartlett Crowe, which was to be held following the meeting. I was surprised when I learned from Quinn's brain that Eric was to officiate the wedding, which I'd been invited to attend.

I'd wanted to decline the invitation. After all, the last thing I felt like doing was attending a wedding! However, it was listed on the docket of required events and meetings that I'd been given by Eric when I arrived in Rhodes.

Given that he was part of the Louisiana group, Bill took a seat next to me as Quinn departed the room, making me even more uncomfortable than I'd been before.

Initially, Bill wasn't going to be in Rhodes with the small Louisiana delegation; however, after Katrina, plans had changed. Sophie needed all the funds she could get for the rebuild, so Bill was there to sell his database.

Why he was at the committee meeting was beyond me.

Again, I tried to steal myself. After all, I'd assured Sophie that I'd be fine with Bill at the summit, and—so far—I had been.

Thanks to Thalia.

In fact, every time Bill even sniffed in my direction, Thalia dropped fang. I could tell—through the bond that I was still pretending had never been made complete—that Bill was extremely frustrated, but he was also scared of Thalia.

Of course, I knew that Bill had been frustrated since June—when Sophie had started sending him on one assignment after another. I'd received a letter a week from him from the various locations he'd been “exiled” to. Oh—they were “polite” letters. They focused upon how much he missed me and how we should “try again” with our relationship. He said that he'd even be willing to “accept” the fact that I was having another man's child. After the first few letters had come—all saying the same thing—I had just quit opening them. I'd written him just once; funnily enough, Andre had “helped” me to craft the letter.

Sophie's eldest child and I had reached a kind of “understanding” during my visits with the queen. Andre had stopped looking at me as if I were a prize he wanted to take, and—in turn—I had started to tolerate him. In fact, he could be quite funny when he wasn't leering, and I could understand why Sophie had been happy to be around him for so long. His sense of humor was even more “biting” than Pam's at times!

When I'd mentioned that Bill was writing to me, Andre had practically sparkled with delight—not that *real* vampires sparkled—and had suggested that we should write him back. Andre had dictated the letter as I wrote, but I had to admit that it likely put on hold any plans Bill might have had to try to return to Louisiana unbidden.

In fact, Andre had been surprisingly truthful—and *unsurprisingly* misleading.

“I” told Bill “thanks” for showing that he cared by writing. But “I” emphasized that I needed to focus on my pregnancy and wouldn’t be making any major life decisions until after my child was born. “I” also let Bill know that I wanted to see him soon after the baby was born. Of course, he didn’t know that this was because some of his blood was needed to break the blood bond.

To Sophie-Anne and Andre, Bill had—predictably—kept up his protests involving being kept separate from me. Of course, he couldn’t exactly go against the queen when she “called dibs” on a human in her kingdom, especially one who didn’t recognize the claim of another vampire.

Still, it was plain to see that Bill was unhappy with the arrangement—*quite* unhappy. But I was done giving any fucks about Bill’s happiness, though I did care about my own discomfort in that moment, for I was having to bear the brunt of his brooding without letting on that I was feeling anything at all from him.

And then he tried to take my fucking hand!

Oh. Hell. No!

Maybe it was Bill’s attempt at physical contact—on top of having to deal with his emotions, on top of filtering through so many human thoughts, on top of trying to read so many difficult-to-read Were thoughts, on top of the stress of seeing Quinn, on top of the emotional toil of being near Eric and his not-so-new-anymore love interest, on top of being six months pregnant, on top of having a hot flash, on top of my skirt being a little too tight (despite its elastic waist), on top of needing to pee *again*—which caused my headache to reach a point that I could no longer stand.

But whatever caused it, the agony was immediate and epic!

Suddenly, I saw spots of white light floating in the air, and my meal from earlier threatened to make another appearance, which I’m certain wouldn’t be welcome in a room full of vampires.

I couldn't spare a thought to leaving the room discreetly, not if I was going to throw up outside of it, so I rose quickly, wobbled from dizziness and shoes I ought not to have worn, and ran for the door.

Thalia, I knew, was on my heels.

Bill too.

And I also knew that I would never make it to the bathroom.

It's funny how one's "vomiting instincts" kick in when needed, and I spotted a beautiful tree of some kind decorating the hallway right outside of the conference room. More importantly, the tree was planted in a large, sturdy-looking pot.

I was on my knees in front of it before you could yell, "ruined control-top pantyhose."

And then I did a magic trick. I made my dinner reappear.

After suffering a few migraines over the previous months as I'd tried to push my telepathy to its limits and beyond, I'd learned to erect my shields *before* my headaches got too bad. A few porcelain god "church visits" when I'd been working at Merlotte's had taught me that.

This was much worse than any of those times, however. And the headache had come on so quickly that I would have believed it if someone told me I'd been shot in the head!

As I hugged the tree's pot like a long-lost lover—actually, more like held onto it for dear life—I lost my senses, my thoughts, and my memories.

In fact, I felt as if I lost every part of who I was.

Or maybe I'd always been lost?

Maybe a life of trying to ignore an essential part of myself—my telepathy—had made me a "non-person."

Maybe being lied to and manipulated by Bill had made me even less than that.

Maybe being lied to and manipulated by Quinn had made me lesser still.

But I knew one thing as I began to hear and see and—unfortunately—taste and smell again: I *really* wished that I *really* could just disappear.

A gentle hand was holding back my hair. I looked down at the shoes worn by the person who “owned” that hand.

Amazing steel gray pumps—five-inches at least. Just a hint of a red sole.

Olivia had been wearing those shoes.

“Can someone get me a cold cloth?” Olivia asked, confirming the identity of my helper.

“She is unwell. Move aside so that I can give her some of my blood,” came Bill’s voice.

I turned back to the pot and vomited some more, heaving until my ribs felt like they would break.

I felt warmth on my cheeks and realized that they were tears, even as a cold cloth was placed on the back of my neck.

It felt like heaven, but it soon opened up hell. The first thoughts into my mind were Olivia’s. They were kind and full of concern. She wondered if they should send for the doctor that the hotel kept on staff. Of course, she also pitied me. Eric had told her that I was a telepath, and she figured that must be a horrible thing to have to endure, especially since she’d never heard of another one. Eric had also told her that the father of my child was unknown, and she wondered if I’d been raped. I wretched again. That hadn’t been the first time that I’d had that thought. To me, every time I had been with Bill or Quinn now seemed like a kind of attack—a violation.

Seemingly having nothing solid or liquid left to give, I dry-heaved as I contemplated a fear I’d worried about more and more during the past weeks. *Had I violated Eric?* He’d been memoryless, and I’d let us have sex. What kind of person did that make me? After all, Eric wasn’t of “sound

mind” when we’d been together. The fact that “my” Eric and I had wanted each other now seemed immaterial. The fact that the “real” Eric had wanted me before seemed immaterial.

All that mattered was the possibility that I’d violated him, and—even if our sex wasn’t a violation of him—the aftermath had been. I had withheld the truth about *us*, and when he’d finally stooped to desperate measures to get it, I’d shared only scraps of it—and in the cruelest way possible.

Yes. I’d violated him.

I heaved again, spitting thick stomach acid and bile into the pot.

As the cool cloth continued to sooth my sweaty flesh, Olivia’s kind thoughts were overridden by other people’s judgements, including Quinn’s. He was wondering how he’d ever managed to lower himself to fuck scum like me. I heaved again.

Unfiltered, the thoughts continued to stream into my mind in nauseating waves. I had no shields to stop them: no control, no power, no “self.”

Humans judged or pitied me as they hurried away or continued watching the “train wreck.”

Weres recalled all the gossip they’d heard about me. They too wondered why Quinn had sullied himself with me.

Worst of all, I saw myself in all of their eyes.

Dozens of Sookie Stackhouses—all bent over a poor decorative tree’s now ruined pot.

I’d sweat so much that my hair seemed matted in places. Or maybe I’d just thrown up in it. I looked white as a sheet. I’d lost a shoe. My hose were shredded. My skirt was barely covering my bottom.

As I watched myself heave again from all of the heads of my human or two-natured audience, I couldn’t help but to judge myself right along with them.

Pathetic—that was the word that came to most of their minds. And to mine.

From their brains, I could also see the rest of my supernatural audience.

Quinn was about twenty feet away from me. He was standing next to a vampire I'd learned was named Victor Madden. The weretiger was thinking that his debt to Felipe de Castro should be completely forgiven simply because he'd had to fuck someone like me.

Thalia was standing close to me, though she wasn't looking at the spectacle I'd become. She was in full-on guard mode. And Hennesy had clearly been nearby or had been called in too, for she was standing in guard-mode on my other side.

From the eyes of the human who'd brought Olivia the cloth that she was still pressing soothingly against my neck, I could see Bill hovering nearby and looking downright anxious—but not in a *worried* sort of way. His fangs were down as if he were ready to bite into his own flesh and make me drink his blood again.

Again, I retched.

And then I was back in Olivia's mind as she rubbed comforting circles upon my back.

Her eyes were lifted up towards Eric.

What was in his expression? Worry? Discomfort? Impatience?

God! How long had I been there—vomiting into a poor tree's pot? I forced my eyes to the plant.

What was this kind of tree called? A fichus?

"Feeling better?" Olivia asked kindly from behind me.

"Yes. Uh—morning sickness," I managed. "And a bad headache."

"Thalia," I heard Eric's commanding voice, "you and Hennesy should take her to her room. Now!"

I heard no answer from my vampiress guard, but I was immediately swept up into her arms. It was an odd sight, according to Olivia's thoughts, as Thalia held me like Rhett had held Scarlet.

Only I didn't try to fight her. I didn't want to move any more than necessary, for my stomach was still gurgling.

As Thalia walked us down the wide hall and into the lobby, I was pelted by more human thoughts.

What the fuck happened to that woman?

I bet she let the vamps fuck her half to death! Is she pregnant? Sick bitch!

Fangbanging whore!

I remember being sick all the time when I was pregnant too!

I bet that bitch is responsible for the mess I've been called to clean up.

Look at that vampire following them. I didn't know anyone wore sideburns like that anymore!

What a weird fucking sight! That woman carrying that other woman is tiny! Geez! Vampires must be strong if she can carry tubbies like that one around.

Of course, this last thought was very true! Thalia was probably 5 feet tall—if that. And she was slim. On the other hand, my pregnant belly made me look like a “tubby”—or a whale, more like.

I tried to put up my shields again, but I failed, and the thoughts began to bleed together as Thalia got us onto an elevator and Hennesy pushed the up button. The upward motion of the conveyance almost caused me to upchuck again, but Thalia gave me a look that told me that she would kill me if I did so.

At least Bill, who was certainly the sideburn-wearing vampire, hadn't gotten into the elevator with us. Otherwise, I don't think even Thalia's threatening gaze could have stopped me from retching again.

Chapter 14: Known & Unknown

SOOKIE POV

“What a fucking mess,” Hennesy grumbled to herself as the elevator doors opened and she rifled through my purse to find my room key.

The mess, of course, was both me *and* my purse, which had apparently received quite the blast of vomit.

To tell the truth—I was grateful that Hennesy had picked it up at all! She wasn’t pleasant, but clearly she was willing to go above and beyond the call of duty.

The Were unlocked my door, and Thalia had soon put me down on the toilet in my bathroom.

Or—maybe—it was called a commode in this kind of hotel? There was a bidet, too—though I’d needed the bellboy to tell me what it was for.

Sophie-Anne had arranged for me to have a really nice suite, complete with a luxurious bathroom with a tub the size of a small pool, an amazing bedroom with a bed so big that four Eric-sized people would have fit in it, and a sitting room with a small kitchenette attached.

Sophie thought that I should get used to the finer things in life; moreover, she thought that I deserved them.

I wasn’t so sure.

In truth, the large suite had made me feel lonely.

As I made my way to the sink to brush my teeth, I thanked God for Sophie—even if the suite she’d put me in had made me sad. Oddly enough, it had taken a vampire to help me to understand what having a real friend could be like. Though I worked with her, I’d never felt *used* by her. And—even when I disagreed with her—she still liked me. *And* she didn’t pity me.

Yes—having her as a friend had been an unexpected and a welcome blessing.

I dared to glance at the mirror and take in the wreckage that was “me,” even as I heard a familiar thought pattern followed by a knock on the outer door of the suite.

Olivia.

I quickly grabbed a washcloth and did my best to rub away the little bit of make-up that was left after my sweat-evoking encounter with the tree’s pot. I’d worn my hair down that night, and I was horrified to see that there was, indeed, a little vomit at the ends, so I bent over the sink and wet that part of my hair, grabbing the bar soap to give it a good lather before rinsing it thoroughly.

That done, I blotted my hair with a towel and shucked my jacket, which also had vomit on it. Thankfully, my blouse and skirt seemed sans puke. I kicked off the one shoe that had made it back with me and then “evacuated” myself from my ruined control tops before throwing them into the trashcan with a sense of satisfaction—pathetic though it might have been.

Finally, I put my hair up with a ponytail holder and went into the sitting room to face the woman who’d been kind enough to help me—the woman who was “with” the man I was in love with.

At least a vampire signature hadn’t come into the room with her.

Olivia’s multi-faceted eyes showed nothing but concern as I tried to greet her with a smile, though I was pretty sure that the expression fell flat. Hennesy was standing next to the door, looking bored and/or disgusted. I didn’t know where Thalia had gone.

“I know we don’t really know each other,” Olivia began somewhat nervously, twisting her hands together. “And Eric hasn’t really said much about you—besides telling me what you can do. Um—he wanted me to immediately trust anything you said concerning safety or business—or anything else really. And—as you know—I’m working for the queen now too.”

“He told you to trust me?” I asked.

She nodded. “Yeah. And don’t worry. Your amazing talent isn’t something I would disclose to anyone.”

“Thank you,” I said.

She took a long, shaky breath. For some reason it comforted me to know that someone like her could be nervous.

“Like I said, we’ve hardly met—but Pam has made enough comments to hint that you were *with* Eric for a while,” she said.

“Pam hints as subtly as a hammer hammers,” I mumbled.

Olivia chuckled. “But she’s *interesting* to be around,” she remarked.

“Yeah. She is,” I agreed. “Listen—Eric and I,” I paused, “*were* together for a little while, but you don’t need to worry. He had amnesia at the time. And—uh—he doesn’t remember when we were—uh—a couple.”

“That must have been difficult for you,” she said with a sincere frown.

“Nothing was ever harder,” I told her honestly. I shrugged. “Except maybe for that scene downstairs just now. Thank you, by the way. It was kind of you to help me.”

“You needed someone. I’m glad I was there for you,” she smiled, her thoughts matching her words exactly.

I managed to smile back at her, this time a sincere one. It was, in truth, difficult not to like her. “I’m so glad to have *officially* met you, Olivia. I hope that you and I can be friends?” I said as if I’d spoken a question.

“I hope that too,” she said genuinely. “Anyway—I just wanted to check on you—and to tell you that Eric said you didn’t need to bother to come to the wedding.”

“Why wouldn’t I?” I asked, trying to stand up a little straighter—to look stronger than I felt.

“Uh—he figured that you were too sick,” she said.

I shrugged. “I’ll just rest for a bit, and then I’ll be fine.”

“Are you sure you want to face . . . ?” she stopped mid-question.

“The vultures? Absolutely not,” I chuckled ruefully. “I wanna curl up into a ball and die. But Gran—my grandmother—taught me that I should always try to face my fears. I’m afraid I haven’t always been good at doing that; I used to always put off facing my troubles to another day. And those days always turned into weeks, and then months, and then never.” I sighed. “But, lately, I’ve been trying harder.”

Olivia reached out her hand to me, and I took hers.

Her mind opened like a book.

She loved Eric. I could hear that as plain as day. But that didn’t stop her from wanting to be my friend. I saw lots of friends in her mind in that moment. So she certainly didn’t need the likes of me; she was just a truly kind person. And, most surprisingly, *she* admired *me*!

“Promise me that you won’t come if your nap doesn’t help you—okay? Eric will understand. I think he worries about you,” she said.

I wasn’t sure about that.

I squeezed her hand. “Thank you, Olivia—for being nice.”

She leaned in to give me a quick hug and then left the room. Moments later, Thalia came in.

“Shower and dress,” she ordered. “You have been summoned.”

“Summoned?” I asked.

Thalia looked at me through narrowed eyes. “Do you need for me to bathe you?”

Somehow her question seemed like a threat.

“Uh—no thanks,” I whispered as I hurried into the bathroom.

Truthfully, I had expected a bit *more* from the woman in front of me. In the visions I had experienced with Sookie Stackhouse in them, she had seemed much stronger. But maybe she simply needed a good test in order to prove her true mettle.

She would soon be getting one.

At the moment, however, she was just looking at me with uncertainty.

“Your child *will* shift,” I told her.

One would have thought that I had just let all the oxygen out of the room, given the abject horror on her face.

She looked around desperately—as if cataloging everyone who could have heard my words. Only my handmaidens were present, and they were loyal to me.

But, of course, she could not know that.

“Do not worry. Your secret is safe in this room, but you *will* need to help your child—when the time comes,” I said.

“Who are you?” she asked. “Thalia said that I should listen to you. And you were at Peter Threadgill’s trial. And even Eric . . .”

Her voice trailed off.

“Even Eric?” I asked her.

“Sheriff Northman—he—uh—seemed to revere you,” she finished.

“I am known by many labels,” I responded with a smirk. “Prophetess, psychic, seer, knower, soothsayer, oracle. My name was once Pythia, but I have not been called by my given name for *many* years. Those of my kind address me as the Ancient Pythoness.”

“You can see the future?” Sookie asked, her voice awestruck.

I was used to the tone.

“Clearer than I can see the present,” I relayed. “To me, *this* time is already past. And I have moved along already.”

“Dr. Ludwig told me that my daughter wouldn’t—uh—shift,” she whispered.

“She is right, but wrong,” I returned.

“Huh?” the woman in front of me sounded.

I assumed she was asking a question of clarification.

“How did *your* essential spark become ignited?” I asked.

“I don’t know,” she responded.

“Vampire blood,” I informed, “but not just any blood. Strong blood. *Pure* blood. Blood worthy to ignite the spark of the Fae.”

“Eric,” she whispered.

“Yes. The Northman has such blood,” I confirmed.

“Are you saying that my baby’s gonna need vampire blood one day?” she asked, even as she placed her hands over her womb.

It was the sign of a good mother.

“Yes,” I responded.

“When?”

“She will be seventeen. She will be beautiful and stubborn. And she will find herself in peril. But someone who loves her will save her and provide blood.”

“Who?” she asked.

I smiled at her—even though I knew that my smile was off-putting to most people. “Who indeed,” I stated—rather than answering. “Whoever it is will ignite her spark and that magic will incite her ability to shift.”

“But—then—Quinn,” she stammered.

I frowned. That tiger was a waste of space on the earth as far as I was concerned. Thus, I refused to say a single word about him. He was ultimately inconsequential anyway.

“Seventeen years is a long time,” I said instead. “Her eyes will be brown—like yours. Her hair will be blond—like yours. Her mind will be,” I paused, “like yours.”

“She’s gonna be a telepath?” she sighed.

“She already is,” I responded.

Sookie bit her lower lip. “How can I keep her safe?”

“Who has ever kept a child completely safe?” I asked her. “Your daughter will fall and break her skin. She will tumbled and break her bones. She will have her heart broken. She will feel pain and sorrow and loss. In short, she will deal with all human afflictions, for who could save her from such things? Not a mother—not even one who loves her with all that she is.”

“I’ll fail her,” Sookie whimpered.

“Of course,” I returned. “All parents fail their children, just as all children fail their parents. That is just the way of things. But you will be better than most.” I shrugged. “However, that is not why I wanted to see you.”

“Why did you want to see me?” she asked, her voice full of trepidation.

I was used to that tone too.

“Set your alarm for 2:31 p.m. tomorrow,” I told her. “Not a minute before. Not a minute after.”

“Huh? Why?” she asked.

“One does not ask ‘why’ of an oracle,” I told her before motioning for one of my handmaidens to lead her from the room.

“Wait! Please!” she begged. “What’s all this about?”

I smiled and approached her, bringing my hand up to touch her cheek.

It was warm.

“Chaos and destruction. Life and death.”

She looked at me with fear in her eyes.

Another thing I was used to—though she had nothing to fear from me.

“Amidst the chaos and destruction, you will help life overcome death. And you will help death live.”

My handmaiden began to escort her out.

“Please. I don’t understand,” she whimpered.

“No one ever could—not fully,” I returned. “But now you understand *enough*.”

BILL POV

“She should have my blood,” I growled. “Obviously, given her display tonight, she needs it!”

Eric gave me his smug look. God—how I hated him!

“Sookie was suffering from morning sickness.” He smirked. “I seem to recall my wife doing the same. I believe it is a natural condition among pregnant humans,” I added. “Did you not have human children, Bill?”

I growled. “Yes! But—had I been a vampire then—I would have helped my *wife* to avoid her discomfort.”

“Ah—but Sookie is not your wife. Is she?” Eric had the audacity to say.

“She *will* be,” I returned.

Eric seemed to sigh—as if I were annoying him!

“Her future is not my concern, but her *present* protection is. The queen has ordered that I keep Sookie as safe as possible while she is in Rhodes. And I have been given the added mandate of making sure that her blood is neither taken by nor given to *any* vampire.”

“But she is my bonded!” I insisted.

“Is she?” he asked. “I cannot tell,” he added nonchalantly.

I growled at him. In truth, I could not tell either.

“Yes—*clearly*—she’s had a lot of your blood,” Eric said, waving his hand dismissively.

“However, she is neither reacting to you nor mooning over you. A bonded human wishes to be close to his or her vampire. From what I can tell about Sookie, she seems rather indifferent to your presence.”

“One could say the same thing about you,” I fired back.

“Well—I don’t claim to have a bond with her,” he returned. “And—after the conflict with the witches—I moved on with my life and so did she. Sookie is the queen’s employee at this summit, and I am the queen’s main envoy here. You seem to be the only one stuck in the past, Bill. *Wanting* to have a bond with Sookie is not the same as actually having one,” he added smugly.

“Don’t try to tell me that you don’t want a bond with Sookie,” I growled at him.

“Bill, there’s no way in hell that I’d tell you anything about my desires—one way or the other. However—know this—” he said threateningly, “if you try to give your blood to Sookie again—without explaining *to her* the repercussions of doing so—I *will* be forced to punish you.”

“You have no authority over me,” I said. “I’m not even a resident of Area 5 anymore,” I smirked.

“Here—in Rhodes—you *are* my underling,” he smirked back.

“We won’t be in Rhodes for much longer,” I sneered.

“Which is why I feel the need to inform my queen that you were trying—*quite insistently*—to give Sookie blood when she was ill. I may be mistaken, but hasn’t Sophie-Anne forbidden you from giving Sookie more of your blood?”

“Sookie is my bonded!” I yelled insistently. “Not even a queen can interfere with that.”

“Ahhh—back to that,” he said patronizingly. “You forget; my blood is in Sookie too. I would know if a bond had formed between you two.”

I frowned.

“And—Bill—you *don’t* have one,” he added.

“You lie!” I hissed. “I feel something *more* with Sookie.”

“More than what?” he asked. “And why wouldn’t you? You’ve fed her copious amounts of your blood several times,” he growled. “And let’s analyze those blood-giving situations—shall we? The first time you gave Sookie blood, you manufactured an attack upon her by redneck drainers so that you could play the hero. The second time, you lied to her, claiming that I was a threat to her and that she needed even more of your blood before you brought her to Fangtasia to find the thief. Then, you left her alone in the middle of the woods in the middle of the night where she was vulnerable to the Maenad. Tell me—Bill—do you even use your nose? A Maenad can be smelled from *miles* away. Or maybe you wanted for Sookie to be attacked, wanted another reason to give her a *large* dose of your blood. And who knows how Sandra Pelt got loose?” he added in a lilting tone. “One would have thought that you’d have checked their restraints carefully before you left Sookie alone with the Pelts. But—then again—maybe you did *‘check’* them.”

“Shut the fuck up!” I yelled. In truth, I was a little worried by his words. He was right, after all. But there was no way he had proof of that.

“I would never intentionally harm Sookie!” I insisted.

“Of course not,” Eric said patronizingly.

“Regardless of your lies, you have just proven that Sookie is my bonded!” I said triumphantly. “She’s had my blood *plenty* of times to form a bond!”

He dared to laugh at me!

“No,” he said patronizingly, “what I’ve just proven is that your blood is as impotent and as weak as you are, Billy Boy. Now—get back to your booth and sell the queen’s database. And, remember, I have eyes on you.”

I frowned. “What? You are spying on me?”

Eric tilted his head to the side a little. “You are a weasel, Bill. And I am just looking for a reason to help the queen to see that.” He grinned like the Cheshire cat.

I was momentarily concerned, but then realized that Eric could know nothing about my meetings with Victor Madden. I’d been too careful for him—or anyone else—to learn of my plans.

In truth, since Sophie-Anne had been sending me to all corners of the globe and not recognizing my right to Sookie, I had been looking to jump ship to a different kingdom. Nevada was an obvious choice. Felipe de Castro had shown an interest in Louisiana before, so the information I knew about the kingdom would be invaluable to him. And Felipe was a man of vision. I knew that he would give me more resources and compensation for my database. I knew that he would see my worth in ways that Sophie-Anne never had.

“Go do your fucking job, Bill!” Eric said with a longsuffering sigh. “Before I decide that you’ve outlived your usefulness.”

I scoffed and turned to leave Eric’s room. I hated him! And I vowed to make him pay as soon as I was part of de Castro’s retinue.

ERIC POV

The contingency of people from Louisiana was sparse to say the least, so I was pleased to see Sookie and Thalia sitting in the make-shift “chapel” as I entered with Olivia.

Surprised, but pleased.

After all, I’d not wanted for Olivia to have to sit next to Bill. I didn’t trust that motherfucker—and certainly not with my companion.

“You’re feeling better?” Olivia asked Sookie as we approached her.

“Yes. Thank you,” Sookie responded, her smile fake and her jaw set in that determined/stubborn way she adopted in order to “seem” okay when she was not.

At least I didn’t feel intense pain from her anymore—as I’d felt as she’d run from the conference room earlier. I could tell, however, that she still had a headache. And the fucking hotel seemed to have a fucking shortage of adequately padded chairs! I would have given her my own seat in the conference room, but doing so would have drawn more attention to her. Still, I hated to think of Sookie being uncomfortable, and I chastised myself once again for bringing her to Rhodes. In fact, I’d tried to get Sophie-Anne to take her back home after the trial, but the queen had indicated that she wanted Sookie to stay.

“I must take my place up front,” I said to Thalia, even as I gestured toward Olivia.

The ancient vampiress nodded, letting me know that she would watch over my companion as well as Sookie.

Though Olivia didn't need my help to be seated, I held her hand in mine as she sat gracefully onto the chair next to Sookie. Olivia had changed into a beautiful midnight blue evening gown, which I could tell was Vera Wang. I shook my head, pissed off at myself for knowing that; obviously, I'd spent too much time with Pam.

Sookie was dressed in the same maternity dress she'd worn to Fangtasia earlier that month, though she now filled it out a little more. But I didn't want to allow myself to linger over her curves or to think about her developing body.

She was, however, too lovely for me to ignore entirely. Sookie was one of those women who seemed to become more beautiful when she was pregnant. Indeed, her body seemed to be ideal for birthing children—at least by the standards of the culture I was raised in. Her hips were full, and her body was strong. Her breasts, already ample, were becoming fuller in preparation to nourish her daughter.

My fangs wanted to drop as I thought about the beauty of her.

But I stopped myself from thinking about that loveliness. And I stopped myself from considering the bravery that it must have taken Sookie to be at the wedding after what had happened earlier.

With my ears, I could hear the gossiping about Sookie. Some people even joked that she should have sat closer to the potted plants on one side of the room. I couldn't help but to wonder what Sookie was hearing with her *extra* sense.

However, again, I didn't let myself wonder for too long, nor did I speak to Sookie before taking my leave in order to go put on my ceremonial robe. In fact, I'd not said ten words to Sookie since we'd been in Rhodes. After all, I didn't want to torture myself, nor did I want to tempt myself.



But—despite my best intentions—I had been tempted to kill both Compton and the large, bald feline. Compton had skulked his way around Rhodes. When he was overseas, he'd had a vampire named Dominic watching his every move, but Sophie-Anne and I had decided to give Bill a little rope so that he could hang himself. And he was cooperating nicely with Victor Madden. I already had evidence enough of Billy Boy's betrayal.

And as for Quinn? Well—he'd continued passing around rumors that made him the poor pussy victim to Sookie's big bad vagina.

Needless to say—although Sookie and I'd had our issues—I knew damned well that she was the furthest thing imaginable from a “whore.” If anything, she was naïve and had let herself get too quickly involved with Quinn, though I had no doubt that he'd been on his “best behavior” with her.

I also had no doubt that the child she carried was the tiger's. However, Bill's blood was currently covering up that fact, which explained why Sookie had told me that he was still useful to her. I tried not to wonder what she would be doing to protect the identity of her child's father after the girl was born. After all, wondering about that was none of my business.

“Northman!” Russell Edgington said enthusiastically as he affectionately slapped me on the shoulder. I knew it was “affectionate” because I wasn't thrown across the room.

“Thanks for doing this,” Bartlett Crowe said with a big grin on his face.

“Happy to,” I responded sincerely. And I *was* happy to perform the two kings' pledging ceremony. It was rare that monarchs pledged for anything resembling love, but these two were exceptions. Plus, I liked both of them. I'd known Barty Crowe for centuries, and—though my first meeting with Russell had been recent and in disguise—he wasn't the reason why the trip to Mississippi had gone badly.

In fact, since then, I'd had several business dealings with him.

As I put on my official garb and placed the ceremonial chalice and dagger on the table at the “altar” at the front of the room, I glanced at Olivia, though my eyes quickly moved unbidden to Sookie. I was glad that my hood covered the direction of my gaze as I compared the women side by side.

No matter how much I tried, I would never love one of them.

And—no matter how much I tried—I would never *not* love the other.

I looked down at the table before me.

Bill had been right about one thing. A large part of me had wanted to bond with Sookie Stackhouse once upon a time. And I’d even entertained the possibility of pledging with her. However, I liked to think that I would *not* have tricked her into either one of those things.

During the past weeks, I’d contemplated giving Olivia some of my blood, though I’d yet to discuss such a tie with her. It seemed like a logical next step for us; however, I knew that I would never wish to create a full bond with her.

In truth, I had no pull to do so.

I was, once again, struck by the difference I felt when it came to the two women. With Olivia, I felt little “pull”; however, she didn’t try to push me away. With Sookie, I felt pulled in a way that went beyond anything I’d ever experienced—or contemplated—yet she did nothing but push me away.

I was torn from my thoughts when Quinn took the stage in front of me. Was Mr. Clean really wearing Genie pants? I shook my head. He should be killed just for that!

After Quinn said some words—thankfully being brief about it—I began the ceremony. However, my eyes kept cutting toward Sookie, for—after her earlier episode—I needed to reassure myself that she was truly okay.

Chapter 15: Careening

SEPTEMBER 25, 2:41 P.M.

I couldn't think about anything other than Eric as the elevator doors opened, depositing me and a Were named Timothy onto Eric's floor. Not knowing exactly when the bombs would go off, I had been afraid of taking the elevator, but with a large, pregnant belly—as well as other guests hurrying to evacuate via the stairs now that the alarms were blaring—I figured the elevator was my and Timothy's best and fastest bet since the Were was pushing a coffin trolley too.

We hurried to Eric's room, and I cursed when I dropped the key because my hands were shaking so much due to fear and adrenaline. I tried to gather myself and thought about what a difference ten minutes could make.

Ten short minutes.

2:31 P.M. (TEN MINUTES EARLIER)

My phone alarm went off at exactly the time that the Ancient Pythoness had told me to set it for.

The phone had been a “gift” from Sophie—meaning that she'd *insisted* that I have it.

I lay looking up at the ceiling for a moment, not knowing what to expect or why I was supposed to wake up right then. The night before had been very taxing, and not just the throwing up part of it either. The wedding, too, had been difficult. Strangely, Olivia had made things better by being good company, but—inevitably—the reception had begun. I'd sat in a corner, thankful that Thalia deterred anyone—including Bill—who wanted to speak with me by doling out murderous glares and glimpses of her fangs. Meanwhile, Eric and Olivia had danced beautifully

together; in fact, I found myself awestruck that any couple could be so graceful! Olivia's smile had lit up the room.

After a while, I'd closed my eyes to the sights of the party and had concentrated on reading the thoughts of the Weres and humans in the room. I learned that the King of Florida had a spy in Sophie's court, but I'd not been useful beyond that. When my headache worsened, I raised my shields, and Thalia escorted me to my room, where I'd literally fallen into bed after having scrubbed my face and changed into a two-piece pajama set that looked like something a grandpa would wear. I no longer wanted to sleep under any covers—call it a pregnancy quirk—though I did like to be covered, thus the old-fashioned cotton pajamas.

Knowing that I'd be forced to the bathroom very soon by my “awakening” bladder, I turned over to look out of my window. The glass on my floor was not the “vampire-safe” version, but it was still opaque, so the world outside looked gray—gloomy. With a sigh, I sucked it up and let my mind stretch out and listen to what was going on around me.

In the next second, I was sitting up straight and panting with fear. Even my bladder went on hiatus! I thrust my phone into the pocket in my pajama top and put on the only practical pair of shoes I'd brought—a worn pair of New Balance sneakers I'd found at a secondhand store. I didn't bother with socks.

I ran out into the sitting room.

“What's wrong?” Hennesy asked with alarm as soon as she saw me.

“There are bombs in this hotel. *Lots* of them,” I panted.

“What? How do you know?” she asked somewhat skeptically.

“I'm a fucking telepath, and I *know!*” I yelled. “So shut the fuck up and do what I tell you to do!”

“What I'm going to do is get you out of here!” she said, standing up.

I glared at her. “*No*—what you are going to do is go get Olivia, and you are gonna get *her* out of here.”

“You are my charge, not her,” Hennesy said gruffly.

“Look—we can stand here arguing, or we can get a move on!” I yelled. “Listen—I’m going to go downstairs to speak to the hotel manager. You go get Olivia and meet me down there—okay? You know where her room is—right?”

Hennesy growled. “Fine!”

We ran from the room, neither of us bothering to take anything else with us. I was pleased when Hennesy ran towards the stairwell. Olivia’s suite was a couple of floors above mine.

Meanwhile, I pushed the elevator button and cursed the conveyance for taking its time.

When I *finally* reached the lobby—probably a minute later—I was given a few “looks” because of my outfit, but I ignored them and ran toward the concierge desk.

“I need to talk to Matthew—right now!” I yelled. The concierge looked at me like I was insane. “Plumbing problem!” I screeched, knowing that would get the fastest action from him—without causing a panic. Matthew had been the hotel manager who had listened to me about the soda can bomb. He was a Were, and he knew that I was something “different.”

Not 30 seconds after he was called, Matthew hurried toward me.

“Miss Stackhouse, what is it?” he asked.

I spent another 60 seconds telling him about the thoughts I’d heard from one of the Fellowship members currently making sure that a large number of suitcase bombs were in place throughout the building.

To his credit, Matthew didn’t doubt me and didn’t question how I knew what I knew. He simply pulled the evacuation alarm and told the concierge to call the police and the bomb squad.

“What about the vampires?” I asked.

“We have a plan in place for them,” he assured.

“Is there a pecking order?” I asked, thinking of Eric.

“We start on the highest floors,” he said. “Weres will get them into coffins and then down to vans.”

Not good enough.

“Listen,” I hissed. “I’m pulling rank. I want you to evacuate these first,” I said as I cried out the names of the vampires I knew and hoped to ensure would be saved: Isabel and the other Texas vampires, Russell Edgington, Bartlett Crowe, the Ancient Pythoness, King Isaiah of Kentucky, and Thalia.

And Eric.

I didn’t know many more vampires by name. And—probably to my discredit—I paused before adding Bill to the list.

Matthew told me that Russell and Bartlett had left the hotel before morning and that the Ancient Pythoness had also left. He also said that Thalia wasn’t staying at the hotel. He promised that he’d personally oversee the vampire evacuations I’d requested—but that still wasn’t enough for me where Eric was concerned.

“I want Eric out first!” I said. Yes—it was selfish of me, but I *had* to make sure he was safe.

“Okay,” Matthew said, motioning toward a burly-looking Were. “This is Timothy. He’ll get Mr. Northman.”

“I’m going with him!” I said insistently.

Matthew tried to convince me to evacuate immediately for only a moment before I showed him how convincing and potentially deadly my pregnancy hormones could make me. And then he realized that it was just easier to give me the key to Eric’s room. He had other things to worry about—after all.

“Tell my guard, Hennesy that I left the hotel,” I said beseechingly to Matthew.

The Were manager looked reluctant, but nodded.

Hurrying as fast as I could, I accompanied Timothy to a service elevator, even as the alarms continued to sound to spur the humans to leave the premises.

I didn’t know when the bombs would start going off, but I hoped that the time given to me by the Ancient Pythoness was an indication that they’d wait at least until I’d gotten Eric out of the hotel.

I tried to take deep, calming breaths as we waited for the elevator to come.

Had the Ancient Pythoness known about the bombs? If so, then why in the hell hadn’t she told the authorities about them the night before?!?

I didn’t have time to contemplate that question, however, as the elevator doors opened to take me, Timothy, and a coffin trolley higher up in the full-of-bombs pyramid.

2:42 P.M.

Thankfully, Timothy quickly picked up the key my shaking hands couldn’t hold onto and unlocked Eric’s door. It was only then that I recalled that Quinn was in the hotel somewhere. An evil part of me hoped for a moment that he was sleeping—with headphones on.

I certainly wasn’t going to make an effort to save him—or Bill (beyond what I’d already done). Maybe that made me a bad person.

But there was only one person I loved enough to risk myself and my child for: *Eric*.

I was hoping—no praying—that Timothy and I could get Eric into a coffin—if he wasn’t already in one—and get him downstairs to the parking garage before the first bomb went off. There we would find the hotel’s fleet of light-tight vans—one of which Timothy had the key to.

As I flipped on the light in the room and saw that Eric was lying on the bed, there was a loud rumble from somewhere below us, and the room seemed to vibrate.

It looked like my prayer wasn't going to be answered.

"We have to hurry!" I said, quickly running over to where Eric lay.

But Timothy stayed in place by the door.

"Come on!" I yelled. "We need to get him into a coffin!"

"I'm sorry," the Were said. "I have a family."

And with that, he ran from the room.

"Goddammit!" I yelled, even though I knew Gran would turn over in her grave if she heard me taking the Lord's name in vain. "I have a family, too!" I cried.

They were all in the fucking room with me!

Even if one of the members of that "family" had no idea that I thought of him in that way.

As I felt another rumble from below, I knew there was no time to waste lamenting Timothy's exit, and I also knew that I couldn't move Eric into a coffin by myself. At least his coffin was already on a trolley. I began shaking Eric's body and yelling.

"Eric! Eric! Wake up!"

I slapped him as hard as I could, and when that didn't work, I punched him—hurting my hand in the process.

"Eric! Eric! Wake the fuck up!"

"Sookie, what are you doing? Doing here?" he asked, his voice slurring and his eyes barely opening.

"There are bombs going off in the hotel! I need you to move, Eric! I need you to get up!"

He seemed to be struggling to keep the little consciousness he had achieved—despite my warning, and his eyes closed.

And that's when I started begging. "Please, Eric. Stay with me! Stay awake! I can't move you on my own! Please! Fight! Fight with me Eric! Come on! Get on your fucking feet, Viking! Fight! Please!"

I could feel hot tears streaming from my eyes as I beat his chest as hard as I could.

His eyes opened again and seemed to focus a little more. There was another explosion—this one closer to us, and the whole building seemed to screech and lurch.

But—at least—the blast worked as an alarm clock for Eric.

"Come on!" I begged. "There are light-tight vans in the garage."

Eric stood up, and though he stumbled a little, he stayed upright. He was wearing black silk pajama pants and nothing else, and any other time, I would have appreciated the view.

He looked at me and then my belly. "What are you doing here, Sookie?" he asked, his tone almost angry.

"Trying to save you!" I responded, not quite understanding why he'd ask a question that had such an obvious answer—and certainly not understanding his anger.

Maybe he was angry about the bombs?

I grabbed his hand. "We *have* to go!"

There was another rumble, and the air seemed to become hotter.

"We cannot go down through the building," he said, looking around and grabbing and putting on the ceremonial cloak he'd used to perform the marriage ceremony of Russell Edgington and Bartlett Crowe.

"What?" I asked.

"There is a fire below us," he said, even as another rumble hit—this one a little closer than the last.

He looked worried. “Alarms are going off. Where is Hennesy? Why didn’t she get you out?”

“I sent her for Olivia,” I responded.

He gave me a look that would have taken years to decipher, so I didn’t even bother to try.

“The blasts are moving upward,” he said as the heat in the room seemed to rise again.

For once, I hoped that I was in the middle of a hot flash.

Eric looked at the coffin, and his eyes seemed to light up with an idea the second before he pushed the coffin—impossibly hard—against the specially-made glass that framed the hotel and kept out the sunlight.

Obviously, the vampire was trying to let some of that light in.

I held my breath.

Again, Eric rammed the supposedly indestructible coffin against the supposedly indestructible window. I guess the makers of those objects didn’t count on a thousand-year-old vampire doing the destroying, however, and I breathed in relief as the glass of the window cracked in about a thousand directions with the center of them being the impact point of the coffin. However, the glass didn’t shatter.

Eric looked at me and then at my belly again before saying something in a language I didn’t understand. Hell—maybe no one but the Viking had understood it in centuries. But whatever he said seemed to be motivational for him because when he pushed the coffin into the glass a third time, the pane he’d been targeting was literally pushed from the building.

The vampire’s eyes widened at he saw the sun for—likely—the first time in a thousand years. And he hissed as he felt its effects. Quickly, he took the coffin from the trolley—before pulling the hood of the cloak over his head and then pulling me inside of the cloak with him.

I’d not been that close to Eric for so long that I almost wept tears of joy at the contact.

“Trust me!” he said, in an almost begging tone.

“I do,” I responded, finally catching up with his plan. I looked up and into his eyes, which were glowing inside the hood of the cloak.

If I had to die, at least it would be in his arms.

“You will *not* die,” he said, making me wonder if I’d spoken my thought aloud. “And neither will your daughter.”

In the next moment, Eric shoved the coffin through the open space a little before jumping on top of it. We teetered between building and air for a moment before the coffin tipped downward and found purchase on the smooth outer façade of the pyramid-shaped building.

I had never been skiing. Or snowboarding. Or sledding. Those activities were not exactly common in Louisiana.

But I suppose that I was doing a mixture of all of those things with Eric as we literally rode the coffin downward.

I knew that—despite his sluggishness and the sun—he was using his considerable strength to keep us relatively upright and steady on our makeshift sled. However, I quickly began wondering just how—or, rather, *if*—he had a plan for slowing us down.

But I shouldn’t have wondered.

Eric wouldn’t have been Eric without a plan.

Right when the ground was looming like a concrete giant, he flew us away from the coffin. I heard its hard impact on the cement even over another explosion and wondered how the coffin had fared, given that it had survived up to that point.

However, before I could wonder any more, Eric had landed us safely onto the ground as if he were placing me onto a pillow. His large hands immediately moved to my belly. My daughter kicked him.

“Okay,” he whispered. “You’re both okay.”

And then he released me and collapsed onto the concrete—dead for the day *again*.

Immediately, the parts of his body not covered by the cloak began to smoke.

“Help!” I screamed at the top of my lungs, even as a piece of fiery debris lit the cloak on fire.

I used my own hands to pat it out.

“Help!” I yelled again, looking around me desperately.

Seeing no one, I righted the cloak so that it covered Eric and then used my body to cover him more as I continued to yell for help as loud as I could. We seemed to be on the backside of the pyramid, however, and though there was a service road nearby, the main evacuation was clearly happening from the front of the building.

When I knew help wouldn’t find us itself, I once again checked the cloak and then took off running in search of help. When I turned a corner, I panted out a breath of relief as I saw several ambulances, including one just arriving; I quickly ran over to it.

Before the crew could get out, I yelled at them. “No! Please! Wait! You have to help me. There’s someone injured over there!” I pointed in the direction I’d run from. “There’s an access road. Please! Come with me.”

“Miss, there are a lot of people hurt here,” the driver of the ambulance said to me. “We’ve been ordered to go to the triage area. Get your friend over there.”

“I can’t! He can’t move!” I yelled with frustration. “Please! You have to help me!”

The driver looked uncertain, but still attempted to open his door to get out.

Not. Fucking. Happening.

I used all my strength to stop him from getting out, as I looked at him intensely. “Lionel!” I hissed out his name. “If you don’t help me right fucking now,” I said, my voice low and cold, “I will make sure that Shirley knows you fucked her sister!”

Lionel's eyes went wide and—though he had a ruddy complexion—he paled to white.

“How did you . . . ? Who are you?” he asked.

“Not important! You *are* coming with me. *Now!*” I growled.

Lionel nodded. “Okay. Uh—just keep quiet.”

“What's up, boss?” one of the two paramedics in the back asked. “Are we moving or not?”

“We have a confirmed critical injury toward the back of the building,” Lionel said, glaring at his crew, before looking back at me. “Get in and lead the way, Miss.”

I ran to the passenger side, which wasn't occupied, and jumped in.

Quickly, Lionel drove in the direction in which I pointed, and soon we were back where I'd left Eric. I breathed a sigh of relief when I saw that the cloak was still in place.

“You have to be careful! He's a vampire!” I cried.

“A fuckin' vamp!” Lionel spit out.

“Yes!” I returned. “And you'd better take *real* good care of him, Lionel!” I emphasized. “Or Shirley will find out about her mother, too,” I added in a low hiss.

That made Lionel move his ass!

Thankfully, the others in the ambulance weren't bigots, and they followed me to Eric's side. Soon, they had my vampire better covered and into the ambulance.

Not that Eric was mine.

But I was claiming him until he woke up.

One of the paramedics—a woman whose nametag read “Jane”—helped me into the vehicle, and we sped away from the scene.

A part of me wondered if I should stay—try to find survivors with my gift. But as I placed one hand onto Eric's under the blankets he'd been covered with and one onto my belly, I knew that I couldn't go back to that still-exploding pyramid.

I prayed that alerting Matthew had made a difference between life and death for a lot of people. I knew that—come nightfall—vampire rescue squads would be called in. Between them and the Weres on the police and rescue squads (and there tended to be a lot in such positions—unbeknownst to humans), I knew that supernatural noses and ears would find any survivors.

Just as well as—or better than—my telepathy could have.

No. I wasn't about to leave Eric—not until he asked me to.

He'd saved me so many times. It was my turn now.

To save him.

To make sure that he stayed safe.

Even if he could never be mine.

I said a quick prayer for Olivia and Hennesy.

And then I heard a deafening explosion behind us—different from the previous ones—and a wave of energy jolted the ambulance.

I felt my body being propelled, and I hit something.

Hard.

I felt pain.

I saw sunlight.

And then the world went dark.

BILL POV

3:05 P.M.

I woke up to intense pain and the smell of burning flesh.

My flesh.

I turned my head and looked at Victor Madden. He, too, was awake and on fire. But how?

No longer willing to take another night of pretending I was a loyal Louisiana subject, I'd gone to Victor's room the night before, and I'd let him make me his lover—though I would have preferred not participating in such an unnatural act. Still—Victor had been skillful enough to make me feel pleasure, though that pleasure had shamed me.

A necessary sacrifice on my part, however.

I'd fallen into my day-death next to him after he'd promised that he'd be secretly taking me and my research to Nevada the very next night.

Other promises had been made too.

Sookie would be kidnapped and brought to Las Vegas where I would be able to solidify our bond once and for all! And—if Sophie-Anne or Northman tried to do anything about it—de Castro would kill them!

Yes—I'd gone to my rest with a smile on my face.

But I knew that I would never smile again as I yelled out in pain because of the flames licking at me. And then I had the sensation of falling. And then I was crushed by other falling things.

But at least the fire seemed to have been put out during the fall.

The air was thick with smoke, and I could no longer see Victor. But then the smoke began to clear, making way for the sun, which seemed hazy and completely harmless for a few moments before it began to burn my flesh.

I tried to move, but most of my body was trapped by twisted metal.

I screamed as the sun's rays pushed more intensely through the smoke and soot. But I couldn't look away from the orb. I felt my eyes burning.

I felt *everything* burning.

I tried to make my last thought be about Sookie—or even about my human wife, Caroline.

But my last thought was of Lorena—and pain.

Chapter 16: Two Hours

SOPHIE-ANNE POV

“Is Eric awake?” I asked.

“I don’t know,” Sookie responded, her voice full of fear and pain.

“Are *you* okay?” I asked.

“A concussion.”

“The baby?”

“They think she’ll be fine,” she said, relief flooding her tone.

“Thank God,” I whispered. Yes—I’d been a Christian before I’d been turned. So I *did* believe that there was a being watching over the world and *all* the creatures in it—including vampires.

“They wouldn’t let me stay with him. They took him somewhere else,” Sookie said desperately into the phone. “I don’t know what to do!”

“Where are you? Where is he?” I asked.

“The vampires are being taken to an underground garage about five miles from where the Pyramid of Gizeh collapsed. I’m in the Rhodes Memorial Hospital—in the ER,” she said.

“Do you know how bad Eric’s condition is?” I asked.

She sobbed. “No—not fully. He was burned quite a bit even before we got him into the ambulance. Afterwards . . .” She was quiet for a moment, and I heard her sniffing. “After the ambulance crashed, I was out for a few minutes. I know that sunlight was let in, and part of Eric was uncovered in the crash. From the thoughts of the second team of rescuers . . .” There was another pause and more sobbing.

“Sookie?”

“His left hand and part of his arm. I know they’re gone,” she whimpered. “And he’s burned really bad. His . . .” She paused again. “His body is blackened so much I couldn’t even recognize him from their thoughts.”

“But he’s alive?”

“I think so,” she sobbed. “He wasn’t ash.”

“Then he’ll be fine,” I said, trying to sound more certain than I felt. I’d seen plenty of vampires succumb to their injuries when the magic within them was simply not enough to keep them alive.

“I don’t know where Hennesy and Olivia are,” Sookie whimpered. “I think they would have had enough time to get to safety, but I just don’t know. And I have no idea where Thalia is. The hotel manager said she didn’t stay in the hotel.”

I sighed. Hennesy was supposed to protect Sookie—not Olivia—even if Sookie ordered her to do otherwise. But it wasn’t the time to chastise the telepath for ditching her guard now.

“Don’t worry about them, Sookie. I will look into it.”

Her crying worsened. “I *need* to get to Eric, Sophie! He’s all alone! He needs blood!”

She was gasping hysterically.

“Is there a clock in the room?” I asked sternly.

“What?”

“A clock!” I said adding even more force to my voice.

“Uh—yeah.”

“What time is it?” I asked.

“7:14 p.m.,” she whispered. “After I got here, they didn’t give me a phone for a while,” she added bitterly. “And mine was lost!”

“It’s okay. By 9:14 p.m., the world will be better. Do you trust me to make it so?” I asked.

“Yeah,” she said in such a timid voice that I barely heard her.

“Good. Keep your eyes on that clock, and keep yourself calm for little baby Sophie.”

“I told you—I’m not naming her after you,” Sookie said with a tentative chuckle.

“At 9:14, you might change your mind,” I responded before hanging up.

I looked at Andre. “Get Ludwig here ASAP. Then call Anubis. I want an airplane chartered and waiting for our people at the Rhodes airport within the hour.”

Without argument, Andre pulled out his phone and dialed.

Andre and I’d had quite a few disagreements over Sookie at the beginning of our affiliation with her, but he’d gotten over his “issues” regarding the young telepath—after some “tough love,” as modern parents would say.

Initially, he had wanted to kill Bill Compton and bond with Sookie himself. But I could tell that he wanted to possess her in ways that would have turned my child into a monster. And I wouldn’t allow that—*not ever*.

When it seemed as if Andre might try to claim Sookie despite my wishes, I’d issued my first maker’s command to him in over 800 years: I’d forbidden him from harming Sookie either directly or indirectly.

He’d been bitter. Angry. Petulant.

I’d had my Berts place him in silver and had sat by his bedside for a full night and a day, sharing in his pain.

And then I’d found the courage to tell my child *why* I’d refused him free reign over Sookie. Of course, Andre had known about some of my past; so much of it had been spent with him, after all. However, I’d kept from him the full extent of the abject horrors I’d faced when I’d been used sexually by more men than I could remember.

Frankly, I'd loved Andre too much to share the details with him before, but—this time—I left nothing out as I spoke vividly about my past and explained why I wanted Sookie protected. In truth, she reminded me of myself. She'd been lied to, manipulated, and used. And I wasn't about to let her become the plaything to anyone else—especially not my child.

And, truthfully, I blamed myself—at least in part—for Sookie's current predicament. After all, I'd sent Bill—though I'd never dreamed that he would treat Sookie as he did. However, I *should* have followed up with the situation. Instead, I'd figured that Bill was too much of a coward to misrepresent the situation in Bon Temps. And, then, I'd become busy with Hadley, whom I'd newly made my child; Waldo's jealousy of her; the negotiations with Arkansas; and Hadley's true death.

I could hear the unpleasant voice of Dr. Ludwig as Andre's call connected to her. She'd lived in my kingdom for many years. I'd offered her sanctuary—in exchange for her services.

And before that, I'd saved her life in order to settle a debt that I'd owed to her parents.

Few knew much about Amy Ludwig, but I was one who did. She was half Water Fae and half goblin—an odd combination to say the least. Her parents, Jacob and Ennika, had been exiled from their respective realms for the sin of loving each other; however, they made a good life for themselves in the human realm. Both had been healers, and they taught their child the healing arts of their respective cultures, even as they augmented their skills by exploring the medicinal arts of humans, especially their usage of various plants.

It was many years *before* Amy was born, however, that I interacted with her parents. Jacob and Ennika lived in peace—using their skills to aid those whom they felt were worthy. Luckily, when I sought their aid, they thought me qualified to be in that category.

When I found Andre, he was near death—having been malnourished and beaten by those who had kept him as a servant. I was prepared to turn him then—after I killed those who had

mistreated him—but I wanted for him to be strong before I did so. I also wanted for him to *choose* to be my companion.

Thus, I gave him only enough of my blood to stabilize him and took him to the Ludwigs, whom I'd heard about from the queen of the realm I was staying in. The physicians helped Andre's body to heal and to become strong—by using a combination of my blood, their innate magic, and the plants of the earth. And—when he was ready—Andre was able to choose me with a clear mind.

To say that I had owed the doctors a debt was an understatement.

It was fifty years ago that I heard that the family of healers had been attacked by the Water Fae, who had begun their onslaught of those of “mixed blood.” They had killed Jacob and Ennika, but they had not killed their daughter—not yet. They had found amusement in experimenting upon the mixed blood Amy Ludwig, for she was the only one ever of her kind. The Water Fae had certainly intended to kill her—*eventually*—but they were enjoying their torture of her too much to give her a quick death.

When I arrived, I was glad to rip out their throats.

Though she'd been in terrible shape physically, Amy had declined my offer to turn her. She had, however, accepted some of my blood. But that blood had been too little and had come too late to prevent some permanent damage. Even after fifty years, her back was hunched, and she couldn't walk easily or quickly. Of course, she was part Fae and had mastered the skill of teleportation years before. And as part goblin, she could also literally sneak into almost anywhere—including a warded palace.

Thus, I wasn't surprised when I heard a “popping” noise in front of me.

She looked up at me. “Sophie-Anne, your brat said you required my aid. What do you want?” she asked gruffly.

I smiled at her. Despite her lack of bedside manner, I appreciated Amy's consistency. In all the years I'd known her—and even on the day I'd saved her life—she'd never been what one would call “pleasant” company. Of course, goblins were not known for pleasantries, and she'd clearly inherited most of her personality from her goblin mother.

“Amy, I need for you to go to Rhodes immediately. Eric and Sookie have both been hurt. I'm arranging for a private jet, which will be ready when you are prepared to get them out of there. I want them back in Louisiana as soon as possible,” I relayed.

She nodded and then “popped” away without even asking where to find my sheriff or the telepath. I knew that she had her own ways of knowing, however.

“What about Bill?” Andre asked. “And Thalia, the Were guard, and Northman's woman?”

“Ah, yes,” I sighed. I'd been so worried about Sookie, her child, and my sheriff that I'd forgotten that Bill was in Rhodes, too—selling the database.

He'd been under strict orders not to interact with Sookie in any way. In fact, I'd told Eric that he could kill Bill if he bothered Sookie, much to Bill's chagrin. Bill was still going on and on *ad nauseum* about being bonded to Sookie. But he had no allies and was too weak of a vampire to keep me from pulling rank—despite the “maybe” bond that he'd never admitted “maybe” existed to Sookie.

Most of the time, Bill's protestations were a moot-point, for I kept him *very* busy overseas. However, because of Hurricane Katrina, the profits from the database were too tempting to pass up at the Rhodes summit, so I'd allowed him to be there. Of course, Eric and Thalia had been keeping their eyes on Bill to make sure he behaved.

Frankly, I was more worried about Thalia than I was about Compton. If he'd died in the Rhodes explosions, it would actually solve quite a few problems—especially where Sookie's moral dilemmas were concerned. I just hoped that Thalia had kept to her usual practice of going to rest in

the ground. A room for her was not in the copy of the arrangements that Eric had made for Rhodes, so I took that as a positive sign.

I looked at my child. “After you arrange for the plane, see if you can contact Bill and Thalia by phone. If you can, they can meet the plane and travel back with Amy and her patients. Try to contact Hennesy, too. According to Sookie, Olivia will be with her if they are still alive. Beyond that, we’ll just have to wait for word on all of them. However, Sookie, her child, and Eric are my *main* concerns right now.”

Andre nodded and began to complete the tasks I’d set out for him to do as I took out my own cell phone and dialed Pam.

“My queen,” she answered, obviously recognizing my number. She was one of the few who enjoyed the privilege of having my private one. Her voice was quivering, and she was clearly upset.

“You know what happened?” I asked.

“Yes,” she said. “I am watching the news reports right now. I can tell that Eric’s been hurt, but I know that he lives. He’s,” she paused, “not awake, so it must be bad. I just got off the phone with Thalia, who is the only one in our group that I was able to contact. She is going to search for Eric in the makeshift hospital where they’ve taken a lot of the vampires.”

“I’m glad Thalia is okay,” I said, truly pleased. “And she *will* find him where she seeks him.”

“How do you know?” Pam asked.

“Sookie. Somehow, she woke Eric up as the bombs were going off, and they escaped the hotel before it collapsed. She was too hysterical to make much sense about how they did so, however. Something about sledding,” I said. “She and Eric were in an ambulance making their way from the site when the hotel went down. The shockwave from the implosion made the ambulance wreck. Sookie has a concussion, and all that she knows about Eric is what she saw from the human minds around her when she came to.”

“What did she see?” Pam asked nervously.

“A missing hand. And a lot of burns.”

“Sookie’s baby?” Pam asked after she’d taken a moment to compose herself.

“She seems fine. Ludwig is on her way. And arrangements have been made to bring Eric and Sookie to Louisiana as soon as possible.”

“Thank you,” Pam said, though she was clearly and understandably still upset that her maker had been so gravely injured.

“I need you to be strong, Pamela,” I returned. I wanted to comfort her, considering that we now shared a fledgling personal relationship that had gone beyond mere fucking months before. However, I needed her to be in sheriff-mode right now. “As I’m sure you know, Peter Threadgill was found guilty the night before last of an overthrow attempt on Louisiana.”

“Eric told me,” she said, obviously trying to hide the emotion in her tone.

Good girl.

“Threadgill was executed; however, since we were not yet officially pledged, I wasn’t automatically given Arkansas. The Ancient Pythoness asked if I wanted the state, but—given the fact that I am concentrating most of my efforts onto the rebuild—I didn’t want my resources stretched too thin. Thus, Jennifer Cater was pronounced the new Queen of Arkansas. It is possible that she might try something, so I need you to make sure the Northern border remains secure.”

“I will,” Pam said, her voice stronger.

I smiled. She was her maker’s child; that was for sure. There was no hesitation in her tone—no uncertainty. “I am sending Rasul with some others to help you,” I informed. “He will function as your second until your maker is recovered.”

“Thank you,” she said.

“Queen Cater shares a maker with Freyda of Oklahoma,” I informed. “It is possible that they will align. Normally, I wouldn’t worry about them since Freyda is scared shitless of Stan, whom she knows is my ally. However, Texas had a large contingency in Rhodes, including Isabel, though I know that Stan was not there. I will call him after I hang up with you to see if he has any news. I’m sure that he will try to shore up his borders, but we will all need to be vigilant for the foreseeable. Vipers like de Castro are always on the ready to strike when they sense weakness, and Freyda and Jennifer could be easily convinced to be his pawns.”

“If anyone thinks we are weak, they’ll get a big fucking surprise,” Pam said with authority.

“Yes—they will,” I responded before hanging up.

SOOKIE POV

I looked at the clock: 8:45 p.m.

Sophie had promised that my world would look better by 9:14 p.m., and I trusted her. I truly did. But that hadn’t made the time since 7:14 p.m. go by any more easily.

I was worried about Eric, so worried that I had successfully fought against my pain medication to stay awake—though certain parts of my body felt numb. I knew that the staff hadn’t given me a whole lot of medicine, given my concussion, but I was pretty sure that I wouldn’t have been able to sleep even if I’d been sporting a morphine drip.

I hadn’t told Sophie about all of my injuries. My right hand was fractured—probably from hitting Eric until he woke up—and my left shoulder had been dislocated. My left ankle was sprained because something had fallen on me during the ambulance crash. There were also second degree burns on that leg.

Apparently—it had been Eric’s body which had fallen on me. And—if I had second degree burns from the contact—I couldn’t imagine what his burns were like.

I looked at the clock: 8:47 p.m.

Just as I was getting ready to call Sophie again, I heard a “popping” noise. My first thought was Claudine, but my visitor turned out to be much shorter.

“Dr. Ludwig?” I asked, when I didn’t initially see who was there. The diminutive doctor approached the bed with my chart in her hands. Apparently, she’d taken it from its holder at the end of my bed.

“Your child? How’s her activity?” she asked by way of greeting.

“Fine. She was asleep for a bit, probably from the medicine they gave me, but she’s started kicking again,” I reported.

“Good,” she responded before coming over to me and touching my hurt hand and then my belly.

“Eric,” I said. “He needs you more than I do. He was burned. He’s at the”

“Airport,” she interrupted. “Waiting for us.”

“What?” I asked.

“He *was* in more need,” she said simply. “So I *did* go to him first.”

“How is he?” I asked desperately.

“Why do you care?” she responded in her gruff manner. At that moment, I wanted to hit her. But making a fist hurt like hell.

“Because I love him!” I answered.

“Does he know that?” she asked sourly.

“Eric deserves *better* than me. Please—how is he?” I begged.

“Very burned and very broken. But he’ll probably recover—*in time*.”

“Is he awake?” I asked.

“He will not be healed enough to awaken for quite some time,” she said.

A sob escaped my lips.

“It could have been worse,” she informed. “Very few survived the hotel’s collapse.”

For the first time since nightfall had come, I consciously tried to feel Bill.

“Bill?” I asked.

“He wasn’t at the makeshift hospital, so you tell me,” the doctor smirked.

“I *can’t* tell you,” I said honestly. “I can’t feel him anymore.”

She nodded. “Then he is likely dead—or very badly injured. Shall we hope for the former?”

I didn’t know how to respond—or how to feel—as Hennesy came rushing into the room.

“Olivia?” I asked her.

“Uninjured. She is already on the plane—with Eric and Thalia,” the Were responded.

I sighed with relief, though I felt a jolt of jealousy that Olivia was with Eric and I was not.

But then I stifled that feeling. After all, the *right* woman was by Eric’s side now—the woman he would want to see when he woke up.

“The queen is displeased that I got Olivia out and not you,” Hennesy said stonily, as if she were angry at me.

“I’ll tell her that I told you to go get her,” I promised.

“You said you’d be waiting at the concierge’s desk,” she added.

“I needed to help Eric,” I explained. “He was in danger!”

“And you weren’t?” she growled. Yep—the Were was angry.

“Clearly—you were as safe as a babe in church,” the doctor intoned.

I glared at her. “What was I supposed to do? If I hadn’t gone to Eric, he would have died.

The Were that was sent for him ran as soon as the first blast went off.”

Hennesy seemed unimpressed. “If I’m to continue guarding you, we *will* be discussing this later.” She looked at the doctor. “The ambulance is ready.”

Ludwig nodded. “I’ll meet you in it,” she said as she “popped” away.

Before I knew it, Hennesy was wheeling me out of my room, but I didn’t protest. I knew that she was taking me to where Eric was—even if another woman was already by his side.

QUINN POV

I woke up groggy, and the events of the day filtered into my mind slowly.

I’d been overseeing the decorating of the ballroom when the alarms had first gone off.

I’d thought about trying to get Victor Madden out of the hotel, knowing that his favor would be useful with de Castro. However, as soon as I heard the word “bombs” from the frightened lips of one of the hotel employees, I decided that no vampire was worth risking my hide for.

The stream of humans from the hotel had been pretty thick as they’d quite literally run for their lives. I sneered as I also remembered seeing quite a few coffins being wheeled out of the hotel—notably one being guided by the King of Kentucky’s Britlingen guards.

Most of the evacuees had followed several members of the hotel staff like cattle, moving as far away from the hotel as possible.

Foolishly, I’d apparently stopped before I was truly clear.

I remembered intense heat. And then I was being propelled into the air.

I took a deep breath and tried to assess my current condition. I could feel that my spine was broken, and I couldn’t move my legs. However, I also knew that I *would* heal. My two-natured blood would ensure it—hopefully before the next full moon.

Having managed to get my mind turned back on fully, I took in my surroundings. I was in a hospital bed in a curtained area; I was likely in an emergency room.

I inhaled.

Ash.

Burned flesh.

Sweat.

Blood.

Ammonia.

Bleach.

And then something lovely.

Sookie?

And then something that smelled like me.

Almost. Just. Like. Me!

I grunted and tried to sit up, but I could not.

“My child!” I growled.

That bitch had been carrying my child all along!

Chapter 17: A Medicinal Slap

OCTOBER 2, 2005—ONE WEEK LATER

PAM POV

“Seriously, Sookie, you really *should* try to get more sleep,” I drawled. “There are bags under your eyes. I’ve never seen you look worse.”

Sookie startled awake, her head flying upward from where it had been resting on Eric’s bed. There was a little string of drool on the left side of her mouth and her eyes blinked rapidly, as if trying to use Morse code to understand their surroundings.

“Ludwig said that he moaned earlier,” I deadpanned.

“He did!” Sookie smiled as if a single moan were a cure for human cancer. She sounded proud of my maker.

In truth, I’d thanked even the human God that I was pretty sure I no longer believed in for that moan as well.

I looked down at my maker. The very few parts of his body that were not bandaged were an unnatural pink—as most of his body had been burned to the point that his tissues and/or bones were exposed.

Every part of his face was covered with bandages—as if he were doing an impression of a mummy, and his amazing blonde hair had been burned off and had yet to regrow.

He was being given blood intravenously, but the healing was going very slowly.

Needless to say, he’d yet to wake up.

He’d lost his left hand—and his arm almost up to his elbow as well. Ludwig had said that over 90% of his body had been burned. I was pretty sure that Eric would be glad that he’d worn underwear to bed. His pajama pants had torn in the accident, but his “junk” was part of the unburned 10%—thanks to his Fruit of the Looms.

I'd already had the charred, but miracle-working polyester/cotton blend skivvies framed and put up in his office.

And I was working on composing enough jokes to last me a lifetime, based on his briefs protecting his meat and two veg.

Of course, he needed to wake the fuck up in order for me to use them!

In addition to his “crown jewels” being unscathed, part of Eric’s right leg—the area right around his knee—had been virtually untouched and had healed quickly. That was where Sookie kept her hand most of the time—as if her touch might make him feel better.

I figured that—if anything could reach his mind as he healed—it would be her presence.

Ludwig walked into the room.

More quickly than one would have thought, given her physical condition, she was by Eric’s side and checking under one of the bandages on his chest.

So that Sookie wouldn’t be overly upset, Ludwig had not told her what she’d told me: that she’d never seen a vampire survive as much exposure to the sun as Eric had suffered. She didn’t know if it was his age, his strength, or his gods that had saved him.

I would never admit it aloud—given the fact that people might accuse me of sentimentalism if I did—but I figured it was his “heart,” which had saved him. And the love in that heart—for the woman who’s hand was perched right above his right knee.

In fact, I would bet at least two pairs of shoes that the stubborn bastard had stayed alive just to make sure that Sookie had survived.

“So?” Sookie and I asked at the same time once the doctor was finished with her examination.

“He improves each day,” she said flatly, “and he’ll wake up when he wakes up.”

She looked at Sookie. “His woman is here to see him.”

Sookie looked at Eric forlornly before she rose and limped back toward her own room—rolling the portable monitor keeping track of her daughter’s heartrate with her. Sookie’s leg was in a splint, but she could waddle on her own as long as she had a crutch to help her. During the previous week, she’d also gone into false labor a few times because of the stress she’d been under, so Ludwig wouldn’t allow her to go home—not that Sookie would have anyway. She spent most of her waking hours—and all of her sleeping ones—by Eric’s side.

Ludwig had tried to stop Sookie from being out of her bed so much, but the little troll-like doctor had soon learned how fruitless an argument with Sookie Stackhouse could be.

Much more fruitless than a sturdy pair of Fruit of the Looms!

Except when Olivia visited, which had been every day like clockwork since Eric had been in Ludwig’s hospital, Sookie had stayed by my maker’s side.

I’d heard the telepath praying at times. At other times, she read to him. Often, the exhausted woman simply slept.

Always with her hand on the healed patch above his knee.

But she always made herself scarce when Olivia arrived.

And—as for Eric’s human companion? I couldn’t deny that I was impressed with Olivia. She would donate blood for Eric whenever the doctor would let her. And she spent at least an hour a day—which was as much time as Ludwig would allow her—sitting beside Eric.

Of course, unlike Sookie, Olivia didn’t argue for more time. Nor did she threaten. Nor did she glare.

No—Olivia did *exactly* as Eric’s doctor told her to do.

Still—I couldn’t lie. I admired Olivia. But it was Sookie whom I felt was better suited to my maker.

But it was clear that he was loved by both of them.

After sharing a nod with Olivia, I went into Sookie's room, where she was coming out of her bathroom.

"Well—I can say this for the baby: she *certainly* likes making me need to pee," Sookie said with fake light-heartedness in her tone. I helped her get into her bed.

"How is little Pamela today?" I asked.

"You'll have to tell me," she chuckled. "There's only one Pamela in the room."

"What will you name her?" I asked Sookie as I sat down in the chair next to her bed.

She gestured toward the nightstand. "Andre—of all people—gave me this when he visited," she said.

I picked up a baby name book.

"Whenever I can't be with him," Sookie said, glancing at the door leading to Eric's adjoining room, "I look at it. Maybe you can help? I'm looking for a strong name—but nothing too unusual."

I opened the book to a random page, which turned out to be the beginning of the "L" section.

My vampire eyes quickly took in many names I didn't think were "right": Lacy, Layla, Laney

I thumbed ahead, finding myself in the R's: Raina, Ramona, Rebecca.

"It's hard to decide on a name for someone you love so much," Sookie said.

I flipped forward again, this time looking for a specific name.

As if reading my mind, Sookie sighed. "My name isn't in there—not that I would name a kid after myself anyway." She shrugged. "What do you think of Nadia?"

"Eric had a daughter named Nadja," I responded before I could stop myself.

Sookie paled. "Oh. Um—I was thinking about Samine too."

“That’s nice. But isn’t *Pamela* nicer?” I asked, hoping to make her smile. “Or maybe Abby?”

She chuckled. “I actually considered Abigail, but then I realized that you’d get way too much pleasure out of that!”

“Dear Abby is an icon,” I pouted.

“So are you, Pam,” she smiled.

She and I spoke of other names I randomly found in the book for a little while before I looked at her seriously.

“What does Olivia really think? Of Eric?” I asked.

“She loves him,” Sookie said immediately. “But she wonders how long her love will be enough.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“She wants children; in fact, she has done some research into *in vitro* and adoption. But when she has mentioned kids to Eric, he has acted indifferently, so she’s worried about what he’d think if she decided to have one, especially since she would want him to be the child’s father in every way that mattered,” Sookie sighed.

“What else?” I asked.

“She’s worried. Since Rhodes, she’s been getting death threats. She is being protected—right?” Sookie asked me with concern.

I nodded. “Yes. Indira is protecting her at night.”

“And during the day?” she asked.

“A Were named Tray Dawson. Don’t worry. He’s trustworthy.”

Sookie sighed with relief. “Eric wouldn’t want her to be hurt.”

“No—he wouldn’t,” I agreed. “Anything else I should know about her thoughts?”

“Um—Olivia thinks that she loves Eric more than he loves her,” Sookie said tentatively.

“She’s right,” I intoned.

“I wouldn’t know,” Sookie commented, biting her lower lip. “But I *do* know that she wants to be *everything* he needs.”

“And if she’s not?”

“Why wouldn’t she be?” Sookie asked, taking the book from me and flipping through it with purpose.

I knew I wouldn’t get anything else of substance out of her in that moment, so I concentrated on helping her narrow down names until an hour was almost up, and then I excused myself to see Olivia.

“Is he getting better—at all?” Eric’s companion asked me as I walked back into my maker’s room.

“Little by little,” I responded.

She smiled. “Good. The doctor never tells me anything specific.”

“Well—she *is* a bitch,” I intoned.

She frowned at me. “She’s just *different*,” she said charitably.

I chuckled. “That too.”

“Can I ask you something, Pam?” Olivia asked.

I nodded. “Sure. Asking doesn’t guarantee telling, but knock yourself out.”

She smiled at me and shook her head. “How is Sookie? The doctor said that she was here too, but she won’t let me visit her.”

“She’s fine. A couple of false labor issues. A broken bone or two,” I remarked.

“She saved my life,” Olivia said. “And she saved Eric’s life.” She closed her eyes. “And *so* many more lives too!”

I sat down in the chair across from Olivia, putting Eric's unconscious body between us.

"Saving the lives of *others* was never Sookie's problem," I informed.

Olivia looked at Eric's face and then at mine. "What about her *own* life?"

"Her life is for her child now," I said honestly. Before—it had been for her grandmother. For the shifter. For her so-called friends. For her useless brother. For Bill. Sookie had never lived for herself, though I knew that she thought of herself as selfish.

"Does she still love him?" Olivia asked, looking down at Eric's bandaged face fondly.

"Yes. Enough to risk everything for him," I responded.

"Enough to give him up?" she asked.

"Yes."

"Does he love her?" Olivia asked.

"I would never speak for my maker," I said, though I gave her a look that clearly indicated my own beliefs on the matter.

Olivia took a deep breath. "Would it be better—*for Eric*—if I stopped coming? If I cut ties with him?"

"Have you ever thought about being a lesbian?" I asked her, even as my respect for her grew.

"There was an episode—in college," she smiled. "But I'm afraid it was—ultimately—unsatisfactory."

I chuckled.

"I cannot compete with Sookie—can I?" she asked forlornly.

"No one ever would be able to compete with her," I said honestly.

"So—should I stop coming here?" she asked.

“Eric and Sookie are their own worst enemies,” I relayed honestly. “And you have been good for him.” I shrugged. “Honestly, he’d be pissed at me if I told you to stop coming.”

She chuckled. “Thanks for the ‘straight’ answer,” she said sarcastically.

“You should have learned by now—nothing about me is straight.”

She chuckled, but then sighed as all the mirth left her eyes. “I like Eric—love him even—but I don’t know what to do. I feel like I’m intruding here.”

“Eric’s a big boy,” I said. “When he wakes up, let him decide what he wants.”

She nodded as she twisted her fingers into the sheet next to my maker. She’d not felt emboldened enough to explore his body in order to find the spot on his leg that was uninjured, and I’d not told her about it either. To me, it was Sookie’s spot—maybe the only one she’d ever have.

Still—I didn’t think less of Olivia for not finding it.

Rather—I thought *more* of Sookie for searching until she had.

Olivia had left exactly an hour after she’d arrived.

And—like clockwork—Sookie hobbled back into Eric’s room moments after she had.

My telepathic friend quickly moved the sheet off of his right leg—completely ignoring the parts of his body that were still charred—before placing her unbroken hand onto his knee, her IV wires looking uncomfortable as they jostled against her skin.

“What will you do?” I asked her.

“When he wakes up?” she responded.

“Yes.”

She sighed deeply. “I’m going to do the *wrong* thing—the selfish thing.”

“What’s that?”

“I’m going to tell him that I love him. I’m going to tell him that the biggest mistake of my life was not being brave enough to fight for him after Hallow’s spell was broken. I’m going to tell him that—if he wants me—I’ll never *not* fight for him again.” She sighed.

I looked at her thoughtfully. “He may very well reject you,” I said honestly.

“He *should* reject me,” she said forlornly. “Olivia’s the better woman.”

I walked over to Sookie’s side, and she raised her head to look up at me.

I’m sure that she was surprised when I slapped her.

“Ouch!” she yelled. “What the fuck?”

“Yes. What the fuck?” Dr. Ludwig sneered from behind me.

“Trust me. I didn’t hit her hard.” I shrugged. “Plus, it was a medicinal slap.”

“What?” Sookie asked incredulously as she rubbed her cheek.

“Don’t be a baby,” I chastised. “You have needed someone to slap some sense into you for a very long time now. First, you were so naïve that you thought Compton was a good catch. Then, you were too blind to see that my maker wanted you—before, during, *and* after his amnesia. Then, you decided to try a pussy, but you didn’t choose mine! And, now, you are all, ‘Eric shouldn’t pick me because Olivia’s better than I am.’ Really, Sookie, you need to stop saying—stop *thinking*—such things about yourself!”

“But she *is* better,” Sookie said stubbornly.

“How so?” I asked.

“She’s smarter, prettier, and more cultured—just to name a few things. I can’t compete with her!”

“Then don’t,” I returned. “Let Eric be the one to decide.”

“I already said that’s what I was going to do! You were the one who said he might reject me!” she reminded.

“Yes, but you aren’t supposed to think that he *should!* Dammit, Sookie, stop thinking of yourself as not good enough for him. That’s *always* been your problem!”

“But I’m *not* good enough!”

I slapped her again.

“Ouch!” Sookie yelled out, looking at the doctor. “Aren’t you gonna stop her?”

Ludwig cackled. “Looks medicinal to me,” she snarked before leaving the room.

And then I did something that went against my every instinct: I knelt down next to Sookie, probably dirtying my Gucci suit as I did so.

It was the winter line and fit me like a glove.

Only for Sookie.

My telepathic friend looked at me with suspicion. “Please don’t hit me again.”

I smirked. “I can’t promise that, Sookie. But—if you will hear me out—I will promise not to hit you again *today.*”

She sighed. “Fine.”

“I know that your life has been difficult, Sookie. I know that you’ve been conditioned to believe that—because you were different and, dare I say, *more* than others—you were actually ‘less’ in some way. You were conditioned to believe you were abnormal. You were conditioned to believe that nobody would love you if you *weren’t* normal. So I understand why you spent most of your life focusing on building shields so that you could pretend to not be *you*. However, I believe that trying to hide your *true* self from others—because you fear rejection—has made you believe that you aren’t worthy of being loved.”

Large tears collected at the corners of her eyes and then began to fall. She was shaking her head as if to deny my words.

I took her unbroken hand firmly and continued. “I have excellent taste, Sookie.”

“Huh?” she asked, before sniffing.

“In clothing, in décor, in women, in blood—in everything really.”

“Okay,” she said, still obviously confused.

“In the people I decide to like, too,” I added. “I liked you from the start. Do you know why?”

“I’m not boring?” she responded.

I chuckled. “No, you are not. But you are also brave. You are loyal. You are principled. You are clever. You work hard. You know what it means to sacrifice for another. You know what it means to put others before yourself. Sookie Stackhouse, you are a good person—a beautiful one, inside and out.”

She was crying in earnest now, but I kept speaking.

“You are right that Olivia is worthy of my maker. And he *might* choose her over you. And—because of the hurt he felt in the past at your hands—he might not be able to accept you back into his life.” I shook my head. “Eric is just a man—after all.”

“A man who hates having feelings,” she sniffled.

I laughed. “Yes. And you caused a lot in him.”

She sniffled again; it was a horrible sound.

“How could I ever have rejected him, Pam?” she asked hysterically. “I love him so much.”

“I think that Dear Abby would tell you that you and Eric are a lot alike. You don’t like having feelings much either,” I said.

“Every time I love someone . . .” She stopped midsentence.

“They are taken from you or reject you. Or—in the case of Compton—they are duplicitous, unredeemable, soiled douchebags,” I finished for her.

She nodded in agreement.

She sniffled again.

“Doctor!” I yelled.

Ludwig seemed to appear out of nowhere.

“How is *this* cured?” I asked, gesturing towards Sookie’s tears and snot-filled nose with distaste.

Ludwig sighed and threw me a box of Kleenex before “popping” away again.

I handed the box to Sookie, who dutifully wiped her eyes and blew her nose. Thank God!

“You know, Eric is just as likely to choose you as he is to choose Olivia. For all of her style and grace, for all of her intelligence and education, for all of her beauty and kindness—she couldn’t have done what you did in Rhodes.”

“Because she’s not a telepath,” Sookie said.

I scoffed. “Sookie, name another person whose first thought would be to make sure the girlfriend of the man she loved was taken to safety. Name another person who would have gone further up in a bomb-filled building. Name another person who could have woken up a vampire and then tobogganed down the side of a building with him before blackmailing an ambulance driver to rescue him.”

Sookie frowned. “But I love him. I couldn’t let him die.”

“No, Sookie,” I said, shaking my head, “you *wouldn’t* let him die. And—trust me—when I say that *that* kind of tenacity and stubbornness is hotter than hell,” I leered.

She chuckled, even as she continued wiping her face of various kinds of moisture.

I stood up and looked at my slacks. I smiled when I saw that they appeared to be unharmed.

Thank the fashion gods for the doctor’s cleanliness!

“You are a strong woman, Sookie Stackhouse,” I said confidently. “And you will survive even if Eric doesn’t choose you. Moreover, his choice will not affect your worthiness.” I moved to the other side of the bed and looked down at my maker.

“He really is worth fighting for,” I said. “So do not give up before you even start. You have many merits—just as Olivia does.” I winked at her. “Don’t downplay them. Don’t deny them. Don’t discount them.”

“I *want* to fight for him,” Sookie said. “But I don’t want to see Olivia get hurt. She really is a good person.”

“Two women love one man,” I said dryly. “One will be hurt. That’s just mathematics.”

“But is it really fair of me to swoop in? I mean—I had my chance with him. And I blew it,” she said, shaking her head and sounding again as if she’d already lost the battle—or maybe an entire war.

I wanted to slap her *again*. But I refrained.

“Would Olivia not be hurt even more if Eric stayed with her only as a form of settling?” I asked, shaking my head.

“Maybe,” she relented.

I figured that was the best I was going to get from her—*for now*. So I changed the subject to one that was even more potentially unnerving.

“I can smell that your child is Quinn’s now.”

“I know,” she whispered. “And I also know that that means Bill’s dead.”

“Do you feel any grief for him?” I asked, trying to keep my distaste for the man from my voice.

“No,” she admitted. “But I *do* wish Quinn had died too—even though I know that makes me a horrible person.”

I chuckled. “Not in my eyes.”

“That’s not exactly an endorsement of my morality, Pam,” she said sarcastically. “Amelia and Claudine are trying to come up with something to cover up the baby’s scent though. The doctor is helping.”

I nodded.

“Meanwhile,” she said, “I’m stuck here—not that I would leave Eric anyway. And I feel better having this on,” she added, touching the monitor that was keeping track of her daughter’s heartrate.

She sighed and lay her head next to Eric’s leg.

“How are things, Pam? Out there?” she asked.

I shrugged. “Jennifer Cater tried to get spies into Area 5, but between Rasul and Thalia, they were neutralized.”

“Do you need me? For work?” she asked. “Sophie says that all is well every time I talk to her, but I don’t believe her.”

I smirked. “We vampires have done quite well without you for many, many years, Ms. Telepath,” I grinned.

“Don’t joke, Pam. Eric was a deterrent for attacks. We both know that. And—with the damage from Katrina . . . ,” she started.

“Sophie-Anne was even cleverer than my maker gave her credit for,” I reported. “She has called in favors, and our borders *are* secure. Stan is secure, and even Isabel survived—thanks to you. And your friend Barry is with them even now. Mississippi and Indiana cut their honeymoon short and are both back in their states. And Russell, Bartlett, Sophie-Anne, and Stan are staunch allies.” My voice softened. “So—we are fine out there, Sookie. Just worry about yourself and little Pam.”

“I’m not naming my baby after you,” she chuckled.

“Too bad—*for her*,” I said before leaving the room.

Chapter 18: Raw

ERIC POV

Appius was chasing me—*for fun*. He often liked to toy with me during my earliest decades with him.

“If you can elude me for an hour, I will set you free,” he said.

“I won’t even use the bond,” he promised.

I flew as fast as I could. Hid as well as I could. But he always found me in the final minute. And then he would hurt me.

Pain.

Pain so intense that it reminded me of my maker—made me remember him even though I was barely conscious.

Even though I knew that Appius wasn’t really there.

Was he?

Had he not eventually tired of me and sent me from his side?

With the pain I felt, I couldn’t tell.

From my maker, I’d learned that there were three kinds of pain. One kind cut the flesh. One kind cut the will. And one kind cut the heart.

In the end, Appius had owned two of these parts. He’d owned my body; there was nothing I could do to stop him from taking it at will. And he’d also owned my will, for he could order me to do anything his sadistic mind desired.

Eventually, I’d learned to do as he wanted—to *be* as he wanted—before he even had to ask.

I learned to take pleasure in being fucked because Appius wanted me to.

I learned to take pleasure in inflicting pain onto others because Appius wanted me to.

And I learned to take pleasure in my captivity because it was the *only* way he would ever let me go.

And—eventually—he did let me go.

After declaring that he had no more to teach me.

Yes—he'd taken my body and my will, but he'd *never* found my heart.

I'd hidden it so far away that I'd begun to wonder if I'd lost it when I was transformed from human to vampire.

After all, my heart was dead. Un-beating. Useless. Rotted.

Cold—like me.

But my heart felt warm as a warm hand firmly held above my cold knee. Everything else hurt, but that hand felt so good that it seemed to drive the pain away—though it brought a different kind of ache with it.

An ache of the heart.

OCTOBER 9, 2005—ONE WEEK LATER

SOOKIE POV

“He could reject you.”

Pam's words echoed in my mind. Of course, they were in stereo. Sophie had said that same thing. And Dr. Ludwig.

And my own mind.

Still—I was trying to be positive. I was trying to remember the other things Pam had said to me too—as well as the sense she'd tried to slap into me. She'd been right about a lot of things. I had always tried to hide what I could do. Even with Gran, I didn't want to speak about my telepathy—not that she'd ever encouraged me to do so. I suppose I took that to mean that she

didn't like that part of me any more than my mother or father had, and I didn't want Gran to start to resent me—as they had.

So I'd tried to hide it.

Even when Uncle Bartlett began to think horrible things about me, it had taken me a long time to tell Gran what I'd "heard."

I shook my head to shake my memory of that monster away. I took several breaths and let the feeling of Eric's cool skin comfort me.

As for the positive things Pam had said about me? Well—I was trying to believe them. But—regardless—I'd decided to *strive* for them.

"Hi," Olivia said tentatively as she walked into the room. When I'd learned that the doctor and Pam were limiting Olivia's time with Eric—I'd been pissed off at them both. Yes—I'd decided to tell Eric how I felt, but I didn't want them to stack the deck in my favor!

I'd insisted that she be allowed to come whenever she wanted—even if that took away from my time with him.

"Hi," I said as I stood up. My leg was a lot better, and I could manage without the crutch now. Plus, Dr. Ludwig no longer thought the portable baby monitor was needed. "I'll just give you some privacy."

"Stay for a minute?" Olivia asked.

I nodded and retook my seat somewhat tentatively. "Sure."

After she took the seat on the opposite side of Eric, the atmosphere in the room quickly turned awkward.

"You're in love with Eric—aren't you?" she asked.

"Yes," I admitted.

"You are the reason he held back with me," she said with a sigh.

“I hurt him,” I shared. “He tried to love me, but I rejected him. And—by the time I realized I’d made a mistake”

“He was with me,” she finished.

“Yes,” I confirmed. “And I honestly thought he was better off with you, too.”

Olivia contemplated for a moment. “What do you think now?” she asked.

“I *still* think you are the better person,” I said honestly. “But I want him, so—when he’s better—I’m gonna tell him how I feel and beg for another chance to make him happy.”

“I should instigate a cat fight for those words,” Olivia said—though I could tell she wasn’t serious.

“Pam would be pissed if we did it without her here,” I chuckled.

Olivia lightly touched Eric’s newly pink cheek. The bandages had come off of it only the day before. “He still loves you—you know?”

“Sometimes love isn’t enough,” I sighed, shaking my head.

“You’re right,” she said knowingly.

“I’m sorry,” I told her. “I’m sorry I’m messing up your life.”

She chuckled. “Sookie, you *saved* my life. And Rhodes changed a lot of things.”

“I know,” I whispered.

“Life is too short to spend with a man who cannot love me—even though I love him,” she sighed. “I want a partner in my life—not a,” she paused, “perpetual boyfriend.” She smiled at me and we both chuckled at that label for Eric.

“I want someone who loves me more than anything or anyone else. I want someone I can raise children with,” she said, smiling at my belly. “And—vampire or not—I’d hoped that Eric would be that someone. I still hope that. But—once he recovers from his injuries—I’m going to

insist that he take a long look at himself and decide if he can be the man to give me what I want—if he *wants* to be that man. And if he can't," she paused, "then I'm going to walk away."

I didn't know what to say.

"I love him enough to want him to be happy, and—just as importantly—I love *myself* enough to want to be happy too," she said. "In fact, if he can't give me what I want, I hope he ends up with you."

"I admire you," I observed.

"And I admire you too," she smiled. "He'd be lucky to have either one of us."

"Very lucky," I said, actually believing what I was saying.

Probably for the first time.

Yes—Olivia was a good woman.

But I still wanted my vampire back.

ERIC POV

I felt the groan that escaped my mouth throughout my whole body—the vibration of it causing me further pain.

"Eric," a voice said.

It was feminine and familiar, but I felt as if I were hearing it from underwater. Was it Pam? The queen? Olivia?

Would it be impossible to hope that it was Sookie?

The mystery didn't seem solvable in that moment, and I forced myself to ignore my pain as I turned my mind toward assessing my condition. Clearly I'd been burned—*badly*—in the sun.

Likely, my hearing was off because the hair in my ears—or maybe my ears themselves—had been burned. Growing back or healing complex systems always took longer, and the ears were quite complex.

I couldn't open my eyes. Had my eyelids been burned? I knew that—if they had been—the healing of them would force my eyes closed for several days as the nerves repaired themselves. I tried to inhale, but again I was stifled. In fact, all my senses seemed completely useless.

Except for touch. Something was touching my leg—still right above my right knee.

A hand.

It felt—good.

It felt right.

OCTOBER 16, 2005—ONE WEEK LATER

SOOKIE POV

As odd as it might have been, Olivia and I had become friends. We often laughed together or talked for long hours as we sat vigil over Eric, who'd still not woken up. Dr. Ludwig assured us that he was progressing “normally” and that his body was accepting the blood she was giving it and healing itself as it could. According to her, the burns and the missing “bits” were “competing” for the blood, even as the magic which had barely been enough to keep him alive was trying to recoup. It was the replenishment of that magic which was causing Eric to stay in his coma-like state.

Of course, there had been more positive signs. At night, he would groan if he tried to move. And he'd actually uttered a few words—though none that I could understand. However, his eyes hadn't opened.

I suppose that Olivia and I had bonded over the fact that we both loved the Viking. And I'd learned that she was an even more amazing person than I'd thought she was. In fact, I would have been truly intimidated if she hadn't been so likeable!

Oddly enough, I found myself more jealous of the belief she had in herself than even her relationship with Eric.

Olivia knew exactly what she wanted. And she wasn't the kind of woman who would settle for anything less than that. Being around her made me realize just how much I'd "settled" during my life. But I was determined not to do so anymore. Even if Eric rejected me, I was done settling—in any part of my life.

According to Pam, rumors had circulated around the Supe community that I'd been the one to notify the Pyramid of Gizeh manager that a bombing was imminent. And—honestly—it made me feel good to know that my actions had helped to save hundreds of lives. Sadly, hundreds of others had died, but I knew I'd done my best. The story of my going after Eric had also been widely told—thanks to Matthew, who seemed to be the origin of all the information about me. Part of me was pissed off that he'd talked about me at all, but a larger part of me was grateful that he had survived.

Predictably, when Sam had heard about my latest near-death experience, he had called me on my brand new iPhone (which Sophie had insisted upon and which had my same number as before). Sam had wasted no time in lecturing me about the dangers of vampires. And then he'd followed that up by implying that I'd been a bad mother by risking my child's life to try to save Eric. He'd finished up by suggesting that the happenings in Rhodes clearly proved that I should settle down with him so that he could keep me from getting myself killed.

My first inclination had been to hang up on him.

However, I supposed that much of Sam's lecture had come from a place of concern. And I listened to every word of it, happy that it was over the phone so that Sam couldn't witness my tears as he laid into me. I suppose that I also felt guilty. After all, I *had* risked my daughter's life by going after Eric. But I knew that I could have made no other decision—not if I was to retain my soul.

In the end, I once again thanked Sam for having given me my job, and I reiterated that I had quit and I was staying that way!

Given Amelia's experience as a property manager, I asked her to manage mine, too. I was done with Bon Temps—*finally done*. I'd called my brother to make one last try of a relationship, and he'd just echoed what Sam had said before telling me that “everyone” would have been better off if I'd never been born.

Well. Fuck. Them!

The only person in town that I was determined to maintain a relationship with was Tara; however, I knew that friendship would likely consist of only a few exchanged cards each year and maybe getting together in Shreveport once in a while. That fact made me sad, but I couldn't stay in my hometown just for the single friend I still had there—not when most of the thoughts directed at me were hate-filled.

Indeed, Olivia had been right. Rhodes had changed everything.

It had made me braver. It had taught me that I needed to fight for the life I wanted.

Though I was still stuck at Ludwig's hospital, I was determined that I was going to make a brand new life for my child and myself once I was out. I now hoped that life would include Eric, but I was prepared if it didn't.

I sighed as I took Eric's newly healed right hand. His left arm had begun re-growing but it would be a while before his hand came back in.

“You were right,” I whispered to him. “I gave everyone else in my life so many chances—and then second chances and then third chances—just hoping they would love me. I’m sorry I couldn’t do the same for you. But I was so scared—scared of what would become of me if you couldn’t love me. I wasn’t even brave enough to really give you any chances. But I am now—if you’ll let me.”

I rested my other hand on my child. “Maybe things happen for a reason. Maybe I needed to get my ass kicked so that I could teach *her* how to be the one who kicked ass.” I shrugged. “Maybe I needed to lose you so that I would understand how blessed I was to have you. Who knows,” I said.

“But here is one thing I *do* know: Bill’s blood is gone,” I whispered, lying my head as near to his body as I could without touching him.

According to Dr. Ludwig, there were still certain places on him which were still “raw.”

In fact, I’d just gotten the okay to hold his hand only that morning.

“Bill died when the pyramid collapsed,” I whispered. “I suppose that’s a blessing—really. I’d been prepared to break the blood bond with him as soon as my pregnancy was over,” I shared, even though I was certain Eric couldn’t hear me since it was daytime. “Anyway, I’m pretty sure that Sophie meant to ensure that Bill died one way or another, despite my ‘human ethics.’ Between you and me, I think that Sophie has *a lot* more human ethics than she says she does!”

Her treatment of me was evidence of that.

One hand over my daughter’s insistent kicks and one holding Eric’s hand, I rested. When she visited, Amelia thought I must be terribly uncomfortable, sitting up as I lay my head onto Eric’s bed, but—truth be told—my little girl had been giving me heartburn from hell, so the position was nice. And—away from Eric—I simply couldn’t make myself sleep.

No matter what I did.

ERIC POV

The soothing hand was on my own now—or at least on the hand I had left. I could feel the skin on my left forearm knitting itself together. I could feel bone trying to grow. These things—and the pain that went along with them—told me that I’d lost my left hand and my arm up to almost the elbow.

Had it burned off? Had it been cut off?

I tried to remember.

Rhodes. I could recall being there.

Russell and Barty’s wedding.

My decision later that night to tell Olivia—for her own good—that we needed to end our personal relationship as soon as we returned to Shreveport.

Sookie.

Bombs.

“You were right,” I whispered.

“Eric!” an excited voice said.

I still couldn’t tell who was talking though.

But I *did* know that Sookie was right. Everyone in her life had been right. Being around vampires only endangered her. It made her vulnerable to attack.

“Why did you come?” I asked angrily.

“Eric?” the voice asked.

“You stupid woman!” I mumbled as I relived the moment when I woke up, only to find Sookie risking herself and her child for me. A part of me had celebrated. She’d come for me. She cared for me!

But at what cost? I'd barely been able to get her and her daughter to safety.

But were they still safe?

“Fucking idiot,” I mumbled.

In my mind, I heard and felt the bomb blasts.

I'd wanted to say so many things to Sookie in that moment.

I love you!

Thank you for coming for me—and not Bill or Quinn.

I shook my head. She was in danger because of me! She and her daughter were going to die—because of me!

“Stay away from me, Sookie!” I yelled out, the pain of the movement against my burned lips causing me to cry out in pain.

I heard crying.

Was I the one weeping?

“Get away, Sookie,” I whimpered, not able to yell again.

I wanted her so badly to get to safety. I shook my head and felt my whole body convulse. It wasn't safe—not with me.

“Get away, Sookie,” I muttered again before all conscious thought drifted away.

Chapter 19: New Lives

OCTOBER 23, 2005—ONE WEEK LATER

SOPHIE POV

Sookie had welcomed me into her new home with all the hospitality of a grand Southern lady.

However, I could tell from her blood-shot eyes that she was having difficulty sleeping.

Still, she'd gotten me a blood and had started rattling off information about the spell Amelia and Claudine had finally perfected, the one that I was there to "test" out to make sure I couldn't smell a connection between Sookie's child and the weretiger.

"It works," I told her simply, once she'd taken a breath.

She smiled. "Good. So I can work tomorrow night!"

"Sookie, you needn't . . ."

She interrupted me. "But the doctor cleared me to work. And working will help me to occupy myself!" she said with false enthusiasm.

Amelia came into the room, and she and I shared a worried glance. The witch had been the one who'd packed up all of Sookie's belongings in the old farmhouse the week before—after Sookie had insisted she leave Dr. Ludwig's hospital and come to New Orleans immediately.

The witch had also performed stasis spells on both the vehicle, which had transported Sookie to New Orleans, and her new home—so that her scent wouldn't be detectable. However, Sookie had been trapped inside of one or the other for a week.

Given the immaculate condition of the house, I was glad that Amelia had agreed to move along with Sookie. Obviously, the witch had helped Sookie to unpack; I would have hated to think of a pregnant Sookie doing it all by herself.

Sookie's abrupt exit from the hospital had not been explained to me until the day before—when I'd insisted that Amy tell me what had happened.

Apparently, Eric had spoken—*at last*—though in delirium. Still, Sookie had taken his insistent words that she get away from him as a sign that he didn't want her—in any way.

I wasn't so sure about that, however.

But my opinion had not been asked for by my friend, so I'd refrained from giving it. I knew Sookie well enough to know that her stubborn (and, perhaps, self-destructive) streak had set in.

"I could use you at 9:00 p.m.," I said, instead of trying to talk Sookie out of working.

My friend smiled with relief. "Thank you, Sophie! Thank you so much!"

Only Sookie would thank someone for letting her work!

I looked at Amelia. "Did you visit your apartments today?"

Yes—I was trying to be "polite" and to keep the conversation on something that was decidedly "un-Viking."

"Yeah," the witch responded. "The power to that area is slated to come back on next week. And—after that—I'll be able to get a contractor in there."

I took a card out of my clutch. "This is the name of my contractor. He is honest."

"Thanks," Amelia said gratefully. "My dad's been trying to convince me to use his people, but I wanted to avoid that."

I nodded to the witch. Sookie had invited Amelia to stay in her new home until her own apartment was habitable again. The residence I'd gotten for Sookie was well outside of New Orleans—and, thankfully, on higher ground than most of the area. Thus, the property had received only minor wind damage from the powerful hurricane that had blown through the month before.

The house I'd chosen was actually similar to Sookie's previous home. It was an old farmhouse with a large porch. And, importantly, it was far enough away from other residences to offer her peace.

Bubba and a vampire I'd known for centuries, Adalene, were acting as Sookie's vampire guards—since Thalia did not care to relocate from Area 5. However, if Sookie decided to move back there, Thalia would become Bubba's back up again.

Hennesy and a trustworthy Were from the area pack were her day guards. However, I had no reason to suspect that anyone knew where Sookie was staying.

“Well,” I said, after finishing the horrible synthetic blood I'd been given, “I must go. I will see you tomorrow night.”

Sookie's smile was forced. “Yes. I'll be there! Thank you, Sophie! So much!”

I leaned in to kiss my friend's cheek. “Try to get some sleep, my dear friend,” I said.

“Of course!” she nodded.

AMELIA POV

I'd been visiting Sookie at Dr. Ludwig's hospital the week before—when Eric had spoken his first understandable words in three weeks. He'd said a series of short sentences which had systematically torn away any hope Sookie had found regarding Eric and herself. I recalled them all as I made a tea which would hopefully help Sookie sleep.

“You were right.”

“Why did you come?”

“You stupid woman!”

“Fucking idiot!”

“Stay away from me, Sookie!”

“Get away, Sookie.”

“Get away, Sookie.”

When Sookie looked upset as I took her tea into her room, I cursed myself for being such a loud broadcaster.

The last thing she needed was to re-hear Eric’s words from my brain!

“I know you can’t help it, Ames,” Sookie said kindly. “And—really—I don’t know what I’d do if I had to be here all alone right now.” She took a deep breath and accepted her tea. “I think that working will help me—don’t you?”

“Yes,” I said honestly. For the first few days after we’d gotten to the new home, Sookie had done okay—but only because she could concentrate on unpacking boxes. I’d packed up everything—*literally* everything in her old home—from her attic to her root cellar. So she’d also been sorting through things as we unpacked. Many of her grandmother’s possessions had been repacked for charity or thrown away.

Sookie had taken a lot of time over each item, mourning her grandmother again and again

Among the possessions was a small token that seemed quite magical to me. And—as soon as my mentor, Octavia, returned to New Orleans—Sookie had given me permission to show the token to her.

I sighed. I knew Sookie had thrown herself into her emotional unpacking so that she wouldn’t have to focus upon the man she loved.

“He was delirious,” I said to my friend; actually, Sookie now seemed more like a sister.

“Yes. He was,” she sighed. “I really *am* trying to tell myself that, Ames. And—once he’s better—I *do* plan to go see him.”

“You do?” I asked, both surprised and pleased.

“I have to.” She sat up a little straighter. “I still plan to tell him how I feel.” She gave me a little smile. “I owe myself that. I owe *him* that.”

I nodded. At least that was something. “Have you heard anything—about how he’s doing?”

“Olivia called earlier. He’s apparently thrashing around again tonight.” She shrugged. “The doctor says that’s a good sign though.”

“That’s really good,” I said to Sookie. “Hopefully, he’ll be awake soon.”

She nodded and went back to sipping her tea as I slipped out of her room.

A loud popping noise made me jump as soon as I reached the hall.

“Claudine!” I yelled out as I looked at the beautiful fairy. “You scared me half to death. Is everything okay?” I asked when I saw that she looked pensive. Another “popping” sound came from behind me, and I turned around to find a tall, beautiful fairy with long gray hair standing there.

His eyes were the exact shade of blue as someone I knew very well: Sookie.

“Fuck,” I muttered to myself.

OCTOBER 30, 2005—ONE WEEK LATER

ERIC POV

We were in a freefall.

And then I was using all of my remaining energy to land us safely.

She was okay. Her child was okay.

Sookie.

I smelled her—a fading scent, but a distinctive one.

Sookie.

She’d talked to me—words I sometimes couldn’t make out. She’d read to me. I’d missed out on a lot of the texts, but I’d been comforted by her voice, and I’d picked up on a few things.

She'd hated Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* and had moved on to something "less fuckin' annoying" before she was halfway through. On the other hand, she'd liked *Wuthering Heights* and had laughed that I was probably the inspiration for Heathcliff.

She'd told me that she was trying to read "smarter books" so that she'd be able to teach her little girl how to appreciate more than romance novels.

The last book she'd been reading to me was Agatha Christie's *Ten Little Indians*. I recalled her apologizing for taking a break from the highbrow stuff—but, apparently, the book was in Gran's collection, and she'd read it many times. Sookie said that she'd been looking for something familiar and hoped that I didn't mind.

But then she'd disappeared.

No more reading. No more words.

Sookie.

No more Sookie.

Where was Sookie?

"Sookie," I whispered. She did not speak back.

I forced my eyes open.

She was not there.

"Pam?" I said as I took in my child sitting next to me.

She'd clearly been in down-time.

"It's about time," she said sarcastically.

"How long?" I asked.

"Five weeks," she said.

"Almost a record for me," I said enigmatically. Once, when Appius had decided to flay me and then light me on fire, I'd been unconscious for six weeks. "How bad was it?"

She scoffed. “Well—if you are talking about Area 5—it’s better than ever. Thanks to me,” she preened. “Jennifer Cater and Freyda are shaping up to be real problems, but because of my excellent ‘strategery,’ they have been thwarted.”

“What did I tell you about using that non-word, Pamela?” I grumbled, even as I tried to sit up a little.

Pam had been incorporating that horrible pseudo-word into her vocabulary ever since she started thinking that Will Farrell made a better George W. Bush than the current president himself did—not that I necessarily disagreed.

“You just don’t appreciate good humor,” she returned.

I shook my head. “So—the two queens to our north have been trying things?” I asked, refocusing us onto the important topic at hand.

Pam nodded, her expression more serious now. “Yes. And there is reason to believe that they are allied with de Castro. Sophie should have just claimed Arkansas.”

I shook my head. “She was wise not to. How is the rebuilding coming?”

“Well. The Queen has put almost all of her private funds into getting New Orleans back onto its feet, and she has pressured the government to get its head out of its ass and actually act! Much is being done—and quickly.”

“What were the losses in Rhodes?” I asked—even as I recalled Sookie saving my life.

“Stan lost three vampires, but Isabel and several others were saved—thanks to Sookie. Victor Madden perished. Compton was Louisiana’s only loss.”

“Olivia?” I asked. I sighed, knowing that if I loved her, she would have been my first thought. But I had not thought of her until that moment. Indeed, I knew that I needed to cut her loose—for her own sake.

“Sookie ensured that she’d be saved,” Pam informed.

I smiled to myself; that sounded like Sookie.

“And Sookie?” I asked.

“She was here until last week,” Pam said somewhat cautiously. “She had some minor injuries. And during the week after the bombings, she had some false labor scares.”

“But the child is well? Sookie is well?” I asked.

“They are both fine.” Again Pam was tentative in her tone. “Sookie’s moved to New Orleans now.”

I cringed. That fact bit at me.

“Do you remember speaking to her last week?” Pam asked.

“No,” I said. “I remember nothing but pain—and . . .” I stopped midsentence.

“And?”

“A comforting presence,” I said as I recalled Sookie’s voice.

Pam scoffed. “Well—it’s *extremely* doubtful that *that* was me. Sookie stayed with you most of the time—you know. Until you ordered her out,” she added acerbically.

“What?” I asked.

“She stayed with you almost constantly. Olivia has come a lot too. I week ago, however, you ordered Sookie away.”

I contemplated for a moment, trying to recall why I would have done that. Of course, Sookie and I were not “together,” so why would she even want to sit vigil at my side. But, then again, she was already in the hospital because of her own situation. That must have been why she’d been there.

And then I recalled a clear picture of Sookie standing in my hotel room. She was quivering with fear as another blast went off. She was clutching her belly. Why the fuck had she risked so much to rescue me?

“Sookie is better off in Sophie-Anne’s care,” I said, trying to sound indifferent. And she was. I was injured. Hell! It would take me at least six months to grow back my arm and hand.

“I’m done! I fucking give up!” Pam said, standing up.

I frowned at her. “What are you talking about?”

“Two idiots,” she muttered before walking out of the room.

I heard her saying something about Dear Abby as she moved down the corridor.

DECEMBER 10, 2005—ALMOST SIX WEEKS LATER

SOOKIE POV

I wasn’t due for three days, but it was clear that my daughter was ready to be born. Hennesy and Amelia had both come running when my water broke.

I was glad that Amelia had decided to keep being my roommate when I asked her to stay on. She had opted to maximize her profits on her newly renovated (and repaired) apartments by renting out all of them. She’d also found a family to rent Gran’s house in Bon Temps for a fair price.

Plus, I’d pretty much made Hennesy move in too—since I hadn’t liked the other Were guard Sophie had gotten for me and wanted Hennesy full-time.

Despite her initial sourness, I’d warmed to Hennesy, and she’d warmed to me. Plus, she’d relocated in order to stay my guard. So—a room in my home and a chair at my table—had seemed appropriate things to offer her.

Her not even blinking when I got baby blue paint for the nursery also worked in her favor. Apparently, she liked blue too, and she thought it was dumb that it was a supposed “boy” color.

In contrast to the new friends in my life, Jason had tried to sue me, claiming ownership of the old homestead, but happily Gran’s Will had been ironclad, and Desmond Cataliades was—well—a demon.

As I closed my eyes, breathed deeply, and suffered through another contraction, I contemplated what my newly discovered great-grandfather Niall had told me about Gran. I shook my head. She'd had an affair which had spanned *at least* the production of two children—though Niall thought that it had lasted much longer.

Gran had also known all along that I was part fairy.

The first piece of information had been easier for me to stomach. That Gran had had an affair made me feel less “bad” about my own sexual choices in a lot of ways. Plus, I'd seen how she was with my Grandfather Mitchell. They'd loved each other and had made a good life together. Who was I to judge if they were both happy?

However, the fact that she'd known that there were fairies in the world—and that I was part-Fae—was more difficult for me to deal with.

I squeezed my eyes tighter as another contraction took over my body.

Through my pain, I imagined what my life would have been like if Gran had told me—at *any* point during my difficult childhood—that I wasn't a freak or a crazy person. I wondered what it would have felt like to know that I was part fairy—and that there were *others* like me out there.

“You are perfectly normal for a fairy,” Gran said in my fantasy. “Your real grandfather was a telepath, too.”

As my body shook with pain, I imagined her sitting down with my mother and father, explaining to them why I wasn't “normal.” Would it have made a difference with them? Would've my mother—knowing that my dad was part-fairy too—been more accepting of me?

Would there have been fewer doctors' visits—where my “head” was checked?

Would there have been less medicine—which made me sleep for days and live inside the thoughts of those around me like nightmares?

Would my family—*at least*—have just let me be *me* when only we were around?

After all, my father and my brother weren't normal either. We were all part fairies!

Part different!

Or—maybe—they would have all loved me. The thought of that brought tears to my eyes that even my labor pains hadn't done.

“It'll be over soon,” Sophie cooed.

But it was already over—at least where the family I'd been born into were concerned.

My parents were dead.

Gran was dead.

My brother blamed me for all three deaths and hated me.

Gran hadn't chosen to tell anyone about her knowledge of the Fae—likely because she didn't want to admit that she'd cheated on her husband.

I sighed as my contraction passed.

I'd felt Gran's guilt at random times over the years I'd lived with her. But I'd refused to listen to her mind as she'd felt guilt—except for one time. That time, Gran had recalled how Uncle Bartlett had once been “too affectionate” with her daughter, Linda. However, she'd turned a blind eye to his behavior, though she'd made sure that he was never alone with Linda again. I knew that she'd carried around a lot of guilt for allowing Bartlett to get close to me and Hadley. By then, she'd felt certain that her brother was too old to try anything. But a leopard didn't change his spots, which Gran had learned the hard way. I'd forgiven her for that many years ago. After all, she'd wanted to believe that the initial incident was just a misunderstanding. And—like me—she'd wanted to believe good things about her brother.

I supposed we'd both been let down in that way.

Yes—I'd forgiven Gran for letting Bartlett get close to me, but I was having a more difficult time forgiving her for not ever telling me why I was different from everyone else. After all, she'd taught me both charity and forgiveness.

Did she think so little of me to imagine that I would have judged her for having an affair?

Or had she just not thought about the fact that the truth would have been the greatest form of charity I could have ever received?

The greatest peace.

The greatest gift.

Had any of her guilt ever been about not telling me? Of course, perhaps, had it been Fintan's paranoid warnings which had kept her silent?

He'd stubbornly erected spells to keep his fairy family away from his human family, though he'd not done anything to keep other fairies from finding us—at least according to Niall. I'd learned that the Water Fae had killed my father. My mother had been collateral damage. Had Fintan not erected his spells to limit Niall's power with my family, my dad would have been guarded.

However, those painful thoughts gave way to my physical pain as my *very large* daughter decided that she wanted to meet the world.

Amelia held one of my hands as Sophie gripped the other.

“Where's Ludwig?” I growled.

After setting the scene—so to speak—Dr. Ludwig had left after telling me she'd be back when I was no longer wasting her time.

As soon as I asked my question, the doctor “popped” back and announced that my child was crowning.

“Push,” she said simply.

I obeyed—for a very long time.

Claire Sophie Stackhouse was born fifty minutes later.

She was eleven pounds and one ounce.

I cursed her father—but what was new?

QUINN POV

“You promised me that you would locate her!” I growled.

“Do not forget yourself,” Felipe said, showing a little fang. “Sophie-Anne is careful with the asset.”

“That asset is carrying *my* child!” I said.

“I thought you cared *nothing* for the young woman or the baby,” the vampire sneered.

“She tried to trick me,” I said, my body shaking. “And she *will* pay for trying to make me the fool.”

Felipe shrugged. “If your daughter proves to be a telepath, I will allow you to punish the mother however you wish, but I will *not* be left empty-handed. I *will* have a telepath! It has cost me much already!”

I didn’t contradict him, though I honestly didn’t think that Victor was much of a loss.

“Is the takeover still on for New Year’s Eve?” I asked.

Felipe nodded. “Yes. Northman intends to make that his first night back at Fangtasia. His unknown whereabouts and condition were the only things that stayed my hand up until this point.”

I didn’t respond to that. As long as I got what was mine out of the situation—my revenge upon Sookie Stackhouse—I would be content.

Chapter 20: Fight for Love

DECEMBER 31, 9:00 P.M.

SOPHIE POV

“Are you certain?” I asked my informant from Felipe’s court. Sandy Sechrest had been a lover of mine almost a century before, and she was an absolute wizard with numbers! She was also inconspicuous and innocuous—two things which made her the perfect spy.

“Positive,” she said in such a whisper that I could barely hear her over the phone. “It will be later tonight—exactly two hours before the new year. Your time.”

“Thank you,” I said, even as I abruptly hung up the phone.

Given her clandestine tone, Sandy wouldn’t be wanting to dilly dally on the phone with pleasantries either. And I had a lot of things to do in order to prevent Louisiana from being taken over.

Plus, I had to babysit to boot!

9:05 P.M.

SOOKIE POV

Claire was an angel. She was little more than two weeks old, yet she was already quite the sleeper. And she’d basically put herself onto her own sleeping schedule! Funnily enough, she seemed to want to keep vampire hours. She slept from 9:00 a.m. to about 3:00 p.m. Then she’d EPPP for a while (“eat, pee, poop, and play”) before napping from 7:00 p.m. to about 8:00 p.m. Then she’d EPPP some more before napping at about 2:00 a.m. And then she’d EPPP one last time before the morning came and she was ready to sleep again.

Also, she was content to drink from breast or bottle, which was fine with me—given the fact that I was producing more milk than Claire would ever need and had to express a lot of it.

Given this fact, Amelia was able to be my back-up feeder.

And Hennesy was my “back-up back-up.”

Unless it was nighttime. If it was, I just let the vampires in my life fight it out for feeding rights when my breast wasn’t available. Claire was particularly fond of Wybert.

Hell! Even Andre had fed my daughter!

Though his attempt at cooing had fallen flat.

I knew. Sophie had caught it on video.

Another amazing thing about Claire—not that anything about her didn’t amaze me—was her mind. It “poked” at me whenever she needed anything. And it also told me when she liked/disliked someone. For example, she liked Amelia, Bubba, Hennesy, and Wybert very much. She was more-less indifferent toward Sigebert. Meanwhile, I still couldn’t tell the two “Berts” apart!

And—sadly to say—Claire liked Sophie even more than she liked me at times. I tried to tell myself that it was Sophie’s quiet vampire mind that was the reason for that. Or—at least—I hoped it was.

Of course, maybe Claire just felt the disquiet within me. That uneasiness was why I was currently driving from New Orleans to Shreveport—with Hennesy sitting shotgun (with a literal shotgun in her lap) and Bubba sitting in the backseat, humming “Heartbreak Hotel.”

I shifted in my seat a little. I was still sore from giving birth. Claire was over 11 pounds, for goodness sakes!

Of course, I was also uncomfortable about the situation. After all, it wasn’t every day that a person went to beg her “sort of ex” to give her another chance.

I had a fleeting thought that Eric had chosen New Years to make his reappearance at Fangtasia because it was “our” anniversary of sorts. But then I shook that thought away. There were fifty other reasons why Eric would have chosen this night, and none of those had to do with me.

I was interrupted from my thoughts as my phone rang.

“Would you?” I asked Hennesy.

The Were nodded and answered my phone for me. I didn’t like talking on the phone while driving.

“Sookie’s phone,” Hennesy answered.

I heard a feminine voice, but I couldn’t make out the words it spoke.

After Hennesy hung up, she turned to me. “Turn around,” she ordered.

“What?” I asked.

“There’s to be a takeover attempt tonight, and the queen wants you secured.”

I pushed down the gas pedal. We were only five minutes from Fangtasia.

Hennesy growled at me.

“Did you *really* think I would turn around?” I asked with a growl of my own.

“No,” the Were said. “The queen didn’t either. She wanted me to tell you that Wybert has Claire in a secure bunker.”

I nodded and pressed the gas pedal even harder.

Bubba kept right on humming.

ERIC POV

“I understand,” I said into the phone receiver, even as I scanned the Fangtasia crowd. I was in my customary black, and—since my hand had yet to regrow—I’d opted to wear a hook.

For effect.

In fact, most of the fangbangers were fixated upon it.

The others seemed focused on my tight leather pants.

Pam always did know how to choose wardrobe!

Come to think of it, she'd chosen the hook too.

I sighed as I hung up my call from the queen's child. I had been hoping for a peaceful night. It was my first night back at work—at least publically—and I'd been eager to reestablish a bit of normalcy.

In fact, I'd been hoping that a Fangbanger might catch my eye. It had been months since I'd broken things off with Olivia, and—even if Sookie had still lived in my area and was still “into me”—I had resolved not to pursue things with her again.

Pam had called me a fool and had told me that Sookie loved me. However, if that were true, then her love for me had almost gotten her *and* her child killed in Rhodes.

Claire—I thought to myself. The name meant “bright” or “clear.” I couldn't help but to smile to myself as I thought of the infant. According to Pam, she'd been born healthy. And Sookie was well too.

I called Pam to my throne. She arrived moments later.

“Apparently, there is to be a takeover attempt tonight,” I whispered in Old Norse.

“Oh?” she asked, her eyes brightening with excitement.

“Gather the troops—*quietly*,” I instructed.

“Oh—I'll be *extremely* subtle, Captain,” she smirked.

I'd forbidden her from calling me “Captain Hook,” but she continued to push my limits.

She was lucky I didn't have time to punish her by making her change into the 80's style sequined dress I'd put into her Christmas stocking.

I looked down as I received a text alert. It had been Andre who had called me to warn me of the threat, but it was Sophie-Anne who was texting me.

“Take care of our girl,” the text said.

A moment later another text came in.

“And she *is* yours too—more than she’ll ever be mine—or anyone else’s.”

A moment later, there was yet another text.

“Tell her you love her, you idiot! You might die tonight. You might as well die an honest man.”

Though I already knew what “girl” Sophie-Anne was talking about, I was still a little taken aback when Sookie pushed her way into Fangtasia a moment later, skirting right past Maxwell Lee. I knew that Sookie had delivered her child only 21 days before, yet her curves were already working toward receding to their previous state, though her hips were still wider and her breasts were still bigger.

In other words, she looked sumptuous!

Sookie paused just past the entrance, took a deep breath, and then strode purposely toward me—with her Were guard and Bubba on her heels.

“I need to speak with you,” she said meaningfully.

Without a word, I took her hand and led her to my office. Hennesy and Bubba stayed outside the door.

For a moment, Sookie and I just looked at each other.

“You should go, Sookie,” I said. “It isn’t safe here.”

In the next second, I felt the sting of one of her palms across my cheek. My fangs clicked down.

“Fuck you, Eric! It’s not safe for you here either!”

“I’m not a new mother!” I yelled.

She narrowed her eyes. “And I’m not willing to let Felipe de Castro take over this state and enslave me or my daughter!”

I growled. “That’s what he intends?” I asked.

“Ever since he had Quinn seduce and impregnate me—yes! And he wants Louisiana too! He thinks Sophie’s vulnerable.”

“How do you know all this?” I asked.

“There are nine vampires and one weretiger less than half a mile away from here! And—trust me—I’ve made it my fucking goal to learn how to thoroughly read a weretiger!” she yelled.

“Sookie, I . . .” I stopped midsentence, unable to finish my thought.

“The attack’s coming at 10:00 p.m.,” she said, her eyes closing. “Quinn doesn’t know I’m here, but his motivation is to get to me. He knows that my daughter is his.”

She started trembling with fear.

“Sookie,” I said, reaching out to take her into my arms. “I promise. I won’t let him. Not ever.”

She looked up at me. “I came here to beg you to give me another chance,” she whispered.

“What?” I asked.

“I fucked things up so badly, Eric. But—if you’ll let me—I want to fight for and with you. I love you.”

With my good hand—not the hook—I tucked a strand of her hair behind her ear. “You were right back in February. You deserve a normal life—a life free from fear. Every time we’re together, you are in danger.” I sighed. “I think you and I are just cursed.”

She reached up and placed her palm against my cheek. “Then maybe we should work *together* for a change so that we can break the curse.”

I leaned into her touch. I couldn't help myself.

"You broke things off with Olivia," she barely whispered.

"I did. She wanted things I couldn't give her," I stated.

"I want things too," she said.

"What do you want?" I asked.

She pulled a little green charm from her pocket. "Do you know what a *cluviel dor* is?" she asked.

I nodded as I looked at the object; immediately, it enraptured me. "A fairy charm," I breathed.

"Yes. I've learned that my great-grandfather is Niall Brigant," she said.

I tensed as I was broken from my entrancement. "Then you are a princess of the Sky Fae," I said, awestruck.

"No," she smiled softly. "I'm just me—*just Sookie*," she sighed. "But—with this trinket—I could wish *anything* as long as it was a wish based on love."

I looked at the object. I felt its power.

"I could make you love me back with this," she looked up at me. "Because I *do* love you, Eric. I was just late in seeing that."

"You don't need to *make* me love you," I told her sincerely.

"I could take us back in time to the moment *before* I let you go," she said, a tear falling from her eye.

"But then you wouldn't have Claire," I whispered.

"I could wish that Quinn were dead," she said.

"But then I wouldn't have the privilege of killing him," I growled.

"I could wish that we'd both survive this night," she said.

“We will anyway,” I said gruffly, pulling her tighter against my chest.

“Eric?” she said, looking up at me.

“Yeah?” I asked.

“I love you.”

I sighed. “There’s just so much hurt between us, Sookie,” I said.

“I could wish the hurt away,” she whimpered.

“Don’t do that,” I said. “Hurt is a teacher,” I said. “My human mother taught me that.”

She sighed and then broke herself from my arms and stepped back.

She looked scared as she held up the small green object.

“My real grandfather gave this to my grandmother. It was among the things Amelia packed up in my house.” She shook her head. “I didn’t know what it was when I found it, but then my great-grandfather told me.”

She thumbed the object.

“Gran never used it, but I’m going to—*tonight*,” she said resolutely.

“Sookie?”

“It’s supposed to be for love,” she said, holding the object higher. “I love you. Eric. So—if this piece of magic was meant for me—then it was always meant for you too.”

“Sookie?”

She closed her eyes as if in prayer.

“I wish for you to have your heart’s desire, Eric Northman,” she breathed. “Whatever that is.”

The object glowed, and—suddenly—I was on my knees.

The memories I’d lost from the four nights that Sookie and I had spent together filled my mind.

She'd stopped in the middle of the night to make sure I was okay, though she'd been raped by a rabid vampire only weeks before.

She'd carefully pulled glass and rock from my feet so that I wouldn't have to bear the pain of my body pushing the substances from healed-over flesh.

She'd taken me in and given me clothing and food.

She'd held my hand when I was frightened and knew nothing about myself beyond the name she'd told me.

And she'd done much more than that too. She'd *shared* her life with me. She'd trusted me with her body and her stories. The hearth of her house had become *our* home together. And she'd fought the witches with me—even though she knew that capturing Hallow would likely cause me to leave her.

She'd fought for me.

Maybe she'd always been fighting for me—the best she could. She'd just failed to see that fighting for herself—for us—would have been the same thing.

The *cliviel dor* was still shining in her hands—the love token spent on her wish that I would have my heart's desire. Did she know that those had been words within Hallow's curse?

I suppose that didn't much matter.

I looked up at her. In that moment, she was more beautiful than I could imagine a person could be. The remnants of the fairy magic seemed to encase her in a faint glow.

Yet—her expression was worried.

Worried that I would reject her.

“Okay then,” I whispered as I stood up and reached out my hand. “I will claim the desire of my heart—you, Sookie Stackhouse. *You!*”

She let out a sob. “Really?”

“Really,” I confirmed.

She looked ready to faint, and I pulled her into my arms once more.

“I have you, Sookie. I have you. Just swear to me that you will never let me go again. Swear that you will always fight for us.”

“I swear.” She looked up at me, her eyes shining. “Let’s start with Quinn—okay?”

“I love you,” I said, pulling her to me for an intense kiss.

After I’d let her up for air, Sookie insisted upon making a call. She was determined to “help”—after all.

Of course, Sookie wasn’t the kind of woman to make a “simple” call. Nope. She called her fairy great-grandfather. High Prince Niall Brigant “popped” into my office, complete with a sword strapped to his back.

“Your intentions, vampire?” he demanded without prelude.

Sookie scoffed and gave him a kiss on the cheek.

“Ignore him,” she told me.

The great Niall Brigant looked close to pouting as she chastised him.

I might have found that funny if his question hadn’t cut me to the quick.

So—what were my intentions with Sookie? Clearly, Sookie was my heart’s desire. I knew that; I’d known it before she’d used the *cluviel dor* to give me the greatest gift that she could have bestowed upon me—the memory of *us*.

And then I knew what I needed to do and say. I knelt.

“Sookie, you once took me in off of a dark, lonely road, and you kept me safe. Then and now, you’re ready to fight for me. I couldn’t believe my luck then, and I still cannot believe it. When our enemies are defeated, I will bring you to my side—and I will keep you there always as my wife and my bonded. If you will have me. I will share

everything I have with you. Every vampire who owes me fealty will honor you. And I will honor you—for all the days of my existence.”

Niall and Sookie looked at me with matching expressions of disbelief for a moment before Niall’s lips turned up into a smirk.

“Acceptable, vampire,” the fairy said.

Sookie looked at me seriously. “It’s not just me. I come with a daughter now, too.”

I felt my own lips smirking. “I’ve had some of those before. *Much* easier than sons!”

“How so?” she asked, a smile beginning to form on her perfect lips.

“All you need is a moat and a tall tower. I already have a gator farm, so I’ll be able to keep the moat well-stocked,” I said seriously.

Sookie smiled but then bit her lip nervously. “The Ancient Pythoness told me that Claire would shift one day.”

“Hopefully she won’t kill the gators,” I intoned without missing a beat.

Pam, of course, had to ruin the moment by barging in. She looked at Sookie, at me on my knees, and then at Niall.

“Well hello there,” she purred at the elder fairy. “Tell me—if I am injured—will you heal me with your blood?”

Niall chuckled. “You are Northman’s child—I presume?”

“Mmmm,” Pam sounded.

“Good. We will get to know each other. We will soon be in-laws,” he added matter-of-factly.

I shook my head. Clearly any *moment* I’d been having with Sookie was now gone, so I began to stand up.

“No! Wait!” Sookie cried out. “I accept!”

“Accept what?” I grinned.

“*Everything*. Even the moat!”

I finished standing and took Sookie into my arms before kissing her soundly.

It was Sookie who broke away.

“Quinn just gotta call from de Castro, who’s in New Orleans. *Personally*. The attack is beginning in ten minutes,” she said. “Shouldn’t we get a move on?”

I gave Sookie one last quick kiss and then looked at Pam. “Have Maxwell turn away the humans still in line to get in. Have him claim that we are at capacity and closing the doors until midnight. After that, get the humans already in the club herded into the basement. Then have everyone get into position for attack plan *epsilon*.”

The vampiress grinned. “A wise choice. Come with me, Gramps,” she said, leading Niall from the room.

“*Epsilon*?” Sookie asked.

“Yes,” I smiled. “My people—you included—will be leaving the club via a secret underground passage. We’ll meet up with the others who have been called, and then we’ll surround our foes’ attack force.”

“What if they try to burn the club?” she asked. “What about all the humans inside?”

“The dungeon has a fireproof door and its own ventilation system. It would get hot in there, but not enough to kill those inside.”

“Thank you,” she whispered.

I smiled at her.

She was mine—*finally*.

“Come,” I said. “Let’s get ready.”

SOOKIE POV

It would have been difficult for me to express just how happy I was in that moment—despite the fact that I was getting ready to go to battle.

With Eric.

And with my great-grandfather.

When I'd first met Niall, I'd been wary of him.

Why hadn't he made contact sooner? Why hadn't I been told the truth of my lineage before?

As it turned out, it had been my grandfather, Niall's son, who had kept his father from getting to know me or my family. Fintan, Gran's lover, had used his magic to cover his part-human family from his fairy family. Upon his death, the magic had lessened, and Niall had discovered where we were, but he still couldn't approach us directly. He'd used a "loophole" to make Claudine my fairy godmother, but that had taken effect only the summer before, and Claudine was limited because she couldn't hide her scent from vampires. As for Niall—the house in Bon Temps had made it impossible for him to interact with me. Fintan's spell had lingered there and had kept him away.

Thus, when I officially moved, Niall had been freed—finally—to "visit."

Upon first meeting Niall, I'd been apprehensive of him—to say the least! I suppose that a part of me still was guarded with him. But I'd also gotten the strong impression that he was a good person overall. And I was willing to give him a chance. His coming out to fight in a vampire turf war with me and the vampire I had just gotten engaged to—for all intents and purposes—was a big deal to me.

I'd never in a million years expected for Eric to kneel down and promise me the world. But I really shouldn't have been surprised. After all, when I'd wished for Eric to have his heart's desire, it had been completely selfish *and* completely selfless on my part.

Yes—I'd wanted to be that desire of his heart. And I wanted to stay that way for the rest of my life—or longer.

However, I also knew that I might not be what Eric truly wanted. I'd kept in touch with Olivia enough to know that they'd both moved on, but that didn't mean that I would automatically be what he wanted the most.

With my hand firmly in his, I followed Eric through the tunnel, which took us well clear of the club. From there, we would surround our enemies. Eric's battle preparations had included strapping a sword to his back and stowing some stakes in his clothing. My battle preparations had included being outfitted with several stakes, being handed a gun full of silver bullets, and being hounded by Pam to teach her how to shoot the next time I saw her.

I'd agreed to Pam's request.

Meanwhile, I kept Quinn and his group in my mental sights, updating Eric as needed. Currently, they were surrounding the club, and—though Quinn was wondering why the front door had been closed—he'd been ordered by de Castro not to call until after the club was overtaken.

Right before we left the tunnel, I told Eric where all the Nevada group was lying in wait. And Eric quickly gave instructions to his vampires. Between the ones who'd already been at the club and the ones Pam had called in, we had a group of eight vampires, one full-blooded fairy, one telepath, and one Were.

Eric gave the order to attack our enemies one minute before they were planning to attack us.

I couldn't move nearly as fast as the others in our group, but with Hennesy and Bubba by my side, I did see the tail-end of the fight, and when an enemy seemed to be getting the upper hand on Indira, I shot the Nevadan with silver and slowed him down.

And when Quinn got a little "handsy" with his claws, I put two rounds into his ass.

God—that felt good!

But mostly I just watched and appreciated the lethality of the people on Louisiana's side.

Despite having only one hand, Eric was amazing as he fought. In fact, if anything, he used his hook to his advantage, and it certainly caused a lot of havoc!

The battle didn't last long. Heck—Pam and Thalia alone likely could have dealt with the Nevadan force, especially since we took them by surprise. When Niall and Eric were added in, our forces were clearly superior to theirs. Plus, Maxwell Lee, Clancy, and Indira were all good fighters. I didn't know the other Area 5 vampires who were with us, but they held their own too.

Thus, fewer than seven minutes after the battle had begun, all of the Nevadan vampires were ash and one large Bengal tiger was hogtied with what looked to be strong silver wire. Pam had managed to find a muzzle as well, though I was pretty sure it wasn't needed, given the fact that I'd seen Eric punch Quinn's mouth hard with his good hand and then slice his jaw with his hook.

By the look on Eric's face, I could tell that he wasn't done with Quinn either, but I wasn't about to beg for the weretiger's life—though, in truth, a small part of me felt sorry for him. After all, he had been blackmailed and used by de Castro for most of his adult life—with his mother's safety being threatened all the time.

However, Quinn had allowed his situation to mold him into a bad man, and—as he looked at me—his thoughts told me that he would always want to harm me if he were left alive. And he'd always be a threat to Claire too. He was willing to "sell" a telepathic kid to de Castro. So I was willing to look the other way as Eric did what he needed to do to "skin the cat."

My great-grandfather looked keen to join him.

As soon as Eric assessed that all was well, he strode over to me, took me into his arms, and kissed me breathless.

Moments later, his phone rang, and he grunted before answering it.

“This is Northman,” he said, panting a little.

I, too, was panting. What could I say? The Viking was hot when he was in the midst of bloodlust.

“Yes, my queen,” he said, slightly less impatiently than before. “All is well here.” There was a pause. “I am glad to hear that there were no losses on your end. What of the other sheriffs?” There was another pause. “And de Castro?” He grinned. “I wish I could see that.” There was another pause and he winked at me. “I will tell Sookie that Wybert is currently putting Claire down for her nap and singing her a lullaby, but I will pay you if you can get him on video.”

I grinned at him.

“We will see you tomorrow evening then.” There was a final pause. “Yes. I will be traveling with Sookie to New Orleans.”

I could hear Sophie laughing as Eric took the receiver away from his ear to hang up.

“She seems happy for us,” Eric smiled.

I wrapped my arms around his well-built body.

I felt like I belonged there.

I *did* belong there.

A year ago tonight, I’d stopped my car because I’d recognized that it was Eric running along the country road I traveled every time I worked at Merlotte’s. Before then, I’d *liked* Eric and I was certainly attracted to him. Most importantly—I had trusted him with my life.

After he regained his memories and left my home, I still trusted him—with my *life*.

But I didn't fight for him because I'd never learned how to fight *for me*, and he'd become a part of me by then.

One of the best parts.

It had taken me a long time to figure that out.

As I took in his unique scent, I vowed to always fight—whether it be *for* him, *with* him, or *beside* him.

But I would never fight *against* him again—because, in doing so, I would be fighting against myself too.

And I was done with that.

I was a human.

I was a fairy.

I was a telepath.

I was a mother.

One of my guards was Elvis.

One of my guards became a wolf at will.

My daughter would one day be a telepathic weretiger.

My great-grandfather had pointy ears, sported sharp teeth, and could teleport.

My best friend was a vampire queen.

My other best friend was a witch.

My beloved was a thousand-year-old Viking vampire.

All of these things were parts of me.

And every single one of them was worth fighting for, especially the vampire who was currently stroking my hair.

With his hook.

Epilogue: Bonding

JANUARY 1, 11:45 P.M.

ERIC POV

Sookie was nervous, a fact which I could tell very well, given the blood exchange we'd made the night before—the exchange which had solidified our bond.

The exchange *she* had chosen because *she'd* wanted a bond with me.

Of course, I hadn't resisted. I'd wanted it too!

I couldn't keep myself from growling as I recalled just how Sookie had cut into my flesh in order to take my blood. And—when she'd realized how much I'd liked it—she'd sliced into me a second time too, even as she'd called me “her naughty boy.”

Naughty indeed!

I felt myself getting hard.

“What is it?” she asked me, obviously feeling my arousal.

“The hook,” I whispered, though I knew that both Hennesy and Bubba could hear me very well, though they were not aware of that object's significance.

Sookie licked her lips and I scented her wetness, so—being a vampire—I took advantage and captured her lips in a kiss.

She moaned into my mouth as our tongues began to stroke each other as if they were fucking. I began caressing the sides of her breasts—stoking the fire within her.

“I didn't know that there would be porno available for our entertainment during the drive,” Hennesy said dryly from the drivers' seat.

“Now, Miss Hennesy,” Bubba said sheepishly, “Miss Sookie and Mister Eric just missed each other. You should keep your eyes on the road anyway—since you’re drivin’ and all. Mama always said that hands should be at ten and two and eyes should be forward,” he added seriously.

Sadly, the words from the front seat were enough to remind Sookie that we weren’t alone, and she pulled herself from my arms before looking at me scoldingly. “Eric Northman,” she chastised.

“Yes?” I asked innocently. “I was just trying to make you less nervous, my love,” I declared.

Of course, my statement—unfortunately—reminded her of those nerves. I chastised myself for bringing them up!

“But you’re going to be meeting Claire soon,” she said, biting her bottom lip.

“Then *I’m* the one who should be nervous. After all, it is I who am auditioning to be her father tonight,” I smiled softly, thinking about the little girl who had come from Sookie.

I’d felt her kick my fingers after I’d flown the most precious cargo I’d ever held away from the Pyramid of Gizeh. I’d been so worried that I wouldn’t be able to control our descent—and then so relieved when I’d placed Sookie’s feet onto the ground and felt the child’s kick as if it were approval of the job I’d done.

Sookie sniffled and took my hand into hers—my “non-hook” hand, of course.

Not surprisingly, my woman—*mine*—had insisted (given the naughty things she’d done with my hook) that I wear my “fake hand,” which was covered with a black glove, that night. Pam had initially covered the prosthetic with a sequined glove similar to Michael Jackson’s glove, and I was willing to go along with my child’s “joke.” But Bubba had seemed upset when he saw it (for good reason, I thought), so I’d changed out the sequins for black leather.

“You can be a perv,” Sookie whispered, “but you are sweet too.”

“Sometimes,” I smirked.

“Lots of times,” she corrected as she leaned against me.

I attempted to comfort her through the bond as she began to fret about Claire again. I knew that at the root of her worry was the fact that she’d just spent her first night and day away from her newborn daughter. And—though we’d had a lot of *fun* the night before—she’d missed her little girl greatly.

I pulled her closer. I couldn’t help but to be proud of the mother she’d become.

My phone buzzed in my pocket, and I glanced at the number before answering.

“Pam,” I said.

“No. Niall,” my soon-to-be-in-law said.

“Niall?” I asked assessing my bond with my younger child. She was well. “What’s going on?” I asked.

“Your child has learned that I can keep Quinn in his tiger form *after* he dies,” he reported.

“Oh?” I asked, trying to keep the subject of the conversation from Sookie as she looked at me curiously.

“Pamela wants a fur coat. However, I doubt very seriously that the existence of a coat of her biological father would be a good thing for Claire to see as she grows up,” Niall said casually.

“Tell him I’ll keep it at my house! Exclusively!” Pam yelled in the background.

“Ask Pamela if she would be willing to forgo futures visits from her,” I paused, “sister.”

There was a pause.

“Goddammit, Eric!” Pam yelled—again from the background. “Fine! It’s too hot in Louisiana for a fuckin’ coat anyway.”

“Ah—it would appear that your input has been enough to make her see some sense,” Niall said congenially.

“So?” I asked, still wanting to keep the content of our conversation from my bonded. “How goes it?”

“Oh—the cat is suffering greatly,” Niall said with the kind of satisfaction only a trained torturer could feel. I frowned. I’d allowed myself only an hour with Quinn before I’d focused my attention upon my beloved the night before. But I’d made sure that the tiger had been left in capable hands when I’d left him.

Yes—I wanted the feline dead.

But I wanted it to happen slowly, given what he’d wanted to do to Sookie and the child I was already thinking of as my own.

And I had priorities now—Sookie and Claire—so, since I wanted Quinn to die slowly, I’d had to outsource.

Damn it!

“What’s going on?” Sookie asked me.

“Your great-grandfather is playing with Pam’s phone,” I said.

“You’re lying,” she returned incisively.

“You *want* me to lie right now,” I returned sincerely.

She sighed and nodded.

“Quinn made his bed,” Sookie relented. “But he was given a shitty one to begin with,” she reminded.

I sighed and nodded. “Make sure it doesn’t last past the night,” I told Niall.

“Dammit, Eric!” Pam yelled from the background.

“I understand,” Niall said reasonably. “I will respect Sookie’s feelings on the matter—as you are. I will make sure that the tiger is no more before the sun rises.”

“I didn’t even get to neuter him!” Pam yelled from the background. Clearly she was pouting.

Oh well!

Indeed, I'd been the one to neuter the fucker! And Quinn had yelled out in agony as I'd ripped his balls from him.

"Your maker *did* leave the tiger's cock for you to skewer," Niall observed, even as Sookie seemed to be studying me.

Thank the gods she couldn't hear the conversation.

Thus, I could laugh when my child began extolling Niall with a lecture about the necessity of having a good corkscrew on hand.

"She *did* open a very fine bottle of wine for me with it first," Niall said, as if I needed to know that.

"Well—at least she did that first," I said with a smirk.

"So—it is reasonable to posit that you wouldn't sanction a rug for your child either?" Niall asked.

"Goddammit, Niall!" Pam yelled.

"That is safe to say," I returned. As much as I might have loved a tiger rug in front of my own fireplace, my hearth would be shared with Claire. And it just wouldn't be fucking right to have a rug of her father in the house! Plus, she couldn't be held accountable for who her biological father was. And I didn't plan on letting her in on the details of Quinn's demise either—not ever.

"Well then—have a good evening," Niall said. "You may tell my great-granddaughter that I will see her soon and that I beg the privilege of giving her away at her wedding to you."

With that, he hung up. I chuckled.

"What?" Sookie asked.

"He asked if he could give you away when we wed."

She grinned, but then frowned soon after. I felt a jolt of sadness from her.

“What is it?” I asked, drawing her tightly against my body.

“Jason,” she sighed. “He’s a bastard. But he’s my brother. I just wish things could be different with him.”

“Would you like for me to glamour him?” I asked.

She leaned up and kissed me. “No,” she said after breaking the kiss. “But thanks for offering. Jason’s decided to be as small-minded as his friend, Rene Lenier, once was,” she said severely. “And—though Jason’s no serial killer—I would never want him around Claire, even if he were glamour’d.” She shook her head. “Gran was flawed, but she taught him better. He just chose not to be better.”

“If he judges you, it is because he judges himself. If he hates you, it is because he hates himself,” I said.

Sookie thought about my words for a moment and then nodded. “I think you’re right. He judged me the most when he thought that I was sleeping with more than one guy. Hell—in his mind—I should have stayed Bill’s since he was my first!”

I growled.

“Down boy,” she soothed with a smirk. “The truth is that Jason’s always disliked having a sister who was *different*. He used to wish that he were a better person—that he would come to truly accept me—and I appreciated his effort. But—after Gran died—I think that became impossible.”

“Sounds like an asshole to me,” Hennessy mumbled from the front seat.

“He is,” Sookie sighed. “But—he’s out of my life now. And so is Sam. Almost everyone in that town is.” She smiled at me and leaned up to kiss me.

“By the way, thanks for Terry,” she whispered as if remembering something all of a sudden.

“What about him?” I asked innocently.

“It *had* to have been you,” she said knowingly.

I sighed and nodded my admission.

I'd learned through Pam (who'd learned through Sophie-Anne) that Terry Bellefleur had been kind to Sookie, and I'd found a way to reward him. After I'd healed enough to leave Ludwig's hospital, I'd paid the man a visit and had invested enough money in his dog breeding enterprise so that he could quit Merlotte's. He was now the owner of several more of the canines he preferred and was training them for veterans with post-traumatic stress disorder.

Of course, I'd glamourised him to forget the more horrifying situations in which he'd found himself during the human war he'd fought in.

I frowned. Vampire wars were often violent, but they tended to be over quickly. Terry Bellefleur had suffered for a long time as he'd faced the toils of the desert in addition to the attacks of enemies in the forms of bombs and guns.

I preferred the vampire way. The human method of war seemed to be truly brutal—comparatively. At least with vampires, it was one's enemy who destroyed him or her—not a fucking landmine!

I was drawn out of my reverie as Hennesy pulled up in front of Sophie-Anne's main residence, which was a plain-looking office building located near the more opulent “palace” that people thought was her residence.

The two buildings were connected via a concrete underground passage, which was reinforced with steel walls. The entrances to the passage were hidden and plated in silver. I'd been working for Sophie-Anne for almost three decades before I'd learned of them and of the bunkers where the queen could hide in times of turmoil.

After we were cleared by a security detail, Hennesy pulled into a large parking garage, and we all got out of the vehicle before progressing to another security checkpoint where we were scanned

for all sorts of surveillance devices. Indeed, the queen had learned early on during the technological age that a friend could unwittingly be carrying a bug on him or her.

Once we were cleared, Sookie was literally teeming with energy as she grabbed my hand and pulled me, leading me toward an elevator which would take us to the queen's private apartment. It was clear that Sookie had been there before.

I scented only a few individuals as we exited the elevator. Bubba and Hennesy had been left behind in the garage.

"Rasul," I greeted as Sookie and I turned the corner which led to the apartment's door.

"Sigebert," I nodded at the sullen-looking Anglo-Saxon.

I'd never seen him guarding without his brother.

"وقال انه يعتقد أن الرضيع لا يوجد لديه الحكم," Rasul said in Arabic. [*He believes the infant has bad taste.*"]

I chuckled.

Meanwhile, Sookie had reached out to take Sigebert's hand. "I like you, Sigebert," she comforted as if she knew what was vexing him. "And Claire will too one day. I'd bet money on it," she winked.

"I wouldn't bet a lot," Rasul mumbled.

If looks could have killed, Sookie's glare would have killed Rasul in that moment.

"He's just joking—aren't you?" Sookie challenged.

"Uh—yes. Of course," Rasul assured.

I chuckled at the fact that Sookie was wrangling a 436-year-old Persian vampire so that he'd be "nice" to a 903-year-old Anglo-Saxon vampire.

But—then again—nothing should have surprised me about my mate.

“You get smart—finally,” Sigebert said as he looked at me. “Wybert willing to offer many goats for this woman. I tell him goats no longer in fashion as bride price,” he added in broken English.

I chuckled as Sookie blushed. “Yes,” I said. “I have finally wised up.”

Rasul chuckled, but became silent as both Sigebert and Sookie glared at him.

“Hey—what did I do?” he asked.

“Do not speak,” Sigebert said gruffly.

Rasul huffed, and I grinned widely at the spectacle.

“My brother has the wee child swaddled, and she refuses to be from him. So I have new partner here,” he gestured toward Rasul. “Am glad you are back. Andre’s singing of the song of the spider is,” he paused, “grating.”

I snorted out a laugh. “Is that the ‘Tsy, Bitsy Spider?’” I asked.

Sigebert nodded. “I am tone deaf, yet his song makes me cringe. The child seems to laugh. But she is making feces. Is clear to all but Andre.”

“Andre’s trying,” Sookie said charitably, even as she tried to hide her own amused smile. At that moment, Sophie-Anne herself opened the door to the apartment.

“Well? Are you going to stay out here all night?” she asked impatiently.

I must admit that I was rather stunned at the sight of my queen hugging my beloved as if she were a long-lost sister.

“Hey, Soph,” Sookie said.

“Hello, Sook,” the queen smiled at my bonded. “I like your new perfume.”

Sookie blushed.

The queen looked up at me. “Well, I’m glad you finally pulled your head out.” She looked back at Sookie. “You too, my friend,” she whispered before taking Sookie’s arm and leading her into the room. “I hate to say I told you so, but”

Sophie clearly didn’t finish her sentence so that a sense of drama could be created.

The bitch.

However, any disparaging thoughts I might have had toward my queen were ended as Sookie ran to the both small and large child in Wybert’s arms. The baby was less than a month old, so she was obviously tiny compared to the Anglo-Saxon, yet she was also large, almost twelve pounds to my eyes. Gods! She must have ripped Sookie apart at the birth of her, which made me marvel at the fact that Sookie had been so fucking tight the night before—so perfect—so healed.

All I had to say was that Ludwig was a fucking genius!

And I’d be sending her a bonus.

In the name of my penis.

Of course, in my defense, Sookie had been the aggressor the night before. I’d been willing to wait, but she’d insisted upon having me. And I’d been happy to be had.

The babbling child thrust her hands outward and Sookie took her immediately, gushing and cooing as mothers even in my day had done.

I couldn’t help my smile as Sookie cradled the little one against her bosom.

In that moment, I felt human again. I was a young man returning from a sea voyage and meeting a daughter. Yet—this time—I loved the woman holding the child as much as I found myself drawn to the baby herself.

Aude had been lovely, yet I’d never thought of her as *mine*. She was my brother’s wife. Of course, I’d thought of the children as mine—even those she’d had with Leif—and I’d loved them. Yet I now had a feeling I’d never experienced as I saw Sookie holding Claire.

Sookie was a woman I *wanted* to make my wife.

She held a child that I thought of as *hers*.

A daughter I *wanted* with her.

As the little one turned to look at me, I pulled my phone out of my pocket and quickly texted Pam's phone, ordering that Quinn be killed immediately. It wasn't as if he deserved any mercy, and it wasn't as if I feared he might escape. No. It was that he'd given the beautiful child in front of me half of her DNA, and—for that alone—he would get my mercy.

Pam could bill me.

“Do you want to meet Claire?” Sookie asked in a high-pitched voice as she bounced the child in her arms.

Dumbstruck and short of words, I nodded, and Sookie passed the little girl to me.

She had large blue eyes—the exact shape and hue of her mother's eyes. Her hair was thin, but the color of spun gold. Her lips trembled for a moment as if she might cry, but then she fisted her chubby hand around one of my fingers, even as a part of me more than a thousand years old recalled how to hold a small child.

“You are strong,” I whispered to Claire. “Like you mother,” I added as she blinked her eyes at me, as if communicating a secret code that she was certain that I would be able to decipher.

And I *did* decipher it.

I was her fucking father, after all!

And I was wrapped around her finger.

The End.

Original Cast Banners by Sephrenia

The generous Sephrenia made banners for the characters who were “new” or differently cast people in this fic. Many thanks to her!

I have collected them here.



