



The Boot

by California Kat

Part 2 of the Trunk Trilogy

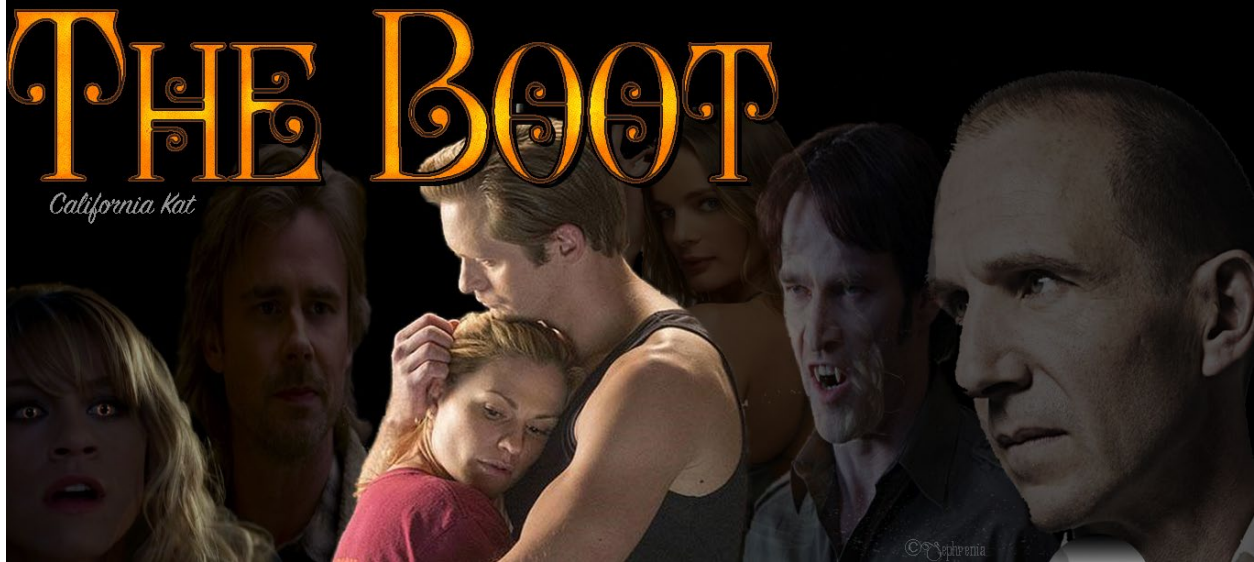


Figure 1: banner by Sephrenia

STORY DESCRIPTION

(Sequel to *The Trunk*) With the Jackson trip having ended very differently than it could have, Sookie has a new lease on life—a life that includes both Eric and a new profession. Will the Viking and the part-fairy be left in peace? With Bill, Debbie Pelt, and a new witch coven in the picture, it's doubtful. And what side will Sophie-Anne be on—when Bill informs her that Eric has interfered with his assignment to secure the telepath?

INSPIRATIONS

The Trunk was inspired by valady1 & ncmis12; thus, I owe them many thanks for the existence of this sequel as well.

MANY THANKS

To my amazing beta, **KLEANNHOUSE** and my story artist, **SEPHRENIA!**

DISCLAIMER

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the Cast

THE BOOT

CHAPTER 01: Clean up Your Own Backyard

Clean up your own backyard

Oh don't you hand me none of your lines

Clean up your own backyard

You tend to your business, I'll tend to mine

– Songwriters: Billy Strange & Mac Davis

“Report,” Eric said by way of a greeting as he entered the dungeon at Fangtasia. He was anxious to deal with the four Weres who’d been staking out Sookie’s home that night – anxious to deal out their deaths if they refused to cooperate.

Pam leaned into the hand already perched onto her hip. “Hello to you too, Master,” she intoned.

Eric rolled his eyes.

“I bet you show more manners with *certain* humans,” Pam remarked drolly.

“And what would *you* know of manners?” Eric volleyed back.

“Our current guests aren’t complaining about my manners *or* my hospitality,” the vampiress returned, gesturing toward the Weres chained to the wall.

“*That* is because they are wearing those damnable pink ball gags that you insisted upon having made,” Eric noted as he strolled toward the prisoners.

“They *are* wonderful – aren’t they! Anyway, the dogs didn’t deserve any hospitality. They didn’t even make me *try* to get their secrets,” Pam pouted.

Eric casually kicked at the legs of one of the dangling Weres in order to wake him up – since Pam’s earlier “hospitality” had left him close to unconsciousness.

“And what is their story?” Eric asked, though he was pretty sure he already knew.

“They *loosely* belong to the Jackson, Mississippi pack – just like the Were that Bubba took out before your little pleasure trip there,” Pam informed.

“Loosely?” Eric asked.

Instead of answering, Pam sang:

My folks were always putting him down

They said he came from the wrong side of town

They told me he was bad but I knew he was sad

That's why I fell for the leader of the pack

“Pam,” Eric voiced her name impatiently, “I do not have all night for your nonsense.”

Of course, Pam just kept right on singing, somehow finding both the perfect pitch and a sarcastic tone:

One day my dad said find someone new

I had to tell my Jimmy we're through

He stood there and asked me why, but all I could do was cry

I'm sorry I hurt you, the leader of the pack

Eric let out an exasperated sound as Pam sarcastically intoned “V-room, v-room” at the end of her performance.

The vampiress looked at her victims. “Actually, you know, I’m *not* sorry I hurt you. V-room-fuckin’-v-room.”

“Pam!” Eric yelled at his progeny. As entertaining as she could be, he was also ready to get some answers – for the sake of the woman whose lips had managed to make his own tingle with life not an hour before.

They were still tingling.

“Fine!” Pam relented. “These puppies fashion themselves to belong to a Were version of the Hell’s Angels. They run with the Jackson pack when they are there.”

“How precious,” Eric smirked, taking in the four men’s matching leather jackets and chaps. Three of them had beards, and all had greasy-looking hair held in place by red bandana headbands. They looked like a caricature of a bike gang, rather than an authentic one.

“Who sent them?” Eric asked curiously, even as he eyed the strongest and oldest among the group, a Were of about forty-five years old.

“These Wolfy Angels said that they ventured to Area 5 on their own – not that I really believe them,” Pam said, her tone reflecting boredom. “Apparently, one of their comrades disappeared when he came to Bon Temps to abduct Miss Stackhouse. Then *another* one of their fury friends disappeared when he went after her and Herveaux in Jackson. You know – *Sookie* is too unusual of a name for her to use when she’s undercover. Even the mongrel wolves were able to guess that Sookie One was the same as Sookie Two. Might wanna rethink that next time,” she critiqued drolly. “Or not. Anyway, these in-bred bikers came looking to ‘revenge their brothers,’” she indicated with air quotes. “Blah, blah, yadda, yadda. V-room, v-room.”

Eric chuckled at Pam’s antics as he ripped the gag from the mouth of the strongest Were – who was obviously the leader among the small group. “Why did the first Were come to Bon Temps? Who sent him?”

The wolf let out a growl.

“Really?” Eric grinned, his fangs sliding into place. “You really think it’s wise *not* to cooperate fully?”

“Fuck you, fanger,” the Were spit out. “I’ve already told that fuckin’ bitch all I aim to tell!”

“You kiss your king’s ass with that mouth?” Eric intoned.

“I *certainly* don’t intend to kiss yours,” the Were returned.

“He was cooperating *with me*,” Pam said sarcastically. “But now that you’re here, I guess a dick measuring contest has to happen.”

“Oh, come now, Pamela,” Eric grinned. “I’m certain you could come in at least second in the penis-size contest – if you wanted to join in. You might have to cut off their dicks first, however.”

“Who says I wasn’t already plannin’ on doin’ that already?” Pam grinned.

The Were cringed and squirmed against his binds. In fact, all of the dangling Weres did.

“Last chance for you to cooperate before I question *that* one,” Eric told the group’s leader even as he pointed toward the only Were without a beard. The younger man smelled very much like the older one. Likely, he was the Were’s son, younger brother, or nephew.

The leader growled, but then nodded to indicate that he’d rethought the level of his cooperation.

“The first Were entering my territory? Why was he here?” Eric prodded.

“Lorena – that crazy vamp bitch,” the Were answered.

“And what about her?” Pam asked in an uninterested tone.

“She promised vamp blood to Harrison if he could find out what her child was working on for the Queen of Louisiana.”

“Did the Mississippi king know that your comrade had been sent to *my* territory?” Eric asked.

“No.”

“You are sure?” Eric asked.

“Yeah,” the Were responded confidently. “Lorena’s a fucking leech on King Edgington, but he doesn’t involve himself in her business – not unless it affects his.”

“How did Lorena come to be in Mississippi?” Eric asked.

“She called in a favor with King Edgington – something involving her maker and the king. She was granted residence in Mississippi for the next five fuckin’ years.

‘Course – King Russell don’t know that that bitch’ll do *anything* to pad her own bank accounts. She’s got deals goin’ on throughout the South – most of ‘em related to vamp blood.”

“And your group’s involvement?” Eric asked.

“We run the shipments for her – in exchange for a cut of the profits or – uh – a portion of the product.”

“Awe!” Pam exclaimed. “Weres hooked on V! How sweet.”

And then – in pure Pam fashion – she continued her song:

He sort of smiled and kissed me goodbye

The tears were beginning to show

As he drove away on that rainy night

I begged him to go slow

But whether he heard, I’ll never know

Look out! Look out! Look out! Look out!

She finished dramatically.

“We don’t *all* do V!” the elder defended, even as he glanced at the youngest of the Weres and tried to ignore Pam. “But we *do* all take care of our own and we meet

our obligations! When Harrison disappeared, we came lookin' for him. *And* we came to finish the job for Lorena."

"You *really* ought not bother," Eric said casually. He'd heard – during his seemingly endless pacing in Russell's mansion as he'd waited for the sun to go down earlier – that Lorena's remains had been found in Russell's pool. And, of course, Sookie had smelled of her too. What exactly had happened to Bill's bat-shit-crazy maker was a topic he'd yet to broach with the telepath – mostly due to the fact that the ancient vampire somehow knew how upset any kind of killing would have made Sookie. And it wasn't the night to dwell on that – not after what Sookie had been through.

"She's dead?" the Were asked curiously.

Eric nodded his confirmation. "Sorry to say that your V-connection's all dried up."

The older Were glanced again at the younger one that Eric had threatened earlier. "Actually, I can't say I'm torn up 'bout that part. Best that our people not get too wrapped up in it. There are other ways to make money."

"If you live to try them," Pam smirked.

"You'd have killed us already if you were gonna," the Were stated, trying to sound sure of himself. He didn't quite achieve his goal – much to the vampiress's delight.

"Your fate is still not decided upon," Eric said in a warning-laden tone. "Tell me – what did your pack-mate – Harrison, was it? – report back before he disappeared. And why – specifically – were *you* in Bon Temps tonight?"

The Were paused for a moment, and it seemed as if his stubborn silence might return for a moment. However, it did not.

“Harrison didn’t find jack shit at Compton’s place – besides a well-worn and well-scented path leadin’ straight to a sweet-smellin’ lass. I overheard her name when he was tellin’ it to Lorena: Sookie Stackhouse. Unusual name,” he leered.

The vampire contemplated taking the Were’s teeth for that look, and then he chastised himself for not cautioning Sookie to use a different name in Jackson – as Pam had pointed out. He’d assumed Sookie would think of doing so on her own, but *he* should have taken into account her relative inexperience with the Supernatural world. Herveaux, at least, ought to have introduced her by an assumed name at Josephine’s, but – again – Eric hadn’t thought to make that order explicit. Clearly, that had been a mistake.

“Lorena told Harrison to grab the girl as leverage over her beloved Billy boy,” the dangling Were informed, rolling his beady eyes. “But several days go by and no word from Harrison. ‘Course him goin’ on a bender ain’t unusual, so we didn’t none worry much. Now – fast forward to last Friday night, and me and some guys was at Josephine’s when an interestin’ thing shows up with Herveaux. Pretty gal. Smelled sweet. Name of Sookie. Was gonna grab her then and there – question her – but King Russell stepped in.” He scoffed. “That vamp’s got no problem employin’ us for his own dirty work, but treats us like scum afterwards.”

“And here you’d think Russell would *love* that biker look you’re sporting,” Pam said drolly. “You’ve got *bear* written all over you.”

The Were growled. "I ain't got nothin' to do with what the king does with all his boy toys."

"No v-room, v-room?" Pam pouted.

"Quite right," Eric intoned. "Russell doesn't go for bears, Pamela. He prefers cubs," he added, gesturing toward the younger Were.

The elder growled louder. "All I know is that little Miss Sookie Stackhouse has questions to answer! I came to Bon Temps *myself* on Saturday morning! And guess whose shallow grave I found in the woods behind a bar that she just so happens to work at?"

"Harrison's!" Pam said with the excitement of a child answering a riddle. Of course, her reaction was feigned.

"That's right," the Were snarled. "And then Jerry went missin'!"

"Ah—the same Jerry that went to Herveaux's apartment to try to abduct Miss Stackhouse," Eric said with a scowl of his own.

"As I said, that bitch needed to be questioned even *before* I found Harrison!" the Were yelled his explanation.

The vampire shook his head and pulled his phone out of his pocket. "Call *my woman* that again, and I won't let Russell see to your punishment because there will be nothing left of you to punish," he warned menacingly.

One of Pam's eyebrows rose so high it almost met her hairline.

"Yours?" she asked.

“Ja. Tillräckligt att hävda henne [*Yes. Enough to claim her*],” he responded in Swedish.

“Vet hon det [*Does she know that*]?” Pam returned with a smirk.

“Yes,” Eric answered simply right before the phone was picked up. He used vampire speed to exit the basement to avoid both the Were’s ability to overhear his conversation and Pam’s half-amused and half-skeptical look, but not quite in time to avoid her recommencing of “The Leader of the Pack.”

“Your majesty,” Eric greeted.

“Ah, Eric!” Russell Edgington purred. “Or are you still pretending to be the delectable Leif.”

Eric rolled his eyes. As he did with his friendship with Colonel Flood, Eric generally kept his associations with powerful vampires – especially those he “liked” or trusted – to himself. Russell Edgington was one of those. Stan Davis was another.

Taking on the persona of “Leif” helped him to do that from time to time.

Contrary to what the unwise perceived, during his thousand-year life, Eric – because he operated according to a code of honor that most older vampires could appreciate – had accumulated many “friends” and favors. Moreover, he had rarely put himself into an *uncomfortable* enough position to collect on most of those favors.

Thus, he was owed by many – including King Russell Edgington.

Particularly, Eric had once traveled with and protected, Embry, one of Russell’s children’s children. Russell’s child had been staked, and Embry had been less than a

decade old at the time. In fact, Eric's first journey to the United States had been to deliver the youngling to his grandsire.

The Viking took a split second to internally critique the way that most creatures – even those of his own kind – tended to flaunt their associations in order to look better to others. Appius was like this. Queen Sophie-Anne was also in the practice of parading around her friends or “name-dropping” in order to solidify her own power. However, Eric had retained his human father's sense of caution when it came to exposing one's allies. In the Viking's experience, such exposure often led to dissent between the “friends,” for – almost invariably – the more powerful of the two felt that the other was aiming to use him or her. It wasn't as if Eric denied his connections either; he'd simply learned that it was prudent to keep them close to his vest. For example, though Sophie-Anne was pretty confident in her own rule and in Eric's loyalty, Andre might believe that Eric's having powerful allies in close proximity to Louisiana would make the Sheriff a threat (mostly because Andre wouldn't be above stabbing his monarch in the back – and would have likely tried to do so if Sophie-Anne wasn't his maker). Just as annoying as Andre being overly (and wrongly) suspicious was the prospect that Sophie-Anne might want the “use” of Eric's allies. Indeed, she would have no compunction about calling her Sheriff and asking him to use *his* friendships for *her* benefit.

And Eric was too fucking stingy with his hard-earned connections to spend them on Sophie-Anne's whims. Thus, he'd never been one to name drop.

“I am back to Eric, your majesty,” the Viking responded to Russell's query.

“And what kind of shenanigans are you involved in this time, Viking – that you needed to use your alter ego in my kingdom?” the monarch asked with intrigue. “You told me *only* that you’d be in Mississippi for a few nights and wanted to avoid the scrutiny of your queen. But – *clearly* – your visit had something to do with the lovely-smelling woman you looked after like I might look after Talbot,” he added in a slightly more serious tone. “Tell me – is the infamous Viking off the market – *before I finally* get you into my bed? Say it isn’t so,” he added dramatically.

Melodramatically.

Eric chuckled, but chose his words carefully. Friends or not – Russell was an opportunist.

“I *did* know Miss Stackhouse before the incident at Josephine’s, and my presence in your state *did* involve her. But you need not worry; we are both back in Louisiana now – safe and sound.”

“As evasive as ever, Eric,” Russell laughed. “Tell me – is Bill Compton’s disappearance and Lorena’s demise related to you and your charming friend’s,” he paused, “little visit?”

“Bill is a subject of Louisiana – one the queen tasked me with returning to his work here,” Eric relayed casually.

“Then why keep your visit a secret from Sophie-Anne?” the king asked.

“For *almost* the same reason as my secrecy from you,” Eric hedged.

Russell laughed louder. “Fine! Keep *some* of your secrets. But I *have to* know one of them.”

“And what is that?” Eric ask curiously.

“I heard you pacing around in your bedroom well before sunset earlier. Since you rose only minutes after I did, I almost called down to find out if you were older than you’d let on – or if, *perhaps*, rising especially early was a vampire gift of yours. But then I decided to wait. I rarely get to appreciate the feeling of anticipation anymore,” he drawled. “But I never got to ask. Imagine my surprise when I realized you’d left my estate *before* the sun fully set!”

“Imagine my own surprise,” Eric returned carefully – though enigmatically.

“Even with the storm, Eric, that was quite the risk.”

The Viking didn’t need to voice his agreement.

“A mystery is rare, dear boy. I *love* to solve one, and I am an excellent detective. Plus, my reach is great,” Russell chuckled to himself. “For example, I inquired about the name ‘Sookie Stackhouse’ after I realized you *and* she were gone.”

“And what did your reach tell you?” Eric asked, trying to sound unconcerned.

“I ought to hold back my information from you as you are holding back from me, but I can guess at your goal – to keep the lovely *telepath* who helped with Stan’s little issues safe and sound and in your care,” he pronounced with some delight. “Tell me – is she *yours*? She smelled of Mr. Compton too – you know. I did not smell him until her blood spilled, however. Clever of you to put her in the Were’s company so that she’d smell of wolf.”

Eric smiled to himself. Indeed, covering Sookie’s scent had been one of the reasons why Alcide had *seemed* to be such a good choice as Sookie’s guard in Jackson.

However, his smile faded as he recalled all the ways in which Alcide had not been the right mutt for the job.

The Viking tread carefully. “Sookie *is* my human now. Any other inclinations she’d had in any other direction were resolved tonight.”

Russell was just as much the king of reading between the lines as he was of Mississippi. “So – that tells me that *before* tonight, she was not yours. Thus, I missed an opportunity last night – didn’t I?”

“You did,” Eric responded honestly.

“Your tone also indicates that Miss Stackhouse’s decision *needed* to happen, and I know that you do not think so ill of me as to believe I would have taken her without her consent – especially not after the way she saved my second-in-command.” He paused. “Therefore, I must ask. Is she in danger? Is she well?”

Eric was somewhat surprised for a moment by Russell’s sincere-sounding concern. “Something bad was prevented from happening to her,” he responded softly.

Russell sighed. “Is your queen an issue? I could, perhaps, speak with Sophie-Anne. Or simply expand my territory?” he added, only half-joking.

“I will keep your kind offers in mind. Meanwhile, Miss Stackhouse is considering going into business and offering her skills on a freelance basis,” Eric shared.

“I would consider it an honor to pay to see her work,” Russell responded.

“Perhaps her fee could be lessened in return for a favor?” Eric suggested.

“Oh, dear boy! I have already forgotten the whole Lorena matter,” the king chuckled. “Do not fret about it, and make sure Miss Stackhouse doesn’t either! Indeed,

I am grateful to have done with Lorena. She was, at first, amusing enough to observe. But her," he paused, "preoccupation with her substandard child was getting annoying. And Talbot had begun complaining about her cattiness toward him. I see no reason to look into the matter of her death any further. After all – it's *clear as a bell* that Lorena was killed because she was not a good steward of her time! She ought to have sought shelter from the sun *long* before dawn. It seems she became desperate enough to try to use the pool and its cover for her day-rest without informing my Were guard. It's a pity one of them lifted that cover before the thunderstorm rolled in," he laughed at his own fictional account. "Of course, without Lorena here, there would have been no need to keep Mr. Compton in custody, though I *was* hopeful that I might learn more about his project with Sophie-Anne. In fact, the only impressive thing about that pissant is that he did not disclose much information about his project – just that it involved some kind of vampire phone directory – or some such thing. Imagine anyone being interested in a Yellow Pages for vampires!" he finished with a light chuckle.

"It is difficult to imagine the use of such a thing," Eric agreed, even as he was extremely grateful that Russell did not know about the true nature and extent of the database – at least, not yet.

"Tell me – when can I expect that visit from your asset? I long for a little drama!" Russell paused for dramatic effect. "Oh – and Bubba was incredible!"

Eric chuckled. "Yes. He rarely sings, but when he does, it is transformative. How about Bubba, Sookie, and I all visit with you sometime after the New Year? I'm

certain she'd be glad to see you again – under better circumstances. In the meantime, the favor I was going to ask for does not involve Lorena – except in the periphery.”

“You have me intrigued then – *again!*” Russell laughed.

“You may not find it very amusing once I tell you,” Eric cautioned.

“I’m listening,” the king said, suddenly all business.

“It seems you have some rogue Weres in your state – or, at the very least, they are *near feral.*”

“There *is* a group – a motorcycle gang of sorts – that is affiliated with the main pack in my area,” the king said contemplatively. “They are a bit rougher around the edges than even the normal Were. But their stay in Mississippi is,” he paused, “seasonal, so I tolerate them. Is that the group you speak of?”

“Yes. Lorena employed them. She sent one of them to come into *my* area and sniff around her child’s home,” Eric relayed.

“Yet you will forgive that encroachment because Compton was her child.”

“I would have – forgiven *that,*” Eric emphasized, “but the Were – at Lorena’s behest – tried to kidnap Sookie after he did not find what he was looking for in Compton’s home.” He paused. “Clearly, he intended to move her from my territory to yours.”

“*Your* territory. Odd that you don’t call it Sophie-Anne’s,” Russell said with a smile in his tone.

“I serve my queen,” Eric said firmly.

“But I doubt any ruler alive – or undead – could *truly* rule you, nor would a wise ruler want to – at least not completely,” Russell returned sagely. “Tell me – did Miss Stackhouse have your blood *before* the Were from Mississippi tried to abduct her?”

“Yes,” the Viking responded honestly. “Moreover, she was under my official protection, which is why your Were was killed – by the very same vampire who entertained you tonight with his singing. Bubba is very fond of Sookie. Indeed, he also discovered another Were stalking Sookie and her Were guard, Alcide Herveaux, Friday night – in your territory. Bubba killed that one too. I assume you will forgive that offense?”

Russell chuckled. “Yes, of course. And, truly, you *must* come visit soon! Things become so much more interesting when you are around, and I cannot help but to believe that your little telepath shares your talent for attracting,” he paused, “attention.”

“Perhaps,” Eric relented – with a little chuckle of his own before getting back to business. “The disappearances of their two packmates stirred four more of the biker beasts to come for Sookie tonight – at her home *in Area 5*,” he emphasized. “I have them strung up in my dungeon even now. I have told you all I learned from them – save for one thing: the *type* of payment the Weres were expecting from Lorena.”

“And what was that payment?” Russell asked, an edge to his tone.

“Mostly V,” Eric responded. “I believe that there is abuse within that faction, though – perhaps – mostly among the younger members; however, you may wish to investigate whether the abuse has spread into the main pack.”

The younger vampire paused to carefully choose his next words. "I know that you do not have an issue with the Weres in your state drinking the blood of vampires; however, I also know that you use the blood sparingly, as a treat to reward their loyalty. I also know that it is offered fresh – so that certain," he paused again, "dangerous addictions do not occur. And though I might not completely agree with your philosophy on this matter, your majesty, I must own that the illegal use of V – both among humans and the two-natured – is, overall, much less of an issue in your state than it is in Louisiana. So I am not calling your policy into question."

"I hear a 'but' coming," Russell observed when Eric didn't speak for a moment.

"No," Eric responded. "You do not need my counsel to deal with your rogues. I am merely waiting for you to tell me what to do with the ones in my custody."

Russell contemplated for a moment. "It seems *you* are doing *me* a favor – more so than you are asking for one from me."

"A wash then?" Eric suggested with a smirk.

"Indeed," Russell concurred. "So I still owe you for Embry," he added somewhat sourly.

No vampire enjoyed owing another – especially not for the greater part of a century.

"As you say," Eric said diplomatically.

"So," Russell said, his tone lighter once more, "tell me – how bad are the ones you are holding? Are they even worth the effort of collecting them?"

"They are still reasonable enough," Eric responded honestly.

“Would *you* bother giving them another chance?” Russell asked.

“I would flip a coin,” Eric said honestly. “And – if luck favored them – I’d watch them like a hawk for a while.”

Russell chuckled. “You do so amuse me, Viking. And you will release them into my custody?” the king asked.

“Yes – with the caveat that *any* Mississippi Weres with malignant intentions will be killed – without the benefit of questioning – in Area 5 from now on.”

“Especially if those intentions are directed towards Miss Stackhouse?” Russell asked with amusement in his tone.

Eric didn’t answer. He didn’t need to.

“There is a werefox named Debbie Pelt,” the Viking said instead. “She harmed Sookie today. If you value her at all as an asset, you will ensure that she refrains from stepping one toe into *any* part of Louisiana,” he conveyed with an edge to his tone. “In fact, she’d best not even look west for too long at a time.”

“Miss Pelt is the one who told me that my Weres were bound and determined to execute the King of Rock-n-Roll tonight,” Russell returned contemplatively. “In truth, I would have inadvertently let it happen – as I had not been planning to question the unidentified vampire. Indeed, I was happy to allow him to take the blame for anything that occurred here in the hours before dawn yesterday. To be honest, I’d planned to,” he paused, “reward Ms. Pelt.”

“Then reward her by warning her,” Eric said coldly.

“Tell me—should I simply kill her?” Russell asked. “If you ask it of me, I will see it done.”

It was Eric’s turn to contemplate. “*If* the werefox can behave—*if* she stays away from me and mine—I do not need her life,” the vampire said, remembering his ‘compromise’ with Sookie. “Her past contains periods of drug and alcohol use. It could be that her misdeeds are now fueled by V usage,” he added with a roll of his own eyes. He knew that Russell would help the werefox if she was salvageable, and here he was giving the Mississippi king the key to giving her that help! He wouldn’t have even contemplated such a generous “gift” if he’d not been thinking of Debbie’s recent victim—the overly kind-hearted telepath who had somehow wormed her way into his own dead heart.

“Feeling charitable?” Russell commented with surprise in his tone.

“Don’t ask,” the Viking mumbled.

Russell chuckled. “I’ll send Betty Joe for the Weres tomorrow night—if that is agreeable. I will make sure they understand that they are not to bother you or yours again. If they defy me, they *will* be made an example of. I’ve not had occasion to put a head on a pike for quite some time, after all!” the king exclaimed flippantly. “And one must make examples every now and then if one is to ensure a good pack. You said there were four?”

“Yes,” Eric confirmed.

“One head for each corner of my estate. What divine symmetry,” Russell mused almost longingly. “Perhaps, I *will* flip that coin—after all.”

Eric didn't comment. Truth be known, he thought Russell was overly involved in the business of the packs in his state. Of course, anyone would have wanted his or her guards to display loyalty, but Russell was basically the *de facto* packmaster of the Jackson Weres. It would have been like Eric taking over Long Tooth and asking Colonel Flood to defer to him – even in Were matters! That level of micromanagement simply didn't appeal to Eric, though he had to acknowledge that Russell's ways had kept him alive for three times as long as Eric had walked the earth.

The old king was doing something right.

“Bring yourself – *as yourself* – Miss Stackhouse, and whoever else you like for a visit when you can. And consider the Were situation solved on my end. *And* – if that queen of yours *does* decide to give you any problems, keep in mind that I'd give you any Area of Mississippi to run.”

“That is very kind, your majesty. But – for the present – I am quite happy in my situation.”

“It's an open offer,” the King of Mississippi said before hanging up.

“I'll keep it in mind,” Eric responded – even though there was no longer anyone to hear his words.

CHAPTER 02: Catchin' on Fast

Give, give, gimme all you've got to give

Love, love, love every moment you live

Now you've taught me all you know

Have I passed the test

Show me all you've got to show

Baby you're the best

– Songwriters: Bernie Baum, Bill Giant & Florence Kaye

MONDAY, DECEMBER 13, 2004

2:00 P.M.

Sookie woke up feeling a little sore – unsurprising, given the fact that she'd been packed in a trunk like a sardine just 24 hours prior.

Not to mention the fact that she'd been staked, beaten up by Debbie Pelt, and almost killed by Bill within the last 48 hours.

She sighed. “Eric was right,” she muttered. “I really *do* need a guard – and probably a shrink,” she added with resignation.

She stretched out her telepathy as far as she could and sensed three two-natured minds within thirty yards of her home: one Were, one that was similar to Sam, and one that “read” only as a color in Sookie's mind: dark blue. Likely thanks to Eric's blood,

she was able to grasp onto the thoughts of the Were and shifter. The Were was Tray Dawson. The shifter, Onawa (one of the new guards), had arrived half an hour before. Tray was explaining the layout of the Stackhouse property to the shifter. From Tray's mind, Sookie could tell that Onawa was an absolutely gorgeous Native American woman, though the telepath couldn't even begin to guess the tribe or tribes she was descended from. One thing that she *could* definitely pick up from the shifter was that she was attracted to the Were. Sookie could also tell that Onawa had already decided not to act upon that attraction. First of all, she didn't want to get involved with anyone she would be working with. And that was because of her second reason: she was a "love 'em, leave 'em" kind of woman in that she'd never managed to have a relationship which lasted more than a month. She had already pegged Tray as a two-week "distraction" at most.

Funnily enough, the fleeting thought of Onawa and Jason together struck the telepath. Sookie chuckled to herself and shook her head. Given that both of them seemed to share the same notions about romantic partners, they might – at least – make good "wing-men" for one another.

Getting out of her readable guards' heads, Sookie refocused on the "dark blue" signature. She had to assume that it was being made by the werehawk that Eric had told her about – to be precise, the *shifted* mind of that werehawk – because that mind was well above the house!

"Willow," she said to herself as she recalled the unusual name. Stretching her mind in a different direction, Sookie could "hear" several other Weres just coming into

her range, probably the “extras” that Eric felt were needed from Long Tooth—and maybe even Maria-Star, who was Colonel Flood’s niece and goddaughter, according to Eric. Of course, that group might have included Mustapha too, but Sookie doubted it since she assumed he would arrive with Warren, and she “heard” no human signatures in her range. They were too far away for her to hear their actual thoughts, but Sookie could tell from Tray’s head that they were, indeed, from Long Tooth.

“Eric and Thalia sure work fast,” Sookie said to herself as she rolled out of bed, put on her robe, and began making her way to the kitchen to make some coffee. She found a note on the kitchen table, the handwriting so antiquated that she could hardly make out the words. “Who knew that s’s and f’s could look so much alike?” she muttered as she began reading.

Telepath.

Obey the guards if they approach you, but do not approach them. I have been told you are prone to make friends. They are paid to watch over you—not socialize. Oh—and if they do—I will kill them.

Their lives. Your hands.

Eric asked me to pass along the message that the Weres who aimed to kidnap or kill you are no longer an issue you should worry about.

I, however, hope that you will hold onto your worry—so that you will obey me.

—Thalia

Sookie huffed, “Obey her! What kind of note is that? She can’t tell me who to socialize with!” she complained.

However, Sookie had run out of steam even before she finished pouring the water into the coffee maker. Thalia, as ill-tempered as she was, was also right to a certain extent. Sookie sighed as she admitted to herself that it would have been better had Alcide and she kept a professional distance. Still – if, in the course of time, she and her guards got friendly – Thalia would have to live with it.

“Or stay dead with it,” Sookie corrected.

“Anyway, surely she wouldn’t *actually* kill them – would she?” the telepath murmured as she measured out her coffee grounds.

Sookie shook her head and decided not to chance being *too* social until she could tell when Thalia was joking – *if* the vampiress ever joked. She opened the refrigerator and frowned at her meager options for breakfast, even as she realized that she was famished. The night before, she’d practically had to choke down one of the sandwiches Alcide had packed for her. She’d put the second one into her fridge, and that PB & J now made her stomach growl as if the sandwich were a prime rib. She quickly decided that it would be her appetizer and that she’d cook some eggs as her main course.

She frowned as she cracked three into a bowl. Not surprisingly, the part of her personality that Gran had helped to instill itched to make a huge breakfast for her guards/“guests.” But she shook off that inclination and grabbed a fork to scramble her eggs.

“Compromise,” she said to herself.

Her meal finished and the few dishes she'd used washed, Sookie grabbed the house phone since her cellphone was still in its charger upstairs. She smiled to herself as she recalled that she and Gran had splurged on the cordless phone two Christmases before—as their presents to one another. Her smile quickly turned into a frown, however, as she moved into the living room and sat on the couch.

She closed her eyes so that she wouldn't have to see the empty corner where the Christmas tree had always gone—when Gran was alive. Sookie hadn't put one up this year. With everything that had been happening with Bill's "disappearance," she hadn't even thought much about Christmas.

Now, with only twelve days left until the holiday, she wondered if putting up a tree would even be worth the bother. After all, it was *just* her now. But then she shook herself from that thought.

"I'll put one up—*for me*," she resolved, even making the decision that she'd get a real tree, instead of using the artificial one in the attic. Grandpa Mitchell had been allergic to the real ones, Sookie recalled. And Gran had stuck with the decades-old artificial tree because it was less of a hassle than a real one; plus, it had reminded her of her husband.

Sookie had admired how Gran had done little things to keep Grandpa Mitchell "with" her after his death, but the telepath had always secretly wanted a real tree.

With that thought in mind, she decided to dial Jason before speaking with Sam.

"Sook?" her brother asked upon answering.

Sookie rolled her eyes, wondering who else her brother might think was calling him from her number.

“Yeah,” she affirmed all the same.

“What’s up?” Jason asked. “Thought you was gonna be outta town longer. Bill with ya?”

Sookie cringed at the sound of her would-be rapist and murder’s name. “Uh—no. But he’s fine and will probably be back in Bon Temps soon.” She’d not told her brother much about why she was leaving town when she’d asked him to check on the house and bring in her mail, and she wasn’t in the frame of mind to tell him much now, but she knew she should tell him something. “Listen, Jase. Uh—Bill and I . . . ,” she paused.

“Bill and you what?” Jason asked after a few seconds. “You ain’t gettin’ married are ya?”

“No!” Sookie responded quickly and firmly. “*Very* much the opposite—actually. I’m breaking up with him. I’ve *broken* up with him.”

“Oh!” Jason reacted with some surprise in his voice. “I mean—I’m sorry?” he half-stated and half-asked. “I was—uh—startin’ to get used to the idea of you datin’ a vamp.”

Sookie shook her head. Leave it to Jason to think about his *own* reactions when she was the one who had ended a relationship—her *first* relationship. “Well,” she sighed, “it wasn’t working out with him even before he left town. Anyway, that’s not why I called. I was wondering if you’d help me out. I wanna get a Christmas tree—a

real one – for the house, and I’d appreciate it if I could use your truck to haul it. And – uh – if you’re not busy, I could use some help bringing it in too?” she asked, turning her request into a question.

“Oh – sure, Sook!” Jason said quickly, a bit of child-like excitement in his tone. “Want me to come over there after I get offa work? ‘Round 4:30? There’s still some decent trees over in that lot next to the football field.”

“Thanks!” Sookie effused, feeling a smile spread over her lips. “That’d be great! And I’ll cook you dinner too – if we can stop by the grocery store on the way home and if you don’t have other plans already.”

“It’d take better plans than a beer with Hoyt for me to turn down homemade vittles!” Jason chuckled. “And – uh – maybe I can help with the decoratin’? It’d be nice to do that,” he said with a hint of melancholy in his tone.

Neither of the siblings needed to remind the other that it would be their first Christmas without Gran.

“I’d like that a lot,” Sookie said softly.

“Hey – uh – I’d better get back to the crew,” Jason said, a little choked up.

“Sure, Jase. See you around 4:30,” Sookie returned before hanging up. After giving herself a few moments to stave away the tears that were rising in her eyes, she dialed Merlotte’s number. Even if she wasn’t exactly sure what she was going to do about work in the future, she knew that not working in the meantime wouldn’t help out her pocketbook any. Plus, she didn’t want to *never* work at Merlotte’s again; that thought just seemed wrong to her, given how much the place had meant to her.

“Merlotte’s,” Arlene answered the phone a little breathlessly after the second ring.

“Hey, Arlene! Is Sam around?” Sookie asked.

“Sure thing, sug. You back? ‘Cause if you are, I could *really* use a favor. I gotta date offer for tomorrow night, but since I took your shift when you left town, I had to . . .”

“No problem! I’ll take the shift back,” Sookie said, cutting Arlene off before she’d even finished her request.

“Great! I’ll get you Sam,” Arlene said with a smile in her tone (and likely a skip in her step).

Sookie had no idea who Arlene’s current love interest was, but she knew that it was better to help out her friend when she could, as opposed to giving the redhead a reason to be irritated. Sookie sighed, acknowledging that Arlene really wasn’t that good of a friend when things didn’t go her way. Regardless, Sookie didn’t mind the shift; in fact, she was grateful for it.

“Chère?” Sam greeted. “You back from your trip already? Everything go okay?” he asked a little cautiously, having had a better idea than the others about why Sookie had been out of town.

“Yeah, Sam,” Sookie fibbed. In truth, everything most certainly had *not* gone okay, but she was feeling more and more like her life could get to “okay” — *better* than okay, in fact. “Um—I got back before I thought I would—actually. And I know I asked to be off till next Monday, but I was wondering if you could fit me back on the schedule

before then. I'll still need off Friday and Sunday nights this week, but I could work any other times you need me for. And – uh – if you don't need me – just keep me in mind if someone calls in?" she finished.

"I figured you were good to work when Arlene announced that you were a goddess for taking her shift tomorrow night!" Sam chuckled. "I'll see if anyone wants to give up a shift, but I know offhand that I could use you on Saturday. We were gonna be shorthanded."

"Thanks, Sam!" Sookie enthused.

"No problem, chère," he replied warmly. "It'll be good to have you back. I know you were only gone for a couple of days, but this place just ain't the same without you."

Feeling a little guilty, Sookie took a deep breath. "Sam – uh – I *do* have something that I want you to know about – uh – before I decide on it for sure. I don't want you to be blindsided or anything," she added tentatively.

"What is it?" Sam asked, trepidation in his tone. Sookie wondered for a moment if Sam was worried that she'd gotten engaged to Bill too.

"The thing is – uh – I don't know how long I'm gonna need to," she paused, suddenly quite nervous, "*stay* on the schedule."

The line was silent for a moment.

"You're quittin'?" Sam finally asked gruffly.

"I'm not a hundred percent sure, but I'm leaning in that direction. Um – I'll give you two weeks' notice when I *am* sure, but – uh – like I said, I wanted to give you a

heads-up now – time to start lookin’ for a full-time replacement for me. I didn’t wanna leave you in the lurch,” Sookie rambled.

After a few moments of awkward silence, she could hear Sam’s office door closing.

“Does this have to do with them damned vampires?” Sam growled in a low voice.

Sookie sighed. “Yes, Sam,” she answered honestly. “But probably not in the way you’re thinking.”

“You don’t know what I’m thinking?” Sam practically snarled.

Upset at his tone, Sookie closed her eyes and pinched the bridge of her nose. “I know more than I should about what you think of vampires. And what you think of my having dated Bill.”

“Sookie, I”

“Look, Sam, we don’t have to talk this all out over the phone. I just wanted to let you know that I’m weighin’ my options about my future.”

“What? You gonna let Bill take care of you like some high-class mistress?” the shifter asked bitterly.

Sookie gasped, feeling his words like a shot to her gut.

“Fuck!” Sam murmured immediately. “I didn’t mean that, Sook! Listen, I’m sorry! I know I’m overreacting. I just . . . ,” he stammered out an incomplete apology.

Sookie took a deep breath. “You’ve been a good friend to me, Sam Merlotte. That’s why I’m glad I’m not there right now to hear if your thoughts match the hurtful

words you just said." She took in, held, and then let out another deep breath. "Not that I owe you any explanation after what you just said to me – the kind of person you just accused me of being – but Bill and I aren't together anymore." She paused. "Things have happened between us."

"What things?"

"Nothing that is any of your business right now," Sookie replied, keeping a check on the hurt and anger that Sam's thoughtless words had provoked within her.

"I deserve that, Sook. I really am sorry," he reiterated.

"I hope so," she sighed.

"So – uh – you and Bill are done?" he asked hopefully.

"Yeah," she confirmed. "And – as for the future – I'm considering using my telepathy as a job of sorts. Eric thinks it'll be better than the alternative of others trying to use *me* for my telepathy. I'll be in control of who I work for."

"Northman!" Sam jeered, back to growling.

"Yes. Eric Northman – Sheriff of Area 5 *and* my friend," Sookie returned stubbornly. "*And* the man who saved my life – more than my life – more than once in the past 48 hours."

"Sook, don't break things off with one bloodsucker just to pick up with a worse one! Stop bein' so fuckin' stupid!" Sam exclaimed with frustration.

Maybe it was the fact that she'd almost died less than twenty-four hours before that caused Sookie's already thin patience to run out. Maybe it was the judgment in Sam's tone – or his already thoughtless words – which had been meant to play upon

what he *knew* to be her insecurity regarding others believing her to be a “kept woman.” Maybe it was that she’d *already* decided – though she’d not spoken it aloud to herself or made it “official” – that she *was* going to take Eric up on his offer of helping her to be the one in control of her telepathy.

The one in control of her life.

Suddenly, she had no doubts about what she wanted to be now that she’d “grown up.”

She *was* going to try earning her living from her “curse” – really try! That thought both frightened and thrilled her.

Using all the control that she had *and* truly hoping to preserve her relationship with one of her very few friends *and* remembering that it was around the time of the full moon when all two-natured creatures lost a bit of control over their emotions, Sookie did not say the words she was thinking – words that had likely never been said or even thought in Gran’s living room.

Words that included a lot of “fucks” and a lot of “yous.”

Sookie took another deep breath. “Unless you’re firin’ me on the spot, I’ll still take Arlene’s shift tomorrow. And I’ll take any others you wanna give me through December 27, which is exactly two weeks from today. But that’s it, Sam,” she said before hanging up.

She ignored the phone when it rang in her hands; instead, she got up to put the receiver into its cradle in the kitchen just in time to hear Sam issue a hurried apology on her answering machine and assure her that she wasn’t fired and that he really hoped

she'd reconsider leaving. Then, he begged her to talk things over with him before she made her final decision about anything. And, after reminding her that he'd lived in the Supe world a lot longer than she had, he asked her if they could talk before her shift the next afternoon. Next, he offered to keep her on the schedule – even if it was on a limited basis – after the 27th, just in case her new job didn't work out for some reason.

Sookie sighed as she wondered how long her “telepath for hire” business would take to be up and running. And then she spent a minute or two worrying about the fact that she didn't even know how to go about starting such a business! At that point, panic almost drove her to call Sam back, but she didn't. Instead, she took several deep breaths and calmed herself. “Eric wouldn't have brought up the new business idea if he'd not already thought everything out,” she assured herself.

She glanced at Gran's old cast iron pan. Just looking at the sturdy, well-seasoned item made her feel warm. She closed her eyes, imagining how Gran would approve of her new venture. The older woman always had great hopes for her.

“It's time I did the same,” Sookie thought, though she couldn't help but to wonder how she'd pay for the food to go into that pan until her new business got up and running.

She frowned as she recalled how Bill had taken her payment from Dallas and wondered if Eric would lend her some money if she did need it. Of course, she had no doubt that Eric would make her a loan. After all, he was paying God knows what for the guards! And – though it had been too long in coming – she now trusted him not to hold such a loan over her head or to look down upon her for asking.

Still—even the thought of asking for money made her cringe. Borrowing money was something Gran had never been willing to do.

“Stubborn pride,” Sookie admitted, knowing that she’d inherited a large dosage of the same from her Matriarch.

Before she could contemplate her finances any longer, however, an unfamiliar human mind “appeared” on her radar. She couldn’t help but to tense up at the negative stream of thoughts flowing through that mind – thoughts that were cursing *Sookie Stackhouse!*

CHAPTER 03: I WONDER, I WONDER, I WONDER

All by myself alone at home a feeling blue

Thoughts keep roaming through my mind, they're all of you

— songwriter: Daryl Hutchins

Sookie could feel three Weres, including Tray, and Onawa begin to circle around the vehicle bringing the human onto her land. She concentrated her telepathy even more on the unknown human as he got closer.

He was growling — as much as a human could, that is — about the fact that his car was being scratched by her pitted driveway.

In addition to cursing his battered Buick, he was already judging “whatever a Sookie Stackhouse was” for a litany of things: where she lived, the rundown appearance of her house, the fact that the pole her mailbox was on was a little crooked.

Even her name, which he thought was “white trash personified.”

But then his thoughts transferred to Eric, specifically going over the errand he was to run for his “master.” Sookie rolled her eyes at herself as she realized that the thinker — though an asshole — was no threat to her; he was Eric’s day-man! Quickly, she went to the door, grabbing a sweater on the way. She didn’t like greeting people without a bra on; plus, it was a cool day.

Sookie opened her front door just as Tray Dawson approached the vehicle. The other two-natured beings in the vicinity seemed poised, their minds buzzing with energy as they readied to shift if need be. Out of the corner of her eye, Sookie saw a graceful hawk land in an oak near where her lawn met the woods.

“Bobby Burnham!” the man identified quickly in Tray’s direction as if he’d been prepped to do it. “I’m here on an errand for Mr. Northman.”

“I.D.,” the large Were ordered. From Tray’s mind, Sookie picked up that Eric had informed him that Bobby would be dropping by that day. Still, the Were had never met Bobby before and was in “protective mode.”

Of course, Sookie could tell that Bobby was who he said he was, and she almost said something to Tray, but then she realized that Mr. Burnham might not know about her ability.

Sookie smiled to herself as she realized that she’d not thought of her telepathy as a “disability,” nor had she revealed her ability when she’d not needed to.

They were baby steps, but she was proud for having taken them.

While Tray carefully checked his I.D., Sookie continued to listen to Eric’s day-man’s thoughts, even as she took a moment to study his appearance. Bobby looked to be in his early-to-mid 40s. His brunette hair was styled in order to best cover his clearly receding hairline – though to Sookie’s eyes, the styling seemed mostly to draw attention to the places where he no longer had hair. Despite his hairline, however, Bobby could have been considered handsome – *if* he didn’t have such an unpleasant, pretentious “air” about him. Sookie recalled how Gran used to say that even the prettiest people

couldn't really hide their ugly – just as beauty often shined right out of a face the world might label as hideous.

Sookie almost laughed when she heard Bobby regretting that his current errand did not afford him the opportunity to try out the British accent he'd been practicing in order to sound more sophisticated. He had to save that "skill" for errands involving people that would not have the opportunity to mention his "Britishness" to his "master."

Having sniffed the day-person's car and finally satisfied with his I.D., Tray turned to walk back toward the woods.

"Uh, Mr. Dawson?" Sookie asked before Bobby could begin the errand she'd already heard about from his head.

Tray turned back around. "Tray is fine," he said with a little nod.

"Um – okay, Tray. Uh – then call me Sookie. I – uh – don't know the protocol, but my brother is comin' to take me Christmas tree shopping and then to the store this afternoon about 4:30."

The Were nodded as if making mental calculations. "Not a problem," he indicated before turning once again to resume his post. She felt the other two-natured minds withdraw further from the house as well. It seemed clear that Eric hadn't been lying when he'd promised that the guards would be as unintrusive as possible.

"Mr. Burnham, would you like to come in?" Sookie asked the man, who'd been looking around her yard with disdain.

From his thoughts, she knew that he was trying to figure out two things: how to complete his work “politely,” as the “master” had ordered, *and* how to complete it quickly so that he didn’t “get fleas from the redneck.”

Sookie sighed. She knew that she had two choices: to either perform the role of the perfect Southern hostess, despite the tenor of Bobby’s thoughts, or to do them *both* a favor and hurry along his “errand.”

His reticence to proceed further than the porch made up her mind for her. “I’d offer you tea, but you look anxious to be on your way, Mr. Burnham,” Sookie said evenly – professionally.

Bobby frowned a bit, remembering again that he needed to be “polite.” Of course, even in the next moment, he was worried about the lint that would likely be in Sookie’s home and how that would affect his heavily starched clothing. “Yes – uh – Sookie, I have other errands for Mr. Northman this afternoon. And you may call me Bobby,” he added, as if he were being threatened with fangs.

Maybe he was.

Sookie bit her tongue. She was tempted to tell him *not* to call her Sookie. She was even more tempted to tell him that she would prefer calling him Mr. Burnham. However, she knew that such a clear sign of distaste on her part would *not* hurry him along. And she had a shower to take and Christmas decorations to pull from the attic.

“What did Eric need?” Sookie asked.

Bobby frowned, and – from his thoughts – Sookie could tell that he disapproved of her calling “the master” by his first name.

He'd have to get over that.

"He asked that I give you this," Bobby said, handing her an envelope.

"What is it?" she asked curiously.

"I did not look; it is not my place," he huffed, as if Sookie had made an accusation against him.

Sookie rolled her eyes and opened the envelope. Inside were a folded piece of paper and a check for ten thousand dollars! She gasped and dropped both items.

Bobby stooped immediately to retrieve them. Unfortunately, he happened to see the check and the memo line, on which was written: "consultation work: Dallas."

The day-man's mind immediately – and grotesquely – went to the gutter. He eyed Sookie's breasts as he rose to his feet and concluded that they were just the kinds of things that Mr. Northman wouldn't mind "consulting" with.

Indeed, Bobby wouldn't mind such "consultation" either – though he figured he'd need a long, sanitizing shower afterwards. Of course, his preference would be that Eric would be involved. A myriad of images involving her, Eric, and himself jetted through Bobby's mind, even as the bile rose in Sookie's throat.

The telepath didn't know what she was more disgusted with: the nature of Bobby's thoughts about her or the level to which he seemed to worship Eric. Either way, Eric *would* be hearing about the situation. Number one – she simply wasn't willing to accept dealing with someone like Bobby. Not anymore. Number two – she didn't think it was safe for Eric to have someone obsessed with him in a trusted position.

But, of course, her disgust over Bobby's thoughts was nothing compared to her shock at seeing all the zeroes on the check. "Hold that," Sookie said about that check as she grabbed the note from Bobby and opened it, making sure that the day-man couldn't see what was written.

Sookie,

First, I wish for you to know that I found myself missing you as soon as I left your home. I look forward to our date on Sunday.

Now for business: I want to immediately right a wrong that was done to you. Your work in Dallas went above and beyond anything that I expected of you when I hired you. In just a few days/nights, you did the following: 1.) You found a listening device that could have interfered with a sheriff's interests. 2.) That same listening device could have harmed ALL vampire-kind had it "heard" the wrong things. 3.) You rooted out a spy that might have continued to operate within Stan's nest. 4.) You saved Farrell from certain death—placing yourself at great risk to do so. 5.) You stopped Steve Newlin from carrying out his sick, distorted version of a crucifixion. 6.) You saved an unknown number of lives—mine included—when you warned of the attack on Stan's nest. 7.) You helped me to avoid intense pain and, perhaps, short-term silver poisoning when you removed the bullet from my body. 8.) You impressed the hell out of me.

Okay—perhaps you might not feel as if the last item qualifies as an accomplishment, but I assure you that it is no small thing.

I anticipate that you will be aching to argue about receiving this payment since I've already paid it once—to Bill. But the money was never to be for Bill. It was for you. Indeed, if I had thought I could avoid the wrath of your pride—then or now—I would have included a bonus. But I know better than to push my luck on some things.

Sookie chuckled, even as she tried to avoid the thoughts of an impatient, still-dirty-minded Bobby.

Also, you need not worry about any financial burden I will bear in paying you; indeed, I intend to recover the original fee—now that I know it was misallocated.

Oh—and remember how I said that I knew better than to push my luck on some things?

On others, I may not know as well.

—I

P.S.: Bobby has another envelope for you.

Sookie looked up at Eric's unpleasant minion, who was—indeed—holding a second envelop, this one larger. With it, he gave her the check back and then indicated that he needed to “take his leave.”

The telepath was just glad that he didn't bother to lie that it had been “nice to meet her” before he all but ran to his vehicle.

She frowned at the check again as she walked into her home – a home that badly needed a new roof. A home with a stove with only two working burners – and one of those only half-worked. A home that needed its property taxes paid by February. Eric had been right in his letter. A big part of her wanted to rip up the check – not because she was angry at Eric, but because she didn't feel that it was right for him to pay twice.

However, was it her fault that he needed to do that? No.

It was Bill's fault

"Bill was a shitty boyfriend," she muttered. "Even *before* he tried to rape me and drain me," she added bitterly.

If there was one truth that Sookie was really coming to understand, it was that one. Indeed, part of her soul-searching – her journey to get "closure," as Oprah might say – was to figure out *why* she'd let herself become so meek with Bill.

So that she could avoid making the same mistakes again.

"I'd been afraid to do *anything* that would have made him leave me," she sighed to herself. "I lost a part of *me* when it came to Bill, and I can't blame all that on him or the blood."

She poured what was left in the coffee pot into her cup and sat down at the kitchen table. As she sipped the strong brew, she determined that she needed to let herself off the hook in one important way; it was, after all, natural to lose oneself – at least somewhat – in a first "real" relationship. Indeed, her telepathy had shown her that phenomenon many, many times. The truth was that most people did one of two things the first time they were "off the market." Either they became "actors,"

presenting to their partners what they hoped might be an “ideal version” of themselves so that they wouldn’t be rejected, or they truly altered themselves for their partners. For example, Tara had always despised baseball, but when – as a sophomore in high school – she’d begun dating a senior named Craig, who loved the sport, she’d suddenly “loved” it too, even spending hours hanging out with him when their main activity had been perusing his baseball card collection together. Hell! Tara had beamed when he bought her an Atlanta Braves jersey for her birthday!

Though she was ashamed to admit it now, Sookie had judged – at least to a certain extent – the people who lost themselves in that way, especially when they continued to do it well into adulthood – like Arlene did with the steady stream of men in her life. Sookie viewed her chameleon-like behavior as a character weakness.

Of course, at the same time, she had unconsciously envied the people who were given a chance to behave like or even *become* a “different” person for “love.” After all, she forced herself to behave like a “normal person” every day, yet she had never attracted a man who would have been willing to do much of anything for her.

The closest she’d gotten before Bill walked into Merlotte’s were J.B. du Rone and Sam. But – to be honest – J.B. was simple and spent a lot of his time with her fantasizing about her breasts and thinking about the *single* football play the coach had been hounding him to “really learn.” J.B. had been trying *and failing* to learn the simple play – for weeks!

And as for Sam? Well – Sookie had been both flattered and apprehensive about his initial interest; in truth, in the beginning, she *would* have been receptive to it.

But—for years—Sam didn't act on that interest. And—like anyone who wanted to feel a *little* less rejected—Sookie had eventually told herself that she was “glad” he didn't “make a move” because Sam was a good boss, and she didn't want to jeopardize the best job she'd ever managed to keep. Given the nature of Sam's thoughts—swirling, reddish, and often difficult to distinguish—she even began to doubt whether he'd ever actually been interested in her at all. Or—on her more confident days—she would tell herself that Sam must have an unspoken (and “unthought”) policy not to date any of his waitresses. Of course, after Bill showed up, Sookie knew that wasn't true.

The telepath frowned as she thought about how Sam had *finally* verbalized his interest only after she'd shown an interest in Bill. No—after Bill had shown an interest in *her*! Sadly, even when she and Sam had “enjoyed” their single date (if it could be called that), a lot of the shifter's energy had been spent telling her why she shouldn't have anything to do with vampires, rather than focusing on why she should have more to do with him.

Or telling her what he really was—a being who could shift into animals.

Was Sam more interested in keeping her away from others—specifically, from a vampire—or in having her for himself? As Sookie got up to rinse out her cup, she realized that it was likely the first of the two, and that just made her even more frustrated with her soon-to-be ex-boss.

Of course, she was frustrated with herself too. She had allowed Sam to belittle her choices, just as surely as she had allowed herself to become altered by Bill.

For Bill.

Because she'd wanted to keep him.

Bill had seemed to be a "white knight" – though with shark-like teeth. He'd shown an interest in her from the start. He'd pursued her openly. She'd been intrigued and then enamored. And – after Gran had died – she'd been alone and vulnerable.

Perfect prey for a shark.

Was it any wonder she'd ignored all the bad things that had occurred during her and Bill's early interactions? Was it any wonder that she'd forgiven him after each glitch in their "relationship," even when he'd prioritized revenge over her safety in Stan's nest?

Though it was difficult to do, Sookie felt that she *needed* to give herself "a pass" for the way she'd behaved during her first relationship. Yes – she'd accepted things she shouldn't have. Yes – she'd changed herself to try to fit what Bill seemed to want. And – yes – she'd stayed with her "first love" longer than was healthy for her – both physically and mentally.

In other words, she'd been "normal!"

"Maybe 'normal's not always a good thing after all," she chuckled to herself as she put her cup into the drainer.

Maybe the key to not losing *herself* again was to not settle for someone who would want for *her* to "get lost."

"If that makes any sense," she muttered to herself, shaking her head.

And what to do about Eric! Should she even be starting something – even if it was casual? Was it too soon? Too complicated?

“Too combustible?” she asked aloud, looking at the refrigerator where that word was displayed on her word-of-the-day calendar.

She smiled to herself. “Eric,” she whispered, turning her focus to the check still on the table. In that moment, she determined two things: 1.) that she was going to put that money into her bank account that very day – because she had earned it – and 2.) that she wasn’t going to put mental restrictions around the time-line of any relationship she had with the Viking. They’d take it as fast or as slow as seemed right *to them*.

Because they’d *both* earned that.

Unlike Bill, Eric didn’t want her to be anything other than herself. Sookie was certain of that.

In fact, he was encouraging her to embrace *all* the things that made her who she was – her telepathy being just one of those things. No – with Eric, she didn’t think she’d be in danger of losing herself. On the contrary, she was already looking forward to *finding* herself – whether or not a relationship worked out with the Viking.

The thing was that – now that she was open to the prospect of a relationship with Eric – she felt their chances of working out were pretty damned good! And that thought made her laugh to herself a little.

Because she felt truly happy – and hopeful – for the first time in a long time.

She was certainly attracted to Eric – for the obvious reasons! Hell – that man left a department-store’s-worth of melted panties in his wake wherever he went!

Sookie was interested in the Viking beyond his looks, however. She’d seen enough of Eric to know that he wasn’t just a pretty face – and body. He could be

playful, but he could also be contemplative. He could be flirtatious, but he could also be tender. He certainly looked down on people – fangbangers being one of the more obvious groups. But he wasn't shy about accepting good people into his life – Bobby notwithstanding. And – importantly – he treated her with respect – like he saw himself and her on equal footing.

And he “felt” something for her.

She couldn't deny that she “felt” quite a bit for him too – already – though those feelings had snuck up on her.

“They shouldn't have,” she sighed as she recalled the butterflies that had surged throughout her battered body when she'd seen him floating outside her hospital window following Rene's attack of her.

He'd stirred her even then.

Glancing at the clock, Sookie realized that she *really* did need to get her shower taken, but she could no longer resist the second envelope that Eric had sent to her. She ripped it open and read.

Sookie,

I believe I know you well enough to speculate that you have decided (or will soon decide) to accept the payment you are due. That whether or not to accept it was something you needed (or still need) to contemplate at all says much about your character.

As I said in my previous letter, I knew that you would balk at receiving a “bonus” for Dallas, but I hope that you will not deny a gift from me. Is it not customary for a man to bring a token to a woman on a first date? Is it not customary, even, for people who are dating to exchange gifts for the Christmas holidays?

Sookie chuckled. “The odds of you celebrating Christmas are about the same as the odds of me keeping out of trouble.” She read on.

I could shower you with diamonds, but I know that kind of gift would not be acceptable to you. You would see such jewelry as impractical and excessive.

I could buy you a new car—to replace the box of metal you currently drive. However, that gift, too, would be too much in your eyes. You would see it as unnecessary since your own stills functions.

Of course, you likely believe that I should get you nothing.

But did we not agree that compromise was a good way to go last night?

Thus, I have decided upon a practical gift for you—somewhere between a car and nothing. It should be arriving when you next leave your home—waiting as a surprise for when you return.

After you receive your gift, I very much hope that you will call me to complain, for I would very much like an excuse to speak with you this upcoming night. Riling you seems a failsafe way ensure that—I think. And I am nothing if not an opportunist.

—L

Sookie couldn't help but to laugh at the note as she placed it on the table and grabbed the check to put it into her wallet.

"Somewhere between nothing and a car. That gives him a lot of room to maneuver," she said shaking her head at the highhanded vampire.

CHAPTER 04: Plantation Rock

So come on bend your knees

Twist with ease side to side

Like the swaying trees keep in rhythm

Now have some pep double step

Shake right there like a rockin' chair

– Songwriters: Bernie Baum, Bill Giant & Florence Kaye

Eric Northman touched down on the outskirts of Bon Temps about a quarter of a mile from where he really wanted to be: at Sookie Stackhouse's home where his blood told him the object of his desire – and his affection – was safe, sound, and happy. Despite his enhanced hearing, however, he couldn't make out any noises from her home until an especially loud laugh was heard. Eric couldn't help but to smile as well, even as his quick vampire mind reviewed his evening thus far.

He'd woken up at his normal time that evening – *not earlier*.

As usual, he'd reached out into his bonds to find that Appius and Karin still lived, but were too far away to feel emotions from; that Pam lived and was still resting for the day; and that Sookie was perfectly fine – *not afraid for her life*.

Needless to say, that evening's beginnings had been preferable to those of the night before.

After allowing himself a few quiet minutes to enjoy the peace with which he had awoken, Eric checked his messages to find that Bill Compton had arrived in Bon Temps about twenty minutes before dawn. True to form, the Civil War shithead had immediately attempted to contact Sookie. Of course, Thalia had put a stop to that and had informed Compton that if he tried to approach Sookie again – without the telepath’s permission – he would be hung up with silver.

By his balls.

Bill had stood down – for the moment.

Eric sort of hoped Compton would try to push Thalia, but figured that the younger vampire was too chicken shit to do so – at least not by himself. Still – Eric planned to have some additional words with Sookie’s would-be rapist and murderer.

And maker.

Eric growled. Clearly, Bill already needed a reminder of the boundaries Eric had set down for him the night before.

Satisfied that Sookie was safe and content in her home, Eric nodded toward Thalia as she approached him in the woods. She was not trying to sneak up on him, but Eric found himself wondering if she could. Indeed, he speculated that it might be great fun to test her stealth one evening. Of course, such a “hunt” often culminated in sex between the vampire participants, and – before Sookie came into his life – Eric would not have shied away from “testing” Thalia in that way too.

But now things were *very* different.

“What has you so deep in thought, Viking?” Thalia asked as she drew near.

“I am considering something,” he paused, “ – something singular.”

“Do tell,” Thalia demanded curiously. Of course, all of her requests tended to sound like commands. “Little is deserving of the label, *singular*.”

“Sookie is. The way I feel about her is. What I wish to pursue with her is,” Eric responded honestly.

Thalia shrugged. “*She* is unusual – to be sure. A hybrid of some kind?”

Eric indicated his concurrence by nodding.

“Fairy? Britlingen?”

“I had not considered the latter,” Eric indicated. “I’ve never tasted one.”

Thalia grinned almost evilly. “Tremendous stamina as lovers. Enticingly rich in flavor.”

“Sweet?” Eric asked, taking a moment to wonder if he’d been wrong in his hypothesis that Sookie was Fae. In many ways, it would be better – much better – if she were a Britlingen, for their politics were uncomplicated. They were not known to breed often with humans, but a hybrid child was not completely unheard of. Indeed, Dr. Ludwig had a part-Britlingen apprentice, who went by the name of Aphra Smith (though Smith certainly wasn’t her real surname); Aphra specialized in mental medicine. The Viking couldn’t help but to wonder if it might be a good idea to ask Sookie if she wanted the part-Britlingen’s phone number.

“Savory, not really sweet,” Thalia answered his question, her eyes flashing with lust in a way that didn’t entice the Viking at all, although it could not be denied that the vampiress in front of him was beautiful in her way. In that moment, Eric realized that

he'd been on his way to monogamy – at least, in his thoughts – well before Sookie had asked for the same of his body.

Eric shrugged. "Sookie's blood is sweet in a way that I believe is Fae."

"You tell me this freely?" Thalia asked with surprise.

The Viking nodded. "As you already indicated, you can sense a difference about her too, and I know that your senses are well-honed. To guard her well, you must know the things that make her up – her biology *and* her character. Moreover, I trust you; if I did not, I would not have employed you to see to her safety. Most importantly, however, you have honor. You would not take blood from a creature I have claimed. Thus, there is no need for me to try to hide such things from you."

Thalia looked ambivalent to Eric's strong praise and trust, though the Viking knew that she took neither lightly. A sour temperament was simply the vampiress's "default setting." And she certainly felt no need to acknowledge the praise verbally; instead, she began her report.

"This evening – so far – Compton has stayed in his home as instructed," she stated with some disappointment. "This afternoon, Sookie went out with her brother to secure a Pagan ritual accompaniment. The siblings have had dinner and are now taking small trinkets from boxes that smell of dust."

"Pagan?" Eric asked.

"A dying tree," Thalia shrugged. "Humans, I believe, now associate the decorating of such a tree with a religion, but I do not care to keep up with their fads anymore."

Eric chuckled and shook his head. Leave it to Thalia to label Christianity as a “fad” – with the same tone that she might have commented on leg warmers in the 1980s.

“Was Sookie’s day security up to your standards?” Eric asked.

“The telepath is alive and there was apparently no danger to her today,” Thalia indicated matter-of-factly. “From Dawson’s report, it is clear that the team you hired will be sufficient for the foreseeable future. Onawa, the shifter, prefers a bear as her familiar, but she indicated that she can shift into a cougar or a wolf without the need of an image to contemplate. The bird of prey, Willow, seems competent enough. Maria-Star is quite strong – as you know. Indeed, I would suggest *she* be given leadership of the two-natured group – at least, when I am in the ground.”

Eric contemplated for a moment. He’d thought to put Mustapha in charge, but Thalia’s suggestion was a good one. “I will check with her godfather tonight to confirm that she is ready for such a responsibility. If she is, she’ll be given the reigns. If not, Mustapha will take charge from Tray tomorrow.”

Thalia nodded and finished her report. “Dawson has already agreed to take two to three shifts per week so that the other members can rotate in a schedule that will not be over-taxing for them. Mustapha and Warren were delayed, but will arrive tomorrow morning. In the meantime, Flood has committed a few extras to patrol the border of the property. It was seeing how Maria-Star organized and deployed them that gave me the feeling that she would be a good leader.”

“Her lead was followed?” Eric asked.

The vampiress nodded. “One Long Tooth male *tried* to challenge her, but got a broken nose for his trouble. Once she established dominance, he and the others have followed without question. In addition, she *improved* upon the patrol pattern that I had left with Dawson.”

“Improved upon *your* work?” the Viking asked, his eyebrow rising.

“My work was *perfect*—for the number of guards expected,” Thalia emphasized. “When two additional guards were offered by Colonel Flood, Maria-Star took the initiative to adapt the plan for more efficiency.”

“That is good,” Eric commented.

Thalia nodded in agreement. “I know Mustapha. There is nothing incompetent about him, but he—like Dawson—is a better soldier than general.”

Eric contemplated for a moment. “I have heard that Maria-Starr is a born leader, but she is young. Once I speak with Flood, we will discuss this again.”

Thalia nodded.

“In the meantime, ensure that no fewer than two guards are assigned to Sookie when she is home and three—two with her and one here—when she is not,” Eric ordered. “Also make sure that one of the guards traveling with her is always a woman so that public restrooms will not be an issue.”

Thalia nodded in agreement. “I will ensure the orders are understood.”

“Bubba will be making his way back here soon,” Eric commented. “He is already fond of Sookie and can keep an eye on her during times when you cannot.”

Thalia contemplated for a moment. "Bubba will do if there are no imminent threats; however, I'd prefer to pair him with a partner when I am not with Sookie at night."

"Do you have anyone in mind?" Eric asked, knowing that the fierce warrior in front of him would already have a suggestion.

"Padma has expressed an interest in staying in Area 5," she commented.

Eric nodded. "A good thought," he said of Indira's vampire "sister." Indira was a trusted subject of his, and Eric knew that Padma was only a decade or so "younger" than her "sister." Padma had asked for permission to visit Area 5 a few months before, and Eric would be pleased if she stayed indefinitely. She was stronger than her sister, despite her slightly younger age, and her vampire gift related to diplomacy; she would be a good complement to Thalia, given the elder's gruffness.

"Ask Padma, and – at *any* time – let me know if there is anything or anyone you require so that you can better perform your duty," he stated.

"Fine then. I *need* to kill Compton," she requested hopefully. "He annoys me."

Eric chuckled. "Me too. But that is *currently* not an option," he added darkly as he thought about finding Bill attacking Sookie in the trunk the night before. "And when it is, *I* will be the one to do it."

Seeing the rancor in his eyes, Thalia nodded, effectively deferring the potential future kill to her sheriff.

"Why not kill him now?" she asked.

“Two reasons. Sookie needs to understand the necessity of the act before I progress – if I am to keep her affection.”

“That is important to you?” Thalia asked.

“*Essential*,” Eric emphasized.

The vampiress nodded, despite her surprise at his zeal. “Your second reason?”

“Compton still has information that is required.”

“Surely, torture would be an effective – not to mention *enjoyable* – method of learning anything he had to tell,” Thalia commented, her eyes sparkling with anticipation.

Eric chuckled. “I agree; however, he’ll *really* have to have fucked up for Sookie to give me *carte blanche* to do my worst.”

“Pity,” Thalia said almost wistfully.

“Speaking of that waste of fucking space,” Eric said, looking toward Bill’s ramshackle home, “apparently, I need to set some firmer ground rules for Mr. Compton.”

“Have fun,” Thalia grinned fangily before disappearing into the woods.

Anxious to complete his interactions with the muck that was Bill Compton as quickly as possible, Eric sped to the younger vampire’s home. He didn’t bother to knock.

“Eric,” Bill greeted with a clear lack of respect for his elder.

“Watch your tone,” Eric warned.

Bill fumed like a child, but wisely kept his mouth shut.

“Good. It is best that you simply listen for a change. If you want to stay in my area, you will need to follow several rules for the foreseeable future.”

“It is the *queen’s* area!” Compton unwisely piped up. “*You serve her!* And do not forget that she appointed me to be Area 5 Investigator!”

For Bill’s insolence, Eric backhanded him into the closest wall, causing a Bill-shaped hole in the plaster.

He was beginning to enjoy causing such shapes.

He’d never had an inclination towards being an artist before, but there was something quite promising in the idea of using Compton as his “chisel.”

“I thought that you understood that I did not want to hear your annoying voice,” Eric sighed dramatically as Bill righted himself.

The younger vampire seemed tempted for a moment to charge at Eric, but stayed where he was.

“As I was saying,” Eric indicated in a bored tone, “you have rules to follow – some of which I made clear last night. But you have seemingly forgotten our conversation. Tell me – do I need to wait while you find a pen to write them down?” he asked sarcastically.

Bill glared, but said nothing.

The “artist” in Eric lamented.

“If you enjoy having fangs, you’ll adhere to the rules carefully from now on, Billy boy. Number one: you are not to try to speak to or otherwise contact Sookie in *any* way. Number two: you are not to step one toe onto her property – or any Stackhouse

property, for that matter. Number three: you are not to attempt to use Sookie's brother or any of her friends to make contact with her. Number four: you are to stay away from Merlotte's on any night when Sookie is working there."

"You cannot keep her from me! Sookie is mine!" Bill yelled, earning himself another blow from the "master sculptor" and losing a significant part of another wall in the process.

The Viking took a moment to admire his work. "Sookie has renounced your claim and accepted mine," he announced, taking pleasure in seeing the younger vampire's confused and angry – almost constipated-looking – expression. "That being said, she *does* wish to speak with you – but on *her* terms and on *her* timeline," he continued, ignoring the fact that Bill was actively growling at him. Indeed, Eric would welcome a reason to do more "art work" in Bill's ancestral home.

The mural he was working on seemed to be missing more Bill-shapes, after all.

"Sookie would *never* agree to be yours," Bill seethed.

"Yet another thing you are mistaken about," Eric said evenly.

"The queen will hear of this," the younger vampire muttered.

"Be sure to tell Sophie-Anne how you *personally* asked me to oversee Sookie's care when you went to Lorena," Eric reminded. "And – if you've conveniently forgotten that little tidbit – I'm sure that the recording of our conversation regarding Sookie would be a revelation to Sophie-Anne."

Bill's eyes widened. "You recorded that?"

Eric chuckled. "You have so much to learn about politics. Of course, unlike Nixon, I destroy any tapes that could incriminate me, but I keep *everything* that could damage an enemy – even one as ultimately ineffectual as you."

"Fuck you, Eric!" Bill snarled.

The Viking ignored the younger vampire's words. "So – to reiterate – since you never did get that pen – stay away from Sookie and anyone or anything that is important to her. Her preliminary plan is to speak with you on Friday night. Unless you hear otherwise, you will present yourself at her home exactly one hour after sundown. At that point, you will cooperate *fully* as Sookie gets what she has labeled 'closure.' And – just so that you are aware – Thalia and I will be nearby during your talk with Sookie. If I feel anything amiss from her – you *will* suffer for it. If you try to give her blood, any increased tie or bond made will die within moments because *you* will die within moments," he added coldly.

"Sookie is mine," Bill snarled, apparently willing to live his "un-death" quite dangerously.

"She belongs to whomever she wishes; that is now me," Eric announced assuredly – no doubt whatsoever in his voice. There had been a time when he would have questioned whether such a declaration would have been possible, but that time had passed. Though Sookie still harbored some positive feelings for Bill, those were fading more and more each day – each minute, in fact. And the Viking was confident that Bill would further ruin Sookie's previous affection for him when they spoke on Friday night. But – even if Sookie could somehow forgive Bill for what happened in the

trunk – there had already been enough nails in the coffin of their relationship to keep it closed. About that, Eric had no concerns. That Bill might say something or try to do something that hurt Sookie physically or emotionally was the *only* thing he feared regarding the younger vampire. But – given Sookie’s obvious need to confront Bill – Eric was realistic enough to know that sometimes pain was a necessary part of healing.

“She will choose me again. She will be mine again,” Bill opined.

“She will not,” Eric stated flatly.

“It might take time, but she *will*,” Bill insisted.

“After Friday night, I’d be surprised if she ever wanted to see you again, and I will be taking her wishes into account – very strongly.”

“You cannot harm me,” Bill said arrogantly. “The queen would”

“*Suspect* me of removing you from this world. Yes! She *certainly* would!” Eric chuckled. “However, I have acquired much experience masking my involvement in certain,” he paused, “deeds over the years. And I’m willing to go the extra mile in order to do things that I enjoy,” the Viking added threateningly. It was crystal clear to Bill that his elder would very much *enjoy* dragging him that extra mile.

Before Eric could say any more, his phone rang; it was the ringtone he’d programmed for Sookie.

The Viking smiled, but then looked at Bill warningly. “One sound from you, and you will learn how painful it is to regrow a tongue.”

“And a cock!” came Thalia’s yell from outside.

Eric chuckled as he went to answer the phone. “It figured she’d be listening,” he mumbled with amusement.

“Sookie,” he greeted, even as Bill looked ready to burst. “What are you so amused about?” he asked, feeling her pleasure flowing through the blood tie he shared with her. He was beginning to understand just how satisfying it was to feel her positive emotions as they floated through him like a leaf on water.

“Jason and I were just putting up a Christmas tree. It’s been fun – going through the old ornaments. Sharin’ stories,” she responded.

“And yet you just felt sad,” Eric commented, his own lips curling downward into a frown.

“It’s just that this is our first Christmas without Gran,” she said in a hushed voice. “She would have liked this – Jason and me getting along and decorating the house together. We’ve had a patchy relationship for a while, but today things seem better between us – like we can actually stay close even though Gran’s gone.”

“That is good, Sookie,” Eric said sincerely. Unlike others – namely Bill – Eric hoped that Sookie would maintain robust relationships with those whom she cared about – as long as those individuals were good to her in return.

“Yeah – but it’s hard too,” she commented.

Eric was glad that Bill was overhearing their intimate conversation and hoped that the younger vampire was beginning to understand the level to which Sookie’s affections and trust had shifted; however, if Sookie opened up any more, Eric

determined that he would leave. Bill didn't need to know one more detail about Sookie's private life than he already did.

"Perhaps you will want to speak more about this on Sunday?" Eric asked.

"Oh – are you busy now? Too busy to talk?" Sookie asked with clear disappointment in her tone.

"I am not too busy, and rarely will I be too busy to make time for you. But I *am* nearby right now," he responded significantly.

There was a pause as she interpreted what he'd said. "You're with Bill," she stated, even as her emotions changed to a swirl of feelings, none of them very positive.

"Yes. I am making sure that he understands that you want to be left alone for the next few nights and informing him of your request that he come to see you on Friday night."

Sookie took a loud breath. "Okay. Thanks. Any problems?" she asked.

"Nothing of consequence," Eric responded, looking pointedly at Bill. "He has been made aware of your wishes. Thalia has been given leave to make sure he adheres to those wishes if he does not have the discipline to do so himself."

"Maybe that shouldn't make me feel better, but it does," Sookie sighed.

"It is understandable that it does," Eric responded, even as Bill looked like he might be trying to bite through an invisible gag. Indeed, a drop of blood escaped his mouth, indicating that he had – quite literally – needed to bite his tongue to keep from wagging it.

"Yeah. Thank you, Eric," she said in a soft voice.

“You’re welcome. I am sorry that my gift wouldn’t fit under your Christmas tree,” he smirked, shifting the subject a bit.

“Oh – right! That’s why I’m callin’, mister!” she chastised loudly. It was clear that she was *trying* to sound annoyed. It was even clearer that she was failing at it. “A driveway, Eric!” she demanded. “You got me a driveway! Really!”

“It’s just gravel,” he offered.

“Just?” she gasped. “You think I should be glad you didn’t do a gold-plated driveway or somethin’?”

“You would have preferred that?” Eric asked with a smile.

“No! Don’t go gettin’ any fresh ideas! God knows you have enough of those in your head already!” she said with a little snort in order to hide her laugh.

“What? Are you upset that I did not wait for the 25th to give you the gift? I must admit that I’m not completely aware of all the protocols of the holiday. But now that I know there is a tree, I will rectify that by getting you a present for *under* it – one that you cannot have until Christmas Day.”

“Wait! No! I’m not upset about the fact that it’s early!” Sookie insisted.

“You do not like the type of gravel I chose?”

“It’s not that either. The gravel’s really – uh – pretty, if gravel can be described that way.”

“The workers bothered you?” he asked.

“No – they were here and gone while Jason and I picked out the tree and went to the bank and grocery store.” She exhaled. “Thanks for the check – by the way. You were right. I almost didn’t accept it, but then I remembered that I *had* earned it.”

“That you did; you went above and beyond in Dallas,” the Viking said, glaring at Bill, whose eyes had widened as he realized that Sookie had discovered that he’d withheld her original pay from her.

Sookie was silent for a moment. “Thank you, Eric – really. For everything – even the driveway. You know that you don’t need to buy me gifts though. I – uh – feel weird accepting them. I’m not one used to bein’ spoiled.”

“I know,” Eric said, turning his back on Bill and smiling softly. “I’m not one used to spoiling.”

“Pam?” Sookie asked with challenge in her tone.

“As if my spoiling of her were a *choice* on my part?” He chuckled. “Anyway, we’ll learn to compromise in that regard too.”

“The spoiling regard?” she asked with a little giggle.

“Yes.”

“And what will that look like?”

“Me learning just how much I can spoil you before you want to stake me,” he grinned widely.

He heard a little displacement of air and could imagine Sookie shaking her head at him. “Better not play too close to the fire, Mr. Northman,” she said flirtatiously.

He chuckled again. “Good advice for a vampire.”

Again, she was silent for a moment or two. “So – uh – I guess I’ll say goodbye for tonight.”

“Goodbye, Sookie,” he said earnestly, even as he resisted the urge to suggest that he come over for a quick visit – or a long kiss goodnight. He held his tongue, however, as he wanted to respect Sookie’s desire to have the privacy to contemplate her situation on her own. Plus, Sookie knew that he would be there immediately if she asked him to be.

But, despite the fact that Eric could feel longing from her in the blood tie, Sookie did not ask. “Goodnight,” she said, before ending the call.

Eric put the phone back into his pocket and slowly turned around.

“You did well, Bill,” Eric said to the younger vampire. “Not a peep! Honestly, I didn’t think you had it in you.”

“You are manipulating her – playing upon the things she’s gone through,” Bill seethed.

The Civil War veteran had very little grasp of space or time for the next minute as Eric flung him around, making the entirety of the old house his “canvas.”

They ended up in a bathroom – Bill’s face pressed up against a mirror.

“Open your fucking eyes!” Eric ordered.

Shaking with fear, Bill complied; he couldn’t help but to stare into his own eyes. “*That* asshole is the manipulator. You, Bill! You! And – as I learn the full extent of your misdeeds – you can be assured that Sookie will learn of them too.”

“You’ll hurt her,” Bill squeaked out.

“Never like you have, Bill,” Eric growled with barely controlled rage. “No one will hurt her like that again,” he added, pressing Bill against the mirror until it cracked, pieces lodging into Bill’s flesh.

“Pity it’s not silver,” Eric seethed before thrusting Bill’s head against the porcelain toilet and then into the bowl. “You need to consider your health, Bill. If you continue to try to claim Sookie – to insert yourself into her life in any way – you will learn the true meaning of regret.” The Viking pulled Bill’s face out of the bowl and slammed him against the toilet again, this time shattering the stool.

So as not to get his feet wet, Eric hovered and then dropped Bill, who took several moments floundering to his feet.

“You cannot threaten me,” the younger vampire said, despite the evidence to the contrary that was shattered around him – not to mention the glass and flaked porcelain which were lodged in his face.

A mosaic of masonry, glass, and blood.

“It’s not a threat,” Eric returned evenly – coldly. “It is a warning. And – now that Sookie has agreed to be mine officially, you can consider it to be your *only* warning. For now, you live because she wishes it. However, she has also freed me to do what is necessary if you do not respect her wishes.”

Still hovering about an inch off the ground, the Viking bent down to look Bill in the eyes. “I *really* hope you misbehave so that I can as well,” he said with a wink before leaving the whimpering, weak vampire behind.

CHAPTER 05: SENTIMENTAL ME

Dreaming while I live

Living just to give

All my love to you

No one else will do

Sentimental me

– Songwriters: James Cassin & James Morehead

Thalia was leaned against a porch column when Eric exited the once-proud Southern mansion.

“Eavesdropping, Thalia? Really?” Eric asked.

She answered in Greek. “Θα έπρεπε να ξέρω τι έχω να κάνω με τον Bill Compton [I needed to know what I am dealing with where Bill Compton is concerned].” She scoffed.

“Είναι εξίσου παραπλανημένος για τη θέση του στην ιεραρχία μαζί σας όπως ήταν μαζί μου [He is just as deluded about his place in the pecking order with you as he was with me].”

“Ανησυχώ περισσότερο για το πώς βλέπει τη θέση του με τον Sookie [I am more concerned about how he views his place with Sookie],” Eric observed – also in Greek – as he and Thalia walked toward the woods.

“He is clearly a coward,” the vampiress continued in English since they were far enough away from the house that Bill couldn’t hear them anymore. “But a delusional and foolhardy one.”

“The worst kind,” Eric supplemented. “And – because of that – I want him in silver and in pain if he breaks any of the simple rules I’ve instructed him to follow,” he commanded, his tone deadly.

“Is he right? Would punishing him cause you problems with the queen?” Thalia asked.

“If problems arise, I will deal with them. I will not take any chances where Sookie’s well-being is concerned,” Eric responded. “Not any longer. Bill has been warned. He has been given his chance to leave Sookie in peace. I believe that she will cut all ties with him on Friday night. If he pursues her before or after their meeting, he will be proving that he is too much of a loose cannon to allow to survive, and even Sookie *will* understand,” he added firmly – as if he were willing that position into existence for the telepath.

“Yes. I believe her capable of perceiving that only a truly desperate and dangerous fool would defy you,” Thalia commented.

“Or attempt to make unauthorized contact with someone *you* are charged to protect,” Eric added with a smirk.

Thalia nodded in agreement. “Compton would have to be insane to do *that* – completely delusional.”

“Yes – which is why he would need to be restrained – *with great prejudice* – if he did. Until I could kill him.”

With those words, Eric took off in flight. He circled Sookie’s home and then her land to make sure all was secure.

As the telepath put the “ancient-looking” Stackhouse family star on top of the Christmas tree, she could feel a particular “ancient” mind entering her range.

“What’s up, Sook?” Jason asked.

“Huh?” she asked, climbing down from the stepladder she’d used to give herself the necessary height to put the last touch on the tree.

“You smiled – just then,” Jason shrugged. “Uh – not that you don’t smile a lot, but – uh – well, it’s hard to explain, but I just ain’t ever seen you smile that smile before. It was all peaceful-like.” He shrugged again and handed her her mug of hot chocolate.

“Oh!” Sookie smiled again, even as she glanced toward the window in the direction where Eric’s mind lingered.

From its position, the vampire seemed to hovering within sight of the house, but she couldn’t see him.

She realized that she would have – in the past – felt that his action was intrusive as if he were checking *up* on her. But – now that she knew him better, she felt checked *on*.

He was making sure that she was safe.

And she knew that he wouldn’t come closer unless she asked.

She turned back to Jason. "It's Eric."

Over dinner, she'd given Jason a short version of what had happened in Jackson, including her reasoning for breaking up with Bill. Although she'd not told him how bad things were in the trunk – and how close Bill had come to raping and draining her – she'd made clear that he'd hurt her physically. She'd also made clear to Jason that the emotional pain Bill had caused her had *already* convinced her that breaking up with him was the right thing for her to do.

And then she'd told her brother about Eric – not everything, of course, but the things she felt like he needed to know. For instance, she'd told him that Eric was keeping her safe and encouraging her to consider life goals beyond Merlotte's. She'd also told Jason that she had decided to date Eric.

"Oh!" Jason said with realization. "You need me to skedaddle so that y'all can visit?"

Sookie shook her head. "No. He's already gone," she indicated, realizing that the disappearance of him from her range made her feel a little sad – and a little less safe, despite the fact that she knew that Thalia and several two-natured beings were close by. "He just came close enough to make sure I was safe," she added.

"Oh!" Jason cried – with some realization in his tone. "You – uh – told me that y'all weren't serious. But you *also* said he was gonna give you guards on account of your – uh – head thing and all." He frowned in confusion. "Seems to me like *he's* serious – is all – especially if he's checkin' on you without expectin' anythin' in return."

Sookie nodded and sat down on the couch. “I know that Eric’s very serious about wanting to make sure that I’m safe. There’s – uh – some reason to think that other vampires – more powerful ones – want to – uh – sort of use me as their full-time telepath. Without my really havin’ much choice in it,” she added.

Jason’s frown deepened. “Yeah – when you said you was gettin’ guards, I figured somethin’ like that might ‘a happened. And it’s not like you ain’t been hurt lately, Sook. That Rene thing,” he shook his head, “well – especially after Gran – I was worried when you got hurt so bad. And then you came back from Dallas with all those cuts and a hurt foot.” He shook his head. “I’ll admit that I blamed vampires for that all happenin’ to you. But I’ve been thinkin’ about it more.”

“And what do you think now?” Sookie asked, leaning forward.

“I think Rene and them Fellowship nuts were – uh – well nuts,” he said somberly. “*Human* nuts. Well – uh – not that there are *other* kinds of nuts, ‘cept there are a lot of kinds of nuts,” he frowned.

Before Jason could inadvertently begin quoting *Best in Show*, which Sookie had recently rented because of all the dogs on the video cover – and at which she’d laughed hard enough to almost wet herself – she stopped him.

“Yes, Jason. There are a lot of bad, crazy people in the world,” she agreed.

“I worry though ‘cause bein’ around vamps *has* made you a target of the – uh – crazies. But,” he frowned, “if it weren’t you, Rene would’ve targeted another person’s sister and Gran.” He looked down and sniffled before quickly swiping at his eye. “And

I reckon that Gran'd have my hide if I hated on vamps just 'cause they were vamps. And then there was *that*," he added, gesturing toward Sookie.

"Huh? *That*?" Sookie asked, unable to even begin to decipher his movement's meaning.

"The way you smiled just then. You deserve whatever it is that did that for you, Sook. With Gran gone and – uh – me bein' – uh – well *me*, you need good things in your life – things that make you smile like that."

It was Sookie's turn to brush away a tear. "Jase, you're a good thing," she insisted, reaching out to give him a hug.

"Thanks," he said sincerely once they'd broken off the hug. "But you still deserve those smiles – and lots of 'em," he added.

Sookie smiled at him. "Thank you, Jase," she said, feeling the gratefulness in her heart well up and then spill over as she looked at her brother, then her "real" Christmas tree, and finally at the chair where Gran always sat. For the first time in a long time, seeing that piece of furniture didn't eclipse her happiness.

It made it stronger.

It had taken Eric a lot of willpower to pull himself away from Sookie's home. Although they didn't have a full bond, the vampire could now feel his blood within her – as well as her emotions – with an intensity that was surprising to him. He had no doubt that the acuteness of the feeling had something to do with her fairy blood. The

bonding between creatures of magic was always more intense than the bonding of a vampire with a human.

Though Eric had not experienced bonds other than those he had with his children and his maker, he knew from others and from his studies what to expect from one.

He found himself wondering what it would be like to have a permanent bond with Sookie.

Her emotions would always be a part of him.

Her location would always be known to him.

His blood would forever change her – stir the human blood inside of her to exhibit just enough magic to be able to sense him too.

He couldn't help but to wonder if a bond might also strengthen – in a permanent way – the magic that was *already* an aspect of her being.

Of course, her blood would forever change the chemistry of his own, too, adding its mark upon him. He'd read the accounts of vampires who'd bonded – at least those who'd been willing to be interviewed by the few vampires who had taken it upon themselves to become historians of their kind.

Not surprisingly, even those vampires who had allowed their stories to be recorded had not all been forthcoming with their real names or other details that might identify them. What they agreed upon unanimously was that they *changed* through bonding with another. Usually, they described those changes as being for the better, though there were drawbacks for some. For instance, several had reported “feeling

more human” after their bonding—in that they’d been less able to squelch their emotions.

Eric scoffed but then smirked. Sookie had *already* proven to be a landmine of emotions for him. However, the last 48 hours had taught him that trying to suppress those emotions was what would give him the most intense pain.

Other reports that the vampire had read indicated that having “more human” qualities had been extremely beneficial for the vampires who bonded. They indicated that they had felt more drive and “urgency” about life—as a human might because of their short lifespan.

Even others indicated that they began to feel more compassion for other “species” beyond vampires—a “side effect” that was met with mixed feelings among the vampires who had bonded.

Indeed, before Sookie, Eric had read the stories of bonded vampires as cautionary tales—negative examples that were *not* to be followed. But now he could not help but to believe that the pros of bonding with Sookie would outweigh any cons. However, the choice would be hers. He’d already committed himself to that idea. Touching down in the parking lot of Fangtasia after hovering in the air to assess for any potential threats, Eric took out his phone. By the time his call was answered, he was in his office, which was both soundproof and swept for listening devices each night.

“Yes,” answered Franklin Mott.

“This is Eric Northman.”

“Oh,” the vampire said with some surprise. “I had not thought that I had run up my marker in your casino enough to receive a personal call,” he said, unconcerned.

“You have not,” Eric returned. “However, I will forgive what debt you do owe in exchange for a service.”

The line was silent for a moment. “What service could you possibly need of me, Mr. Northman?”

“Your current companion?”

“Oh—you want her?” Franklin asked, his tone clearly indicating that he would have no trouble passing her on to him.

“No,” Eric responded. “But I *do* want to ensure that she leaves her association with you as a free human—*not* belonging to another.”

“Mr. Northman, though I have not adopted all of the tenants of mainstreaming,” he relayed with some derision, “I am not in the practice of causing problems. Even when I give my humans to my friends, I am thoughtful in the trade.”

Eric decided not to mention that he’d heard that Franklin’s “thoughtfulness” extended mostly to his own personal benefit rather than to his human pets’ welfare.

“Be that as it may,” Eric responded, “I have an interest in Miss Thornton and will—in exchange for the balance you owe to my casino—require that you ‘break up with her,’ as the humans call it. Moreover, you will ensure that the break up is amicable enough so that she is not averse to vampires.”

“And would this break up need to occur immediately?” he asked.

“The sooner the better,” Eric responded.

“And my entire marker will be torn up?” Franklin asked.

“That is what I said,” the Viking returned slightly impatiently.

“And if I still have an interest in keeping Miss Thornton?” he tested.

“Your outcome would surely be determined by hers,” Eric responded with a hint of threat in his tone.

The line was silent for a moment. “I was beginning to tire of Tara anyway and had begun contemplating Mickey’s interest in her.”

“Mickey is a cruel bastard,” Eric said with derision.

“I had made no firm decisions,” Franklin returned. “And I thought that he’d settled down in recent years.”

“He’s become better at hiding his messes,” Eric informed.

“Oh. Well – that matters not. Being out of debt with you will ease my other burdens. I will sever the relationship with Tara tonight. Do you want me to remove her memory of me? Or to make sure she feels no emotional distress whatsoever?”

Eric considered for a moment as he wondered what Sookie would prefer in this situation. Ultimately, he determined that she would not want her friend’s memory altered unnecessarily. “No. Just make sure that the break up is as easy as possible so that she does not harbor resentment toward our kind. And, Mott, do not let me hear of your giving Mickey *any* human,” he added with warning.

“Now that I know he is still the same as before, I will not. And I will disentangle myself from Tara before morning,” Franklin said even as Eric hung up the call.

The Viking dialed another number moments later.

“Flood,” came the rough tone of the Long Tooth packmaster. The tone differed from Franklin Mott’s smooth tone about as much as two voices could.

“It is Northman,” Eric greeted.

“Ah. I figured you might check in with me at some point – since your subject has been arranging last-minute guards for a human in Bon Temps. Rumor has it that the human is *yours*.”

“Sookie Stackhouse *is* mine,” Eric responded. “Tell me – are you free to speak openly?”

“Yes, sir,” the packmaster responded somewhat stiffly and formally – as he might address a superior in the military.

Eric knew Colonel Flood well enough to know that the Were respected him like a general – not just because of the vampire’s age, but also because of his acumen in battle. The respect between the two was mutual, though the pecking order was clear. To the colonel’s credit, he didn’t begrudge Eric’s dominance. And, to the vampire’s credit, he didn’t demean or belittle the Were.

“As I’m sure you are aware, your godchild was asked for *specifically* by Thalia for my human’s security detail,” Eric began.

“Yes. Maria-Star took the specific nature of the request as an honor,” Flood relayed.

“Your goddaughter has my esteem, Packmaster Flood. “And not just because of her relationship with you. I have heard that she would be a good leader for Long Tooth one day.”

The colonel let out a long sigh. "If I could choose my successor, she would be it – despite her age. But I do not think that the majority of Long Tooth is progressive enough to accept a woman in the role," he added somewhat angrily.

"I admit that this is the impression I have gotten from my contacts," Eric returned.

Flood chuckled. "You know, you could just ask *me* about such things."

"I know. But Pam very much enjoys being involved in the gossip gathering, and I'd hate to take that from her."

Flood laughed louder. "Is she still getting most of her information from Donna and Diane?"

"Yes," Eric confirmed. "The florists are quite chatty and, therefore, great helps in my child's quest to learn everyone's business."

"But they do not know all," the colonel reminded.

"That is the reason for my call. Thalia is heading the security detail for my human, but I will need a daytime leader as well. I had thought to have Mustapha Khan fill that role."

"I know of Khan. Damned shame he got kicked out of the marines before 'Don't Ask, Don't Tell' was taken off the books. He was a good soldier."

"Yes. And he has honed his skills when it comes to protection in the private sector. But it is his excellence as a *soldier* that has given Thalia pause. She worries that he is not *leader* enough and has suggested that Maria-Star be given the role."

“Shit,” Colonel Flood exhaled. “And you want to know from me if she is ready for such a task?”

“Yes,” Eric confirmed. “Before you say anything, however, I need for you to be aware that Sookie Stackhouse is more than just a human. More significantly, however, she is more important to me than,” he paused, “perhaps any other being.”

There was silence on the line for a moment. “What is she?”

“The working theory is that she is part fairy. Regardless of specifics, however, she has a skill that will be coveted. She is a telepath. Make no mistake – whomever is on her security detail may face danger and must be ready to die in Sookie’s stead,” the vampire said passionately.

“And the Were in charge will need to be the *first* in line to protect her – to set the example for the others,” Flood concluded.

“Yes. Sookie is too important – too important *to me* – to lose. Thus, I will not accept failure. I require the best to make sure that she is safe.”

Colonel Flood responded with no hesitation in his tone. “Then choose Maria-Star. She will not let you down.”

“You understand the danger?”

“Yes. And she will too,” the Were returned. “Like your human, Maria-Star is special – too special to waste away without the opportunity to have a voice in a pack that isn’t quite ready to dive into the future. I know that – in the role you will have her do – she will excel and be given the chance to prove herself. Hell! She might even

change a few minds so that – when I do finally have to choose a successor – the pack will be ready for her.”

“Alright then,” Eric responded. “Would you like to inform her?”

“Yes,” Colonel Flood said quickly. “I would. Thank you for that. After her parents died, she became more a child to me than a niece or godchild,” he added, his rough voice made even gruffer by emotion.

“I will inform Thalia,” the vampire said before hanging up the call. As much as he was willing to stretch his “emotional legs” for and with Sookie, he wasn’t ready to stay on the line with his ally if the Were was going to display his emotions for his godchild.

Indeed, Eric was grateful that his burgeoning feelings for Sookie hadn’t affected his discomfort with emotions in general. That would have been the last thing he needed, given the potential threats he and Sookie might soon be facing.

CHAPTER 06: Doin' the BEST I Can

You know I was the kind who'd run

Any time you'd call

I guess I was the only one

Who didn't mind at all

– Songwriters: Doc Pomus & Mort Shuman

TUESDAY, DECEMBER 14, 2004

Sookie woke up to the sound of chirping; however, that chirping was not from birds—or even the werehawk, who'd become one of Sookie's guards. No—the noise sounded artificial.

Sookie fully opened her “extra-sense” even as she opened her eyes, a new step that she'd decided to take each morning—for her own self-preservation and despite the guards that she knew were watching over her.

Her eyes landed on a new and *very* chirpy cellphone—one that she'd never seen before! It was the kind that flipped open. Arlene had been going on and on about them a couple of weeks before, commenting on the colors available. The one before Sookie's eyes was cobalt blue.

Meanwhile, her telepathy “landed on” Tray Dawson and Tara. Tray—as seemed to be his way—was thinking more in images than words, and Sookie could vividly see a

distraught-looking Tara sitting on the porch swing. Further beyond Tray, Sookie could “hear” Onawa, Willow, several Weres, and a human. She “listened” to the human for a moment to make sure that it was Warren, whom had been expected with Mustapha that morning; it was.

The telepath sprang out of bed and grabbed the still-chirping phone. “Hello?” she asked as a question.

“Sookie, you have a visitor,” came Tray’s deep voice.

“Tell Tara I’ll be right there,” Sookie sighed, knowing that Tray had already been informed about her ability.

“Oh—uh—sure,” the Were said as he realized that he’d not used Tara’s name, yet the telepath had known who was there from his thoughts. “That’s gonna take some gettin’ used to,” he added with a mutter as he hung up.

Sookie saw a note that had been left under the phone and quickly picked it up as she flipped the phone closed. She quickly identified Thalia’s handwriting.

Obey your guards today.

The phone is from Eric. He asked that I tell you that it is an aspect of your security and will allow you to communicate with your guards. Several numbers are programmed already. You may reach me by pressing #2.

Maria-Star, who will be heading your day-time security, is #3. Your other guards are also programmed, though I will leave it to you to learn their codes. Eric also asked that I make sure you know that he can be reached by pressing #1; he believes you will accept the phone without too much argument; however, he still hopes to receive a complaint call at sundown.

There was no greeting, nor was the note signed. Sookie rolled her eyes as she put down the message, muttering, “Figures that Thalia would manage to *hang-up* in a note!” She grabbed her robe as she considered the content in the note.

It was just like Eric to look for loopholes in order to give her a gift. “An aspect of my security,” she chuckled to herself with a shake of her head as she looked at her old phone plugged into its cord.

“Well – that thing *is* a piece of crap,” she allowed, putting her new phone into her robe’s pocket. She was already looking forward to calling Eric after her Merlotte’s shift that night in order to “complain.” However, she’d also already decided to thank him too.

But – in the meantime – she had a crying friend downstairs.

Her robe in place and her slippers on to combat the cold floor, Sookie quickly went to the front door. Tara was in her arms not a second after the telepath opened it.

“Oh, honey! What’s wrong?” Sookie asked with concern, even as she ushered Tara toward the kitchen table so that she could start them some coffee.

“It’s Franklin,” she hiccupped. “He broke up with me last night. Actually, early this morning,” she added with another sob.

“I’m so sorry,” Sookie said compassionately, even as she felt guilty that Franklin’s action might have been her doing. “I didn’t know you cared so much about him,” she added somewhat pitifully, wondering if it was too late to have Eric contact Franklin again to have him reconcile with Tara.

Her friend sniffled, and Sookie grabbed a box of Kleenex for her. "I don't even know why I'm so upset. It's not like I've known him that long. It's just that it was so nice dating someone who wasn't from here! He knew so much about the world and even about the fashion business. He helped me write a new business plan for the store and everything!" She wiped her eyes and then blew her nose in such an unladylike fashion that it made Sookie have to turn away to smile. She figured she'd start the coffee while she was at it.

"You want some coffee, sweetie?" she asked her friend.

"Okay," Tara agreed in a whimper. "I don't want to put all this on you, but—uh—you've dated a vampire. Are you still with Bill, by the way? That guy at the club the other night was smoking hot, you know. And there was that other one with the glasses who couldn't take his eyes off of you. He was really handsome too!"

"The one with the glasses?" Sookie asked, though she had a suspicion about whom Tara was referring to.

"Yeah. The real tall blond guy? He was hanging back from everyone. I thought you noticed him," she commented. "In fact, I *know* you did! I caught you looking at him a few times!"

"Was I?" Sookie asked. "I mean—yeah. I'm sure I was, but I didn't think I was that obvious about it."

Tara shrugged. "You were to someone who knows you. I mean—every time you looked over at him, you held your breath. I know you only do that when you're really attracted to someone. Remember Leo in *Titanic*?"

Sookie blushed and then giggled like the teen she'd been when Leonardo DiCaprio had taken her breath away. Tara was right, of course. Sookie had never been able to maintain a poker face when she was really drawn to someone.

That was what made it so ironic that she could hear a myriad of embarrassing or disturbing thoughts without giving herself away. But a man who captured her attention would capture her breath as well—in a way that was definitely noticeable to her best friend (if not others).

Sookie started the coffee maker and then took a seat at the table with Tara while the glorious dark liquid percolated. “Oh, yeah. Well—uh—that was Eric. He’s a—uh—friend actually,” she smiled to herself, but held off on telling Tara that she had a date coming up with him. She didn’t want to be insensitive, especially given that Tara’s relationship with a vampire had just ended.

“Is Eric a vampire?” she asked. “I can’t always tell, but—hanging out with Franklin . . .,” she paused for a moment to swipe at an errant tear, “I learned to tell better who’s a vampire and who’s a . . .” She stopped.

“A what, hon?” Sookie asked.

“Uh—Franklin told me that there are *other* things, too,” Tara practically whispered, leaning in to talk to Sookie as if there was someone in the house who could overhear them.

Immediately, Sookie poked into her friend’s head to hear that Franklin had told her about Werese!

“I know about werewolves too,” Sookie said honestly, though she intended to mention what Tara knew to Eric. The telepath didn’t think it was smart for vampires to tell “regular” humans about the two-natured. It wasn’t that she didn’t trust Tara; however, her friend had almost let slip the existence of Weres at her kitchen table not two minutes before!

For the first time, Sookie found herself feeling “protective” of the supernatural world – worrying about what others knew about it or how they could hurt it. Even a week before, she would have denied that she was even a part of it. The thought of “looking after it” now, however, made her feel happy – as if she’d stumbled upon a purpose she’d always longed for but was too afraid to acknowledge. She resolved that she’d use her gift to protect as many supernaturals as she could from the Steve Newlins of the world.

Tara interrupted Sookie’s thoughts. “I figured if anyone knew about things like – uh – werewolves, it’d be you. So – uh – do you know anything about Sam? Franklin taught me how to figure out if someone’s a werewolf, and I think he might be one!” she shared, still whisper-talking.

Sookie rose to get them both a cup of coffee. “You should ask him, Tara. Even if I knew anything, I wouldn’t want to say. Okay?”

Tara nodded again. “Thanks,” she said as she took the steaming mug. “I was gonna ask Sam, but it felt a little awkward. I mean – how do you raise that topic? ‘Hey, Sam! What’s up? I was wondering if you like howlin’ at the moon!’”

Sookie couldn't help but to giggle for a moment, but then turned serious. "You know – until they decide to come out like vampires – it would be best not to ask *anyone* about whether or not they're a werewolf. I mean – what if you're wrong and accidentally let the cat out of the bag?"

Tara considered for a moment as she took a sip of her coffee. She sighed. "You're probably right. Maybe you can ask Bill to glamour me to forget or something; I imagine Franklin shouldn't have told me about it."

"Probably not," Sookie agreed. "But – uh – I don't wanna talk to Bill about that – or *anything* right now. I'll ask Eric – okay?"

Tara shrugged. "Okay. So – where *do* you and Bill stand?"

Sookie frowned deeply. "We're over, Tara."

"Oh, Sook!" Tara said compassionately, reaching out to pat her friend's arm. "Are you okay?"

Sookie considered for a moment just how much she wanted to tell Tara about her situation. "You're here about *you*," she tried to deflect.

Tara scoffed at herself. "I really shouldn't be that upset about Franklin. If I'm bein' honest, I'm probably mostly surprised and my feelings are hurt – because he broke things off so suddenly." She sighed loudly. "I mean – I was having a great time with him and thought he felt the same!" She shook her head. "This is a new feeling for me."

"What is?" Sookie asked for clarification – needing to make sure that Tara hadn't been on her way to falling in love with Franklin when she interfered.

“Getting dumped when things are good,” Tara pouted. “I mean – when Franklin did the whole ‘we need to talk’ thing, I thought he was gonna suggest we get *more* serious! It’s not great for the ego or the confidence that I was wrong about that,” she admitted.

“So that’s why you’re upset? You don’t love him?” Sookie asked.

“No!” Tara answered quickly and vehemently. “I mean – he was fun! And the sex was – just wow! I mean – vampires!” she exclaimed.

“You ain’t kidding!” Sookie laughed. Bill had been her one and only lover, and she couldn’t deny that she’d enjoyed sex with him (at least most of the time) – though a couple of their encounters had pushed her comfort levels. And – of course – there was Eric. What he’d done to her body had been word-defying. And he’d used only his hands! She felt warmer and caught herself holding her breath as she thought about his kissing skills and talented fingers.

Tara gave her a knowing look – even though she had no idea that Sookie hadn’t been thinking of her first lover.

“Maybe vampires just get bored with humans quickly,” Tara commented before she took another sip of her beverage.

Immediately, Sookie’s countenance deflated.

“Shit! I’m sorry, Sook! I didn’t mean to suggest that’s what happened with you and Bill!” Tara apologized profusely.

“It’s okay,” Sookie sighed. “And – to be honest – I think Bill *did* get bored with me. Either that or he was never with me for the right reasons. It was exciting to be in a relationship with him at first, but he *did* lose interest in me as a person before the end.”

“So – uh – based on the way you’re talking about him in the past tense – um Is your relationship with him is *over over*?” Tara asked.

Sookie nodded. “Yeah – *so over*.” She hesitated for a moment. “Things happened. I was in Jackson to try to save him from his maker, who was holding him prisoner. Of course, before that, Bill had *voluntarily* gone back to her in order to pick up a sexual relationship they’d apparently had off and on throughout his vampire life.”

“So wait! They hooked up and *then* she locked him up!” Tara exclaimed. “That’s *fucked up!*”

“Yeah. It really is,” Sookie agreed.

“Why’d you go to Jackson to help him at all?” Tara asked with a confused frown.

Sookie shook her head. At herself? At the situation? She hardly knew which.

“You know – I don’t exactly know why anymore. The way Bill left town – um – I wasn’t sure if we were together anymore or not. I wasn’t even sure that he’d be coming back! And then Eric told me that Bill had passed my – uh – ‘ownership’ over to Eric!”

“Ownership?!?!” Tara half-exclaimed and half-huffed.

Sookie nodded. “Yeah. As f’ed up as it seems, on account of my telepathy, it’s safer for a vampire – of my choosin’ – to claim ‘ownership’ of me so that other vampires won’t think that they can. Some vampires would even hurt the people I love to make me – uh – accept their ownership.”

“Oh my God!” Tara exclaimed. “That’s crazy!”

“Yeah,” Sookie agreed. “And, if I was targeted by a bad vampire, tellin’ people like Sheriff Dearborn wouldn’t do any good. The vampire could just glamour human cops. Or he could get mad and do even more damage to those I love.”

“So Bill was sort of what? Protecting you when you were together, and – when he left – he got Eric to do it?” Tara asked for clarification.

“Yeah. Well – sort of,” Sookie responded with a shrug. “Saying that I was Bill’s human kept other vampires from trying to take me away and use my gift. Now – Eric’s making sure I’m protected with guards and stuff.”

“So – you’re *his* now? You officially belong to him?” Tara frowned.

“Officially – yeah. I am his,” Sookie confirmed. “At least, that’s what I’m gonna claim to any vampires or other Supes who ask.” She smiled to herself. “But the thing is that Eric” She paused for a moment and considered her words. “He cares about me. He’s brash and highhanded sometimes. And he can be arrogant! I definitely wouldn’t want to cross him! But there’s a side to him that’s chock-full of amazing things. He’s smart and as handsome as hell! I mean – you saw him!” Sookie said to her friend. “His picture is probably next to the word ‘handsome’ in the dictionary!”

Tara nodded in agreement.

“But there’s so much more to Eric. He can be sweet and caring,” she smiled, thinking about when the vampire had so carefully removed the glass from her wounds in Dallas. “And – uh – he wants”

“What does he want?” Tara asked after Sookie had paused for several minutes.

Sookie shook her head. "I don't want to be insensitive. I mean—you came over here to tell me about a break up, and I don't . . ." Once again, the telepath stopped midsentence.

"You don't want me to think you're somehow rubbing my break-up in my face by telling me you *like* Eric? That you guys are an item?"

"Something like that," Sookie blushed.

Tara smiled softly at her friend. "Listen—I know how much you were into Bill. What you felt for him was *a lot* more than what I felt for Franklin Mott." She got up to grab the coffee pot to refill their mugs. Her task done, she sat back down. "I'll get over Franklin—probably in just a few days if I'm being honest. Once I get over my hurt feelings, I'll miss the fun things we did and the good times we had doing those things, but," she chuckled at herself, "you know me, Sook. I'll bounce back. Right now, though, I'm worried about you. I mean—you were just with Bill a few weeks ago, and now you have moon eyes for Eric. Don't you think you're moving too fast, Sook?"

CHAPTER 07: WELCOME TO MY WORLD

Welcome to my world

Won't you come on in

Miracles, I guess

Still happen now and then

– Songwriters: Ray Winkler & John Hathcock

Sookie took a deep breath. “To tell you the truth, Tara, I’m worried about that same thing. Bill was sort of checking out emotionally for the last stretch of our time together, so I guess that I was sort of checking out emotionally too. And I’ve already dealt with the pain over his being unfaithful and leaving me behind without a word— not to mention that he lied or at least misled me about why he was leavin’ town in the first place! And there might be other things too— about why he was interested in me to start with.”

“What do you mean?” Tara asked, her brow knitting.

Sookie sighed. “Honestly, there are things I can’t tell you because it involves vampire politics, but I will tell you that Bill *might* have been sent here by his— uh— boss in order to evaluate my telepathy and pursue me romantically. His boss— uh— wanted access to my mind-readin’, and she figured I’d be more cooperative if I was in a relationship with her lackey.” She shook her head somewhat angrily. “I don’t know all

the details, but my instincts are tellin' me that she told Bill to do *anything* he could to get me to go to New Orleans with him—preferably as his willing companion. Without Eric's help, I might have never known it was all fake," she added, brushing away a tear.

"Oh, Sook! I'm so sorry!" Tara exclaimed. "That really sucks!"

Sookie chuckled. "Very punny, Tara."

The brunette gasped and put her hand over her mouth. "I didn't mean to make a joke, Sook! I swear!"

Sookie brushed off the apology. "It's okay, Tara. Really it is. And vampires *do* suck," she laughed lightly, "sometimes. Anyway, that's all I can tell you, and I *really* don't want any of this getting out."

"Say no more," Tara said, gesturing like she was zipping her mouth shut.

"Thanks," Sookie said.

"So—uh—you didn't finishing answering before," Tara said after taking a drink.

"What's up with you and Eric?"

Sookie smiled, but then looked at her friend as if asking for permission to proceed—and to be excited about her news.

"I *really* wanna hear; I promise!" Tara assured. "Anyway, it'll take my mind off things to hear about whatever it is that's puttin' that smile on your face.

Sookie smiled a little wider as she thought about her conversation with Jason the night before. He, too, had noticed her smile—her "Eric smile." Looking back, it was difficult for her to remember the last time she'd truly felt like smiling with Bill.

“Eric and I are gonna be dating. I’m gonna spend time with him – get to know him. And he’s agreed to do that – to go as slow as I need. Meanwhile, he’s gonna help me get a new business up and running.”

“A business!” Tara squealed excitedly. There was nothing she was prouder of than her own business, Tara’s Togs. “What kind ‘a business?”

“A sort of telepath for hire thing – for vampires and maybe even Weres who have to deal with humans. Eric thinks that – if I work for important vampires – they’ll have my back if – actually *when* – some stronger vampire tries to kidnap me.”

“Eric thinks that could happen?” Tara asked, clearly fearful for her friend.

“It might,” Sookie admitted with a sigh.

Tara took a deep breath. “And Eric’s on it? With the protection thing? I mean – I saw the hunk ‘a burnin’ guard you have outside. But – uh – if you and Eric don’t work out – with the datin’ thing – will the guards stay?”

“Yes,” Sookie responded with a reassuring smile. “He made sure I knew that last night.”

She shook her head. “Wow! It’s scary to think you need guards. Is there a particular person you’re bein’ guarded from right now?”

Sookie considered for a moment, again wondering how much to tell her friend. Again, she decided to be honest about what she said, but to withhold things that could put Tara (or others) in danger. “Someone – more than one person actually – tried to hurt me in the last week. Bill’s maker sent a werewolf to kidnap me. Then I got hurt by a Fellowship nut who was after a vampire. Then Bill’s maker tried to kill me. Then Bill

hurt me when he was” She stopped for a moment to compose herself. “When—uh—well, Alcide’s psycho ex-girlfriend locked me into a trunk where Bill was—uh—sleeping for the day. He’d been hurt by Lorena and woke up hungry. So—uh—yeah. He attacked me and would have likely raped and/or killed and/or turned me if Eric hadn’t come. Eric thinks that—at least—Alcide’s ex, Debbie Pelt, could come after me sooner rather than later, so he talked me into the guards for a year.” She frowned. “After that, we’ll reassess whether I still need the guards. I did argue against them at first, but Eric talked me into them—for at least the time being.”

Tara’s eyes had been widening throughout Sookie’s account. She opened her mouth as if to speak but was clearly having a difficult time knowing exactly what to say.

Sookie sighed. “It is all pretty f’ed up,” she owned.

“And you argued *against* having guards?” Tara asked incredulously, having found her voice again. “Excuse my French, but *that’s* the part that seems most fucked up to me, Sook.”

The telepath rolled her eyes, but nodded in agreement all the same. “You and Eric can form a club to complain about my stubbornness. And—for the record—I *did* give in—and not just because of Eric’s persuasiveness. Tara, when I was locked up in that trunk—waiting for Bill to wake up and *knowing* that he was gonna hurt me—I had a lot of time to think about what I wanted out of my life.”

“What do you want?” Tara asked curiously.

“To be happy. To be as free as I can be.” She shrugged. “And some things I don’t know yet,” Sookie admitted. “I mean—I envy you in a lot of ways.”

“How so?”

“Well—you have Tara’s Togs, and I know you love it! I know that you want to design clothes too, but your shop is real nice—something of your own that you can be proud of!”

Tara smiled. “I *am* proud of it. And—thanks to Franklin—taking some design classes is a part of my plan, but so is actually designing things of my own before then—one of a kind pieces—to sell in my place. He helped me figure out how to start my own label and everything!” She sighed. “You know, that’s one of the reasons I’m really gonna miss dating him. He was so good at making business things seem easy. And he was really encouraging; he actually said my sketches were good!” she added with pride.

The telepath felt a stab of guilt for being the one to take that encouraging voice away from her friend—that is, until she remembered what Eric had said about Franklin Mott’s “passing around” tendencies.

“Maybe Eric would have some ideas that could help you,” Sookie offered.

“Actually, Pam would be even better to ask!”

“Pam?” Tara asked. “Who’s that?”

“She’s the vampire that sort of co-runs Fangtasia with Eric,” the telepath responded, careful not to give away the fact that Pam was Eric’s child. “She’s a little scary at first, but—as long as she likes you—there’s nothing really to worry about. She

has a wicked sense of humor, so I bet you two'd get along. She has to wear black leathery things at Fangtasia, but I get the impression that she's something of a fashionista. And she's a knock-out too." Sookie chuckled. "I bet she'd – at the very least – be interested in one of your one-of-a-kind things, especially if you made it with her in mind. And vampires – a lot of them, at least – have been around long enough to have had a lot of businesses. At least, that's the impression I get." Sookie shrugged. "I'll introduce you to her – if you want. We could go to Fangtasia some night and maybe dance a little so the trip wouldn't be a waste of time even if she didn't wanna help you."

Tara smiled as the wheels in her mind were obviously spinning. "Thanks, Sook! I'd like that – even if it's just about us girls hanging out. You know – I miss this," she said, gesturing back and forth between them. "I miss bein' this close and seein' each other all the time." She laughed. "Gran used to say we were joined at the hip. And I really regret that we haven't hung out as much in the last few years."

"It's okay," Sookie said with a sad smile. "You know that Gran looked at you like family. She was so proud of you, and I'm proud of you too! You just got busy with your business." She shrugged. "And I could have done a better job hanging out with you, too."

Tara took Sookie's hand. "Let's prioritize each other more again – okay? I miss Gran so much, and wish I'd come to see her more often than I did. I don't want regrets about my best friend!"

"I don't either," Sookie agreed.

Tara frowned. "And I'm sorry I didn't think about you and work before. I always thought you were pretty happy at Merlotte's. I really couldn't have imagined that you'd – uh – envied me at all!"

Sookie shrugged. "I'm not unhappy at Merlotte's, but the truth is that my job there was all I could find with even a little bit of job security. And I had to work – not unlike everyone else," she chuckled ruefully. "Lots of people aren't that satisfied with their jobs – I suppose. And it really used to be fun to work there."

"Not anymore?" Tara asked, once again fetching the coffee pot and distributing refills.

Sookie sighed. "Sam's gotten a little weird."

"Weird how?" Tara asked.

"Well – I used to think he had a little thing for me. Remember?"

"Yeah. I remember dropping a pretty un-subtle hint in his direction once," Tara said a little guiltily. "I – uh – *might* have told him you were interested in him one night when I was a little tipsy and you weren't working."

"When?" Sookie asked.

"A couple of years ago?" Tara responded, her voice rising as if she were asking a question, as she tried to remember when she and Sam had had their short exchange about Sookie.

"Oh," Sookie frowned. "See – that's kind of the thing. He *never* made a move – even though he had to have known I would have been receptive at one point. Then Bill entered the picture and Sam got all territorial. We even went out once – sort of."

“Really?” Tara asked excitedly. “You never told me that! Spill!”

“There’s not much to tell. Like I said, it was after I’d met Bill – after I was already interested in Bill – which Sam knew about. But Bill and I’d had a little falling out,” she recalled. “Sam asked to go out after the Descendants of the Glorious Dead meeting – the one where Bill spoke. But nothing much happened with us – besides talking – and it was when we got home that I found Gran dead.”

Tara reached over to squeeze her friend’s hand in comfort.

Sookie squeezed back, a silent expression of gratitude. “Anyway, Bill and I became an official couple not long after that, but Sam never accepted my choice. In fact, it’s clear that Sam doesn’t like me with any vampire. And when I told him that I likely wasn’t gonna be workin’ for him for very much longer, he said some pretty hurtful things, insinuating that I was too dumb to look out for my own good. And – worse – he accused me of basically allowing myself to become a kept woman to Eric because he’s gonna help me get my new business thing up and running!”

“That’s all kinds of wrong on Sam’s part!” Tara exclaimed. “He – of all people – should know how hard you’ve worked to make sure you and Gran stayed afloat – without takin’ a hand-out from anyone, let alone bein’ someone’s bought-and-paid-for mistress! *And* I’m sure he knows just how fucked up that kind of comment comes across – especially in these parts where it’s been pounded into us that only the worst kinds of women are the ones rich men set up as their on-call booty calls!”

Sookie nodded. “Sam tried to apologize, but he pretty much finished making up my mind for me – when it came to whether I should quit or keep working at Merlotte’s.

In fact, my last day's December 27, two weeks exactly from yesterday – when I talked to Sam on the phone.”

“I probably would have just quit on the spot,” Tara shared. “But you know my temper. I still can't believe he'd treat you like that.”

“Well – by the time Sam said what he did, I'd already promised Arlene I'd cover for her tonight. And – even though he was cruel yesterday – Sam's been a good boss for the most part. Plus, I was wantin' to keep my job at Merlotte's until I knew the telepath-for-hire thing was gonna work. But now I realize that it'll be better if I just commit to the new job and cut ties with the past. *And* have faith that it'll work out.”

“Do you think workin' as a telepath will make you happy?” Tara asked, recalling what Sookie had said about what she wanted out of life.

“I'm not sure actually,” Sookie shared honestly. “Truth is – I never allowed myself much time to think about what I would want to do if I could have any job. But I really *do* like the idea of having a more comfortable life and not having to worry about whether or not I can afford toothpaste and tampons! And I like the idea of helping people. Eric seems to think I can set rules for the types of work I do. So I can help vampires stay safe from groups like the Fellowship of the Sun. Or I can help them know if a human's trying to cheat them in business. But I can choose not to work with them if they want to use me for things I'm not comfortable doin'. I have a deal with Eric that – if I find a human doin' something like cheatin' a vampire – he'll turn them into the human police. I can make that a part of any contract I make!” she added,

already feeling excited about the possibilities. “Best thing is that I wouldn’t have to hide what I am and what I can do – at least not from other Supes.”

“Other? *Other!* What are you?” Tara asked excitedly.

“Eric thinks I’m part Supernatural, but he’s not sure what kind,” Sookie shared – though she didn’t go into detail about the kinds of creatures she’d been learning about.

“And maybe I am. After all, ‘normal’ people aren’t telepaths,” she stated, using the fingers of the hand not holding her coffee cup to make quotes for the word “normal.”

“You have always been special, Sookie,” Tara smiled. “And hey! If you find out you’re something, I hope you’ll tell me – even if you have to get a vampire to glamour me just to be sure I keep it to myself.”

“You wouldn’t be freaked out if you learned I was a leprechaun or something?” Sookie grinned, feeling a weight lift off her shoulders that she didn’t know had been there now that she was talking to her best friend so openly about her “otherness.”

“You’re *Sookie*. Nothing’s gonna change about that,” Tara shrugged as if she wouldn’t mind if Sookie did, in fact, turn out to be a leprechaun. “There was a time when I was a little freaked out by what you can do,” she said with a look of regret, “but that was usually when I had a silly secret I thought I needed to hide.”

“Like your crush on Jason?” Sookie asked with a giggle.

“Exactly!” Tara blushed a little. “I still can’t help but to like him – you know – a little. I know he’s a total horndog and all, but I really do hope that I’m unattached when he finally decides to give up all the cATTin’ around. He’s a decent man when he doesn’t get in his own way.”

“He is,” Sookie agreed with a smile. “You know – just last night, he helped me with the Christmas tree.”

“Oh – you have a tree!” Tara exclaimed.

And just like that, the morning visit turned casual. After moving to the living room and looking at the Christmas tree, the two friends decided to make a quick brunch and continue their visit. By the end of it, they’d made additional plans to get together later that week.

When she was getting ready for her shift that afternoon, Sookie couldn’t help but to feel glad about her reconnection with her friend. Tara hadn’t been the only one who’d pulled away from the friendship. Sookie had been putting so much energy into her relationship with Bill that she’d lost sight of the aspects of her social life that she’d truly treasured. And – even before that – she’d pulled away (both consciously and unconsciously) from Tara, whose life had evolved to what Sookie thought of as “grown up” status. Meanwhile, Sookie had felt stuck; thus, she’d worried that she no longer had much to offer to a ‘grown-up’ friendship.

She didn’t feel that way anymore!

CHAPTER 08: DON'T BE CRUEL

Don't stop thinking of me

Don't make me feel this way

Come on over here and love me

You know what I want you to say

– Songwriters: Elvis Presley & Otis Blackwell

Sookie steeled herself as she pulled into her customary space at Merlotte's – not that there was assigned parking. Still, most of the staff had their unofficial spots, determined over time by habit and the kinds of unspoken agreements that seemed to rule places of work, especially small ones like the bar and grill seemingly in the middle of the woods.

She noted that Terry Bellefleur's truck and Holly Cleary's car were in their usual spots too – as was Sam's truck, which was parked next to his trailer.

She'd always found immense comfort in the familiarity of Merlotte's, even on the days when it was a struggle to keep up her shields; the people who worked at and frequented the place of business were – at least – staples that she could count on.

"In such a lonely life," she sighed to herself, allowing herself to acknowledge the greatest fear that she'd ever had – that, without Gran around, there would one day be no place in the world where she was wanted.

No place where she “fit.”

Merlotte’s had helped to *allay* that fear a bit, and her Word-of-the-Day calendar had given her that word to describe the feeling. Indeed, she’d felt both useful and wanted at her place of work, and it was with that thought in mind that she sent a prayer out into the universe: that her last two weeks at the place she’d so valued for the last several years would be peaceful.

With her shifter boss waiting inside, she feared that particular prayer might go unanswered, however.

“Time to find out,” she whispered to herself with resolve.

The telepath took several deep breaths and dropped her shields. She could pick up a few thought patterns coming from within the bar and grill; the topics of those thoughts were completely normal for the most part. Holly was filling salt shakers while she hummed Michael Jackson’s “Billie Jean” even though a Garth Brooks song was playing on the jukebox. Terry was studiously dicing onions for a batch of chili – as he even more studiously tried *not* to remember the knife he’d carried with him in Vietnam. The few customers in the restaurant were thinking about whether they should order another pitcher, bills they needed to pay, Christmas gifts they still needed to buy, or how long the week had already seemed even though it was just Tuesday.

Perfectly normal and usual.

The only unusual thinking in Merlotte’s, in fact, was from the only “unusual” brain: Sam’s. He was in his office – no doubt waiting for her to arrive since he was generally prepping the bar area at that time of day. Her telepathy stronger thanks to

the vampire blood in her body, Sookie could tell that her friend was already cataloguing all the things he wanted to say to Sookie about why vampires were “evil” as a “race.”

She sighed, a part of her wishing that vampire blood didn’t have an effect on the power of her telepathy; after all, just “hearing” red snarls and getting a sense of Sam’s emotions would have been enough for her.

More than enough!

Sookie shut out Sam’s mind and let her telepathy roll outward, as if she were a pebble thrown in the water and her ability was tied to the ripples created. She touched on the minds in Merlotte’s again as she “rode the small waves” of those ripples. Further from her “center,” she “discovered” Tray’s mind to the south and Maria-Star’s to the east. She’d officially met the lead of her security team for a few minutes before she’d left for work, and she’d already gotten a sense of the Were’s mind.

The telepath smiled. Maria-Star had one of the most organized and structured brains Sookie had ever encountered, and it was quite open for a two-natured brain – though it didn’t project to her as Debbie Pelt’s V-addled brain had. The thoughts were red-tinged in Maria-Star’s brain, but they were crisp and clear – as if Sookie was seeing them through a telescope with a red lens. Oddly enough, what she’d “seen” had reminded Sookie of Thalia, for Maria-Star was incredibly focused on her duty.

Having found no others on her “radar” (and having stalled for long enough), Sookie took a few additional deep breaths before getting out of her car. She’d already mentioned to Maria-Star that she would be having a discussion with Sam and that that

discussion might get heated. She'd asked her guards to stay outside, assuring them that she could deal with Sam herself.

From Maria-Star's thoughts, Sookie had learned that the Were was willing to keep her distance – but only to a certain point. Thus, Sookie knew that her guard would be close enough to hear if things with Sam spiraled out of control.

She said another quick prayer that they wouldn't as she knocked on his door – as she always did when he was in his office and she needed to stow her purse.

"Come in," came his voice, his words sounding sharp.

Sookie didn't like that tone at all, but was determined to keep herself calm. She'd run through her budget after Tara had left, and – because of the ten thousand dollars – she would be fine financially – even if her new business didn't earn a profit for a while. Still, she'd committed to work through the next two weeks, and she was determined.

She was already second-guessing that commitment as Sam looked up at her with a frown – one that turned into a deep scowl as he inhaled deeply.

"Seems you've had *a lot* of vampire blood since I last saw you," he judged.

Sookie grimaced, but kept her anger in check. "Are you gonna do this now?" she asked.

"Do what?" he returned her question with one of his own.

"Tell me how stupid I am? Tell me all the reasons *you* have for why *I* need to stay away from vampires? Tell me that *I*'m incapable of making my own decisions? Imply that *you* are better qualified to determine the paths *I* take in *my* life? Oh – and

think all of those things right at me as well!" she added with emphasis. "Or are you just gonna call me a gold-digger again?"

Sam was silent for a few moments, but his eyes flashed yellow in anger.

"What?" Sookie asked, her hands moving to her hips. Maybe she really did want to get fired. "Are you upset because *you* didn't get to say those things – because I stole your thunder by stealing your thoughts? Or are you angry because I didn't include the thing you are *most* upset about."

Sam growled, "And just what do you think that is?"

"I don't think. I *know*," Sookie corrected tiredly, even as she tapped her forehead. "You flirted with me on and off before Bill came to town. And I thought – at one point – that you liked me as more than a friend."

"I do!" Sam said loudly as he stood up quickly.

Though his posture wasn't exactly threatening, Sookie still took a small step back. "Before Bill came around, you never asked me to dinner, or to a movie, or for a walk, or anything," Sookie reminded with a shake of her head. "And it wasn't exactly as if you didn't flirt with Dawn and some of the other waitresses too."

"I wanted *you*!" Sam insisted. "You had to have known that! You're a damned mind reader!"

Sookie sighed. "And you knew from early on that I couldn't hear you as well as other people – not that you told me why that was." Her shoulders slumped a bit; she already felt fatigued by her and Sam's confrontation. "There were a few hints from your thoughts – I won't deny that. But I tried to respect your privacy by not listening.

And – as you well know – most of the time, I couldn't tell your specific thoughts anyway. So I was never sure if you were interested in me or not; regardless, you clearly weren't interested enough to make a move. And it's not like I was confident enough about that kind of thing to ask you out."

"I *couldn't* pursue you like I wanted!" Sam said firmly.

"Why not?" Sookie asked seriously. "*Why* couldn't you?"

"You know why!" Sam practically yelled.

The telepath's mind told her that Maria-Star had moved to be right outside the backdoor, but was currently holding her position. One more yell on Sam's part, though, would bring her in.

"I don't know why," Sookie sighed. "Not really."

"I'm a shifter!" he hissed, as if those words explained everything.

"You've dated others – *completely* human others – during the time I've known you," Sookie returned.

"Yeah – but I knew those flings wouldn't go anywhere. With you, I wanted more! And that meant I'd have to tell you about what I am."

"Like I told you what I am," Sookie reminded. She shook her head sadly. "Did you think you couldn't trust me? That I'd tell everyone that you can become any animal you want? Is that how little you think of me?"

"No, Sook. I *do* trust you," he spoke vehemently.

“Then were you worried I’d reject you? Do I seem like the kind of person who’d reject someone because he was different – especially if that difference was something you couldn’t control?”

“I didn’t know,” Sam confessed. “I didn’t know until”

“Until Bill came into the bar and I didn’t immediately reject him because he was a vampire – a Supe,” she finished for him.

“Yeah. Maybe,” Sam confessed. “But there were other things to take into account too.”

“Like?” she asked.

“Like the fact that our firstborn might have shifted,” he admitted.

She scoffed and shook her head. “Talk about counting your chickens before they’ve hatched! But putting that to the side, why do you think I would have cared? Do you have a problem with passing on your genes? Were you worried that my telepathy might be passed along too? I really don’t get it!”

He ran his hand through his shaggy, ruddy hair. “When I saw you with Bill, I knew that you were open to the idea of being with someone who *couldn’t* give you kids.”

She shook her head yet again. “No, Sam. I don’t buy kids or a lack thereof bein’ your reason for not pursuin’ me. I think you were just scared of bein’ rejected.”

“*You’re* the one who said you wouldn’t date someone you worked with,” he challenged.

“After I’d already worked here for a year and a half!” she returned softly, remembering exactly when she’d uttered those words. On a slow, rainy night, she and Lafayette had been talking about the various jobs they’d had before finding their way to Merlotte’s. By then, Sookie had pretty much given up on Sam ever asking her out on a date, so she and Lafayette had come to a consensus that dating on the job wouldn’t be a good idea. In a lot of ways, taking that position had been a comfort to the telepath, helping her to overcome the sting of rejection that she’d felt when a guy whom she’d trusted with the knowledge of her “disability” ultimately didn’t want to date her.

The question of whether his rejection had been because of her telepathy or just *her* had haunted Sookie more nights than she cared to admit.

Sam once more ran his hand through his hair – so roughly that she wondered if the action hurt.

“Whether you felt it or not, Sam, you didn’t show any tangible interest in me until Bill showed interest,” Sookie frowned. “And – since then – the thoughts that I’ve picked up from you have been *a lot* more about territory than affection.”

“*You are my territory!*” Sam cried out with frustration. “Don’t you see that I needed to – *still* need to – protect you from those goddamned blood suckers?!?”

“I’m *not* your territory. And protecting me from *anything* is not your job,” Sookie said softly and calmly – though firmly – knowing that the conversation was now swirling in circles. “Speaking of which, I need to do my job – unless you plan to fire me on the spot.”

“No, I don’t,” Sam returned curtly before Sookie spun on her heels and left his office, having decided to stow her purse in the kitchen so that she didn’t need to return to Sam’s office. In fact, she vowed in that moment that she wouldn’t be alone with Sam again – at least not as long as he was going to behave as he was behaving.

Which was like an asshole!

Though the tension was thick between Sam and her as he took his place behind the bar and she started her shift, Sookie was grateful that her boss didn’t seem keen to talk to her about vampires – or anything, in fact.

Even better, Sookie’s shift had begun better than she could have hoped for. Eric’s blood had certainly given her more control over her shields than ever (as well as a skip to her step), and her ability to concentrate on her work enabled her to earn some excellent tips.

At around 8:00 p.m., right after the dinner rush, a bored Tara came in and sat at the end of the bar near the waitress station, chatting with Sookie as she refilled sodas and filled beer pitchers that Sam didn’t seem willing to get for her – as he usually did for the waitresses.

Of course, Tara noticed how Sam was helping Holly but not Sookie. The telepath was just happy that Tara’s internal frustration with Sam was “loud” enough to “overhear” so that she was able to subtly entreat her friend *not* to do what she wanted to do, which was to ask Sam what his “f-in problem was” (though Tara didn’t plan to clean up her language).

Happily, Tara's tension had almost dissipated after she'd had half of the glass of wine she'd ordered. And then—about an hour after she'd arrived—Jason came in, distracting her even more. Soon enough, he and Tara moved to a table in Sookie's section to chat. And not long after that, Sookie joined them for a short dinner break (since she'd not had one up to that point and Holly was getting ready to leave for the night). The siblings and their friend quickly fell into a light-hearted conversation, which included them planning to have lunch together on Sunday after church. Sookie couldn't help but to smile when she thought about how Gran would have liked the idea of them sharing a Sunday meal like she used to insist upon. Sookie and Tara also made plans to have "breakfast for lunch" together that Friday, while Jason looked visibly upset that he'd be missing out on fresh biscuits—until, that is, he was promised a delivery at the intersection where the road crew was currently working.

It was then that Sam decided to insert himself by interrupting the group.

"You plannin' on workin' for the rest of the night?" he asked Sookie gruffly, causing all three at the table to frown in surprise.

"I'm on my dinner break," Sookie said calmly. "I have three minutes left till it's over, and Holly knows to get me if she gets behind," she added, looking at the clock on the wall.

"From where I've stood, you've done more socializing than working *all night*," Sam said crossly.

"What?" Tara asked, her earlier frustration returning with a vengeance. "Well, from where I was sitting, Sook shared a couple of words with me whenever she had to

pour her *own* drink orders. *And* she managed to stay ahead on her tables, even though *you* were the one not doing *your* job!"

"Huh?" Jason asked, not understanding the odd interaction.

"Tara, please. It's not worth it," Sookie said, standing up. "I'm getting back to work now, Sam," she sighed. "Call me tomorrow, Tara – will you? And we'll firm up lunch plans on Friday."

"You're workin' the lunch shift *here* on Friday," Sam said, his voice raised in challenge.

Sookie took a deep breath. "Sam, I told you when I called you yesterday that I needed this Friday and Sunday off because of prior commitments."

"Commitments with blood suckers – I'd wager," Sam scoffed in a low voice that Sookie might not have heard if her senses hadn't been more acute because of the vampire blood she'd recently ingested. "I seem to remember the part of the conversation where you agreed to work here until December 27," he said a little louder.

"So you're quittin' for sure then, Sook?" Jason asked, still trying to catch up with what was going on. The night before, Sookie hadn't gotten around to telling him that she'd given notice, though she had told him about the new career opportunity Eric had broached with her.

The telepath didn't have a chance to respond to her brother's question, however.

"You need to get a handle on your sister," Sam critiqued. "She's lettin' herself fall in with a vamp even worse than Bill."

Jason frowned. "Listen, Sam, I didn't necessarily love Sook's decision to be romantic with a vampire at first, but it *was* her decision. Still is!" he said maturely. "We had us a long talk yesterday 'bout vampire Bill and how she's not seein' him anymore—on account of him turnin' out to be an a-hole and all. But if Sook wants to date another vampire on account of her thing," he whispered, pointing unsubtly to his head, "or just 'cause she f-in feels like it, that's not any of my business. Or yours!"

"Bastard vampire probably glamoured you too," Sam growled. "Ain't no way you'd allow for this otherwise. Think of your Gran!"

"I am thinkin' of her!" Jason said, his temper beginning to flare up.

"Just stop this," Sookie said wearily. "Please." She looked at Sam. "Maybe I should just finish out my shift tonight and be done with it, Sam—if that's what you want."

"I need you for a double tomorrow if you're gonna take advantage of my generosity and take off most of the goddamned weekend!" Sam snarled angrily.

It was right at that moment that a vampire walked into the bar—one with a deadly look.

And likely a deadly intent.

"Oh fudge!" Sookie muttered to herself.

CHAPTER 09: FOR THE MILLIONTH AND THE LAST TIME

For the millionth and the last time

Darling let me hold you tight

One more kiss and then I promise

I will say my last goodnight

– Songwriters: Sid Tepper & Roy Bennett

Sookie had known that Thalia had been nearby since a few minutes after sundown because she had begun to recognize Thalia’s particular “void.” Of course, she’d also known that the vampiress was there to protect her, and – frankly – her presence *outside* of Merlotte’s had comforted Sookie. However, she couldn’t imagine that Thalia’s arrival *inside* the bar would ease the current situation.

“You fuckin’ *that* one now too, Sookie?” Sam hissed, when he noticed Thalia’s quiet entrance.

“Just wait a fuckin’ minute!” Jason rose, his hands already in fists.

Surprisingly, it was Thalia who jetted in to ensure that no physical violence ensued between the two agitated men

“You were supposed to stay outside,” Sookie said quietly, even as Thalia smiled at Sam, a clear invitation for him to do or say something more.

“I was planning to keep my distance – unless you were physically threatened or distressed,” the vampiress said, even as Jason lunged at Sam. Jason was easily subdued by Thalia, though Sam looked to be about ready to shift.

Of course, Sookie understood the meaning behind Thalia’s words. *She* would have stayed outside, but *Eric* must have called her when he felt Sookie’s agitation.

The telepath wasn’t 100% sure how she felt about that. After all, it was highhanded of the Viking to try to solve her problems for her!

Looking at Sam, however, she realized that her impulse to question Eric was wrong. The vampire hadn’t sent Thalia “to her rescue” out of highhandedness; he was worried about her.

He cared.

Just like he’d cared enough to fly through a thunderstorm *before* nightfall in order to keep her from harm. And – given the rabid look on Sam’s face, as well as the fear that she’d only just let herself start to feel because of that look – she realized that Eric had good reason to be concerned.

It was in that moment that she grasped that she trusted Eric Northman to “know” her emotions – to know them and to not take advantage of them. And, ironically enough, that knowledge made her feel strong enough to deal with those emotions.

And with Sam Merlotte.

“Please, Jason, just go,” Sookie said calmly, but firmly, even as she looked around to see that all eyes in Merlotte’s were on them.

“I’m not leaving! Not if you stay here!” Jason said stubbornly.

“Jase, I need you to go. I’ve committed to working here until the 27th, and I *will* do just that – unless I’m fired – or unless Sam becomes a problem and not just an annoyance,” she said just as stubbornly as her kin, though she couldn’t help but to be warmed by her brother’s protectiveness and support. “As you can see, I’ve got people looking out for me.” She gestured toward Thalia.

“That vamp needs to get out too,” Sam growled.

“No,” Sookie said in a steely voice. “If she goes, I’ll walk out with her. If you want me to work for you for the next two weeks, I will. But I *won’t* take another unkind word from you. Not. One. More! You can *think* your nastiness at me well enough that you don’t have to open your mouth,” she hissed.

“I’m *not* firin’ you!” Sam practically yelled.

From his thoughts, Sookie picked up desperation – as if Sam was convinced that he could influence Sookie to keep away from Eric (and all other vampires) if he just had a little more time.

“Fat chance of that workin’,” Sookie muttered.

“Why do I gotta go?” Jason almost pouted.

“Because you’re liable to get yourself hurt or arrested if you don’t, and I don’t wanna deal with either one of those things right now,” Sookie said, turning to comfort Jason by giving him a pat on his shoulder. “I’ll call you when I get home. And I meant what I said; if Sam does *one more thing* to piss me off, I’m out the door,” she added emphatically, though quietly.

“Fine!” Jason said, grabbing his jacket and starting to leave before turning to hand Sookie a ten-dollar bill. “Because—in the mood he’s in—he’d make you pay if I walked out on the bill,” he seethed.

Sookie couldn’t help but to smile a little at her brother’s thoughts. He had already decided that he wouldn’t be returning to Merlotte’s unless Sam apologized to his sister. Indeed, as he was leaving, Jason was already cataloguing other local “watering holes” that he could frequent, even going so far as to wonder how many of his friends he could convince to abandon Merlotte’s altogether if Sam didn’t “get his shit together.”

At this point, Sookie was angry enough at Sam not to discourage Jason if he followed through with his thoughts.

“Get back to work, and cover the bar!” Sam hissed before spinning on his heel and going to his office.

The slammed door could be heard all the way in the front of the bar.

“Geez! What crawled up his butt and died?” Holly asked tentatively as Tara sat back down at the table, looking as if she was wondering the same thing. In fact, a lot of the patrons were frowning in the direction of Sam’s office. They’d rarely seen the bar owner lose his temper—and especially not with Sookie.

For apparently no reason!

Sookie sighed and looked around the room. “Listen, folks,” she said loudly, “Sam’s just a little mad because I’ve given my notice here.”

“What?” Maxine Fortenberry asked. “You find a man to take you on? Is it that vampire?” the gossip tagged on.

Sookie rolled her eyes. It figured that Maxine would risk the stroke of midnight on the one night when there would be something gossip-worthy to witness. And it also figured that the old biddy would assume that Sookie was planning to use a man as her meal ticket. (And some people wondered why young women in the area were so worried about being misperceived as gold-diggers!)

“I found a better job,” Sookie returned, standing a little straighter.

“Oh yeah? As what?” Maxine pushed.

“Something better than waitressing,” Sookie returned. “*And* something Gran would have approved of,” she added pointedly, when she “heard” Maxine’s thoughts spinning towards nastiness. “Now – the show’s over, y’all. Sam’s just havin’ a bad day. We all get them. I will be around to get your tables caught up in a jiffy!” she finished, sounding more chipper than she felt.

“I’m gonna stay till close,” Holly announced in a low voice, even as she looked back toward Sam’s office.

“Thanks, but it’s really not that busy,” Sookie assured.

Holly patted Sookie’s hand. “It could get busier if Maxine stirs things up and people come down here to see if there will be more to the ‘show,’” she scoffed. “Heck, she’s already grabbin’ for poor Hoyt’s cellphone so that she can start her gossipin’. Plus, Cody’s with his daddy tonight, and all I had goin’ on is a meeting with one of my wiccan friends, Angela,” she said in a whisper so that only Sookie could hear.

And Thalia, of course.

"I'd hate for you to miss your meeting," Sookie frowned.

"Don't worry about it," Holly said brightly. "Angela was gonna talk to me about maybe joining a new coven in the Shreveport area, but – to be honest – I got a funny feeling when Angela was describing the coven leader."

"Why?" Sookie asked.

Holly shrugged. "I think the leader – uh, Marnie Stonebrook's her name – might be dabbling in black magic, according to some of the things Angela told me. Actually, Marnie goes by the name Hallow in her work," Holly added with a roll of her eyes. "And feeling the need to have a *professional* name – and only one at that – is never a good sign with witches."

"Why's that?" Sookie asked as she moved to fill a couple of pitchers. She noticed that Thalia was listening carefully too.

"They're either the kind that thinks too much of themselves – as if they were Cher or somethin'," she rolled her eyes. "Or they're the kind that truly believes they will make a mark on the world." She shivered. "Sometimes dealin' with that second kind can be a little more intense than I'm comfortable with. And dealin' with the first kind is f-in annoyin'! Anyway," she said, her tone casual again, "I'm just gonna make a quick call to Angela and tell her that I'm stuck at work and would prefer it if she *didn't* mention me to Marnie after all."

"Thanks," Sookie said sincerely. "You really don't have to stay though."

“I won’t leave you to man – actually woman – both the bar *and* all the tables!” Holly said with a wink as she went toward the bathroom where there was a payphone. “I’ll be back in a jiffy!”

For the rest of the night, Sam stayed in his office, and Sookie covered the bar and a few tables, while Holly took the rest. Luckily, though things did get a little busier than on a normal Tuesday night – thanks to Maxine Fortenberry, who was definitely a “busier body” than anyone ought to be – the two women weren’t overwhelmed.

Ever-watchful, Thalia stayed in a corner booth. With a sigh, Sookie figured it was likely that Thalia’s nights of watching from outside the bar & grill had ended now that the door had been opened for her proximity, but the telepath found herself strangely comforted by the unpleasant vampiress’s presence. Perhaps it was childish of her to take pleasure in the fact that she could make Sam feel uncomfortable in his own place of business.

However, Sam had made Sookie feel that way first!

So – yeah – childish.

And even more childish when she thought about him dealing with Maria-Star and/or her other Were guards being inside from then on.

But Sam really *could* just fire her if he didn’t like it!

And – due to his behavior the last two days – he could kiss her ass while he was at it!

She and Sam were friends, and she'd been more than willing to overlook his "shiftness" and all the lying by omission he'd been guilty of because he'd given her a job and treated her fairly for years! But now he was treating her like a child – patronizing her in a way that poked at something deeper than her stubbornness. It poked at her very notion of her "self" – the "self" she'd been working on understanding ever since she'd promised to do so in the trunk.

The independent "self" that Sam seemed to want to squash before it even saw the light of day – or night – properly.

Meanwhile, Eric was presenting her with ways that she could be *more* independent. Sookie was beginning to see just how "small" she was in Sam's eyes – how he saw her as incapable of moving beyond Bon Temps, let alone her job as a waitress.

Well that was just too damned bad – for Sam!

The telepath was *already* beyond Sam's *small* vision for her. In fact, she was beginning to be excited as she asked herself many versions of the "what if" question. What if she and Eric worked out? What if she got to travel to places she'd thought that pictures would have to suffice for? What if she did jobs where she could save lives? What if she was in a position that she could learn what "personal fulfillment" really was – for *her*? What if she no longer had to worry at all about being accepted by – and acceptable to – those around her?

Because she was acceptable to herself!

What if? What if? What if?

That was so much better than contemplating “what now?”, which was what she’d been asking with Bill for a while now.

And it was also better than not asking anything at all of herself or those around her.

And it was exponentially better than thinking she had no right or business asking anything at all!

“Hey, Hon,” Tara yawned at about midnight. “I’m gonna take off, but call if you need anything – okay?”

“Thanks for sticking around for a while after all that,” Sookie said softly as she hugged her friend goodbye.

At 12:45 a.m., Sookie announced last call – the normal time Sam did it on a weeknight – and she and Holly went about the last steps of their closing routine. Once Jane Bodehouse was picked up at 1:05 a.m., Sookie flipped the dead-bolt, and she and Holly looked at each other nervously.

“We gotta get our purses – huh?” Holly asked.

“I left mine in the kitchen tonight,” Sookie confessed. “But I’ll go with you to get yours. Probably best if we leave together.”

“I will retrieve your purse. I have words to say with the shifter,” Thalia informed stiffly and firmly.

“Thalia!” Sookie hissed quietly – so that only the vampiress would hear. “Holly doesn’t know about Sam!”

“Of course she knows about Weres and shifters,” Thalia said loudly and with certainty. “She is a witch, though not that powerful of one,” Thalia observed, looking Holly up and down with a certain amount of disdain.

“Thalia! That’s just mean!” Sookie exclaimed.

Holly batted the air with her hand. “Don’t worry about it, Sook,” she laughed the comment off. “I’m actually pretty proud that a vampire noticed magic in me at all. And, for the record, I didn’t know what type of creature Sam was. Given that Hotshot’s so close, I would have guessed panther,” she mused. “But I *could* sense the magic around him.” The waitress turned to look at the vampiress. “And thanks. I appreciate your getting my purse for me.”

Thalia simply nodded. Sookie knew that the gesture wasn’t out of the kindness of the vampiress’s heart. Indeed, she was likely looking for an excuse to “talk” with Sam, *or* she was trying to keep him away from Sookie.

Either way, Sookie found herself grateful and hoped that Sam had calmed down.

She got her own purse from the kitchen as Terry quickly moved toward the employee entrance, looking a little shell-shocked. Given that he suffered from PTSD, he’d absorbed a lot of the earlier tension of the night, and Sookie could tell that he was anxious to leave and get home to the dogs that served as his source of solace and comfort.

Holly and she waited for only a few minutes, and the vampiress reappeared without any sounds of violence having occurred in Sam’s office. For that, Sookie was also grateful.

“Your schedule – for the rest of your time here – until the 27th of December,” Thalia said, shoving a piece of paper at Sookie. “If you want him *broken* for it, I will be happy to comply,” the vampiress offered, looking as if she’d relish the task.

“Huh?” Sookie asked as she looked at the piece of paper.

“Geez!” Holly exclaimed, as she leaned over to look along with Sookie.

“Doubles four days a week?” she frowned. “Christmas Eve *and* Christmas Day? Wait! I thought we were closed on Christmas!”

“We were,” Sookie intoned, looking at the two weeks ahead of her. Sam had given her that Friday and Sunday off, but – other than those days – she had only one more day off: December the 23rd. The rest of the time, she worked every night, along with the doubles Holly had mentioned.

“He *tryin’* to get you to quit?” Holly asked.

“Probably the opposite,” Sookie sighed. “Probably *tryin’* to get me tired enough to actually listen to him.”

“Or punish you for not cowing to him,” Thalia said with distaste.

“Manipulative. Cowardly,” she judged. “Reminds me of men I have known,” she added grimly. “From centuries past.”

As Thalia turned to leave Merlotte’s, Sookie couldn’t help but to wonder how long such men had lasted in the vampiress’s acquaintance.

Given how quickly Holly said her goodbyes and made her way to her vehicle, Sookie figured she was thinking the same thing.

“You wanna ride back?” Sookie asked Thalia as she approached her car. Since the vampiress had not been awake when Sookie left for Merlotte’s, the telepath had no idea how the vampiress’s had gotten to the bar.

The vampiress shook her head as if riding in a car – perhaps, especially the well-used car before them – was beneath her. “He said you could call him.”

The *him* was no mystery.

“Did he want me to?” Sookie asked.

The vampiress took a moment to answer. “Want? Yes; I believe his *want* is no mystery. But does he require contact from you this night? No.”

“*My* choice,” Sookie chuckled. “He’s a vampire of his word, but a highhanded one.”

“Don’t forget to give him hell for the new phone too,” Thalia reminded with a smirk as Sookie got into her car.

The telepath still had no idea how Thalia “traveled,” but – when she arrived at her home less than ten minutes after leaving Merlotte’s – the petite vampiress was sitting on the porch-swing as if she’d been there all night.

And she wasn’t alone.

CHAPTER 10: King CREOLE

When the king starts to do it, it's as good as done

He holds his guitar like a tommy gun

He starts to growl from way down in his throat

He bends a string and that's all she wrote

— Songwriters: Jerry Leiber & Mike Stoller

“Bubba!” Sookie exclaimed as she hurried out of her car to give her vampire friend a hug. Of all the vampires she’d met, he was the only one who accepted such a greeting as if it were the natural way to do things. Actually, he was the only one to accept that kind of greeting *at all* — at least, as far as she knew.

“Well howdy, Miss Sookie! You sure are lookin’ mighty good!” he grinned. “And I’m awful sorry ‘bout that Were-in-the-closet business. Mister Eric told me it got you into a pickle, and that sure weren’t my intention,” he said solemnly, like a contrite child who’d been caught with his hand in the cookie jar.

“It’s okay,” Sookie said, squeezing Bubba’s hand.

The simple vampire’s smile came back in full force. “Mister Eric told me I’d get to stay in your woods for a spell — maybe even permanent-like! And he’s even gonna build me a little room under the house that he’s gonna build for your day guards!” he effused. “I sure will be glad to get outta the big city for a while. I don’t even much care

for Shreveport – truth be told – though there’s lots of food there for me,” he added with seriousness.

Sookie cringed a little because she knew well that Bubba’s favorite cuisine was of the feline variety. A memory of her beloved Tina jetted into her mind as she wondered if it would even be possible for her to get another cat with Bubba around.

Maybe a dog would be better, she thought. And, practically speaking, dogs typically traveled a lot better than cats. Indeed, Sookie speculated that it might be real nice to have a furry companion for the road.

“I’m real glad you’ll be around, Bubba,” Sookie smiled sincerely.

“Me too! I’ll just be gettin’ back to the woods now,” he grinned before leaving the porch abruptly.

“He will be good for tracking – if that skill is needed,” Thalia said, suddenly at Sookie’s side. The telepath hadn’t even registered her moving. “Beyond that, he is good as only back-up.”

Sookie sighed. “He’s guarded me before though.”

“When you were not in great danger and when you belonged to Compton,” Thalia returned.

The telepath shivered at the mention of her ex. “What does my havin’ been with *him* at the time have to do with anything?” she asked after a moment.

Thalia smirked. “It was Compton who first arranged for Bubba to look out for you – if I understand things correctly.”

“Are you sayin’ that he arranged for a,” she glanced toward the tree line and continued in a whisper, “unfit guard for me?”

The vampiress frowned. “Bubba is fine – stronger than his age would suggest even. But he is not exactly wise. But – of course – someone like Bubba is nonthreatening to someone like Bill because Bubba would not wish to use you sexually. He lacks an interest in human blood and rarely even fucks.”

Sookie blushed crimson at Thalia’s crude language.

The vampiress shrugged, clearly dismissing the telepath’s coyness. “All I am saying is that Bubba – unlike many others – is not a potential rival for your affections.”

“Uh – Bubba seemed to – uh – think that Bill and me were – uh – are, . . .” Sookie stopped for a moment to find the words she wanted. “It’s just that he seemed to have his mind set on the idea that Bill and I were a couple. And that we’d *stay* that way,” she finished with a trembling whisper.

“Bubba now understands that you are no longer Bill’s human, and – rest assured – he prefers Eric to Bill anyway. Otherwise, I would not have him here. Bubba is loyal to Eric – and to *you* it seems – but I don’t judge him fit to be your only night guard. Thus, when I am not available, you will have Padma as your main guard,” Thalia informed.

“Padma? I don’t think I know her,” Sookie said, trying to recall all the vampires she’d met at Fangtasia.

“You remember an Indian vampiress?” Thalia asked.

“Yes!” Sookie smiled.

“Well – that is not her. That is Indira,” Thalia smirked.

Sookie frowned in question.

“The one guarding you when I cannot is Indira’s vampire sister. Please invite her and Bubba into your home,” Thalia ordered.

Sookie thought about arguing with the vampiress, but then realized that the only thing she objected to was Thalia’s rude, abrupt tone. “Bubba’s got an invite already. And Padma is welcome into my home.”

Thalia nodded and went to leave the porch. “Tell the Viking I said hello,” she snorted before disappearing into the night.

Sookie rolled her eyes before going into her house. However, she *did* find herself hitting the speed-dial code for Eric – “conveniently” number one on her new phone – not a minute later.

“Hello?” she asked when the phone was picked up but Eric said nothing for several seconds.

“I am waiting to be,” he paused, “scolded.”

She giggled as she toed off her shoes. “And what do you think I should be scolding you for.”

“Dirty, *dirty* thoughts,” he flirted, managing to sound suggestive without being creepy.

She realized in that moment that his flirting had become much more understated since Jackson – since the trunk incident. Whether he was being conscientious of that ordeal or simply felt like he could dial back on the leering now that they’d decided to

pursue a relationship – both working and personal – she smiled in appreciation for his restraint.

“I’m afraid they don’t actually make brain bleach to clean away dirty thoughts,” she flirted back. “I know; I’ve looked for it because of the things people around me have thought,” she added with a grunt.

“Probably for the best,” he said with a smile in his tone. “Some of my thoughts about you are the *good* kind of dirty.”

She couldn’t help but to giggle as she turned on the Christmas tree lights before practically sinking down onto the couch. “So – what have you been up to so far tonight?”

“No good,” came his chuckled response.

“Well *that’s* a lie,” she smiled.

“How so?” he asked.

“Turns out that it was a good thing that you sent Thalia into Merlotte’s, though I imagine she’s already told you all about that,” Sookie sighed.

“Just a few bullet points,” Eric said back casually. “I’ve asked her to make sure that all of your guards understand that your privacy – even from me – is not to be taken lightly.”

Sookie felt a little lump in her throat at Eric’s thoughtfulness. “See – there you go again. Proving that the whole ‘no good’ thing is a bunch of bull-hockey.”

“What exactly does that colloquialism mean? Of course, I know what a *bull* is. And I am aware of the human sport, *hockey*. But I do not know how the two fit together in that idiomatic phrase,” he mused.

Sookie laughed. The things the vampire knew always astounded her. But — almost invariably — the things he didn’t know amused her.

“Malarkey,” she grinned. “Do you know that word?”

He laughed. “Indeed. Of course, now I am wondering why people don’t simply say ‘bullshit?’ The gods know that Pam has enjoyed *that* word much more since its connotation became more,” he paused, “festive than literal.”

“She seems like she would like *all* the festive words,” Sookie returned.

“I believe she collects them — sometimes just to annoy me,” Eric chuckled. “She has a webpage — an online dictionary of sorts.”

The telepath laughed. “It figures. And I think people say ‘bull-hockey’ because it helps them to avoid cussing, and because hockey pucks kinda look like”

“Bullshit!” he finished, his voice full of mirth.

“Yeah!” she giggled.

They were silent for a moment, but the lack of noise didn’t make Sookie uneasy. On the contrary, it was oddly comforting. Still, she broke that silence as a comment occurred to her. “I know you and Pam are maker and child and all, but you sometimes seem like siblings to me. I mean — y’all act like me and Jason at times.”

“Your relationship with him is going better now?” he asked. “I smelled him at your home last night, and Thalia did make a note that he was ready to defend you at the shifter’s bar earlier.”

“Yeah,” Sookie smiled. “We had a rough patch after Gran died. Part of him blamed me, and then there was the whole Bartlett thing,” she added wearily.

“What happened concerning *that man*?” Eric asked, the anger clear in his tone as he recalled what Sookie had told him about her “funny uncle.”

Or, Sookie contemplated, maybe it wasn’t anger so much as it was protectiveness.

“Jason invited him to Gran’s funeral. You see – Jase didn’t know about what Uncle Bartlett did to me and Hadley. And – uh – then Bill killed him not long after, and Jason was upset with me because I wasn’t more upset that he was dead. And – of course – a part of him blamed me for Gran’s death,” she finished sadly.

“He was wrong to blame you for that,” Eric said firmly.

Sookie sighed. “I blamed myself for her dying too,” she admitted, “for a lot longer than he blamed me. I still blame myself to a certain extent. After all, it was me who brought Bill into our lives.”

“It was the queen. It was Hadley. It was Bill’s blood,” Eric listed quickly.

“Yeah,” Sookie relented, “but I was a part of it too. The consequences were unintentional – to be sure. But things happened; there’s just no denyin’ that.”

They were silent for a few moments.

“Are you okay? After tonight? What happened?” Eric asked.

“What all *did* Thalia tell you?” Sookie asked wearily.

“I felt your upset – your unease – at times throughout the night, but then I was feeling much more relaxation and comfort. And then – suddenly – it was as if the air was let out of your emotions.”

Sookie shook her head. “Man! It must be crazy to feel what I feel all the time! *And* annoying.”

“Not really,” Eric said sincerely – contemplatively. “I’m sure it’s not as invasive as hearing the thoughts of others. Indeed, your feelings are generally simply in the background of my being. But the sudden change in them,” he paused, “jolted me.”

She sighed. “Sam was bein’ difficult earlier in my shift – but passive aggressively so.”

“Meaning?”

“He wasn’t filling my beer orders like he usually does for the waitresses,” she returned. “And I was getting the silent treatment from him – along with some negative thoughts thrown in about my choices in life. So – yeah – ‘unease’ is a good word for what I was feelin’. But I was dealing with it all okay. Then I took my break and had a bite to eat with Tara and Jason.” She sighed loudly. “Let’s just say that Sam decided to spew some of his anger, and Tara and my brother didn’t take it well.”

“Your emotions indicated that *you* didn’t exactly take it well either,” he said softly, clearly not willing to buy her deflation of the situation.

“And *your* reaction? Sending Thalia in?” Sookie asked just as softly.

“Clearly, I don’t take your emotional pain well either, Sookie. And I don’t take your safety lightly. If it was highhanded of me to send in your guard, then I will own to it.”

Sookie chuckled softly. “I’ve decided that *that* particular kind of highhandedness is okay.” She chuckled a little louder. “A week ago, I would have thrown a fit! But tonight, I let myself acknowledge that Thalia’s presence was actually comforting to me *before* I flew off the handle.”

“I’m glad,” he paused dramatically, “about *both* your comfort level *and* the fact that I am not in trouble.”

“Oh—you *are* in trouble about the phone!” she grinned into the receiver. “But I’m willing to accept it as a—uh—business-warming present!”

“Business-warming?” Eric asked.

“Humans get each other ‘house-warming’ gifts when they get a new place. I don’t know what someone calls it when a new business starts, but ‘business-warming’ works.”

Speaking of ‘warming,’ his voice seemed a lot warmer—and, perhaps, relieved—when he responded. “So you have decided to go into the telepathy business then?”

“Yes,” Sookie said with a deep exhalation. “I was 99% sure last night, but I wanted to be 100% sure. Sam’s behavior today crystalized things.”

“I am sorry that the shifter is not demonstrating that he deserves your friendship,” Eric shared honestly. “But I *am* quite glad that you are going to be utilizing your telepathy for your own financial benefit and—more importantly—to increase your

safety, Sookie. I'll have a business plan messengered to you tomorrow so that you can look it over and make revisions."

"A business plan? Already? Wait! How long have you had this business plan at the ready?" she finished suspiciously.

"Why? Is my presumption *highhanded*?" Eric asked playfully.

"Very!" the telepath exclaimed, though her tone was not one of anger. Indeed, she was surprised more than anything else – and excited. "So? How long?"

"I began entertaining the idea of your starting your own business after you discovered that Longshadow was behind the theft from Fangtasia, mainly because I wanted to have a more solid arrangement with you than the verbal contract we formed that night. However, I didn't act upon my idea because – back then – it would have been Compton managing your career. And – his other faults notwithstanding – he is too young and weak to keep you safe in such a project. However, following the Maenad attack, I realized you were already well into the supernatural world – whether you or I wanted that or not." He continued softly, "I developed a business outline the night you were hurt – while we were waiting for you to regain consciousness." He paused. "I needed something to do so that I would not rattle apart or do something foolish – like hunt the Maenad."

Sookie took a moment to absorb what he'd said. "Even then? You cared for me then?"

"I would have denied it then – but yes. My concern for you was already more than what would have been usual for an asset. However, when I gave the outline to

Bill, he refused to consider the plan. Indeed, he was so vehemently against it, that I began digging into his background and motives that very night.”

“He never mentioned the idea to me,” Sookie said softly.

“We have already established that he’s a prick,” Eric said with an odd mixture of frankness, comfort, and reassurance.

“And adding nails to his coffin really *is* overkill now,” Sookie responded firmly, proud of herself for the fact that Bill’s latest omission had not caused her to fall into a crying fit.

“Ah . . . ,” Eric started and then stopped.

“What?” Sookie asked.

“I was intending to make a comment in poor taste,” he admitted.

“Against Bill?”

“*Most definitely.*”

“Tell me,” Sookie requested. “I think I’d like to hear one right about now.”

“It related to the phrase ‘overkill’ and how it is the closest word humans had for the ‘true-death’ before vampires became known to them,” Eric returned. “I intended to ask you if you were finally ready for Bill to experience *real* overkill, but then I realized the joke intended to make you laugh might cause you pain.”

“Yet you’re telling me now,” she observed. “*Without* the comic timing – I might add.”

“A risk – to be sure,” he said softly. “But you asked, and I’ve determined that telling you the truth when I am able to do so is preferable to lying to you. I have asked

for your trust, and you have given it to me. I will not jeopardize that by keeping from you my dislike of Bill or my propensity toward indecorous humor.”

“Indecorous?” Sookie asked.

“Off-color. Risqué. Rude.”

“You’re better than my Word-of-the-Day Calendar,” she chuckled. “I suppose I’ll have to keep you around. In addition to the fact that we’ll be working together, you’ll be a walking thesaurus.”

He chuckled. “When we travel, I could teach you many things other than English vocabulary. History? Other languages? Art? Architecture? Or – my favorite – sexual education.”

Sookie snorted out a laugh. “Risqué and rude – for sure! That being said, I wouldn’t mind knowing what you think about things. I’ve always loved reading. It might be fun to read a book and then talk to you about it – maybe learn more about the history around it – um – if you know about it.”

“I’d like that very much,” Eric said with a smile in his tone.

She took a deep breath. “I’m gonna use some of my earnings to take online classes too – and maybe even some at the LSU campus in Shreveport.”

“What kind of classes?” Eric asked curiously.

She chuckled. “I don’t know – really. I guess I’ll have to pretty much start at the beginning with stuff like math.” She sighed. “Anything I managed to learn about things like algebra in high school didn’t exactly stick with me.”

“Vampires make excellent math tutors,” he said with a smile in his voice. “It’s easy for us to memorize and apply formulas.”

“I bet,” Sookie chuckled. “I suppose I could take classes like psychology so I can better decipher some of the things that go through people’s heads.”

“Given your ability, I doubt a basic psychology class could teach you much—other than technical terminology,” Eric observed. “But— who knows— you might be intrigued by the more advanced theory. Freud is hilarious!”

Sookie chuckled. “He’s the sex guy— right?”

“All psychologists ultimately are,” Eric deadpanned.

The telepath chuckled a little louder. “Well— they’re right to be, given how often that topic really does float into people’s minds.” She shivered a little. “And— trust me— delving too deep into people’s sexual stuff is *not* hilarious!”

“I continue to be amazed that you retained your sanity before you learned to build your shields,” the vampire said sincerely.

“You and me both,” she returned. “So,” she said, switching back to the previous topic, “about school—I have no idea what classes I’ll end up liking. But I think it’ll be fun trying to find out,” she added with excitement.

“I enjoyed my studies very much,” Eric shared. “Indeed, I still indulge in a class in a new or evolving subject now and then.”

“Night school?” she asked.

“Occasionally,” he responded. “More often, I just glamour a professor I admire to offer private lessons in his or her field of study. That is how I originally got my education – you know.”

“Where did you get it?” Sookie asked curiously.

“I started in Paris in the early 1300s,” he responded. “But I’ve studied in many European universities.”

“Wow!” she enthused. “I bet that was something!”

“It was,” he agreed.

“Well – I think I’ll be startin’ my own studies on my couch – with that business plan,” she said determinedly.

He chuckled. “You’d better watch out; you’re only enabling my highhandedness if you accept the plan without an argument.”

“I’m trusting you to know when enough is enough,” she corrected. “And, Eric – *truly* – you’ve done enough.”

“Then I shall endeavor to continue doing *enough*,” he responded somewhat mischievously. “*Just* enough.”

She chuckled. “There’s no winning with you – is there?”

“You’ve already won,” he said with a combination of seriousness and playfulness.

CHAPTER 11: KISMET

When you meet by chance, it's not by chance

It's kismet

When two hearts stand still, it's destiny's will

It's kismet

– Songwriters: Sid Tepper & Roy Bennett

Eric and Sookie were silent for a few moments, him enjoying her hypnotic breathing and her enjoying knowing that he was *there* with her – for her – even if she couldn't see or hear him.

Both were enjoying the openness and ease of the conversation, though both realized that they wished they were speaking in person.

"You talked to Franklin Mott? About Tara?" Sookie asked, breaking the silence.

"Yes," Eric responded.

"What did you say to him? Um—I mean—Tara came here this morning. She was pretty sad about the whole break-up. I felt a little guilty – actually. Maybe I should have just let them be. Maybe he really liked her," the telepath sighed.

"Do not feel guilty," Eric comforted. "You are correct in that Franklin enjoyed your friend's company; however, he indicated that his enjoyment would have been coming to an end soon. Indeed, he'd been contemplating using your friend to settle a

debt with a vampire named Mickey, who is known for his cruel usage of humans – as well as for glamouring them into complacency.”

“What!?!” Sookie exclaimed. “If he liked her, why would he pass her along to someone like that!?!”

“Mickey’s maker owns a casino, and Franklin is in considerable debt to her. Franklin likely figured that the entire sum he owed might be forgiven – if he offered Mickey a companion such as your friend,” Eric informed.

“That’s horrible! To use Tara like that!” Sookie exclaimed.

“I agree,” Eric sighed. “But vampires such as Franklin Mott have yet to fully acclimate to the present. They see coming out of the coffin as convenient for themselves, but have not changed – in any way – their attitude toward humans. Franklin is not as bad as some, however. He truly enjoys his companions while he has them. Likely, he was very attentive to your friend. As for passing her along, he would normally not give someone he *liked* to one of Mickey’s ilk; however, he clearly thought that Mickey had changed his ways to a certain extent, and since the arrangement would have benefitted him greatly, he didn’t dig to confirm that Mickey’s change was authentic. However, none of that is an issue now.”

“What did you have to give him to let her go?” Sookie asked sagely.

“I simply forgave the debt he owed to my casino. In exchange for that, he broke things off with your friend amicably. And I also made him vow not to pass along any other human to Mickey.”

“Is Mickey really that bad?” Sookie asked with a shudder as she thought of what her friend’s situation may have ended up being like.

Eric shrugged. “He has been before. His maker is not of a bad sort, but Mickey seems untrainable, and it would be best if he were not indulged. And – who knows? In the future, Franklin might reconsider his behavior towards companions of whom he’s tired.”

“Is that really likely?” Sookie asked.

Eric sighed one of the kinds of sighs that Sookie had come to associate with his past. “Some vampires seem incapable of *any* kind of evolution.”

Sookie couldn’t help but to wonder if Eric were talking about his maker, but she didn’t pursue the topic. It was not something she thought was right to discuss on the phone.

They were silent for a few moments.

“I’m thinking of getting a dog,” she said to break the silence.

“Not a cat again?” he asked.

“Not with Bubba around,” she responded with a grimace.

“You know – he won’t touch your pet if he understands that it is off limits,” Eric assured.

“Even so, I was thinkin’ a dog would be nice to have – for when we take our show on the road,” she explained.

“That is not a bad thought,” he observed. “Tell me – would you accept a puppy from me? As a Christmas gift?” he asked.

“Oh—I was just gonna go get a pup at the pound or wait to see if Terry Bellefleur would sell me one from his next litter,” she returned. “I don’t need anything fancy.”

“But you *would* need a dog that was easily trainable—a good companion as well as a guard,” he remarked.

She smiled. “If I agree, you can’t get me anything else for Christmas. And I don’t want a dog that costs thousands of dollars either!”

“I have something in mind that won’t cost much at all,” Eric responded warmly.

“Actually—it will cost only the price of its accessories.”

“Accessories?”

“Food, toys, a travel crate, a bed. Things of the like,” the vampire said.

“Oh! Okay then!” Sookie said excitement entering her voice. “It’ll be nice to be surprised—but not too surprised since I’ll know a puppy’s coming and can get the house ready for it.”

“It will be pleasing to surprise you then—but not too much,” he added with amusement.

The two were silent for a few moments as both were thinking of the upcoming holiday.

“Speaking of dogs,” Eric spoke gently, “Thalia did inform me that your shifter boss has given you your schedule for your final two weeks in his employ. Sookie, you must know that you needn’t work at his bar anymore.”

She sighed loudly. "Truth be told – I almost quit tonight. But I really want Sam to have the chance to calm down. He's been too good of a friend to not get that chance – even though he's being an asshole right now," she added bluntly.

"And if he does not calm down?" Eric asked. "I don't like the idea that you will be subjected to his bad behavior for the next two weeks."

"I won't be," she said firmly. "One more negative word, and I walk. And I won't work without a guard *inside* the building," she indicated, saving Eric the trouble of broaching that topic.

He sighed. "You are very loyal, Sookie. I hope that you are not hurt further if Merlotte cannot match that loyalty."

"Me too," she agreed with a sigh of her own.

"But – just in case – when could I begin the telepath-for-hire thing?" she asked.

"Tomorrow – if you will accept me as your first client," he informed.

She frowned. "But wouldn't that be weird. I mean – we'll be working together on all this stuff. So you'd – uh – be my manager and my client?"

He chuckled. "You could consider it paid training if you wished. There are humans in my employ and many others that I do business with. Your insight into their honesty would offer me great peace of mind, so I would – naturally – pay you for that. Of course, we'll charge more for other clients, but – then again – *your* payment will always be the same."

"How do you arrive at *that* funny math?" she asked.

“I will generally take a cut of your payment, of course,” he indicated, even as Sookie could imagine the smirk playing upon his lips.

“Training – huh?” she asked with a slight chuckle.

“Yes. You could learn various modes of interrogation. I’ve seen you in action a few times, Sookie, and you have very good instincts. But sometimes clients will want for your ability to remain unknown. Other times, they will inform people of your gift in order to elicit fear from those being questioned. We should also experiment with your listening from outside a room and listening to many people at once – say in a conference room full of humans. The more you have experienced various kinds of situations, the more likely you are to complete jobs quickly and efficiently, maximizing both your time and your clients’ satisfaction.”

“You really have thought all this out – haven’t you?” she asked.

“I have. With the business plan, you will also find a basic crash course on vampire and Were politics. Pam or I can fill in the details that I cannot risk writing down once you have those basics under your belt.”

“Maybe I do need training time,” she observed. “Even so,” she sighed, “I said I’d work for Sam for the next two weeks, and I intend to do that – unless he crosses the line again.”

“I figured you’d say that,” Eric said.

“Because I’m so stubborn?”

“No. Well – yes. But I think you are trying to prove something to yourself. And – just maybe – you need to get your closure with that part of your life too. *And I*

am only beginning to understand the seriousness with which you take your commitments, Sookie. Any training I have for you can wait, but I wanted you to know that you have options.”

“Maybe I *am* trying to prove something,” she relented. “It might sound dumb, but I don’t wanna be disloyal to Sam just because he’s being unsupportive to me about this. Like you said – some people have a hard time evolving. And – arguably – I was one of them.”

“But you *are* changing,” Eric said encouragingly. “And your shifter boss may do so as well. As I said during our plane ride, he showed you more trust than you likely knew. And I’m certain it has not escaped your notice that the interactions between the two-natured and vampires are sometimes strained.”

“Yet you have good relationships with some,” Sookie observed.

“I take individuals as I find them,” Eric said. “Any creature might be expected to posture a bit in his or her interactions with another species, but with those individuals who are confident, the posturing will soon come to an end. And in that moment, the observant can see who is worthwhile to associate oneself with.”

“So why do you need a telepath then?” she asked with a smile in her tone.

“To *prove* how good I am at judging character.”

“Hmm. I’m not sure you’re good at judging *humans*,” she returned, a little challenge in her tone.

“Oh? Why, Miss Stackhouse, if I am not mistaken, I dare say that you have something in particular that you feel I’ve failed a test upon?” he questioned.

“Maybe,” she said somewhat coyly. “Tell me – what does your instinct tell you about your day-man?”

“Bobby?” Eric scoffed. “He is loyal and efficient in many matters. He believes himself to be superior to most people and has affectations bigger than the state of Texas! When he learned I was a vampire, he immediately began angling to get me to turn him. I sense that his ‘man-crush’ – as Pam so charmingly calls it – borders upon obsession with me, which is why he has *never* been given the codes to my residences – beyond the front foyers where he can pick up and leave things as required. In short, he is a worm, but he obeys without glamour. Needless to say, I don’t necessarily trust him, so his electronic devices have surveillance features as well.”

“Why keep him around then?” she asked, dumbfounded by his words.

“Before I answer, will you tell me *your* assessment of Mr. Burnham?” Eric asked curiously.

“Are you testing me now?” she asked with a little smile.

“I don’t know. Would you accept your *normal* fee for your assessment of Bobby? We could call it training.”

“What is my normal fee gonna be?” she asked cautiously.

“For non-threatening reads – like Bobby – five hundred dollars per head,” he returned.

“That much!” she asked with surprise.

“You could charge four times that much, but I know you wouldn’t want to,” Eric responded.

“Your plan already contains compromise?” she asked with amusement.

“I changed all the payment schedules before I rested this morning – as a matter of fact,” he said with a grin.

She laughed. “Well – five hundred still sounds like a lot of money, Eric!”

“Not so much for a vampire looking for peace of mind, and you can always do *pro bono* cases.”

“Well how about we call my assessment of Bobby one of those then – okay?” she asked.

“How about I limit myself to a *small* token of appreciation for your work then?” he asked impishly.

“I thought I made clear that there were to be no gifts beyond the puppy,” she said suspiciously.

“Call it a small bonus.”

“Diamonds can be *small*,” she deadpanned in return. “So can a single rock in a driveway. And so can a loophole,” she added with a playful snort.

“How about small as in practically free?” he asked.

“Too many loopholes there too,” she grinned. “You’ll use the old ‘I’ve had this rare emerald lying around for ages – stole it from the Sultan of South Africa in the 1500s.’”

He laughed. “I do not believe that sultans have ever ruled in South Africa, nor did that country even go by that name in the 1500s.”

“Semantics,” Sookie returned, her grin growing wider.

“How about I promise that you won’t mind the token,” he volleyed.

She rolled her eyes, though she knew he couldn’t see her. “Fine. You are right on the money with *everything* you said about Bobby. The most amusing thing about him is that he practices an English accent during some of his errands – *and* in his head!”

“And the least amusing thing?” Eric asked.

“He has a very vivid imagination and would like us to have a threesome with him – though he believes me to be trailer trash without the trailer. Oh – and he believes I must be some kind of whore; that’s the only way he could fathom why you’d be giving me ten thousand dollars!”

Eric growled.

She took a deep breath. “In fairness – he didn’t read the note or even know about the check until I dropped it. From what I can tell, he did *everything* you asked to such a careful degree that the only word for it would be ‘anal.’ He was in a rush to get out of here because he felt he was ‘getting dirty’ just by standing outside. Oh – and he cannot imagine that my boobs could be real.”

“Did he treat you badly at all?” Eric asked.

“Not outwardly,” Sookie stated truthfully. “But I’d prefer not to be around him – or anyone else, for that matter, who thinks I’m a gold-digger.”

“Then he will no longer be assigned errands that relate to you. And I apologize for your having to hear his nonsense at all. As for why I keep him around – it is because he is mindlessly loyal. He does nothing beyond his assigned tasks, except ‘single white female’ me from time to time.”

“Huh?” Sookie asked, mystified.

“Another of Pam’s phrases. Apparently, there is a movie of that name about a woman whose roommate tries to mimic everything about her and then steal her life. I did not see the film, but Pam often extols the two actresses in it – hoping for a threesome herself, I think. Anyway, Bobby occasionally buys himself copies of the garments I order for myself.”

“That’s stalker weird,” Sookie said, her tone echoing the frown on her face.

“You worry for me,” he observed.

“Says the vampire who sent Thalia into Merlotte’s when I got upset.”

“It is nice to be on even ground with you then,” he commented quietly.

“Yes,” she agreed.

“If your instincts tell you that I should be rid of Bobby, I will cut him lose,” Eric said.

“Despite his usefulness?” she asked.

“I trust your judgement when it comes to humans, Sookie,” he replied.

“Wow!” she breathed. “That – uh – feels really nice.”

“I’m glad.”

“I’d hate to be the reason he loses his livelihood though,” she commented.

“But you think he should – don’t you?”

She took a breath. “I don’t think you should take any chances with single, white females. Oh – uh – except for me!” she added, though a blush immediately broke out on her face.

Thankfully, Eric wasn't there to see it, though the vampire most certainly imagined it.

Eric laughed loudly. "Don't worry. I will cut lose the *figurative* single, white female and keep the real one," he stated. "And I will give Bobby a good severance package and an ample glamouring. He will land on his feet, and I will hire *you* to help me find a new day-person."

She giggled. "Now – *that's* a deal."

"Uh, Eric?" she asked, after the two had been silent for a few moments.

"Yes?"

"The database thing. It's still here, and you haven't – uh – asked for it."

"It was left in your safekeeping," he returned gently.

"I think you should take it," Sookie said. "I wasn't thinking about it when you were nearby last night and the night before that, I was exhausted by the time we got here. I – uh – just think it's something you should have. And I don't want it here anymore."

"Alright. I'll have Thalia collect it then," he said gently.

They were quiet for a moment as she shut her eyes. Her yawn broke the silence this time.

"You are tired," he observed.

"I am," she owned.

"I enjoyed speaking with you, Sookie."

"I enjoyed it too," she smiled. "Goodnight, Eric."

“Sleep well,” he said before hanging up.

The telepath dragged herself off the couch and went to the cubby. She took out the database and – without any doubt about what she was doing – walked it to her front door.

As she stepped out onto her porch, she shivered from the cool temperature.

“Thalia,” she said in a normal tone.

Not a second later, the vampiress was in front of her.

“Make sure Eric gets this – okay?” she asked.

Thalia nodded as she took the small box.

“You – uh – don’t need a TrueBlood or anything – do you?” Sookie asked politely.

Thalia frowned. “You are *not* the hostess to your guards, Miss Stackhouse. You will learn that in time.”

Sookie chuckled. “And you’ll learn that I probably won’t stop offering you a drink every now and again.”

“I will not take one from you,” Thalia said firmly.

“That’s not the point,” she grinned before going back inside. “See you tomorrow night!” she said after closing the door.

The telepath heard the vampiress scoff before her void fledged back to the woods.

Sookie couldn’t suppress a giggle as she went to her bathroom to complete her pre-sleep ritual. As she brushed her teeth, she reached her mind outward, having promised herself that she would always assess her situation upon rising and before

going to bed. She “found” both Bubba and the allergic-to-hospitality vampiress relatively easily. Further away, she picked up on two Were and recognized their minds as being part of the Long Tooth group that had been there the night before.

She sighed as she found herself missing Eric’s void – missing his life force just being close to her. She couldn’t help but to wonder if he “felt” her – through their shared blood – in a similar way to how she “felt” him when he was close by.

Not her emotions – just her presence.

As she climbed into bed, she couldn’t help but to think – to hope – that Eric enjoyed her “presence” within him, just as much as she enjoyed when his void was nearby.

CHAPTER 12: LIKE a Baby

The day I found I am alive

Then, I broke down and cried like a baby

Well, it was then I could see

You were playing with me, like a baby

Well, you can bet that some day

I'll forget just like a baby

– Songwriter: Jesse Stone

NEW ORLEANS (the same night as the previous chapter)

“I have been waiting to see the queen for forty-five minutes!” Bill Compton complained, his tone a mixture of desperation, haughtiness, and frustration. “Has she been told that I am here on a matter of *great* importance? Do you even fucking understand me?” he ended his question by muttering.

The Saxon warrior, one of a pair of twin brothers that Sophie-Anne brought over centuries before the so-called soldier in front of him had been born, kept his expression blank. *Of course*, Wybert – just like his brother Sigebert – was capable of great emotion; however, both brothers felt that it was ill-spent around the unworthy.

“Do you even speak English?” Bill hissed out.

Wybert suppressed his desire to kill Bill Compton with his bare hands. The younger vampire had lived in Sophie-Anne's court for about a decade – leeching off of the queen like many of the other sycophants who offered their “services” in exchange for the right to be close to the monarch and feed from her wealth and position.

Admittedly, Compton was slightly better than most, for his talents in procurement had often benefitted the queen and all of her progeny. However, the Civil War veteran was clueless about a *great* many things – including the fact that Wybert could speak English (as well as twelve other languages) extremely well.

Of course, Compton's ignorance stemmed from the fact that Wybert and Sigebert rated him only high enough to have earned their stilted grunts – despite the good-tasting blood sources he'd managed to procure for them over the years.

Compton's current histrionics were only added evidence that he was unworthy of Wybert's time and the queen's favor. Indeed, Sophie-Anne had already been contemplating tossing Bill out of her court – and onto his narrow ass – when the younger vampire showed up with a half-starving, half-dead drug addict, whom he swore was just the kind of “steady meal and fuck source” the queen was always looking for.

Wybert had to hand it to Bill. It took him fifteen nights to get the woman – Hadley – healthy enough, polished up and detoxed so that she could be presented properly to Sophie-Anne, but the transformation in the young human had been phenomenal. Indeed, the queen's pleasure regarding the woman – who was at first a

favored “feed and fuck,” and then a pet, and finally a child— again raised Bill in the queen’s estimation.

However, his maker had lately been displeased by the lack of speed with which Compton was carrying out his current tasks.

And—in Wybert’s opinion—that lack of speed and efficiency on Compton’s part ought to have repercussions. And those were beginning with the annoying asshole *waiting* for just as long as the Queen of Louisiana wanted him to!

Wybert felt several “taps” inside of his thoughts, signaling that his maker was ready for Compton. Although the Saxons did not enjoy the same level of telepathic connection with their maker as Andre did, they could exchange “taps” with one another, similar to a shorthand version of Morse Code.

“Follow,” Wybert ordered gruffly as he turned to leave the waiting area, not really caring if Bill followed. Actually, he would have preferred it if the inferior vampire stayed in place. Sadly, Bill’s heavy, frustrated steps trailed his own much more silent, stealth-honed steps.

“Your majesty,” Bill said in his Southern lilt, an accent that had never held any charm for the Queen of Louisiana. She’d always been one to embrace adaptation to the times within which she found herself, holding on to older traditions only for as long as they suited her needs.

Antiquated ways of talking certainly had never been on her list of items to “keep.”

Of course, neither were pleated khaki pants and polo shirts that looked to be from the 1980s.

“Bill, it is good to see that you are no worse for wear following your time with your maker,” she said, eyebrow raised.

“You knew I was with Lorena?” Bill asked with surprise.

“Do you think Sheriff Northman would have gone looking for you if I’d not spurred him on?” she asked with a smirk.

The queen could not ignore the look of anger that passed over the younger vampire’s face at the mention of her most effective sheriff. From Bill’s past reports to her regarding his assignments, the queen knew that the sheriff had become something of a thorn in Bill’s side, but—for the life of her—Sophie-Anne had a difficult time determining just *why* that was. Oh—she speculated that it had to do with the telepath, Sookie Stackhouse, whom she’d sent Bill to make contact with and—ideally—to procure for her court. However, Bill had been using all kinds of stall tactics where the telepath was concerned.

And that concerned the queen.

“Did Northman tell you about Jackson?” Bill asked somewhat tentatively.

“Why don’t *you* tell me about it? *Now!*” the queen returned, ever savvy. As a matter of fact, she had not yet discussed Eric’s foray into Russell’s territory with her sheriff, and she likely wouldn’t bring up the matter with him—unless there was need. Though Andre sometimes disagreed with her *almost*-full trust in Eric Northman, both

Sophie-Anne's instincts and her experience told her that micromanaging an already effective manager was never a good idea.

And Eric was nothing if not an effective sovereign of his corner of Louisiana. Andre was threatened by that fact; by contrast, Sophie-Anne was comforted by it.

"I do not know what you already know and do not want to waste your time," Bill hedged.

Sophie-Anne "tapped" out a short order to Wybert, who stepped a bit closer to Bill, just as Sigebert, who was standing behind her, moved closer to her. Moments later, Andre and Hadley, risen only two nights before, entered.

"I had not known you'd made Hadley your child," Bill said as he took in Hadley's beauty appreciatively. Sophie-Anne did not mind. Hadley had "come out" particularly well. Her beauty aside, she was also exhibiting amazing control for a younger vampire. Of course, Sophie-Anne was ensuring that the newborn not feel the pangs of hunger for long after she rose each night, but that did not change the fact that her new child had been controlling her blood-craving almost completely, even visiting with her witch friend, Amelia, earlier that evening.

And Hadley's fangs had stayed up during the entire half hour of the interaction, though the witch was fetching and smelled good — *at least, for a witch.*

"Yes. And Hadley is understandably anxious for news of her kin," Sophie-Anne said in a calculated manner, even as she reached out her hand to take hold of her youngest child's.

“Yes! How are Jason and Sookie? They doin’ okay? Have you told them I’d love a visit? Do you think they’ll accept me? Like this – I mean?” Hadley effused.

Sophie-Anne looked up at her child; though she was lovely, she knew little of politics – or pretext. The queen would be glad if things could stay that way – at least for the time being – given the fact that Hadley was clearly clueless regarding the tension in the room. And regarding *why* the queen had raised the current line of questioning with Bill.

“Your cousins are well,” Bill said, though he looked like a human whose necktie was on way too tightly.

“Why are you lying?” Sophie-Anne asked.

“Lyin’?” Hadley asked Bill with confusion.

“I – uh – it is just that Eric involved Sookie in my rescue from Lorena,” Bill said, looking even more uncomfortable.

“Yes. You were about to tell us the *whole* story – beginning with why you did not inform me that you were leaving Area 5 to see your maker. Surely, you would have known that I would have wished to have been informed,” the queen probed.

Bill did not speak.

“You will tell your queen everything. Now!” Andre ordered in his most threatening tone.

Bill recoiled at the sound of it. So did Hadley, who was intimidated by her oldest sibling.

Wybert inched even closer to Bill, ready to enforce any orders Sophie-Anne gave to him.

“Lorena called me to Seattle,” Bill said softly. “She expressed her desire to,” he paused, “reconnect.”

“Why not ask me for a leave of absence then? Why not inform me so that I could send Andre to secure your work?” the queen asked.

The room was silent as Bill looked toward the floor.

“Speak!” Wybert ordered, poking Bill in the side with the blunt end of a short knife the Saxon always kept concealed under his tunic.

“And look at me when you do so,” the queen added in an *almost* casual tone.

A tone that meant that Bill was treading on *very* thin ice.

“Your majesty, I have only ever sought to serve you. I am here to tell you how Northman is undermining my project with Sookie!” Bill stammered, his fear clear in his eyes as he raised them.

“Project?” Hadley asked.

The queen rolled her eyes at her subject. “Bill, I recall asking you to be *discreet* about that little project.”

“What project?” Hadley pushed, jerking her hand from the queen’s.

Andre hissed at his youngest sibling’s public show of disrespect.

The queen held up her hand to calm both of her children. In some ways the two were very much alike – hotheaded and quick to act.

Passionate.

Wybert and Sigebert were her steadier progeny. Of course, Sophie-Anne had selected both Andre and Hadley for reasons of love; by contrast, the Saxons were chosen for reasons of practicality. Both had supplied her with brute force when needed, and Wybert had proven to be a gifted strategist as well – both in battle and politics.

“You already know that Bill was sent to Bon Temps to learn about the status of your family,” Sophie-Anne said breezily to her youngest child. “And you are also well-aware that I was made curious of your cousin, Sookie, because of *your* description of her. It stands to reason that I would want to have her in my retinue – if she chose to be.”

Immediately, Sophie-Anne felt her child’s jealousy.

The queen sent calm to her progeny. “You need not fear, my love. My interest in your cousin only solidifies your *own* value in my mind. Come,” she urged, willing herself to be patient for the moment it took for Hadley to retake her hand.

“And Bill’s project?” Hadley asked, much more respectfully than she’d spoken before.

“He was to charm her,” Sophie-Anne winked at her child. “Enchant her so that she’d work here for me when I required her to so. I had hoped that he might even captivate your cousin to the point that she would want to move here – *permanently* – with him.”

Hadley frowned and looked at Bill. “You seduced my cousin?”

Sophie-Anne smirked, “Yes. He was to romance her – but *only* if she was amenable to the idea.”

“Amenable?” the *mostly*-uneducated youngling asked.

“Agreeable. Receptive,” Andre supplied, though his voice betrayed his impatience with his younger sibling.

Hadley’s frown deepened. “But – uh – that’s horrible!”

Sophie-Anne shook her head fondly. “How so, dearest one? You told me yourself that Sookie was never one to have love in her life – due to her,” she paused, “oddness. And Bill matches the stereotype of the Southern gentleman you told me she fawned over in that film.”

“*Gone with the Wind*,” Hadley whispered. “But I never . . .” She stopped for a moment in order to collect her thoughts. “Sophie-Anne, I don’t want her to have something fake. A – uh – phony love.”

“Do not fret, my love,” Sophie-Anne smiled softly. “Bill was never to force her – only to give her a little touch of a *fairy* tale,” she added, looking at Andre with a knowing smirk.

Of course, Andre had tasted the fairy blood in Hadley, though they’d yet to trace its source. Though Sophie-Anne had never heard of a fairy being telepathic, the ability was clearly a supernatural trait, perhaps an effect of the melding of human blood with the magic of the Fae. Sophie-Anne couldn’t help but to wonder if Hadley’s child, Hunter, might develop some “extra” trait as well, though it seemed that Sookie was the only one who had yet manifested an extraordinary skill in her family.

“Well, if you put it that way,” Hadley said, her face scrunched up as if she were deciphering a difficult mathematics problem, “I guess you *were* sort of doin’ Sook a

favor. I mean, now that Gran's gone," she wiped away a red tear, "she's probably real lonely."

"So, Bill?" Sophie-Anne said brightly as she looked back at her subject. "How is your project with Sookie going?"

"As I conveyed in my last report, Sookie is stridently opposed to moving away from Bon Temps," Bill said apologetically. "And I am still having difficulty with Northman's interference."

"You need to refer to him as Sheriff Northman," the queen said, her voice holding a clear warning in it. If nothing else, Sophie-Anne respected the chain of command.

Bill nodded. "Of course, your majesty."

"What has *Sheriff* Northman done?" Sophie-Anne asked.

"He has tried to undermine my relationship with Sookie at every turn," Bill said as if he were the victim of some great affront.

"Does she prefer the Viking?" Sophie-Anne asked. "If so, let her have her preference. She'll be less likely to wish to move to New Orleans, but—if she prefers her current location anyway—the sheriff is a fine enough caretaker. And—if she enjoys spending time with him—so much the better!"

She winked at Wybert, who was the child that made the most fun of her "match-making" inclinations; in turn, the Saxon subtly rolled his eyes.

"Your majesty!" Bill exclaimed. "Surely you are joking! You *know* the type of vampire Nor—uh—Sheriff Northman is!"

Sophie-Anne's fangs slid down, her earlier levity disappearing in an instant. "Watch your tone, Bill. I selected *that type* of vampire as *my* sheriff before you turned a century old! If you question my judgement, you *will* feel my wrath!"

The queen rarely committed acts of violence herself, but she was adept at inflicting great pain. Feeling her ire through their bonds with their maker, all of her children – even the "Berts" – recoiled a bit.

"Apologies, your majesty," Bill whimpered. "It is just that I do not want for Sookie to be hurt. And Sheriff Northman can be ruthless."

Sophie-Anne took in the bowing vampire in front of her. In that moment, she wondered why she'd put up with him for as long as she had. "What of the database project?"

Bill visibly relaxed at the change in the line of questioning.

"It is coming along well – already over 500 entries! Indeed, when Lorena called me, I thought to put the only master copy in Sookie's home so that it would be secure. It's encrypted – of course," Bill informed with a somewhat guilty look.

"Ah – yes. Back to Lorena summoning you. Tell me – how did you end up in Mississippi, Bill?" Sophie-Anne asked. "I thought that your maker had settled in Washington."

The younger vampire answered guardedly, "Lorena and I spent a few nights in Seattle – reconnecting. Though she usually keeps me with her for at least a month when she calls me, she seemed restless almost immediately – a sign that she was bored and wished to move on. I expected that she would send me on my way, but she

ordered me to travel with her to Mississippi instead. I tried to tell her that being in a state belonging to one of your potential rivals was not wise, but she would not listen, even insisting that we visit Russell's court. It was there that I realized she had started a," he paused, "V-trafficking business."

"Does King Edgington know of this?" Sophie-Anne asked immediately, concern clear in her tone.

"No," Bill responded quickly. "But Lorena used a group of Weres in Mississippi as some of her muscle. The group – made up of bikers – is affiliated with the Jackson pack, but roams throughout the South."

Sophie-Anne frowned. "I know of this pack of wolves." She scoffed. "They fashion themselves to be the two-natured version of Hell's Angels!"

"They know better than to even rev an engine in Louisiana!" Andre growled.

"All I know is that they helped Lorena move her product," Bill volunteered. "However, she was looking to expand and needed more capital. I made the mistake of telling her – months ago – that you had tasked me with two important projects."

"Were you *specific* about the nature of those projects?" Sophie-Anne asked, both her fangs and her ire back in full force.

"No!" Bill averred. "Lorena thought she might torture me to get more information that she could exploit, but I held firm. She did send a Were to Bon Temps to search my home. I heard Lorena on the phone with him about a week ago, telling him to follow my trail to Sookie's home," he added with a whisper.

“Continue your account,” Sophie-Anne ordered, getting control of her anger. There would be time for it later.

“Lorena mistreated me for several nights and had some of Russell’s Weres wake me up periodically during the day with silver – so that I could not recuperate through day-death.”

“Why did the king condone this?” Andre asked.

“Russell is not the type to do so,” Sophie-Anne frowned.

“He was clearing a debt to Lorena. Thus, he looked the other way,” Bill informed.

“How were you liberated?” the queen asked.

“Sookie. She helped me escape from King Edgington’s home,” he stated.

“And why do you look so guilty about that?” Hadley asked suspiciously.

Sophie-Anne looked at her youngest child with mild surprise. Perhaps there was some hope for her yet. At least, she was capable of spotting a bullshitter when one was as overt as Bill Compton.

“Through no fault of my own, I attacked Sookie two nights ago,” Bill confessed so softly no human ear could have heard him.

“Explain!” the queen demanded.

“I was starved and wounded from the torture. As she had helped me to escape, Sookie put me into the trunk of a vehicle. Somehow, she ended up in there too. I awoke and had no control over my actions. The attack was not my fault! Yet Eric almost killed me anyway,” Bill quickly explained, once again behaving as if he had been

the victim. "I have done nothing wrong," he continued with an air of self-righteousness. "And now Eric has all but brainwashed Sookie against me. I fear that he plans to keep her – to use her for his own purposes! Without taking into account *your* desires, my queen."

"Sheriff Northman," Wybert grunted before shoving Bill slightly with his knife handle – a warning that the younger vampire better not break protocol again.

Sophie-Anne sat back in her throne, silent. She let the silence – and the tension – grow thick in the room, relishing as each vampire in her company began to become uncomfortable in her steely presence. Bill was the first, of course. However, her children eventually joined the queen's prey – each in their own way. Hadley bit her nails, a human trait she'd likely never completely unlearn. Sigebert was next to "break," as he shifted from one foot to the other – his own "tell" for being upset. Andre let out a puff of air, his sign of being uncomfortable. Wybert, as always, was the last to show any sign of discomfort. Her stalwart child eventually could not hold in a deep grunt, a sound that indicated he was ready to cut into something – preferably an enemy – in order to cut through the tension.

Only at that noise did Sophie-Anne speak again. "You say you have done nothing wrong, Bill. But I am currently unable to think of a single thing that you have done *right* in this entire situation. You were sent to discover whether or not Sookie still had her telepathic ability and provide her with a good reason to work for me, as well as to check on the rest of Hadley's family. But, during your time in Bon Temps, the family has been less safe, *not* more. And you have given me excuse after excuse for why you

have not brought Sookie and her brother to reunite with their cousin. After you complained about Eric finding out about Sookie's skill, you convinced me that your being Area 5's Investigator would solve all of your problems with him, but your moans about him grew even more fervent after I appointed you to that position. And then — once you told me that Sookie did not wish to relocate to New Orleans — you insisted that your database project would be more quickly completed if you could work away from the distractions of court. You also assured that the extra time in Bon Temps was just what you needed to solidify your romantic relationship with Sookie, which you assured me had become both mutual and real. You also indicated that — because of the solidity of that relationship — you would, at the very least, be able to convince Sookie to be in my employ at crucial times. However, I am not certain I believe *anything* you told me anymore, Bill."

The younger vampire went to speak, but the queen silenced him with a stern look.

"What I *am* certain about is that your recent actions scream of incompetence and insubordination. A vampire might not be able to avoid going to his maker, but he can *certainly* inform his queen of an absence. And one who truly loves a human would *not* endanger his beloved by hiding a potential hornets' nest in her home. Moreover, your explanation of what happened in the trunk is so full of over-the-top protestation that it, too, is unbelievable." She sat forward. "Tell me — how did your maker die?"

"You know she's dead?" Bill whispered.

“Russell surely has spies in my court. I have my own in his,” Sophie-Anne returned.

“I do not know the details of how she died,” Bill said stiffly. “She was killed when I was dead for the day. But I believe Sookie was involved.”

Sophie-Anne’s lips rose into a half smile. “The more I hear about her, the more I wish to foster a good working relationship with her,” she said in Andre’s direction.

Her eldest progeny and second-in-command nodded, though somewhat stiffly.

“Your majesty? What could you have heard about Sookie – beyond what I have told you, of course?” Bill simpered.

She sighed impatiently. “I just told you that I have spies at Russell’s court! You don’t think I have learned something about Dallas too?” She scoffed. “Moreover, the story of a mere human risking life and limb to save one of the Dallas sheriff’s nestmates by infiltrating the Fellowship of the Sun is not something the gossips among our kind could hold in!” She rolled her eyes. “And then there is the fact that Sookie took a stake meant for Russell’s second-in-command!”

“What?” Bill demanded.

“You didn’t hear that bit of gossip yet?” Sophie-Anne chuckled.

“No. But it is only evidence that she is in danger when with Sheriff Northman,” Bill growled.

“Not if my source of information is correct,” the queen smirked, not bothering to tell Bill the details of a certain tall blond vampire’s actions in Club Dead. Eric could go by assumed names all he wanted, but the queen could easily determine that the

vampire who had made sure that a bleeding human survived in a bar-full of vampires and Weres during a full moon was none other than her sheriff – one that she was now quite anxious to talk to.

But first things first.

“Bill, continue your work on the database and suspend your pursuit of Sookie Stackhouse immediately,” she ordered.

“Your majesty!” Bill cried out.

“No arguments,” Sophie-Anne said firmly.

“But – uh – Sookie and I love each other. And she still has the database,” he added quietly.

The queen rolled her eyes. “Well – if she loves you, she will give you the database so that you can continue your work. And – if she loves you, then she will understand that you cannot see her for a while.”

“A while?” Bill asked hopefully.

“I will find out for myself what Miss Stackhouse wants, Bill,” Sophie-Anne said firmly. “And I’ll go with that preference. If she wants you, I will give you leave to recommence your relationship. Otherwise, focus on your other work and try to keep from pissing me off,” she added wearily.

Bill looked ready to speak – to argue.

“You’re dismissed,” Sophie-Anne said with a wave of her hand.

Luckily, for his sake, Bill relented and left the throne room with his figurative tail between his legs.

She gave Andre a look even as she told him telepathically to make sure that Bill left the residence quickly and without incident.

Then, she turned her attention to Hadley, whose pretty face was pouting.

The queen sighed. “Truly, I did not intend for your cousin to come to any harm,” she assured honestly. Though her newest child would never be told of the more *difficult* times of her past because she wanted to keep Hadley’s world much lighter than dark, Sophie-Anne’s aversion towards the exploitation and misuse of women was firmly established as a part of her foundation as both human and vampire. “I really *did* believe that sending Bill to your cousin would be agreeable and advantageous to her.”

“It just seems,” Hadley sighed, “like an artificial way to start a relationship.”

“We started ours through a procurement,” Sophie-Anne reminded gently, even as she ran her fingers along her beloved’s cheekbone.

Her child sighed with immediate contentment as she leaned into the touch, but the moment was soon interrupted when Hadley’s fangs clicked into place.

“You are hungry,” Sophie-Anne said with a little smile. She looked at Sigebert. “Call two donors to our chambers and let her feed well.”

“You aren’t coming?” Hadley asked with some concern. “I mean—you need to be there to make sure I don’t take too much and hurt someone—right?”

The queen smiled softly. “You are doing well enough to control yourself, but your brother will be able to stop you if you cannot stop yourself. And I will be close by, monitoring you all the time. Do not worry. I am very proud of you, Hadley, and I truly believe that you are ready to feed without me in the room.”

The fledgling smiled. "Really?"

"Absolutely," the queen assured.

CHAPTER 13: Mona Lisa

Do you smile to tempt a lover Mona Lisa

Or is it your way to hide a broken heart

– Songwriters: Sara Evans & Jay Livingston

“Are you going to escort me from the premises?” Bill asked the queen’s eldest child with an air of arrogance he’d kept from Sophie-Anne herself.

“Yes,” Andre grinned, showing his fangs.

In truth, the queen’s Lieutenant felt ambivalent about Bill Compton *and* about his maker’s actions in regards to several things, including the telepath and the Sheriff of Area 5.

Andre thought that Miss Stackhouse should have been secured – and *bound by blood* to the queen – immediately.

Irrevocably.

Regarding Eric Northman – Andre did not believe that a vampire as powerful as Northman didn’t have aspirations of a loftier throne than the tacky one in his pathetic club.

Andre frowned slightly, but not at Bill Compton. Sometimes the most difficult part of Andre’s existence was looking out for his maker’s best interests when she made decisions that seemed to go against those interests – as he felt she was doing now.

“I had planned to feed before leaving,” Bill stated sourly. “Or am I not even allowed *that* curtesy.”

“Tsk, tsk, Bill,” Andre returned coldly. “Do not try my patience as you have the queen’s. And – by all means – feed. In fact, I will accompany you to the donors’ lounge.

Bill sneered, but walked with Andre toward his promised meal. Given what he’d been through the last several nights, he needed to feed from a “live” donor. Thus, he would suffer Andre’s surveillance.

“You know, I am right about Northman,” Bill spit out.

“What about him?” Andre asked with interest.

“He is *not* a true subject to our queen,” Bill ventured. “He thinks of himself first.”

“The same seems true about you,” Andre posited.

“I am loyal to Queen Sophie-Anne,” Bill said insistently.

“It seems you will have to prove that again,” the elder vampire observed.

“What if Eric is planning to use Sookie to help him stage a coup?” Bill ventured.

“Do you have any evidence of such a claim?” Andre asked tersely, a violent edge to his voice.

“Not yet,” Bill admitted.

“If you do find evidence, you will bring it to me directly,” Andre ordered.

“Of course. I would do anything to protect our queen from the likes of Northman,” Bill stated, his tone suddenly conciliatory. “That is my main priority, after

all. And I know that – once the queen looks into the matter – she will agree with me that Sookie is better off in my company.”

“The telepath seems more trouble than she’s worth,” Andre spit out.

“She would not be if Eric had not entered her life,” Bill contended.

“Feed,” Andre said, pointing toward a group of bored-looking donors. “And then leave. I hope, *for your sake*, that you do prove to have the queen’s best interests in mind.”

Bill nodded and then selected a lovely blonde to see to his needs. The queen’s second backed off a bit, but kept one eye on Bill Compton, wondering if there was any truth to his suppositions about Eric Northman.

What *was* true was that Andre had never much liked the Viking – and had even tried to talk his maker out of selecting him as a sheriff. There was a level of confidence – arrogance – in Northman that rubbed Andre, who was used to being the alpha-male in any given situation, the wrong way.

He also didn’t like the amount of freedom Sophie-Anne allowed the thousand-year-old sheriff to have. From his little serfdom, Northman was in position to go rogue very easily, and – despite Sophie-Anne’s ability to select effective spies – planting a good one in Northman’s territory had been downright impossible! It seemed that the Viking could sniff out subterfuge like a Were could sniff out a bone. Andre also suspected that Northman had a number of powerful allies, vampires who could help him with a coup.

Andre frowned. He'd always been of the philosophy that Sophie-Anne should have no sheriffs capable of overthrowing her monarchy. But he knew that Eric Northman could – if he wanted.

When he wanted.

His maker and queen, on the other hand, relied on her instincts – sometimes a little too much for Andre's comfort. Although those instincts had not been inaccurate in any “un-life-threatening” way – *yet* – there was always the possibility that it could happen.

A possibility that – to Andre's way of thinking – became more *probability* with each passing decade.

And it was his job to keep his maker safe in case of such an eventuality.

Lately, he'd become more and more concerned that such a situation might be stirring. Call it his own instincts.

He frowned. His concern had begun the year before when his maker had allowed herself to become enamored with Hadley to the point that he questioned some of her decisions.

The situation with the telepath was only one of them. Andre had gently – and then more strongly – suggested that *he* be the one to make contact with Sookie Stackhouse himself. Sophie-Anne, he knew, would not allow him to *force* the woman to serve at court, but Andre knew well that every human had a price that was just short of force. And he was not above using – and following through with – threats to get what Sophie-Anne needed.

And what he *felt* that she needed.

As Sophie-Anne's protector, he didn't give a fuck if he had to step on toes to achieve whatever was required to keep people from stepping on his maker's toes! He felt confident that he could have secured the telepath and arranged for the entire Stackhouse family to visit the court within hours of approaching them.

But – due to Hadley's yarns – Sophie-Anne had become enamored with the idea of matchmaking for the “poor, lonely telepath.” Though tired of Bill herself, the queen had posited that he'd be perfect for Hadley's cousin, based upon everything the simple girl had shared. So happy and “in love” herself, Sophie-Anne had decided that an “in-love” Sookie Stackhouse would readily move to court to be with *her* vampire.

Andre had dropped his preferences on the matter for the most part – though he *had* been able to convince the queen not to tell Northman about the telepath's existence. Andre figured – and it looked like he'd done so correctly – that Eric would claim the telepath as an asset of Area 5, which meant that Sophie-Anne would have to go through him to get access to the telepath.

Andre scoffed. He had always had disdain for the conventions that allowed sheriffs (or Lords – in the Old World) to have their own “independent” retinues. He was a believer in the idea that all subjects in the state should – by right – belong to the Queen first! But the Vampire Council thought differently.

He frowned as he recalled just *why* his plans to keep the knowledge of the telepath from Northman had failed: Compton's incompetence. But – as the younger vampire finished feeding (and receiving a blow job) – the Lieutenant decided that

Compton might still have a purpose left in his miserable existence. Indeed, Andre resolved that he would use Compton for his own benefit—*and as his spy*—for as long as Compton remained in the queen’s realm.

Oh—Andre wasn’t foolish enough to believe that Compton’s “spin” on things would be completely accurate. However, he was also not foolish enough to deny the usefulness of a self-serving puppet. After all, vampires like Compton were nothing if not predictable.

And exploitable.

Andre knew how to exploit.

And—unlike his maker and Queen—he had no qualms about doing so.

MEANWHILE

As soon as Sigebert left the throne room with Hadley, the queen looked at—*looked to*—Wybert, who was, in many ways, her most trusted child.

Andre sometimes had his own agendas, though he generally kept them in check enough to not be “checked” by his maker.

Sigebert was an excellent child, but lacked much humor or self-motivation, having looked—during his human life—to his brother for guidance and having looked—during his vampire life—to his maker.

Hadley, Sophie-Anne speculated, would turn out to be a wonderful child, but she’d been turned for love and companionship, rather than as any kind of asset in business or politics.

Yes – Wybert, of all of her children, was the one she could count on as a sounding board.

A completely honest one.

“I think Compton is full of horseshit! And I also believe that he’s obsessed with Sookie Stackhouse,” she shared.

“I agree,” Wybert responded.

“But he *is* a subject of Louisiana, and I cannot kill him without cause. Or even torture him,” she pouted.

Wybert chuckled. “Unfortunately, I agree with that assessment as well. His not informing you that he was leaving Louisiana could be punished with a fine, but it would not justify torture or death.”

Sophie-Anne frowned. “I have a feeling that Bill will push things with Miss Stackhouse – that he will attempt to continue his relationship with her, even if she is unwilling.”

“Ah, yes. But – at that point – he *will* have disobeyed a *direct* order,” Wybert observed.

“And then we can silver him,” the queen giggled. “But – for now – I worry that his antics might be causing the wrong people to get the wrong idea about me.”

“Northman,” Wybert said with a nod of agreement.

“Him and – perhaps – Russell Edgington,” she sighed, even as she took a secure phone out of her pocket. She smiled to herself, recalling how she’d glamoured her favorite dressmaker so that he would begin putting pockets into her gowns. Indeed,

pockets in dresses was quickly becoming a trend – one that Sophie-Anne felt certain that she was responsible for.

She dialed King Russell's direct line.

"Hello?" came Talbot's cheery voice.

Sophie-Anne smiled to herself. She knew that – as she'd done with Hadley – Russell had found a long-term companion with Talbot. The only question she had was whether or not the king would turn his lover.

"Talbot, dear, this is Queen Sophie-Anne," she greeted. "Is your master handy?"

"Oh, he's *all* hands right now," Talbot giggled, even as Sophie-Anne heard the king growl playfully in the background.

Not a moment later, Russell took the phone.

"Dearest Sophie-Anne! To what do I owe the pleasure of your call?"

The queen sighed. "I'm afraid I have news that you might not find welcome. In his debriefing tonight, William Compton admitted that his maker had begun a V-distribution business in your territory. She was using a particular group of Weres – a clan of nomadic, feral bikers – to do her dirty work."

"That *is* troubling news," Russell said. "I appreciate your letting me know."

"Well – we *are* allies," she responded carefully. "The giving of such news is a given between us."

"Yes, of course," the king said evenly.

Sophie-Anne looked at Wybert and shook her head a little. Her instincts told her that she needed to put a bit more work into her relationship with her neighboring king.

“I hear that you recently met Louisiana’s telepath,” she ventured.

“Yes, though I was unaware of *what* she was while she was here. Otherwise, I might have tried to poach her,” the king laughed.

Sophie-Anne’s eyebrow lifted. “Fair game?” she asked him.

“Not really. It seemed evident enough that she had been claimed already – by more than one vampire,” he returned somewhat guardedly.

“Has she claimed anyone in return?” the queen asked.

“Why ask me?” Russell challenged. “She is in *your* state, after all.”

Sophie-Anne looked again to Wybert, who nodded slightly. Through their telepathic bond, he “tapped” out his support for her continuing on with Russell.

Ambitious on her behalf, Andre would have encouraged her to end the call without acknowledging that she was at a disadvantage to her neighbor. However, Sophie-Anne did not agree that allowing a *little* vulnerability to show with Russell was necessarily a bad thing. Indeed, the elder king had no designs on her state and would be less likely to develop them as long as relatively open lines of communication and free trade existed between Louisiana and Mississippi.

Thus, she volunteered some information that Russell wanted – in order to fish for some information that she needed. “I believe that it is possible that – in sending Mr. Compton to assess Miss Stackhouse in Area 5 – I *may* have caused a few unintentional problems.”

“Oh?” Russell asked.

Sophie-Anne rolled her eyes at Russell's own obvious fishing, but she gave the king what he desired: gossip.

"Miss Stackhouse is my new child's cousin, and I'd hoped to provide the telepath with a love interest that might convince her to give court life a try," she said honestly. "Bill seemed to fit the bill—if you will forgive the bad pun."

"Bad pun forgiven," Russell chuckled. "And *mazel tov* on your new child. I'd intended to send a card."

"And plan a party!" Talbot added excitedly.

Sophie-Anne smiled slightly as Wybert nodded; the queen knew she wasn't "out of the woods" with her neighbor yet, but she was getting there. As for how the king knew about Hadley? Well—she wasn't an idiot. Sophie-Anne knew that Russell had spies in her court; in fact, she even knew who they were, but—since he was an ally—she didn't mind them.

Indeed, she only *limited* the access of her allies' spies within her court. It was her enemies' spies that she dealt with violently. Such tolerance versus intolerance was par for the course among the vampire monarchs. All knew of the possible losses to be suffered or the "open-mindedness" to be found within the courts into which they sent their spies.

"Russell, since you are aware of the telepath, I could use your counsel on a delicate matter," the queen ventured.

"I am at your service," the king responded with interest.

Wybert gave his queen another encouraging "tap."

“I was initially persuaded to circumvent Eric regarding the telepath’s existence, though I am now,” Sophie-Anne paused, “second-guessing that decision.”

The line was silent for a moment. “One such as Northman *might* view such a slight in a negative light,” he finally said.

“Might?” she asked.

“I would,” Russell returned firmly. “And I believe that the Viking feels slights of honor as I do.”

“That is what I thought,” Sophie-Anne sighed with resignation.

“Did Andre convince you to sidestep your sheriff?” the king asked knowingly.

Sophie-Anne did not respond directly to his question; instead, she took on a lighter, more joking tone. “What can I say? Sometimes I’m a greedy bitch!”

Russell laughed loudly. “Yes. But it’s clear that you know when to stifle that part of your personality.”

The queen chuckled along with the king. “Yes. It also seems clear that I will need to speak with my sheriff to clear up any misunderstandings.”

“I cannot speak to that with certainty,” Russell responded diplomatically. “But it is better to be safe than sorry with someone like the Viking.”

“I’m still not willing to sell his contract to you,” Sophie-Anne said with a wicked grin, even as she relaxed. Her instincts *and* Russell’s tone told her that she’d nipped in the bud any issues that the Bill/Lorena debacle had created with the king.

“Goodnight, Sophie-Anne,” Russell said, intuiting – correctly – that the purpose of the call had been accomplished.

“Get back to your dinner,” the queen returned, hanging up the phone.

“That went well,” Wybert observed, even as the queen dialed again.

“Yes. Let us hope that this next call goes just as well.”

CHAPTER 14: Patch It Up

We've got to patch it up baby

Before we fall apart at the seams

We've got to patch it up baby

We can't let time unravel our dreams

— Songwriters: Eddie Rabbitt / Rory Bourke

SHREVEPORT

Eric tensed as he noted the New Orleans area code on his caller ID. Few people knew the number of his private line; most of them were members of the court.

“Northman,” he said as a greeting.

“Eric,” the queen responded. “I have just had an interesting conversation with William Compton.”

“Oh?” Eric asked, trying to keep any tension out of his tone.

“He believes that you are undermining me at every turn and compelling the telepath, Sookie Stackhouse, to reject him. He also believes that you intend to use her gifts to help you overthrow me,” the queen stated, seemingly laying all her cards — *Bill’s* cards — on the table.

“He is misguided — and mistaken. About all,” the Viking responded.

“I have faith that he is,” Sophie-Anne returned after a moment.

“Do you?” Eric questioned. “Do you still have faith that I am a loyal sheriff?” he added, putting some of his own cards out there.

“Apologies are not my strongpoint, Eric. You know that,” Sophie-Anne said after a few moments of tense silence. “That being said, I ought to have made contact with the telepath – with Sookie – through you.”

“Instead of sending Compton to poach her from my territory?” Eric asked, now barely keeping his anger in check.

There was a pause. “Bill was sent to inventory her potential as an asset to my court,” she admitted. “And – for the record – had she proven to be so, I *would* have compensated you.”

“But not tell me beforehand?” he asked.

“I was persuaded not to inform you,” she relented.

“By Andre,” Eric growled.

“Yes,” she answered honestly. “Given my plans to offer a settlement if the telepath ended up in Area 1, I went along with his suggestion. He needs such victories, Eric. You – as a good maker – know this well.”

“He is paranoid!” Eric retorted. “And that paranoia – left unchecked – might damage us all one day.”

“My child is *my* business,” Sophie-Anne growled.

“Yet he is interfering in mine,” the Viking said steadily.

The line was silent for almost a minute.

Eric couldn't help but to wonder if Sophie-Anne was conferring with Andre even then. More ideal would be if the queen was with Wybert. Though the Saxon kept his cards close to the vest, the Viking had known the warrior long enough to recognize both his mental and physical aptitude. Though not as cunning as Andre, Wybert was much wiser in the counsel he would provide to the queen.

And he wasn't an asshole like his older brother.

Finally, the queen spoke. "I will not allow my child's desires to cause me to circumvent your authority in the future, Sheriff Northman."

"Thank you. I do not like circumvention."

"I believe you would not have minded so much—had you not discovered a personal stake in Bill's venture."

"I suspect not," Eric relented. "But I did."

"I am beginning to understand that," the queen said diplomatically.

"On that note, I have a complaint about Bill Compton's overall treatment of Miss Stackhouse," he said firmly.

"I am listening," the queen said with interest.

"He seduced Sookie, which I believe was a part of your instructions to him; however, he acted much more like a stalker and an abuser than a suitor! And—when Lorena called—he arranged for me to see to her safety."

"Bill did not tell me that," she returned.

"I'd venture to guess there are *many* things he did not tell you," Eric growled.

“I am inclined to agree,” the queen stated. “And I have ordered him to leave Miss Stackhouse alone.”

“Sookie is *mine* now anyway,” the Viking informed, his tone leaving no room for argument – or negotiation.

“She has accepted your claim then?” the queen asked.

“Yes – in both personal life and as business partners,” the Viking stated. “She will be starting a business and offering her telepathy for hire,” he added resolutely.

The line was silent for a moment. “You feared that I would take her by force and misuse her,” the queen said with some regret in her tone. “I cannot blame you for that assumption – wrong as it may be – given the way I introduced Bill into the picture.” She sighed. “I suppose that sharing her with the world is your way of keeping me and others from exploiting her for ourselves.”

“I would never have thought you capable of that kind of exploitation *before*,” the Viking specified.

“I am still not,” the queen returned with a bit of annoyance. “But I will forgive you for your current lack of faith. After all, I am responsible for the first slight in this scenario,” she owned. “Let me assure you – now – that I will not attempt to take her from you.”

“I wouldn’t let her be taken,” Eric returned with just a touch of threat in his tone.

“Then we are agreed,” the queen said, ignoring that threat. “I would hope to be a preferred client on Sookie’s list,” she stated more than requested.

“You are, of course, at the top of the list,” he returned.

“That is good to know,” the queen said, her tone slightly more relaxed. “Hadley is my child now. Do you know that she is Sookie’s cousin?”

“Sookie and I pieced together Hadley’s connection with you a few nights ago,” he confirmed. “Are we correct that it was she who told you of Sookie’s gift?”

“Yes,” Sophie-Anne relayed. “And – in a way – Hadley is responsible for *how* I went about making contact with your Sookie. She mentioned that love had eluded Miss Stackhouse, so I ventured into matchmaking.”

Eric was silent for a moment.

“Bill was an unworthy candidate. He’s caused her harm,” the Viking stated with barely-controlled rage resonating through the phone line.

“I thought he would be harmless to her,” Sophie-Anne relayed softly. “I misjudged.”

“Yes! You did.”

“I know he attacked Sookie in the trunk,” the queen said cautiously.

“He’s done *more* than that,” the Viking returned angrily.

To her credit, Sophie-Anne continued to respond to her subordinate’s anger in a composed tone. “Like I said, Compton’s been ordered to desist regarding the telepath, though he will need to contact Sookie one more time in order to reclaim another project he’s been working on for me.”

“The database,” Eric practically spit out.

“Yes. A prototype,” the queen responded casually. “I was thinking about testing the waters with it.”

“It is a dangerous idea. Is it Andre’s?” he asked.

“Eric, you are my favorite sheriff, so I want you to be careful,” she warned sternly. “Whether I go forward with the database or not is my decision. Not yours *or* my child’s.”

“I cannot imagine that it would be taken well by vampires of power,” Eric returned.

The queen didn’t respond for a moment. “Write up a report regarding your concerns,” she finally said. “Contrary to what you might believe about me right now, I *am* open to your counsel and would not have gone forward with the release of the database until I’d had it and the opinions of others I trust.”

“That is heartening to hear. However, Sookie no longer has the database in her possession. I do.”

“Thus, you could destroy it. Or have you already?” Sophie-Anne asked, her voice neutral in a way that indicated that Eric had better tread carefully.

“I haven’t, and I won’t,” he decided.

The line was silent for a moment.

Eric speculated that Sophie-Anne was wise enough to know that he’d chosen not to destroy the Pandora’s Box because of her willingness to consider his ideas on the matter. In truth, she had – in the past – valued his opinion greatly, despite Andre’s hesitation in her seeking it. Eric hoped that the queen was being honest about continuing to trust in his counsel and his loyalty.

Especially since he'd never given her a reason to doubt him – despite what Andre may have imagined.

“Wybert’s opinion is that the database ought not to be released beyond the palace walls,” the queen finally shared with her sheriff.

“And Andre is likely filling your head with all the profits that can be made from it,” the sheriff hypothesized, “even as Sigebert simply assures you that he’ll implement your will – with a sword if necessary.”

“You have learned my children almost as well as I have,” she said with a much more relaxed tone than before. “You *are* my ally, Eric.” She seemed to take a breath. “I would inform you of Bill’s pursuit of Sookie – *if* I had the situation to relive,” she stated, falling just short of a direct apology.

The Viking noticed also that Sophie-Anne didn’t admit that sending Bill had been a mistake in the first place.

But – for Eric – the half-apology was enough.

“Do you want for me to give Compton the database?” he asked.

She chuckled. “I imagine you intend to copy it first.”

Eric was silent.

“Do not fret; I would expect nothing less of you, and knowing what is inside of the database will enable you to better formulate your report for me. However, be aware that I may very well still release the product,” she warned.

“I understand,” he responded.

“I know,” she returned meaningfully. “And – regarding the database – as I indicated, Bill intends to approach Sookie and ask that she return it to him. You may feel free to stop him from seeing her and let him know that he will have to go through *you* to get the item back – when you are finished with it, of course.”

“She wishes to see him – to confront him – at the end of the week,” Eric informed, “to gain closure. Until then, I’ve threatened him with the true death if he contacts her in any way.”

“I see,” Sophie-Anne stated. “Then let him stew about the database until he meets with her. You will,” she paused, “protect her from him?”

Eric let the surprise show on his face since the queen could not see him. That she sincerely seemed to care for Sookie’s safety and wellbeing was something he’d not anticipated.

“My child loves her cousin – you see,” Sophie-Anne continued, her words coming quickly as if in explanation. “She loves Jason too and was heart-broken about the grandmother’s death. Even in her new life, Hadley carries much shame because her actions caused their estrangement. She has hoped for a reconciliation.”

“I will protect Sookie Stackhouse from *all* threats,” Eric said once the queen had finished her explanation.

“Good,” the queen affirmed. “I know that you will have things well in hand regarding one such as Compton.”

“Yes, though he seems determined to make himself a nuisance. I doubt that he will bow out gracefully when she cuts him irrevocably from her life.”

“Let us hope – for *his* sake – that he abides by her wishes,” Sophie-Anne stated thoughtfully. “If he does not, it will indicate that he has ignored a direct order – from me.”

Eric could hear a masculine growl coming from the queen’s end of the call.

“I will be sure to inform you then if – *when* – he disobeys. And please tell Wybert hello from me.”

The Saxon grunted.

“How you can tell them apart so easily – even from something as simple as a sound – has always amused me,” the queen laughed.

The Viking chuckled as well, feeling much lighter, given the nature of his call with his queen. In truth, he’d not wanted to think the worst of Sophie-Anne regarding Sookie. Though he wasn’t pleased with her methods and he certainly didn’t fully trust Andre, he did believe that the queen would not wish to abuse another woman.

Manipulating Sookie to suit her needs – as long as Sookie was *mostly* unharmed? Well – that was another story. However, that particular plotline had now been closed to Sophie-Anne, and the queen was taking that news better than Eric had anticipated.

Or hoped.

“I’d like to meet Miss Stackhouse soon – perhaps a month or so after the New Year? Hadley really does wish to reconnect with both of her cousins as soon as they are accepting of the idea,” Sophie-Anne said, breaking the Viking from his thoughts.

“Compton was supposed to have begun arranging such a meeting.”

“I am sure that did not happen,” the Viking shared.

The queen scoffed. "I'm sure it did not. And – Northman – if it aids you or Miss Stackhouse, you have my permission to expel Compton from Area 5."

Again, Eric let his surprise show on his face. "I will keep that in mind, your majesty. And I will tell Sookie that Hadley wishes to meet with her and Jason Stackhouse," Eric responded. "But – even if the siblings are not ready for that – Sookie and I will come to New Orleans for work."

"Can the trip be arranged for when the Arkansas King's contingent is here?" the queen asked. "I'd like to know what Peter Threadgill's motives are for seeking a marriage alliance with me."

"Surely Arkansas doesn't have enough to offer to tempt you," Eric ventured.

"Perhaps not, but an alliance with a neighboring state often comes with unforeseen benefits. It was before your time in Louisiana, but you have to have heard about Russell and my marriage alliance from the 1830s to 1930s; I believe it is what kept our kingdoms intact while the humans ravaged one another in the war Compton fought in."

"I *have* heard that the marriage was an advantageous one," Eric returned.

Sophie-Anne chuckled. "Do not tell anyone, but Russell and I forewent all but the first conjugal requirement, as well as the yearly sharing of blood. But the shared business ventures between us increased both of our wealth. The shipping business we were able to maintain throughout the war alone was enough to fill our coffers for centuries! I would offer another alliance to him, but I suspect Russell has his eyes set on

Indiana. Indeed – now that I think about it – he is hoping to have his blood and eat it too,” she giggled.

“Your majesty?” Eric questioned her sudden girlish sound.

“I was just wondering when Russell would turn his human lover. I have heard that he is exceedingly fond of young Talbot. However, Indiana is quite handsome. Together, the two would offer Russell the best of both worlds.”

Eric chuckled. “You are right about that. And I see no problem with bringing Sookie to court when Peter Threadgill’s contingent is there – as long as it is understood that myself and other guards of our choosing will be accompanying her.”

“Of course,” she confirmed her understanding of the situation. “I really do look forward to meeting her,” she said. “I’ll have someone call you about the logistics.”

“I will be waiting,” Eric said, his words conveying multiple meanings, which he knew that the queen would not miss.

He would be waiting for the queen’s call to set up the trip. But he would also be waiting to confirm that Sophie-Anne was actually “innocent” of malignant intentions towards Sookie. And – more than that – he’d be waiting to make sure that Andre didn’t cause trouble.

NEW ORLEANS

Sophie-Anne hung up the phone with a slight nod in Wybert’s direction.

“Is the sheriff satisfied?” her child asked.

“Mostly,” Sophie-Anne confirmed, “though it will take a while before I earn his full trust again.”

“Whose trust?” Andre asked as he entered the throne room.

“I phoned Sheriff Northman to assuage any unease on his part regarding the telepath,” the queen stated, giving her child a look that let him know that she did not want to hear any displeasure at her actions.

“Oh?” Andre asked, keeping his voice steady, though his maker — of course — could feel that he disagreed with her smoothing things over with Eric. “How was the conversation? Anything enlightening come from it?”

“Actually, I learned that Bill may have done Miss Stackhouse substantially more harm than he told us about. Also, Eric indicated that the telepath has accepted his claim.”

“And you believe him?” Andre asked.

“Yes,” Sophie-Anne said simply.

“Would you like for me to go to Bon Temps? To confirm the telepath’s preferences?” Andre asked.

“No. I do not think so,” the queen said contemplatively. “Indeed, we shall meet Miss Stackhouse soon enough. She is to start a telepathy-for-hire business in the near future, and Eric has agreed to bring her to New Orleans to work when Threadgill’s contingent is here.”

“A business?” Andre asked suspiciously. “It seems Compton was right. Northman is clearly using the telepath for his own profit and purposes.” He scoffed. “We will be lucky if he allows us her services at all,” he added sarcastically.

“I believe the business is a safety measure for Miss Stackhouse – and a sage one,” Sophie-Anne returned calmly. “And let us wait to gage how Sheriff Northman will hire her out – shall we? It is quite possible that we will be first on her clientele list – just as Eric assured me not ten minutes ago.”

“You should have waited until I was here before speaking with him,” Andre practically pouted. “I might have heard deception in his tone.”

Sophie-Anne stroked her eldest child’s cheek to soothe his rising passion. “Do not fear, dear child. I had Wybert here, and – as you know – it is his ears that are best at sussing out deception over the phone. And – do not forget – my ears are even better than your brother’s,” she winked at her eldest, purposely keeping her mood playful.

Andre could not help but to be soothed a bit. “I worry for you, my mistress.”

“I know, dear child,” she smiled. “And I love you for it. But I need you to trust me in this situation. I know that things did not go as you would have wished in this situation, but things are as they are now.”

“You should have the telepath *here*. Such creatures are too rare not to be used by a queen or king,” Andre said with a stubborn air about him.

“I will be able to hire her for her services, and you know that such an arrangement suits my own sensibilities better than *other* alternatives,” she said

significantly. Indeed, Andre – above all others – knew just how abused his maker had been before she'd turned him.

The child nodded. "Yes, mistress. I will trust your judgement."

"Thank you, child," she said, leaning forward to kiss his lips chastely. The two rarely engaged in sexual intercourse anymore, but their intimacy with each other had only grown stronger in other ways.

"You heard no duplicity on Northman's part?" Andre asked over the queen's shoulder.

"None," Wybert confirmed.

"See?" Sophie-Anne smiled. "All is well."

Andre nodded with acceptance.

Yes – he would accept his maker's wishes regarding Northman and the telepath *for now*.

But he was glad to have his spy deployed nonetheless.

CHAPTER 15: Starting Today

And when memories haunt me

And the tears start to flow

I'll just think of the sorrow

You caused me to know

— Songwriters: Donald Robertson

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 15, 2004

Sookie woke up to the sound of peace and quiet, but jettted upright because she feared she'd missed her alarm clock. She was, unsurprisingly, scheduled for a double-shift at Merlotte's: both the noon to 6:00 p.m. and the 6:00 p.m. to close shifts.

"Shifty f-in shifter," she grumbled, exhaling a puff of morning breath just to spite her cantankerous boss.

She glanced at her alarm clock and blinked in surprise when it indicated only 8:37 a.m. She hadn't missed her alarm after all, but felt too rested to have slept for only 6 and a half hours.

"But I'll take it," she said with a grateful sigh, even as she pushed her telepathy outward. Maria-Star was—from the position of her brain—on the porch. A "new Were brain," Mustapha, was with her, as was a human—Warren.

Sookie immediately zeroed in on the human's brain since his thoughts were easier for her to read. Clearly, the two men had arrived not long before, and Maria-Star was giving them information about their guarding schedules and their temporary housing.

Warren turned his thoughts away from the conversation when they began arranging a time for Mustapha to officially check in with Colonel Flood as a "temporary resident" of Long Tooth. The telepath "read" from the human that his beloved had been "forced" to exist as a "lone wolf" for a while – ever since his original pack had expelled him because of his sexual preference for men. Long Tooth had no such restrictions on gay members – something which Warren was greatly relieved about.

Sookie could literally "see" when Warren went into "sniper mode," for his thoughts seemed to be photographing the landscape as his eyes moved to catalogue potential "nests" for himself. And when he zeroed in on a tall maple tree toward the cemetery, his vision seemed to actually magnify the spot.

"Telephoto vision? Cool," Sookie muttered as she cast her own "special vision" outward even farther. A Were and Onawa were just within her range, but on opposite sides of the property. For the unknown Were, Sookie pushed even more, and – though she was too far away to pick up his exact thoughts – she did establish his "mood." He was bored.

Likely, he was from Long Tooth, but Sookie would "keep an ear on him" until she could confirm that supposition with Maria-Star.

Meanwhile, she picked up that the leader of “*her* day guards” (a label that she still wasn’t 100% comfortable with) was instructing Warren to take a defensive position and ordering Mustapha to relieve Onawa on the south side of the property so that the shifter could get a couple hours of sleep before going with Sookie to Merlotte’s.

Satisfied that all was in hand with her security, Sookie got out of bed and stretched on her way to the bathroom. Twenty minutes later, she was showered and dressed in flannel pajama pants and a long-sleeved T-shirt—since she still had more than two hours before she had to leave for Merlotte’s.

She found herself sporting a smile—despite her long day ahead—as she half-skipped toward the kitchen to start coffee. Her talk with Eric the night before had left her feeling *joyful*—for lack of a better word.

It had been nice to have someone to share a sliver of her life with; of course, she’d shared aspects with Tara, Jason, and especially Gran—and Bill. She regretted the last of these, but she found herself grateful that talking *to* Bill had never “felt” the same as speaking *with* Eric. She smirked as she wondered if her Word-of-the-Day calendar would ever have a page on the prepositions “to” and “with.”

“There really is a difference,” she sighed to herself as she poured some cereal into a bowl. To talk *to* someone, as she’d done with Bill, seemed almost one-sided, and—looking back—she knew that she often hadn’t felt “heard” by the first man in her life. To speak *with* someone, as she was doing with Eric, was so much more of an exchange. She felt just as listened to as she was listening. And the interaction between them seemed equal in a way that she’d never fully enjoyed with anyone.

With her family and friends, she'd always held back. A part of her had been worried that they'd – one day – find her *too* abnormal to keep putting up with. Not to mention the fact that she'd not wanted to worry them with her daily pains and struggles.

With Bill, she'd not held back. She'd put herself out there, praying to God that he'd love her for who she was. It had been *Bill* who had held back. Either by outright lies or omissions, Bill had been the reason why the couple had never truly spoken *with* each other.

Her musings were interrupted when Maria-Star knocked at her back door. Sookie put the milk away and hurried through the mud porch.

“Hey!” the telepath said brightly. “Good morning!”

Maria-Star was all business. “Mustapha and Warren are here. They have entered the guard rotation. Onawa and Willow will be accompanying you when you go to Merlotte’s.”

Sookie laughed.

The Were frowned. “What is funny?” she asked in a no-nonsense tone that rivaled Thalia’s.

“Just the thought you just had. Uh – sorry for invading,” Sookie stammered. “It’s just that I’m trying to use my ability more.”

Maria-Star nodded approvingly. “It is good that you are doing that. Good for you *and* the functionality of your guards. And – for the record – I cannot help but to

think that I would kick Merlotte in the balls if I were the one stationed at Merlotte's again. Yesterday, he behaved like an animal," she smirked.

Sookie snorted out another laugh. "Animal! *That's* the funny part!"

"As I was saying," Maria-Star went back into business mode, "Onawa and Willow are likely to cause fewer issues than the men in the guard contingent, given Merlotte's possessive nature."

Sookie's eyes opened widely. "Eric is the one who suggested sending female guards!" she read from Maria-Star's thoughts.

The Were scoffed. "Sending males would have been more amusing and would have likely forced the shifter to say that 'one more thing' that would have made you quit," she said, her eyes flashing yellow at the thought. "However, Mr. Northman has made it very clear to Thalia and myself that your contentment is second only to your safety."

Sookie smiled to herself at Eric's thoughtfulness.

"Your work guards will be here at 11:45 a.m. to drive you to Merlotte's. I'll make periodic patrols of the woods surrounding the area, but both of them will be staying inside the bar with you for the most part. I believe that you have stated that you will no longer interact with your shifter boss alone – correct?"

"Yeah," Sookie sighed with a hint of regret. She hated that her relationship with Sam had come to that, but that's where he'd put it.

"In that case, one of your guards will impede any such private interaction. Other than that, they have been ordered to watch and protect only."

The telepath nodded in understanding.

“Mr. Northman would like to know if you would be willing to receive a visitor this morning. He instructed that this be given to you.”

Sookie took the note as Maria-Star turned her back. “Just yell out a ‘yes’ or a ‘no’ when you have your answer. I will hear.”

“Oh—okay. Uh—Maria Star?”

“Yes?” the Were asked, turning around again.

Sookie closed her eyes and got a bead on the Were brain she’d not “recognized.” “There’s a Were about two football’s field’s worth in that direction,” she indicated by pointing. “Is that one of your people?”

Maria-Star smiled almost sinisterly. “You have an amazing talent, Miss Stackhouse. It is an honor to be your guard.”

“I’ll take that as a ‘yes,’” the telepath blushed, even as Maria-Star turned back toward to woods. “And you can be as formal in your work as you want, but call me Sookie while doin’ it,” she requested firmly.

The telepath noticed a slight head nod of affirmation from the Were before she turned to go inside to escape the chill in the air. She quickly filled a coffee cup and sat down with her cereal before opening the note.

She smiled as she saw Eric’s neat, somewhat old-timey-looking handwriting.

Dearest Sookie,

I flew by your home in the pre-dawn hour to check in with Thalia, but you were already asleep, and I didn't want to awaken you—even though I have encouraging news for you. I spoke with the queen last night, and during the course of our conversation, she confirmed that she had employed Compton—just as we'd thought. It seems that she wanted him to "court you" because she felt it would be the easiest way to secure you into her service, while also creating a "happy" existence for you. Her motives seemed to have been more matchmaker-oriented than malevolent.

Also, as we suspected, she learned of your ability from your cousin, who is now the queen's child as well. I have confirmed with my spy at court that Sophie-Anne genuinely cares for Hadley. It would seem that your cousin wants to reconcile with you and your brother; that is a matter that you can consider and then raise with Jason as you see fit. If you decided to see Hadley, I feel certain that such a meeting could be arranged at any time.

The queen also seemed to accept my claim upon you, though—as I figured—she wants to employ you. I sincerely believe that we no longer have to fear her trying to take you against your will. I knew you would want to hear of this as soon as possible.

Sookie stopped reading for a moment and heaved a sigh of relief. Eric was right. Knowing that there was one less vampire to worry about trying to kidnap her was a very good thing. She kept reading.

I hate to take away some of your relief, but I must.

"Fudge!" Sookie exclaimed, but kept going nonetheless.

One of Sophie-Anne's children, her second-in-command Andre, may not be on board with leaving you in peace. I do not believe he will be so foolish as to challenge my claim of you in an outright manner, but I felt the need to warn you that he might try to undermine us in some covert way. I do not want to cause you unrest, but I promised that I would not hide anything from you unless I had to (or unless I asked your permission to). Despite this cloud, please do take my news as an overall positive, and be comforted. However, you may also be assured that I will be keeping a close enough eye on the royal court to ensure that I am correct about the queen and that I can curb any ill-intentions Andre may have.

Also, I believe I promised you a business plan. However, I thought you might enjoy beginning your training a bit earlier than planned. If so, a messenger will soon arrive with the plan. She is a potential day-person to replace Bobby. If you open the parcel she brings, there is an envelope on top with a list of questions that you can ask her, but I'd suggest you conduct "your" version of an interview before consulting them. I'd hazard to guess that your instincts will yield things that go beyond my questions. If you haven't the time or the desire to conduct this interview, it will wait. Just let Maria-Star know one way or the other. If it is a 'no,' your guard will simply deliver the business plan herself, and you can go on about your day.

I want to reiterate how much I enjoyed speaking with you last night. If you wish to call after your shift, I promise to be awake.

Yours,

Eric

“Mine,” Sookie sighed to herself with a smile, even as she got up to go to the back door. She yelled out, “Yes! But give me twenty minutes to finish breakfast!”

Christa Larrabee, named for her grandmother Christine, was the nineteen-year-old granddaughter of the packmaster who’d been in charge of Long Tooth before Colonel Flood took over.

Over a cup of coffee, Sookie had learned that Christa didn’t mind running errands for Eric—even out in the “sticks.” She also didn’t have anything against vampires in general *or* Sookie in particular. She did, however, have a king-sized crush on Pam, something that seemed innocent enough. But—then again—Bobby’s obsession with Eric may very well have started out as a crush. And Sookie didn’t want for Eric’s child to receive the kind of danger she was trying to keep Eric protected from.

“Though a ‘single-white-female’ for Pam might be funny,” the telepath thought to herself with a smirk.

During her chat with/“secret interview” of Christa, Sookie had also already learned that a Were named Patrick Furnan had visited Christa’s grandmother to

complain about Colonel Flood's leadership. Apparently, Furnan had wanted the job as packmaster – and still did. According to Christa's thoughts, the matriarch of her family had shut down the Were quickly, proclaiming the Larrabee family's support of Flood, but Sookie figured that Eric would still want to know about the potential issue.

"So – are you a messenger full time?" Sookie asked, as if she hadn't already harvested a lot of information from her guest's thoughts.

"No," Christa answered with a smile. "I also go to college part-time, though I'm not sure what I want to major in quite yet."

"Really!" Sookie brightened. "I'm thinking about going to college soon – probably not until the fall though."

"LSU?" the Were asked. "That's where I go! I really like it. It'll be funny – the cool kind of funny – if we ended up in classes together," she bubbled.

Sookie was impressed that the Were was neither judging that Sookie looked too dumb nor thinking that she looked too old to begin college. The telepath could only imagine what Bobby would be thinking! Christa was simply happy for the prospect of having a potential friend in her classes with her.

"That *would* be cool," Sookie agreed, even as she casually opened up the parcel Christa had brought and took out the envelope on top. Just as casually, she opened that envelope and looked at the list of questions.

1. Is her family loyal to Colonel Flood? Or are they supporters of Furnan?
2. Do you think she'd accept long-term employment?

3. Clearly, she knows about the Supernatural, but does she have any animosity towards vampires?
4. Does she have any misgivings whatsoever about the kinds of errands that Bobby clearly feels above doing?

Sookie folded the sheet and put it back in the envelope. "Sorry about that," she smiled. "I just wanted to make sure that these are the documents I thought they were."

Christa smiled. "Oh—don't worry about it. They must be important if Mr. Northman wanted them brought to you right away," she observed, though her mind held no real curiosity about the specific contents of the parcel. Indeed, she felt that it was best—with any work she did for vampires—not to ask any questions.

Sookie could tell that Christa had certain limits—and the Were was a pacifist at heart—but she would clearly be fine doing the kinds of things that Sookie understood day-person duties to be.

"So how long have you worked for Mr. Northman?" Sookie asked.

"Oh—for about six months. I only run a few errands a week for him though—when they're Were-related and/or when his usual day-guy is too busy," she rolled her eyes.

"I see you know Bobby Burnham," Sookie deadpanned.

"I call him Creepy Worm-man," Christa said with a mischievous grin. "And—did you know that he speaks with a British accent? But only sometimes?"

Sookie barely avoided snorting out a drink of coffee before laughing. "That nickname fits him."

“I swear his eyes stay glued to *any* chest in the area,” Christa shared as she took another sip of her coffee. “Even my grandmother’s,” she tagged on, causing Sookie to almost lose her coffee again. “But I haven’t had to deal with him too often – usually just when I have to pick up something from him in order to actually run the errand Mr. Northman needs. Like today,” she smiled. “And – let me tell you – he seemed happy not to have to come out here, though I have no idea why he’d think the drive was too far,” she said, rolling her eyes again. “Anyway, I’m sort of hoping to work for Mr. Northman more often than I already am. I like school and all, but I *really* like the idea of a job where no two days are the same, and – between you and me,” she leaned in, “Mr. Northman pays *really* well, especially to full-time people.”

“Would you keep going to school?” Sookie asked. “If he hired you full-time?” Oddly enough, Sookie didn’t want the young woman to drop out and – thus – lose her opportunity to change her mind about her future profession.

Christa smiled. “That’s the best part about being a part-time student. Even now, I tend to take classes at night, so I don’t think many errands would interfere with them. And most errands can be scheduled around classes anyway. So – yeah – I would finish my degree. If nothing else, it’ll make Granny happy.”

Sookie smiled at that thought, knowing that her own Gran would be happy to know that she was planning to become a part-time student as well.

“Can I ask you a question?” Sookie asked. “It’s sort of personal.”

“Sure!” Christa said with a shrug. “But if it’s too personal, I might not answer.”

“How – uh,” the telepath inquired somewhat hesitantly, “do you deal with a full moon when you have a night class?”

Christa giggled girlishly. “That’s not the kind of question I was expecting. To be honest, classes tend to get out before I really get the itch to shift. And I come from strong stock too,” she proclaimed proudly. “As long as I turn sometime during the night of a full moon – and don’t try to avoid the turn altogether – I have a lot of control. Just like my daddy did!” she added.

Sookie got a momentary flash of a photograph of a handsome young man and an infant. The telepath had to cover up her reaction as she picked up from Christa’s thoughts that the man was Christa’s father. Lieutenant Jeffrey Larrabee had been killed in action in the Middle East before Christa was even a year old. In fact, the only picture of Jeffrey and his daughter was the one that Christa had carefully stored in her memory. Sookie’s mind couldn’t help but to slip to a picture of her father and her that she’d stared at so often that it was similarly memorized. The telepath resisted the urge to pat the young Were on the arm in comfort and empathy.

Christa’s flash of sadness at the father she’d never known was quickly pushed aside as she continued. “I haven’t had any problems with controlling shifts since puberty.” She cringed a little. “Back then, though, it was another story. I got the ‘flu’ every time my school’s basketball team had a full-moon game. And I had to miss my junior prom.”

“Wow!” Sookie exclaimed, having never considered the kinds of ‘growing pains’ that other Supernaturals had to go through. Sure – learning to construct shields might

have been a longer process for her than learning to control her shifts had been for the Were in front of her, but that didn't mean that the process was any less traumatic in the moment.

Christa winked. "Don't worry. Since one of my aunts was in charge of the athletic scheduling at my school, missing a game wasn't a problem too often. And the boyfriend I was going to go to the prom with turned out to be an a-hole!"

Sookie chuckled, before catching a glimpse of the clock on the wall. "Oh dear! I lost track of time! I really hate to send you on your way, but I have to scarf down some lunch and get ready for work. Do you want a sandwich?"

"Oh—no thanks!" Christa said, standing up quickly. "I'd not meant to stay this long, but this is all I have going on today since I took my last final of the semester last week."

"It's fine," Sookie smiled. "It was really good to meet you and chat!"

"Yeah! It was! And I *really* needed the caffeine before driving back," Christa said with a smile, even as she helped Sookie take the coffee items to the kitchen. After that, she made a quick exit—after reiterating that she'd enjoyed her "visit."

"Definitely better than Bobby," Sookie chuckled.

The telepath hurriedly made herself a sandwich and then went to her room to put on her uniform.

"Who knew that training for a job could make me feel this good?" she asked herself, even as she began contemplating converting her brother's old bedroom into an office for both her school and work stuff.

She felt her life changing in a real way. And she really liked that change.

She liked the *feeling* even more.

CHAPTER 16: DON'T ASK ME WHY

You're all I'm longing for (longing for)

Don't say goodbye (don't say goodbye)

I need you more and more

Don't ask me why

– Songwriter: Billy Joel

“Well – at least he’s not plannin’ to hit me over the head with his disapproval today,” Sookie muttered as she unbuckled her seat belt.

“Your shifter boss?” Onawa asked.

“It’s funny hearin’ *you* call him that since you’re a shifter too,” Sookie chuckled, “but to answer your question – ‘yes.’ Right now, Sam’s giving himself a little pep talk. He plans to apologize – *sincerely* – for his behavior yesterday and ask – *nicely* – that I keep my guards – *specifically* Thalia, not that I can totally blame him for that – outside today. As we speak, he’s committing himself to *not* sayin’ anything about my new job *or* vampires today.” The telepath rolled her eyes.

Onawa chuckled, even as she exited the car. Willow had decided to “fly” to Merlotte’s and would be doing a few circuits around the bar and grill before coming inside. Sookie had heard from Onawa’s thoughts that clothing had been left (in

strategic positions) for all of her two-natured guards, so she wasn't worried about the werehawk coming into Merlotte's naked.

"Well – let me go introduce myself and explain that your guards *will* be inside with you today," Onawa winked as she led Sookie in through the back door. The two bypassed Sam's office, as Sookie's purse would simply be left with her guards that day.

Clearly, Sam's sense of smell had alerted him to the presence of another of his kind, and he was watching warily from the bar area as Sookie and Onawa emerged from the back.

"Mornin', Sook," Sam said, though his eyes were on the other shifter.

"Back at you," the telepath greeted.

"Uh – chère, do you mind if we go to my office for a – uh – chat for a bit before you get started?"

Sookie looked around to see that there were only a few customers in the restaurant area. She slowly walked closer to Sam. "After yesterday, I *do* mind – quite a bit," she said quietly. "So – whatever you need to say – you can say here. I've had a bit of vampire blood lately – as you *kindly* pointed out. So my hearing is real good if you want to keep it at a whisper."

Yes, the reminder of the vampire blood might have been a "test" of Sam's good behavior, and the shifter *did* "twitch," but he held his countenance at neutral for the most part.

Sam nodded with resignation. "I just wanted to apologize, *chère*," he said at a low volume. "I overreacted yesterday. I was upset that you had decided to leave me—uh—Merlotte's," he corrected.

"Well, I appreciate the apology," Sookie returned. "But I won't accept it until you put it into practice," she said firmly. "Until then, you'll forgive me if I don't trust your sincerity."

Sam frowned, but nodded. "I deserve that." He looked over Sookie's shoulder. "Who's that?"

"My guard—one of them, at least," she returned. "Her name's Onawa. She and Willow will be inside for most of the day."

Sam's frown deepened. "Not outside? I know there were some that were *outside* yesterday," he emphasized, making it clear that he'd prefer them that way again. "Uh—and I meant to ask you why you needed guards at all," he asked with some real concern.

"*Not outside*," Onawa spoke up, before moving to circle the restaurant as if studying it.

"Guards, *chère*?" Sam asked again after the female shifter had moved away.

"In case shit happens," Sookie said by way of an explanation. She looked at Sam, practically daring him to ask a follow-up question.

Or step that foot—paw—out of line.

He didn't. He simply nodded. "They'd best order something so they don't look too conspicuous," he said, though he didn't say his words in a bitter way.

Sookie nodded. Sam really did think it was a good idea for them to order food and drinks so that their true purpose in the bar wouldn't be suspected as much.

"Thank you, Sam," she said somewhat tersely, though sincerely.

He nodded and gave her a meek smile before getting back to his prepping and – it seemed – sulking.

Meanwhile, Sookie tossed her purse to Onawa, who caught it without looking. Sookie grabbed a clean apron, as the female shifter gave Sam what seemed to be a look of warning before moving toward the back of the restaurant.

Almost as soon as Onawa found the booth she wanted to keep watch from, Willow walked through the front door. She, like the shifter, took a quick look around the restaurant space before going back to the restrooms, likely checking those out too. However, Sookie didn't pay the two guards much more mind after that because a group of six construction workers entered and took her first table of the day.

At 4:30 p.m., Sookie put in an order for her own dinner – knowing from experience that it was better to eat a fuller meal near the end of the first half of a double shift and then catch a light snack sometime after the dinner rush.

She went to refill her guards' drinks as Terry started her food. "Hey, y'all mind if I join you for my break?" she asked.

Willow frowned, while Onawa kept her eyes moving around the restaurant – as if a foe might jump out from behind the jukebox or one of the pockets of the pool table.

"That isn't possible," Onawa stated.

“We have orders from Thalia and Maria-Star not to do anything even resembling socializing with you,” Willow added, her tone apologetic.

Onawa’s eyes fell on Sookie for a moment. “No offense. But I like this job.”

Sookie sighed loudly and shook her head, determined to revisit what qualified as *reasonable socializing* with Eric, Thalia, Maria-Star, and the damned Pope if need be.

But—for that day—she didn’t want to get her guards into trouble or make them uncomfortable.

“That’s okay,” she said with understanding. “Let me know when y’all are ready for dinner though—okay?”

Willow nodded, still looking sorry.

“Not very friendly—huh?” Sam asked when Sookie took her food to the bar to eat it.

It was the first sentence that he’d uttered even approaching thorny since she’d begun her shift.

“Just professional,” she replied succinctly, shutting down any further comments Sam might make by taking a big bite of her sandwich as she pulled out her phone to send a text.

It was her first—ever.

Sam was annoyed that he didn’t have her attention, but he was keeping to his plan of not pushing things with her that day, so he refrained from trying to engage her again as she ate and played with her phone.

After she'd figured out how to send her text and had carefully typed in her message – between bites – she hit send.

It was to Eric: *I enjoyed the training. Will call later with the results.*

For the rest of her break – one which she kept short – she figured out how to add Tara and Jason into her phone as contacts, and she reviewed the number codes for each of the contacts that were already programmed in, memorizing who went with each number.

Not long after she'd finished her meal, Jason came in with Hoyt. Her brother announced loudly that he was there *only* to look after his sister – just in case *dumbasses* were 'on the job' that night. Sookie appreciated her brother's loyalty and quietly laughed to herself when Jason "thought at her" that he *really* wanted a pitcher of beer, but didn't feel right about getting one until Sam apologized.

Deciding to help her brother out, Sookie approached the bar and her boss. "Hey, Sam?"

"Yeah, chère!" the shifter responded hopefully, as it was the first time she'd initiated a conversation with him all day.

"You should apologize to Jason so that he can order some beer," she informed quietly.

"Apologize?" Sam asked.

Sookie rolled her eyes. "You apologized to me. Sayin' you're sorry to him for insinuating that I am a slut who'd mess around with any *and all* vampires I know would go a long way toward proving you were sincere about that apology."

Sam looked like he might argue, but decided against it, even as he started pouring a pitcher. Sookie read from her boss's mind that he figured an apology would be both easier to give and to receive if it were accompanied by free booze.

The telepath figured he was right.

More amusing than Sam's stuttering – and quite lame – explanation and apology for his behavior the night before – really? low blood sugar? – was the fact that Hoyt and Jason both zeroed in on her guards as “romantic interests” within moments of starting their beers and ordering food from Sookie.

As amusing as it was watching Onawa shut down Jason with a sneer and Willow deny Hoyt with an apologetic wink, Sookie let the guys “off the hook” by telling them that the two were her guards and wouldn't socialize at all while working.

True to character, with that information in hand, Jason practically yelled a “loaded” question across the restaurant, “When do y'all pretty ladies *get off?*”

Onawa smirked at the double meaning, but said nothing.

Meanwhile, Hoyt and Willow blushed almost matching shades of crimson, though it took them both a few seconds to get the *joke* and do it.

After that, Jason and Hoyt tucked into their food, and Onawa and Willow continued their almost-silent watching. Sookie found herself wondering if the “no socializing” rule extended to *within* the guard group itself.

With about fifteen minutes left until sunset, Sookie's two-natured guards ordered food for six to go and then left Merlotte's with it as soon as Thalia strode in.

Sookie was momentarily amused as Jason and Hoyt looked childlike with the departure of her day guards, as if someone had stolen their GI Joes or something.

The telepath chuckled, but then tensed for a few minutes as Thalia and Sam had a Supernatural staring contest. Thankfully – after a while – things calmed down again as the restaurant got busier.

In fact, a lot of people had come to Merlotte's hoping for a repeat of the drama of the night before, but – much to Sookie's relief – no such drama happened. Happily, that didn't stop the tips from flowing, and she and Holly enjoyed a bounty that night.

By the time Sookie made last call at 12:45 a.m., all the customers had vacated Merlotte's except for a weary-looking Hoyt, who'd been joined by his gossip-hungry mother (whom Sookie was beginning to suspect never slept); Jason, who'd found consolation for Onawa leaving in the form of a pretty two-natured young woman named Crystal; and Jane Bodehouse, who seemed to be flirting with an empty bottle of rum that Sam had absentmindedly left on the counter before going to his office to start his paperwork.

Sookie hadn't had the heart to move it, though she *had* called Marvin to come and collect his mother.

With Sam on his best behavior, Holly had left at 11:00 p.m., and Terry already had the kitchen looking ready to go for the next day.

All in all, it had been a great day at work!

Yet Sookie had *not* wanted to be there for any of it.

And it was that revelation that started the telepath's feet heading toward Sam's office. "Terry – watch things up here – will you?" she asked as she passed the kitchen.

The cook nodded and grunted out what sounded like, "Sure."

Of course, Sookie was cut off in the hallway before she could get to Sam's office.

Thalia said nothing – simply looking at Sookie with a raised eyebrow.

"I need to talk to Sam," Sookie said with some sadness in her tone. "And I'd like to *try* it alone – though I'll leave the door open."

The vampiress seemed to study the telepath's features for a moment before giving her an almost imperceptible nod.

Sookie nodded her appreciation and took a deep breath before continuing to Sam's office. She could hear numbers in her boss's head as he tallied the register for the night.

She could register his surprise and then some hope in his thoughts as she knocked, but that hope disappeared when he saw the gloomy look on her face.

"You got a minute?" she asked from the doorway.

He nodded. "Sure, Sook."

She smiled slightly before entering, and he clearly noted when she didn't shut the door behind her. She could see Sam inhaling and knew that he could discern that Thalia had stayed in the hallway, though she was near the entrance to the kitchen, rather than closer to the office.

Sookie knew that that was as far as the petite vampiress would go when it came to giving her and Sam privacy. The telepath was okay with that.

Given Sookie's expression, Sam's shoulders seemed to slump as he quickly went over the events of the day in his thoughts and tried to figure out when he might have done or said something "wrong."

"You were fine," Sookie said with a sigh as she sat down in the chair opposite Sam's desk. "And I really do appreciate your efforts today."

"You used to have a difficult time hearing my thoughts," Sam said softly.

"I used to try not to. Now I listen to anyone who might be a . . ." Her voice trailed off.

"Threat?" he asked, clearly dejected.

"Lately, your thoughts haven't been particularly nonviolent or," she paused, "*nice* when the topic of vampires comes up. It's past time that I used my ability to know things like that," she added with a sigh.

He nodded. "Has taking vampire blood helped you? With reading folks' thoughts?"

Sookie nodded in confirmation.

"You could stop then. Make your ability – uh – normal again?" he asked somewhat hopefully.

She shook her head. "*Normal* isn't something I'm able to pretend to be anymore, Sam," she said softly.

He looked down, his eyes shining as he fought tears. His mind told her that he was mourning an idea that he'd had locked up inside of his mind for a while: a future where they were married and had children. Four of them.

Sookie exited Sam's thoughts for a moment. To be honest, a week before, she might have been tempted by those thoughts, by Sam's sincere vision for their future life. But a lot had happened since then, the main thing being that she'd stopped clinging to fantasies about a "normal" life. After all, in such a life, she would have to suppress a lot of what made her up. And she did not want that.

She took a deep breath. "I know you hate that I associate with vampires, Sam. And I know that a lot of that stems from worry about me. But there's more to it than that? Will you tell me why you have such negativity towards them?"

Sam frowned deeply. "It's ancient history, Sook. And – honestly – the story doesn't make me look that great either."

"Will you tell me anyway?" she requested. "It might be the only way we can keep our friendship."

The shifter sighed deeply and ran his fingers through his hair. "I'll tell you," he said with some resignation. "It involves my dad. Did you know that he was in the military?"

"Yeah," Sookie nodded. "You mentioned it when you and Terry were talking about how you'd served in the army for a few years."

Sam smiled a little. "My dad was a real hard-ass, but a stand-up guy too. He was a career military guy, and – when he retired – he found it difficult to find his place." He paused for a moment. "He was the one who taught me to be wary of other Supes, though – in the army – he was part of a mostly Were squad. You see – all two-natureds in the service end up in 'special squads.' Otherwise, humans would find out

about us when we have to shift while deployed.” He frowned. “It’s not always easy for a shifter to mix with the rest of his or her squad though,” he said, speaking from experience. “Most soldiers are Weres, with the next largest group being some kind of feline – like cougar or panther. Werebirds like your younger guard today are occasionally in the mix, but pure shifters are the rarest of the two-natured and – therefore – the rarest to be found in the military. We’re naturally anti-pack too.”

“Anti-pack?” Sookie asked.

“Just isolated,” Sam responded. “And not because we dislike other groups of two-natured folks either – though most Weres think that’s the case. Shifters are just naturally closed off to others; I don’t know how else to describe it.” He shrugged.

“Heck! Even having a bar like this in a little town like Bon Temps is pretty out there for a shifter!” He chuckled. “My mom calls me the most social shifter she’s ever met! And you know how I like keeping to myself most of the time. Even when married to another of our kind, shifters tend to run alone at the full moon.”

The telepath nodded for Sam to go on when he’d paused for a few moments.

The shifter ran his hand through his hair again. “My dad was quiet – liked to keep to himself. But he still did well in the military, though he never rose above the rank of a Private. He just didn’t have any desire to lead others. Once he retired from the army, it took him a while to find a place. Eventually, he started driving trucks.”

Sam shrugged. “It suited him really – all the hours alone on the road. He worked for a company owned by a Were, so he was even able to take off the nights of full moons with no questions bein’ asked.”

Sam looked away, his expression turning sadder than any Sookie had ever seen from him.

“What happened?” Sookie asked.

“Since my dad worked for a Supe boss, he drove a lot of shipments for the Supe world. Dad didn’t ask no questions; he didn’t get into no trouble.” He shrugged. “It was the military man in him that made him so good at following orders quickly and efficiently. Eventually, when my brother and sister both showed some interest in college, my mom pressured him to take even more jobs than he was takin’. And he started takin’ routes further and further west.”

Sam looked down and shook his head, his eyes moistening again. “The jobs his boss set up for vamps paid the most. And my dad didn’t shy away when his boss told him that the highest payin’ of them all were a bit shady.”

The shifter closed his eyes tightly. “It happened while I was in the military – after I’d deployed for the first time; I was in Afghanistan.”

“What happened?” Sookie urged, her voice soft with compassion as she picked up Sam’s sorrowful mood spinning in red swirls in his brain. He was too emotional for any clear thoughts to come through.

“Dad’s body was found in the Nevada desert. Clearly, it was never meant to be found. There was no identification on him. He’d been tortured. He was naked and riddled with bites – *vampire* bites,” Sam said angrily. “It was only by luck that a Were cop found him and took an interest in tracing who he was, rather than just burning the

corpse immediately in order to cover up the evidence of vampires; it was back before they came out of the coffin, you see.”

Sookie nodded in understanding.

“Anyway, because my dad was military, his prints were in the system, though it took a while for the cop to track down my mom since my parents had moved after Dad got out of the service.” Sam shook his head. “By the time the cop tracked down Mom, Dad’s body had been cremated, but I talked to the cop when I got back state-side.” The shifter’s anger seemed ready to boil over. “That’s how I know the kinds of things the blood-suckers did to my dad.” He shook his head as if to shake away the anger a little. Sookie noticed that his irises were momentarily yellow, but returned to their normal color after a few seconds.

“Dad’s truck was found in Kansas almost a year later, but it had been wiped of all prints. I tried digging around a little, but I,” Sam looked away, “got into some trouble I almost couldn’t get out of in Nevada.”

Sookie gasped as the image of Sam brutally beating and killing a man popped into his mind – and, therefore, into hers!

CHAPTER 17: End of the Road

The night is long

I don't care if I never get home

I'm waiting

At the end of the road

— songwriter: Jerry Lee Lewis

The shifter knew immediately what Sookie had “seen” in his thoughts.

“Sam!?!?” the telepath looked at her friend in horror.

“The night I did *that* was the night I learned *why* my dad was killed. And there was *no* why!” he sobbed. “No fucking reason!”

“Sam?” Sookie asked, seeing how stricken with grief her friend was as his memories gushed to the surface, seemingly all at once. She had to shut them out for a moment, just so that she wouldn’t succumb to the pain of them.

“That man you saw me kill—he was a Were. He worked for Victor Madden, a high-up vamp in Nevada. Dad wasn’t doin’ any goddamned thing wrong when Victor came across him! Dad was just in the wrong place at the wrong time. The Were told me that Dad witnessed something that the Las Vegas vampires were up to, but I couldn’t get the specifics out of him,” he said with clear shame in his tone. “But I did learn some things.”

“What?” Sookie gasped when Sam seemed reluctant to go on.

“I learned that the Vegas vamps *knew* my dad was a trustworthy shifter; he’d been trucking long enough – for the shadier kind of people – to have gained a reputation for keeping his mouth shut about what he hauled and where he hauled it. I learned that my dad swore he would never tell what he had seen. And – when that was clearly not good enough – he begged to be killed quickly.” Sam’s jaw hardened. “But that wasn’t what the vampires had in mind that night; they wanted some,” he paused, his eyes flashing yellow, “entertainment. Dad was innocent, but they took their fucking time with him!”

Sookie breathed out a rattled breath.

“So – you see. They’re fucking monsters, Sookie. And they made *me* a fucking monster! I killed that Were with my bare hands because I knew I couldn’t kill the vamps and because I knew he’d tell them all about me if I let him go. I had a mother and two siblings to protect!”

“Oh Sam,” Sookie sighed sympathetically.

“Don’t pity me!” Sam said insistently. “I don’t deserve it! That Were I killed had been a witness to my dad’s murder, but he couldn’t do nothing to stop them, and he had his own family to take care of – a family that *I* ripped apart!” Sam sobbed for a few moments, his guilt seeming to suck up all the air in the small office.

“If I can become that,” he paused, “*monster* because of vamps, you cannot tell me that *any vamp sheriff*,” he spit out the words, “hasn’t done the same fuckin’ kind of thing

that was done to my father – or worse – plenty of times in order to protect vampires’ precious interests!” he finished with a snarl.

“Oh, Sam,” Sookie repeated, even as tears fell down her cheeks. “I’m so sorry for you.”

“Don’t be sorry!” Sam said gruffly. “Be safe!”

She sighed again and reached out to squeeze Sam’s hand, even as she dropped her shields – since Sam had calmed down. “I’m tryin’ to be,” she said, disengaging her hand after only a moment. “I hate what happened to you and your dad,” she said quietly. “And I can understand why you’d want to take out your pain on all vampires. Some of them probably even deserve it – just like humans like Rene Lenier deserve to be despised. But I don’t believe all vampires would do the kinds of things that happened to your father. And I know that Eric wouldn’t.”

“Sookie, you don’t have any idea what they’re capable of!” he said, his voice pleading with her. “Please, just stay away from them!”

She shook her head. “It’s too late for me to do that, Sam. And – to be honest – I wouldn’t even if I could. Not now.” She took a deep breath. “I’m probably falling in love with Eric,” she admitted, surprising them both with her words. She just hoped that Thalia would keep that piece of news to herself. It was way too early for her to be sure about anything related to the big L-word, but she couldn’t deny how she felt when she thought about or spoke with Eric – nor would she deny herself the pleasure of feeling such “good” things when they came to her.

Not anymore.

“Sookie . . .,” Sam started, his voice clearly strained even before a tear fell down his cheek, “you’ll end up dead.”

“Even vampires die,” she responded softly. “And – for the record – I don’t believe I will end up dead any time soon – especially not because of Eric,” she added. “Regardless, I’m gonna take a chance on him – with him – because I have a feeling in my gut that it’ll be the best chance I ever take.”

“You thought that with Bill too,” Sam said dejectedly.

“No,” Sookie declared with certainty. “I did feel something with Bill; I won’t deny it. But it wasn’t *this*.”

“Maybe I could give you that feeling,” Sam said hopefully.

Sookie shook her head. “If you could, I would have known it by now.” She shrugged. “I’m starting to believe there’s something to the concept of soul mates,” she acknowledged.

“Chère, vampires don’t have souls,” Sam pronounced fervently as if he’d never believed anything more.

“Of course, they do!” Sookie responded, just as sure of her own words. “I’ll always believe that it takes a lot more than death to snuff out a soul,” she continued quietly, “just as I believe that it takes more than a beating heart to prove there’s one in a body.” She exhaled deeply. “When Rene came after me, his thoughts proved that he had no soul. And – when Eric looks at me – I know with certainty that he does have one.”

Sam frowned deeply, and Sookie heard a clear question ringing in his mind.

“Yes, Sam. You have a soul,” the telepath assured, taking his hand and keeping hold of it this time.

“What I’ve done, chère. What I’ve been forced to do,” he practically choked out.

In that moment, she saw him discharging his weapon at some insurgents in Afghanistan. They were enemies aiming guns back at him – firing at him – but he still carried the weight of those kills. And then she saw the Were he killed when investigating his father’s death. She read from Sam’s thoughts that he knew with certainty that – if he let the Were live – he’d tell his vampire bosses, and Sam and his family would be killed. Still, the guilt of that cold-blooded kill had left Sam a shell for a long time. And the fear that he’d be found out had led her friend to Bon Temps.

“What you did was for your country. And for your family,” she said softly, squeezing his hand. “It didn’t take away your soul any more than . . .,” she paused.

“Than what?” Sam asked, as if looking for a life raft in a raging sea.

“I killed Bill’s maker, Lorena,” she said, even as a sob escaped her own lips. “She was horrible, and she was trying to kill me at the time. But I still feel the guilt for taking a life. I probably always will feel a little bad about killin’ and even worse that I’m glad Lorena’s dead. But taking her life – her “un-death” – didn’t jeopardize my soul, Sam,” she continued, letting her own words act as a balm to some of the feelings she’d been suppressing since her encounter with Lorena. In that moment, she knew her words to be true – *felt* them to be true. Sam wasn’t there yet. But she hoped that he’d eventually find a way through his guilt. Of course, Sookie could “see” that the last death on Sam’s conscience was different. He’d not killed the Were when he was being physically

threatened; the Were was already subdued – tied to a chair with thick ropes and chain. Sam had killed him after he'd pounded information from him – in order to prevent future danger.

The Were had been begging for his life. The Were had been crying for his wife and children.

Sam could only “see” his father doing the same as the vampires killed him, so her friend thought himself to be no better than those monsters.

The telepath found herself wondering if she could have done what Sam did – kill a person who *could* be a danger to her in the future, but wasn't an immediate threat. She'd sure as heck prevented Eric from doing the same to Debbie Pelt, even though she was 99% sure that Debbie was still a threat to her. She also figured that Eric had killed “preemptively.” She wondered if such kills made the vampire experience guilt – as Sam still experienced it. She had a feeling that the Viking had “out-lived” that kind of guilt.

“What are you thinking about?” Sam asked.

“Eric,” she replied honestly. “I wonder how many people he's killed in order to protect himself from future threats.”

“Like I did,” Sam said in a whisper.

“Yes,” Sookie responded.

“I envy him; I doubt he feels any guilt or remorse when he's killed like that,” the shifter observed honestly, though with a tinge of bitterness in his tone.

“I know, Sam.”

The two sat quietly for a moment.

“You’re not coming back to work after tonight – are you?” Sam asked, sounding a little broken.

“I don’t want to,” Sookie replied honestly. “I’d rather get started with the next phase of my life.”

“You’re really gonna hire out your ability? To Supes?” Sam asked.

Sookie nodded. “Yeah. Eric believes that every happy customer will be a potential ally. Plus – if I make my ability my job – people will be more likely to hire me, rather than try to kidnap me.”

“Some vamps will still want you for themselves,” Sam said warningly.

“I know,” the telepath acknowledged. “I really do have my eyes opened, and I’ve chosen what I feel is the best road for me.” She squeezed Sam’s hand a final time before taking hers from his. “I know you hate what I’m doing, Sam. And I don’t expect you to suddenly start trusting all vampires, though I do hope you’ll give Eric a real chance to treat me right – *before* you accuse him of treating me wrong.” She sighed. “I know you wish I was yours. A little part of me – the part that wanted a ‘normal life’ so badly it hurt sometimes – wishes we could have worked out too. But that part isn’t really *real* – because I’ve never been normal, Sam. I’m just starting to accept that.”

“I’m not normal either, Sook,” Sam said, looking at her with love in his eyes. And an inkling of hope. Sookie knew that he was making his last-ditch attempt to get her to see his way of thinking – to convince her that he was the best choice for her.

“You want to be normal though,” Sookie said with a sad smile. “You wish you were a regular human. You wish the Supernatural had never touched you or your family.”

Sam gasped a little, his sound an acknowledgment of the truth of Sookie’s words.

“I was right there with you until a few days ago,” Sookie admitted. “But I’m tired – so tired – of denying who I am. I’m tired of spending all my waking hours around other people tryin’ to cover up who I am and what I can do.” She took a breath before continuing. “I know that I’ll have to keep my telepathy from most humans. But it’ll be nice not to have to keep *me* apart from *everyone*.”

Sam looked at her with dawning realization in his eyes. Sookie could “hear” that her friend was coming to understand just how isolated she’d been during her life. Even shifters – for all their desire to be set apart from others – enjoyed finding and running with their own kind. Though rare, they were not alone, and others helped them to understand what they were when the time of their first shifting came.

“Thank you,” Sookie said to her friend.

“For what?” Sam asked, mystified about why she was thanking him.

“For letting yourself – just now – understand that it’s been miserable for me in a lot of ways,” she said in a quiet voice, even as she tapped her temple so that he would know that she was “listening in” on him. “Until I met the other telepath in Dallas, I felt as if I was the only one in the world.” She closed her eyes. “You are thinking that – even though your dad was hardly ever around – he told you about shifting, and he ran with you the first time you changed.”

Both friends wiped tears from their eyes as they were momentarily lost in the beauty of Sam's memory.

"You never had anything like that," Sam observed quietly.

"That's not true," Sookie said softly.

"The other telepath? What was his name? Barry?"

"No, not him. He hates what he is and what he can do even more than I ever did because he didn't have a Gran," she said sadly. "No — meeting him didn't help me accept myself. Eric did," she acknowledged softly. "With him, I feel understood; I don't have to hide. He's the first — to make me feel *that* way — the first to encourage me to feel that way about myself."

Sam frowned, and Sookie could read her friend's shame as he realized that he, too, had inadvertently "encouraged" the telepath to "cover up" her ability — cover up herself.

"I'm sorry it wasn't me," he said honestly.

Sookie gave his arm a pat, but was unwilling to agree with him. She wasn't sorry that it hadn't been Sam — because she was happy it was Eric. Again, it was her gut that told her that the vampire — and only him — was meant to be the one to help her to accept herself. Why *he* was the one wasn't a gift that she would question.

"So — this is it?" Sam asked sadly.

"Actually, no. Not if you don't want it to be," she smiled. "How about I come in tomorrow — as planned. But — instead of just working my tables — how about you go through that stack of applications you have in your desk. I'll help you interview the

promising people, and then I'll train them," she added warmly. "And the interviews will help me train too!"

Sam chuckled a little. "You're gonna use your ability to help in the interviews?"

"Yes, sir!" she grinned. "And I won't even let Eric charge you," she winked.

"He's normally gonna make customers pay five hundred a head! Actually, more than that!"

Sam's eyes widened. "So much?"

Sookie shrugged. "We'll see. I'm sure I'll work for a lot less sometimes. But for peace of mind with guards, day-people, business partners and such, Eric seems to believe that I'll be worth the price."

The shifter nodded. "You will be. I know it." He shook his head. "I'm sorry, Sookie. For what I said yesterday and the day before. I really am."

"I know you're sorry you hurt me," the telepath said with honesty. "And I accept that your fears for me and your beliefs about vampires won't change overnight. And I can also tell that you are trying to be supportive now. So thank you."

"You're welcome. Thank you for giving me another chance – to be your friend."

"You're welcome," she rejoined.

He gave her a wry smile. "So – you'll be here tomorrow."

She nodded. "But – after the hiring and the training – I think it's best if I move on," she said quietly.

"Move on," Sam said quietly.

“Not from being your friend, Sam,” Sookie said with resolution. “I really don’t want to do that – okay?”

“But you will – if I go back to actin’ like a dumbass,” he said gruffly.

“I will,” the telepath agreed sadly. “Ball’s in your court, Sam.”

“I can’t stop myself from worrying. And I can’t stop how I,” he paused, “feel about you.”

“But you *can* stop being an asshole,” she said bluntly.

He chuckled. “That I *will* try to do, chère.”

The two friends rose, and met near the door for a hug that both of them needed.

“I’ll call Arlene to take the second half of your double shift tomorrow,” he said after letting her go. “I was bein’ a prick when I made that schedule for you, and I’d already decided not to follow through with it.”

“I know,” Sookie said, tapping her head.

“If you change your mind – about the new job – Merlotte’s will be here. I’ll be here,” he said softly.

“I won’t,” she answered confidently. “But thanks.”

CHAPTER 18: Double Trouble

I guess there's gotta be two dark clouds hanging over me

My future looks a bumpy as a matchbox on the sea

Every time I think that I have finally got it made

Some losing cards are played, I just can't make the grade

– Songwriters: Doc Pomus & Mort Shuman

Thalia didn't say anything as Sookie left Sam's office and went to the front of the restaurant. The telepath was glad to see that Terry had already locked the doors, and even Jane Bodehouse was gone – as was her empty-bottle boyfriend.

She also noted that all her tables had been wiped down, and her last tips had been collected and put next to her purse, which had made its way from the booth occupied by her guards, where it had been most of the day, to the bar.

"Thanks, Terry – for finishin' my clean-up," Sookie smiled as the veteran walked past her toward the back door.

"No problem, Sook," he said without really looking at her. The telepath could tell that Terry was having a "Xanax day." She felt bad that it was the conflict between her and Sam the day before that had made the Vietnam veteran turn to his anti-anxiety medication.

With a sigh, Sookie collected her purse and her tips and walked toward the rear exit – with the vampiress on her trail.

“I will ride in your car,” Thalia said after Sookie had gotten into her rust bucket.

Sookie couldn’t hide her surprise. “Oh. Well – okay,” she said with a shake of her head.

Somewhat awkwardly, the telepath leaned over to unlock the passenger-side door for Thalia. The vampiress entered without sound, despite the fact that the car door generally squeaked like a drowning rat.

Sookie shook her head. Apparently, even the door was afraid enough of Thalia not to squeak!

The first few minutes of the drive were silent.

“Your private conversations will remain private,” the vampiress finally said.

“Uh – thanks,” Sookie said.

“You were quite,” Thalia paused, “diplomatic with the shifter. I’d thought that he would have to be killed before the end of the month,” she added matter-of-factly. “However, I believe that his behavior will amend now – because of how you conversed with him.”

“Uh – thanks,” Sookie said hesitantly, even as she cringed a little. She had no doubt that Thalia *would* have killed Sam if he’d pushed things too far.

“I had been skeptical that you would be able to safely do business with vampires,” Thalia commented.

“Oh? And – uh – now?” the telepath asked.

“You might survive after all,” Thalia smirked. “That will benefit me, so I am glad to learn that you have skills of persuasion – as well as more wisdom than I would have thought for one so young.”

“A compliment?” Sookie asked dumbfounded.

“No. A mere observation,” Thalia returned.

Sookie let out of a little snort. “Well – since we are on the topic of my skills of persuasion, I think you and I need to get some things *straight* about my Were guards.”

“Oh really?” the vampiress asked, clearly intrigued. “And what do we currently have,” she paused, “*bent*?”

Sookie rolled her eyes. “Not the rules; that’s for darned sure!”

Thalia smirked. “Then, I cannot say that I understand the complaint.”

Sookie sighed. “My Were guards wouldn’t let me eat my meal with them today – when I took my break.”

“You are upset because you did not have a meal companion?” Thalia asked with a hint of confusion.

Sookie shook her head. “No. What I’m sayin’ is that I want to work out a compromise with you – about my guards. Actually, I’ll need to work out one with Maria-Star too ‘cause she might as well be a daytime version of you!”

“She is competent – for a Were,” Thalia stated. “And what kind of compromise are you proposing?”

“Look,” the telepath sighed, “I’ve accepted that I need guards. And I understand that their priority has to be to protect me from God-knows-what! But I’m friendly – dammit!”

“Clearly,” the vampiress deadpanned.

Sookie let out a frustrated grunt.

“So – your consternation is because you wish to be friends with your guards?”

Thalia scoffed.

“If they want to be friends with me – and only within reason. Trust me – I don’t wanna compromise my own safety *or* their jobs!”

“Go on,” Thalia prompted.

The telepath took a breath. “I should be able to eat with them as long as it won’t affect their work. They should be able to have a conversation with each other as long as it won’t affect their work. They should be able to be friendly – if they want! They shouldn’t have to take their food to go after their shifts are over if they want to stay and flirt with my brother and his friend!” Sookie added loudly.

Thalia laughed at her last remark.

“Shut up!” Sookie yelled, though she was laughing at herself a little too.

“Willow was into Hoyt, and Onawa would have been a much better choice for Jason than Crystal.”

“The werepanther,” Thalia snarled. “Your brother left with her this evening, but should be warned not to attach himself to her beyond the most casual of levels.”

“Panther! Really?”

“One of the Hotshot pack,” the vampiress said with a sneer. “Horribly inbred, most of them are not worth the space they occupy and should be put down.”

“That’s a horrible thing to say!” Sookie critiqued, though she had heard a lot of weird stories about Hotshot over the years. Truth be told, she wasn’t surprised to learn about the inbreeding thing. Or the panther thing.

“It is true,” Thalia said with a frown. “Whether it is horrible or not is immaterial.”

Sookie shook her head. “Fine. I’ll warn Jason. Crystal did seem a little – uh – bipolar to me anyway.”

“Arguably, all of the two-natured are,” Thalia commented with a smirk. “But I agree that the woman seemed to have some kind of mental instability, though I have heard that she is about the best Hotshot has to offer these days. She is betrothed to her cousin, however. So your brother really *does* need a warning so that he does not meet a pack of panthers looking for retribution one night.”

Sookie cringed. “Well then – I’ll be warnin’ him tomorrow. But, in the meantime, back to my earlier point. If my guards want to socialize with me or others when they’re *not* on duty, they should be able to.” She glanced at Thalia. “I know that Maria-Star *and* you ordered them not to be friendly *at all*, and I just don’t like it.”

Thalia considered for a moment. “What if they don’t want to be friends with you? Not everyone would enjoy such a thing.”

Sookie let out an aggravated snort. “Well – I won’t force them!”

“Fine. If—*after* their duties are over— they wish to establish a friendship with you— or your promiscuous sibling— they may do so,” she stated.

“And how about *reasonable* friendliness while they are on duty?” Sookie asked.

Thalia frowned. “I will consider the matter.” She gave Sookie a look of disapproval. “This kind of issue is why I dislike interacting with humans. It would be better if you had little or no interaction with your guards.”

“So that they wouldn’t care about who they are protectin’?” the telepath challenged.

“They are not paid to care,” Thalia said.

Sookie shook her head. “Well—I care about them. *And* about you— even though I don’t wanna be your friend either!”

The vampiress looked sick at the very idea.

Sookie went on. “I do care; that’s why I’ve committed myself to making your jobs easier by bein’ cooperative.”

“You should not care about me,” Thalia frowned deeply. “It is a waste of time.”

Sookie chuckled. “Oh—I *know*. But I still would feel bad if you were injured protecting me.”

Thalia was silent for a moment as Sookie turned the car onto Hummingbird Lane. “The guards will be instructed that they can be,” she paused, “friendly— if they choose— after their shifts end, but *will* be replaced— or worse— if I feel that their judgment is becoming doubtful. They will be instructed that they can be more cordial

during their shifts as well; however, they will *not* do things like share meals with you *if* such things would affect your safety.”

“Fine,” Sookie said with a half-smile.

“They will not,” she paused, “*hang out* in your home when they are on duty either.” Thalia sneered as she used the vernacular phrase as if it left a horrible taste in her mouth.

“Fine,” the telepath said, her smile widening a bit.

“Do not expect friendliness *from me*,” Thalia said, even as she zipped out of the car before Sookie had put the vehicle in park.

Sookie chuckled all the way to her front porch where Bubba was waiting with a grin and a small, beautifully-wrapped box.

“What’s this?” Sookie asked as Bubba handed her the box after accepting a hug.

“From Mister Eric,” Bubba beamed. “Well – good night!” he zipped away before zipping right back, even as Sookie took a step toward the door.

“Oops!” he cried out loudly.

It took Sookie a moment to recover from the surprise of his quick exit and return.

“Bubba!” she said loudly. “You’re gonna give me a heart attack if you do that too often,” she laughed.

“Oh! Mighty sorry, Miss Sookie. But I was supposed to give you this too,” he said, handing her a crumpled piece of paper. The box was wrapped so darned pretty that it got me startin’ thinkin’ ‘bout how my momma used to take such time with

presents and such.” He got a faraway look in his eyes. “Especially ‘round this time of year.”

“It’s okay,” Sookie smiled at the vampire, who zipped toward the woods without another word.

Sookie shook her head at Bubba’s quick comings and goings before heading inside. She had no doubt in her mind that the gift in her hands was the “payment” she’d agreed on for her assessment of Bobby. She frowned as it occurred to her that Eric would likely pay her “for real” for her interview of Christa.

She shook her head at herself. “Get used to your own worth,” she instructed herself, even as she went toward the kitchen. “And – you can buy Christmas presents with any payment too!”

After setting her purse down on the table, the allure of the gift was too much for her, and she quickly opened the note.

Unsurprisingly, it was from Eric. Also, unsurprisingly, there was a check for five hundred dollars.

Dearest Sookie,

I received your text informing me that you chose to meet with Christa Larrabee. Even though we have not officially settled upon your contract, I feel bound to pay you for your assessment of my potential day-person. I look forward to your call to discuss Miss Larrabee, your frustration with the

check, and—if you will honor me with the information—your day. Until then, I hope you enjoy the gift I sent in return for the information you gave me regarding Bobby.

Yours,

Eric

Sookie chuckled as she realized that she wasn't too upset about the check. It *had* been a long time since she'd been able to afford nice Christmas gifts. Actually—come to think of it—she'd never been able to afford them! Mentally, she compiled her list: Jason, Tara, Arlene, and Sam (now that he was being nice again). And then there were certain vampires in her life that she wanted to get gifts for: Bubba and even Pam. And, of course, there was Eric.

She sighed and re-read his short note, lingering on his closing word. "Yours," she said aloud.

"Mine," she smiled as she ripped into the small package. What was inside made her smile even more.

Indeed, she smiled all the way through her shower and then her midnight snack.

MEANWHILE

Thalia flew to the stand of trees where Eric said he would be waiting for her.

"Why not just ask the telepath about her day," the vampiress asked with a smirk.

Eric chuckled. "I am not in Bon Temps to do that, though I expect that I will hear about Sookie's day soon enough."

"Then why are you here? And why are we meeting *here*?" she asked as she looked at Jason Stackhouse's home with curiosity. Both vampires could hear the loud sex that was occurring inside the house.

"Does Padma know that she will be Sookie's primary guard while we are meeting?" Eric asked.

"Of course. She is in place now. Bubba is at the telepath's home too, as I'm sure you know."

She lifted her eyebrow, a clear indication that she had caught his recent scent at the residence. "When I left, Bubba was waiting to greet the telepath at her door – with your gift."

The Viking smiled slightly. "Good." He gestured toward Jason's house. "I sincerely wish that those Sookie loves would stop making bad choices about their bed companions. First, her friend Tara was almost bartered to Mickey by Franklin Mott. Now, her brother is fucking the princess of Hotshot and is being stalked." He gestured again – this time toward the opposite side of the property.

Thalia's fangs came down as she looked toward the darkness and inhaled deeply.

"I smell nothing," she said.

"Neither do I," Eric returned, his smirk more prominent. "But I *hear* three panthers."

Thalia looked at him with some surprise. "Your range is impressive."

He nodded in agreement. "Many believe that flight is my vampire gift; few understand the scope of my hearing, a fact which serves me well."

"Yet, again, you have trusted me with your secrets," Thalia mused.

"I've trusted you with something much more precious," he replied.

"And you mean to protect *all* whom Miss Stackhouse cares about?" Thalia asked.

"Yes. They are paths to get to her – to harm her. In fact, I came here tonight to assess what would be needed to set up protection for the brother and Miss Thornton if the need arises. Unfortunately, it already has," he sighed.

Thalia grinned, her fangs showing. "What will we do?"

"Hopefully, we can avoid doing much of anything. I've called Calvin Norris, who will be arriving soon."

Thalia frowned immediately. "You think he can still control his people?"

Eric sighed. "I don't know. The female werepanther Jason returned with clearly knew that she was being tracked by the others." He sneered. "She was performing for them, likely trying to incite her fiancé's jealousy and, perhaps, his violence. Whether the three werepanthers intend to do *actual* harm to Sookie's brother tonight is immaterial. Norris *will* deal with them to my satisfaction, or we will!"

"So – if we aren't going to kill them – yet – what are you going to do with them?" she asked, her fangs retracting.

"You know," the Viking said with a smirk, "I told you about my vampire gift only because I am aware of one of yours."

“Oh? Which one?” the vampiress asked evenly.

Eric chuckled. “Is it true that your ability to glamour the two-natured is as strong as a normal vampire’s ability to glamour humans?”

“Surely you are old enough to glamour Weres,” she responded with a non-answer.

“Weres? Yes,” Eric responded. “Felines have always given me trouble, however.”

“More of a dog person then?” she asked with a chuckle.

He shrugged. “Sometimes. And – given the situation – I want the glamour to hold. If you want, Norris can believe I am the one responsible for the glamouring – so that the power of your ability remains unknown.”

“And it won’t hurt the mythology of Eric Northman for you to seem stronger than you are in that area?” Thalia commented sagely.

“Not in the least,” Eric chuckled.

“Then – yes – I would prefer it if Norris does not understand the depth of my ability. So I will glamour Norris as well. Now, why are we not just killing them all again?” she asked seriously.

Eric smirked. “I don’t want to have to decimate the panthers – even if most of them are worthless. And killing the three – and Crystal – would start a war. However, they cannot be left with a grudge against Stackhouse. After the woman is done with Jason, we will collect all four, and you will glamour them to forget they know Jason. Beyond that, Norris will need to control them.”

“Why call Norris at all then?” Thalia asked.

“To cover the bases. And to make sure he understands that *anyone* with the Stackhouse name is under my protection.” Eric shrugged. “Given Jason’s reputation and Crystal’s behavior, it is not beyond the realm to hypothesize that this night could play out again in two-months’ time – even if everyone involved were glamoured.”

“Or Stackhouse might try to pursue Crystal Norris in Hotshot,” Thalia observed. “Do you want him glamoured as well?”

Eric thought about it for a moment. “I will discuss it with Sookie.”

“I already told her to warn her brother not to pursue anything beyond a fuck with the werepanther,” Thalia informed.

Eric nodded, “Good. After the problem is taken care of here, I want you to arrange for around-the-clock Were protection for Jason. Had I not happened to be here tonight, he may well have been damaged.”

The vampiress nodded.

“If you feel that a vampire guard is called for as well, let me know,” the Viking added.

“Understood.”

Eric lowered his voice, though he’d not been talking very loudly. “I need to discuss something else with you tonight as well.”

Thalia nodded for him to continue.

“Within the next days or weeks, you may pick up the scent of a vampire when I am near. She excels in stealth, so she might be able to avoid your discovering her for a while. But—I doubt she will stay off your radar indefinitely.”

“A guard? For you?” Thalia asked.

“Something like that. More of a failsafe,” he responded enigmatically.

“You doubt my abilities?” the vampiress asked, though she did not seem offended.

He shook his head. “Not at all. I doubt my maker.”

Thalia’s eyes widened for a moment. “Explain.”

“It is simple if you know my maker, and I believe you have encountered him.”

Thalia frowned. “Yes. Is your shadow going to kill him?”

Eric shrugged. “If it comes to that, she will be killing Appius or myself.”

Again, the ancient vampiress’s eyes widened as realization hit her. “You would give up your existence for Sookie Stackhouse?”

“To protect her? Especially from myself?” He raised an eyebrow. “Do you really need to ask that question of me?”

Her piercing eyes studied him for a moment. “No,” she responded simply. “When will your shadow arrive?”

“Soon,” the Viking said simply.

“How will I know she’s not a threat?” Thalia asked.

“Her scent will contain magic. I doubt Padma or Bubba will pick up on that, but you will.”

For a third time, Thalia's eyes widened. "You've hired the Slaughterer."

Eric looked at her with careful eyes. "Why do you say that?"

"I came upon a beautiful piece of work she'd done in Brisbane," Thalia responded. "The assassin's scent contained a small trace of magic, clearly meant to conceal her true scent."

Eric shrugged. "I have heard that she uses all kinds of tricks as she tracks her prey."

"And you have hired her to make you her prey!"

"Only if need be," the Viking responded. "Trust me when I tell you that I would prefer it if Appius never came within a hundred miles of me again. My shadow is—as I said—just a failsafe."

"One I doubt Miss Stackhouse will learn about."

"Perhaps not," Eric responded. "I know that I do not need to ask you for your discretion in this matter."

Thalia nodded. "And I will try to ensure that your shadow is not stumbled upon by anyone in my team, though I will enjoy trying to find her myself now." She grinned in anticipation. "It will be a true test of my mettle—a rare occurrence these days."

Eric chuckled, but his countenance quickly changed as he tilted his head toward Jason's house.

Thalia's body tensed, waiting for any directions her sheriff had for her—even if three pathetic excuses for werpanthers would not be a *true* test of her mettle.

“They have shifted and are moving toward the house,” the Viking said, his fangs extending.

“Please tell me that I can have a little fun with them before Norris arrives,” Thalia growled, having picked up their scents since they’d moved closer.

“Do you believe you can limit yourself to what Norris would find,” he paused, “an acceptable thrashing?”

Thalia nodded. “Of course.”

The two vampires rolled their eyes as the sounds Crystal was making raised to a higher and louder decibel-level. Clearly, she’d picked up that her “pursuers” were drawing nearer.

“I cannot believe *that* is the best breeding female that Hotshot has to offer,” Thalia scoffed.

Eric chuckled and moved his hand, a gentlemanly gesture for Thalia to go first.

The vampiress didn’t need further invitation to have a little fun.

CHAPTER 19: It Won't Be Long

The shooting stars are coming out of your eyes

They point the way, the way to paradise

I got a funny feeling, I can't be wrong

It won't be long until the sparks will fly

It won't be long

— Songwriters: Benjamin Weisman / Sid Wayne

FIFTEEN MINUTES LATER

“Calvin,” Eric said with a nod of his head.

The packmaster of Hotshot — if the werepanthers could still be called a pack — looked at the three naked men, who were struggling against their own clothing, which had been ingeniously used to tie them to a sturdy oak.

“Impressive,” Calvin said, marveling at how cloth could hold his werepanthers in place. Of course, it had not escaped his attention that they’d been roughed up to a certain extent. Two were gasping because of broken ribs. Another’s eyes were so swollen that he could not see.

“Thank you,” Thalia said.

Calvin nodded toward the vampiress and then toward Eric, “Sheriff.”

The werepanther looked toward the house as his niece wailed out Jason's name – along with a few yesses.

He looked back at his panthers, one of whom was struggling even more wildly than before. Calvin scoffed. "Felton, you knew how Crystal was when you asked for my permission to marry her," he chastised.

The packmaster looked at the sheriff again. "Not that I don't appreciate your makin' sure that they didn't kill – or bite – a human tonight, but I *am* curious as to why you and your associate took an interest."

"Our interest lies in the potential victim – although he does not sound victimized right now," Eric smirked.

Indeed, the "victim" was yelling out something that clearly indicated that his companion enjoyed "gettin' a spankin'."

"You're not one to take an interest in a human," Calvin observed, ignoring Crystal's yells that Jason spank her harder.

"Who or what I take interest in is beyond your concern. What is important for you to know is that *several* people in Bon Temps have my protection. Among them are Jason and Sookie Stackhouse. Jason is the one cumming as we speak," he added as he heard the human man – or *mostly* human man – bellowing out that he was doing just that.

Calvin nodded deferentially. "You're right. It ain't none of my business, and I don't want no trouble with vamps over this," he paused, "misunderstanding."

"Whether there is trouble or not is up to you," Eric returned evenly.

“What do you need from me?” Calvin asked.

Eric stepped closer to the werepanther. “Your pack tends to keep to themselves. I’d like for that to remain the practice. But I don’t trust these rabid kitties not to hold a grudge,” he said, kicking the one he knew to be Felton Norris. “Thus, I intend to glamour them to forget all about Jason Stackhouse and to stay out of Bon Temps. I will be glamouring your niece as well – to forget her little romp.”

“Pity. It didn’t sound half bad – for a fuck with a human,” Thalia said under her breath.

Calvin ran his hand through his hair. “Alright.”

Eric nodded, glad that the packmaster was cooperating because he was anxious to get on with his evening – anxious to speak with Sookie. “I will need you to ensure that these strays make it back to Hotshot and that any vehicles they may have in the area are taken back there too. You can explain the condition they’re in now however you see fit – as long as you keep vampire involvement out of it.”

“They’ve gone to bars and come out worse than that,” Calvin said, gesturing toward the three.

“Make sure they bathe – so that they do not smell of vampires,” Eric instructed.

“And we’ll be burning their clothing,” Thalia informed.

Calvin nodded in understanding. Not only did the clothing smell of vampires, but also it was practically shredded.

A phone rang from the ground where it had fallen out of one of those ruined garments. Thalia quickly picked it up – kicking one of the werepanthers while she was at it – and then tossed the device to Eric, who answered.

Crystal’s voice was heard – from both inside the house and through the receiver. Clearly, she was taking advantage of the fact that Jason had gone to the kitchen to get himself and her some beers. “That’s what happens when you fuck around on me, Felton!” she hissed. “And let me tell you – Jason was so much better – and *bigger* – than you are! What are you gonna do about it? Just stay out there all night? It figures since you put the ‘P’ in pussy!”

Eric hung up the call. “Delightful.”

Calvin sighed and hung his head a little. “Will you let me go get her? I don’t want her to end up in *their* condition,” he said, gesturing toward the others. “And – knowing her – she’d try to fight y’all.”

“Sounds fun,” Thalia muttered.

“Make it fast, and don’t let Stackhouse know. We’ll take *these* to your truck while you get her,” Eric said. “And, Norris?”

“Yeah?” he replied.

“I *could* have killed them for threatening someone under my protection. I *could* have made it so that you *never* would have known what happened to them.”

“I know,” the beleaguered packmaster returned. “And I owe you.”

“That you do,” Eric agreed.

THIRTY MINUTES LATER

“Thank you!” Sookie gushed as soon as Eric picked up the call.

He chuckled. “I take it you like your gift.”

“Who knew that twenty different business cards could make my day?!?!” she enthused, even as she thumbed through them all.

“I did,” he chuckled.

“Yeah,” she sighed, her cheeks burning from the width of her smile, “you did.”

“So – do any of the names stick out to you?” he asked after a moment of silence had passed between the two.

“I haven’t made up my mind yet, but I kind of like Stackhouse Consulting,” she chuckled, looking down at one of the many potential names for her new business. “But why aren’t any of them Northman & Stackhouse Consulting or anything?” she asked.

“Because this business is *you*, Sookie,” he said gently – sincerely. “If you want it to have a surname attached, it should be *yours*, not mine.”

Her heart beat rapidly at his words; it took her a moment to realize that it was thumping with pride. “Okay,” she said. “Do *you* think I should give the business my name? I noticed that some of the cards have more generic names.”

“Your name will be well-known soon enough,” Eric responded thoughtfully.

“However, using one of the more generic ones might offer you a bit more anonymity.”

Sookie contemplated for a moment. “What would you do?” she asked.

“Support your choice,” he chuckled.

“No help?” she asked.

“No,” he chuckled.

“Okay,” she whispered. “Thanks. *Really*. I love them!”

“After you choose the name – one of those or any other you prefer – it can be put with any of the business card designs,” he relayed. “Or components from various cards can be melded together, colors changed, that kind of thing.”

“I do think I’ll get Tara’s opinion,” Sookie giggled. “She’s a lot better at design stuff than I am.”

“*You* should have fun choosing,” Eric emphasized. “If you feel your friend would help you to do that, consult her – by all means. But I hope that you will make the ultimate choice based on what *you* want.”

“I will,” she promised.

She laughed out loud. She couldn’t stop herself.

He chuckled in return. “I did not know my gift would please you this much.”

“It’s great! But it’s capped off a really good day too!”

“Tell me about it?” he asked.

“Absolutely,” she smiled, “but work first.”

“Ah – Miss Larrabee. I assume you have your assessment ready for me, Miss Stackhouse?” Eric asked playfully.

Sookie giggled. “Sure do,” she said with a nod he couldn’t see. “She really is pretty perfect – as long as you don’t think a crush on Pam will hurt anything.”

“Young Christa is interested in Pam?” Eric asked with surprise.

“Yeah – she’s got a *huge* crush on her actually.”

“The last I knew she was dating a male member of her pack,” Eric relayed.

“She likes both men and women,” the telepath responded matter-of-factly. Being a telepath, she actually knew of quite a few people who were attracted to both genders, though most of them followed society’s “norms” about sexuality and tried to suppress any “forbidden” attractions.

“Do you think her crush is in the same vein as Bobby’s?” Eric asked.

“Honestly – no,” Sookie responded. “She’s curious about being with a vampire, but I get the impression that she’s happy playing the field. She also had a thought that she might ‘play around’ with Pam, but that she’d likely end up married to a man. I heard Lafayette call people like her ‘LUGs’ once – ‘lesbians until graduation.’”

Eric chuckled. “Pam’s favorites.”

“Why?” Sookie asked curiously.

“She claims they are more adventurous and much easier to disentangle herself from – since they come with their own expiration date.”

“Oh! Well – anyway – Christa really wants to add to the pack – and give her mother some grandkids since she’s an only child.”

“Why did you just become sad?” Eric asked having felt her sudden shift in emotions.

“Christa’s dad died when she was young; she doesn’t remember him, except in pictures.”

“You are sad because you lost your father when you were young as well,” Eric observed perceptively.

“Yeah. I have *some* memories of him,” she shared, “but they’re fuzzy, and sometimes my own get confused with those I saw in Gran’s and Jason’s heads. I *do* remember that he loved me a lot though. I remember the feeling of that. I guess hearing Christa think about the dad she never got to meet makes me appreciate the memories I do have of my own.”

“Yet you are sad?” Eric asked.

“It’s bittersweet,” she clarified. “I don’t think about him or my mom that often. I kind of like it when I do though—when I remember them.”

The vampire was silent for a moment. “I do not think about my human family often either. But I am glad to remember them sometimes,” he shared. “All other memory of them ever being in this world is gone,” he added softly.

“Bittersweet,” she commented just as faintly.

“Yes,” he agreed.

Sookie brushed a tear from her cheek.

Hearing her quiet sob, Eric felt almost compelled to turn around his car and drive back toward Bon Temps. But he didn’t. However, he did change the topic so that her tears would stop. “So—other than Miss Larrabee’s crush on Pam?”

Sookie sniffled, but was grateful—given how emotional the day had already been—to return to a lighter subject.

“I think you should give her the job,” the telepath offered her opinion, “unless you have better candidates in mind. But I figure that you sent your most promising one to me first.”

“Why do you think that?” he asked with a smile in his voice.

“Just a theory,” she said with a shrug. “You’ve already been employing her for errands several times a week—for a while now. At least for Were-related stuff. I’m thinking you already had a good idea of her character, and I’m guessin’ that the fact that she’s a Were puts her at the top of the list.”

“I will admit that I had thought to replace Bobby with her months ago,” he admitted.

“Why didn’t you?”

“I was not sure if she would change her mind about wanting to pursue college full-time after her first semester. I also wanted to confirm the loyalty of her family to Flood. Employing and ally of Furnan would have been a slap in the face to the Colonel.”

“Oh—I can see that. Will Furnan be a problem? I read in Christa’s thoughts that he’d come to visit her grandmother and had tried to get her on his side, but she denied him and warned him to keep his ambitions in check.”

“Flood knows that Furnan is unhappy,” Eric conveyed. “The Colonel has roots in the Shreveport area, but was raised on various army bases and then became a career military man himself. When the previous packmaster got sick and called Flood to return to his roots, the Colonel accepted, but a few pack-members continue to view him as an outsider. I will make sure that he knows about Furnan’s visit to the Larrabee matriarch.”

“Okay,” Sookie said softly. “Oh—and—just so you know, Christa is plannin’ to keep going to school, but just part-time. She thinks working for you full-time would be a good thing, though she hopes she’ll never be given a task like guard duty.” The telepath chuckled. “She knew Maria-Star, of course, and was thinkin’ that she would never want a job like her. It’s not the danger that bugs her either; it’s the thought that she might have to be violent. I didn’t know that a Were could be a pacifist.”

Eric laughed. “To be honest, it’s a rare thing, but certainly not unheard of. My day-people tend to be kept out of troublesome situations, so she need not worry.”

“I figured as much—because of how Bobby is,” Sookie returned sarcastically.

“So—you have no other hesitations about Miss Larrabee?” Eric asked meaningfully.

“Uh—no. Why? Should I? Was there something I should have picked up on that I didn’t?”

“No,” Eric responded. “I just wanted to make sure that you would not be bothered if I hired a *female* day-person.”

“Oh!” Sookie said with understanding. “And a young and pretty one at that.”

“Yes,” the vampire said.

“You wouldn’t be happy—uh—gratified somehow—if I got jealous?” she asked playfully.

“No. I am with you; I would consider no other,” Eric answered quickly and firmly, clearly not willing to even joke about the topic. “Jealousy is indicative of doubt, and I do not wish for you to ever doubt me, Sookie Stackhouse.

She took a deep breath; she needed one – and a moment to compose her thoughts – after that declaration from him. “I’m startin’ to wonder why I ever did doubt you,” she returned solemnly. “And thank you. I don’t ever want to be jealous.”

“So – will you tell me about the rest of your day now?” he asked after a moment of reflection for both of them – remembrance of how they’d started and silent acknowledgment of how their relationship was evolving already.

“Yeah,” she said as she settled more comfortably into the couch cushions. She watched her blinking Christmas tree lights as she launched into her air-cleaning conversation with Sam before telling him all about her negotiations with Thalia.

After that, they discussed the queen and Andre before moving on to topics as diverse as Hadley, Hotshot (and the glamouring of Crystal and her fiancé), Tara’s knowledge of the Supe world, and Eric’s time in Japan.

Of the queen and her eldest child, the two agreed that giving Sophie-Anne the benefit of the doubt was likely very wise, while not turning their back on Andre was even wiser.

Of Hadley, Sookie shared that she would be speaking with Jason about her “return to the land of the ‘living’” the next day. She also determined that it would be best if Jason were glamoured to not pursue Crystal Norris since Jason didn’t know about the two-natured yet, though the new “couple” decided to revisit the topic of whether or not to tell him, given the fact that Sookie’s day guards, including the one Jason wanted to sleep with, were not human.

Eric agreed with Sookie that Tara ought to be glamoured as well, but just to not speak about what she knew of the Supernatural world – unless it was with Sookie herself. The telepath was grateful that the memory of the Supe world wouldn't be wiped out of Tara's head fully so that her human sounding board wouldn't have a big blank spot.

Finally, of Japan, Sookie listened enraptured – before Eric told her that he was still on good terms with the monarch there and could arrange for them to have a nice vacation – even if Sookie didn't think she could do work for him since she didn't know Japanese.

“Yet. You don't know it yet,” Eric had said.

It was more than two hours after they'd begun talking before the two finally said good night.

A reluctant one.

CHAPTER 20: HEY LITTLE GIRL

Hey little girl, you sure are cute to me

Come up a little closer, so I can see

Hold it baby now stay right where you are

Hey little girl you oughta be a movie star

Songwriter: Joy Byers

“Your feelings are unlike any I have ever felt from you,” Pam said with a mixture of wonder and concern as she entered her maker’s office.

Like the night before, Eric had not chosen to “appear” in the club, and she suspected that his long phone conversations with the telepath had something to do with that – as had his trip to Bon Temps.

Though, strangely, he did not smell of Sookie Stackhouse.

“Should I just remove your throne?” Pam asked with some sarcasm when her maker didn’t respond to her observation. “You know that profits will dip if you continue to hide out from the masses. And they’ll plummet if you don’t fuck one now and then.”

Eric gave his child a serious, annoyed look. “Pamela, as I told you before, Sookie and I will be monogamous. Even if I could still palate the fangbangers – given those

feelings you just mentioned – I would not hurt Sookie by disregarding this small request.”

The vampiress scoffed. “Small? Eric, it’s not natural. Vampires are meant to fuck and feed from whomever they want – whenever they want!”

The elder rolled his eyes. “I taught you better than that.”

“Well – obviously – I meant from the *willing!*” she clarified. “The point is that we aren’t made to be with just one person! So it’s *not* a small request!”

Eric shook his head. “It is to me. In fact, the thought of monogamy – with Sookie – does not seem like a hardship to me in any way. And I cannot imagine that it will become so.”

“And when it does?” Pam challenged.

He looked at her sternly.

“Okay – *if* it does?” she corrected.

“I will be extremely surprised,” he responded candidly. “And then I will discuss the matter with Sookie; I will end the relationship without deceiving her.”

“But it would hurt her nonetheless,” Pam cautioned.

Eric frowned. “I truly don’t believe the monogamy will be a hardship. And – if it becomes one – it might very well be Sookie who wishes to pursue another. And that will end the romantic aspect of our relationship,” he responded, looking as troubled as Pam had ever seen one.

“And what if she ends the relationship altogether? How will that affect you – if you still want her?” Pam asked, concern now dominating her features.

“You worry because I am,” he paused, “*feeling* now?”

Pam nodded. “Yes. Especially if your affection strengthens, I,” she paused, “worry for you. You will be hurt if she,” the vampiress paused again, “moves on from you.”

Eric smiled at his child; it was a smile that a tolerant parent offers a child who has yet to transition into adulthood. “You fear that she will break what is left of my heart,” the vampire observed. “I will not lie. Such an outcome *is* possible, for – if our relationship ends – I am convinced that Sookie will be the one who does it. I am equally certain that such a dissolution will hurt me deeply.”

“Yet you will still risk yourself in that way?” Pam half-asked and half-stated.

“I already have,” Eric said gently.

The two were silent for a while as Eric thumbed through some invoices and gave his child time to process the changes he was making to his existence. As adaptable as vampires could be, they rarely changed themselves radically, nor did they allow themselves to be vulnerable. Eric was doing both, at least on a personal level. He couldn’t, therefore, blame Pam for questioning him to a certain extent. In her place, he would have done the same.

Of course, he would never allow her to question him publicly or treat Sookie badly; however, the maker had confidence that his youngest progeny, who already liked Sookie, would soon adapt to the changes within him.

Pam frowned, even as he felt a measure of acceptance in their maker-child bond. “I still don’t believe you’re giving up sex and *fresh* blood for her.”

Eric laughed. "If all goes well, the sex part will take care of itself soon enough. And, perhaps, one day, so will the blood part."

"Why one day?" Pam asked. "Surely you plan to take Sookie's blood when you take her to your bed."

The Viking shrugged. "I've vowed not to for the time being."

"What?" Pam asked incredulously.

"Pamela, Sookie and I are twice tied. You know the meaning of that," Eric informed.

"Twice!" Pam gasped.

Eric nodded. "Yes. And I've assured her that I won't take her blood again until the tie has faded – unless she and I decide to," he paused, "bond."

Pam's mouth opened and closed a few times – comedically.

"Eric – Master – a bond is"

"Permanent. Yes," the Viking said. "And it will be considered with as much gravity as it deserves – by both Sookie and myself – before it is undertaken. However, for the time being, I will not take her blood because I don't want to preclude the possibility of giving her mine if an unforeseen emergency arises."

"But – but – what will you eat?" Pam asked.

Eric chuckled. "It is not as if bagged blood is a hardship. Indeed, you *yourself* have argued that it is better than feeding from most fangbangers."

"But – uh – you need to bite!" Pam exclaimed.

Eric rolled his eyes. “I *like* to bite. There’s a difference. Anyway, it will be only a matter of months before Sookie and my blood tie dissipates to the point that feeding will be possible.”

“Well – even then – you’ll be *settling!*” Pam huffed.

“I just don’t see it that way. Even if I did not care for Sookie, I might select to feed only from her; she is fucking delicious!” he smirked.

Pam rolled her eyes. “Whatever! And way to rub it in! I was talking about *variety* anyway! How you could settle for first *only* bagged blood and then *just one* flavor of human, along with *just one* bed-partner for the foreseeable future is beyond me!” Pam emphasized.

“Speaking of variety, it would seem that my new day-person has a crush on you,” Eric grinned.

“Nice subject change,” she said, rolling her eyes. “Wait! New? Did Bobby finally break into one of your resting places and try to christen it with you? While you were dead for the day?”

“That thought is disgusting,” Eric scoffed. “And – no. Had he done that, he’d be dead. As it is, I will be glamouring him later tonight and hiring Christa Larrabee to replace him.”

Pam’s eyebrow rose with interest. “The pretty brunette Were?”

“Yes,” Eric smirked. “Variety.”

“Well – in the name of *variety*, I’d tickle her fancy,” Pam leered.

"I'm sure you would – *will*," Eric chuckled. "Just don't toy with her harshly. I'd like to keep her long-term."

"Your telepath won't mind your having a beautiful 'girl Friday'?" she snarked.

"Miss Larrabee is telepath approved already," Eric smirked. "She dropped Sookie's business plan at her home today, and Sookie conducted an interview for me."

"So – you had her poke around in the Were's brain?" Pam asked with interest.

"Any juicy gossip?"

Eric chuckled. "Nothing beyond the girl's crush on you and Furnan's continued attempts to undermine the Colonel."

"I really do think we should just kill that jackass," Pam said, her tone bored. Indeed, Eric was getting bored with Patrick Furnan's ineffective little power-plays too, but he'd yet to do anything truly harmful to Colonel Flood. Furnan's sudden, suspicious death, on the other hand, might cause legitimate unrest within the Long Tooth pack.

"Yet we won't kill him unless the Colonel asks us to," Eric grinned.

"Speaking of the two-natured, why do you smell of panther?" Pam asked, scrunching up her nose.

Eric grinned. "Do you recall Crystal Norris?"

Pam nodded. "Her kind of *variety* is too crazy for even my tastes, though she is certainly beautiful."

“Jason Stackhouse thought so too. Unbeknownst to him, Crystal went to Merlotte’s – with her fiancé and two of his friends following – in order to troll for a sexual toy for the night.”

“Ah – the old ‘I’ll make him jealous by fucking someone else’ ploy,” Pam chuckled. “I can’t remember that one ever backfiring,” she added sarcastically.

“It very well could have if I was not scouting Jason’s property to see if one Were guard would be enough to cover the land there under normal circumstances.”

Both of Pam’s eyebrows rocketed up, as she realized that her maker intended to protect Sookie’s family member as well.

Eric ignored his child’s reaction and went on with his explanation. “Long story short – Felton Norris, the fiancé, showed up at Jason’s with ill-intent. Thalia and I took care of the situation.”

Pam pouted. “Why didn’t you call me? I always miss out on the fun.”

“You had several Were toys in the basement only a couple of nights ago,” he reminded.

Pam rolled her eyes. “Does *everyone* in Hotshot have the surname Norris?” she asked drolly.

“Not quite yet,” Eric answered, as if her question had been a serious one.

He ignored his child’s rude hand gesture.

“So – I was serious before. Should I take out the throne?” Pam asked with an odd mixture of snark and genuineness that only she would have been able to pull off.

Eric could “feel” that she was no longer questioning his decision to pursue a relationship with Sookie as much as she was still mystified that he’d take such a step. Moreover, even though Pam might outwardly complain about fewer profits without him showcasing himself to the fangbangers (and occasionally fucking one), she wasn’t legitimately concerned about profits. After all, Eric had more money than even she would know what to do with, and she had plenty of money of her own too! Indeed, the two had a variety of businesses in the area.

Undeniably, Fangtasia had been an amusing business for them both in some ways, and it certainly made a hefty profit for what was basically a store-front for his Sheriff duties. However, if it went out of business the next night, neither vampire would lose any figurative sleep over it.

“No need to remove it—but you *should* begin the process of finding someone to fill it.”

“Oh?” she asked with intrigue.

“Yes. A new piece or two of fangbanger bait to satisfy the masses—unless *you* want to take up the throne yourself,” he smirked.

“Oh—hell no!” she cried with mock horror. “But I *will* start fishing for a new zoo exhibit—or two. Now—back to your *feelings*,” she teased. “Would you like for me to read you a Dear Abby column I think would apply to you?”

Eric rolled his eyes and stood up. “Oh—hell no!” he mimicked her earlier exclamation. “I have somewhere I need to be.”

“Bon Temps?” she smirked.

“I’ve already been there tonight,” he responded enigmatically, winking at her before speeding out of the club.

In truth, Eric may very well have stayed to listen to what the human advice columnist had to say about relationships had his blood not “felt” an unmistakable presence nearing.

He left his car at Fangtasia and flew off into the night, following his blood until it found his first child close to a small creek that was – quite literally – in the middle of nowhere.

His honed senses had not picked up another being for miles, so he landed without circling the area.

“Karin,” he smiled softly. “You have come earlier than I thought you would be able to.”

She approached her maker and knelt before him.

“You need not show me such signs of obedience,” Eric said softly as Karin rose to her feet. Indeed, his first child had not made such a gesture since he’d released her fully from his command.

She moved closer to him – close enough for an embrace, though the two did not touch. She breathed in his scent.

“It pleases me to see you again; it pleases me to show my respect for the one who made me,” she said.

He leaned in to give her a brief kiss on her forehead. "Seeing you pleases me as well, Karin."

She nodded an acknowledgment and stepped away a bit, her eyes tracing the sky above – as if she was looking for a particular star. "My loose ends for my last assignment were tied quickly, and I was anxious to be here."

"I am glad to have you nearby," Eric said softly. He did not need to remind her that he was especially glad that she'd be close enough to kill him if Appius arrived on the scene and tried to compel him to harm Sookie. "Do you need aid finding lodgings?"

She shook her head. "No. I have already settled into a dwelling place."

Eric nodded, not surprised that his independent-minded child had seen to her own needs.

"I wanted to see you tonight – to greet you in person," she said after a moment, though her eyes were still on the sky above. "But I will remain unseen from this point on. Unless Appius Livius Ocella is near," she spat out the name, "I see no need to track you often, though I will certainly hone my skills at doing so."

Eric nodded. "I have informed Thalia that you may follow me from time to time. She needed to know that you are necessary – and no threat to Sookie. Indeed, she will likely try to track you in order to hone her own skills," he smiled. "However, she has no idea that you are my child – and she will not – unless you decide to reclaim your place at my side."

Eric looked at Karin closely, wishing that he could take in her scent as she'd taken in his. But part of her stealth was wrapped up in the spells she used to change and cover her scent. "Have you decided what *you* wish to do regarding Appius?"

Eric could see the uncertainty in Karin's eyes as she finally turned her gaze toward him again. And – though he could no longer feel the nuances of her emotions because he'd released her irrevocably – he could sense her mixed feelings.

"I have not," she responded. "I would like to see him dead; however, I've not yet determined whether I wish to change my existence enough to be," she paused, "Isolde again. And – since you have stated your preference that Appius not be killed unless I decide to be her or he misbehaves – I will simply watch and wait for now."

The older vampire nodded in understanding.

"It would still be easier if I could just kill him regardless," Karin stated flatly.

"I know," Eric acknowledged. What held him back from telling his child to hunt his maker down and finish him was still a mystery to the Viking, given the dread he had for Appius. Likely, it had to do with one of the commands that Appius had never lifted from him – that he could never cause his maker any harm.

"I will be finding out where Appius is and making sure that he is watched," the vampiress informed. "Do you wish to have reports of his activities and whereabouts?"

Eric shook his head. "Not unless they threaten to affect me and mine."

Karin nodded.

"I have found a fairy in the area," Karin informed, changing the topic.

"Have you indeed?" he asked. "You have been busy in your short time here."

She shrugged. "A night is long when used well."

He nodded. Given the fact that he'd been the one to teach her that saying – albeit in another language at the time – he could not argue.

"There is a strip club called Hooligans," she relayed. "From what I can tell, a fairy runs the place and is its strongest draw. There is magic," she paused, "discouraging vampire patrons – as you might expect."

"I am aware of the club and its Supernatural elements," Eric shared. "But I thought keeping my distance was best. It is good that they have spells keeping other vampires away."

"I mention it only because you thought you might need to contact Niall. My connections tell me that Claude Crane – one of Hooligan's proprietors – is related to our old fairy friend."

Eric considered her words for a moment. "I will mention this to Sookie and take my cues from her on the matter. She is undergoing so many changes in her life that she may wish to wait a while before learning about her Fae heritage – if, indeed, she is part-fairy."

Karin looked at her maker with intensity. "I hate why I have come – the duty you have asked me to perform for you – but I am truly glad to see you. Eric, I" She stopped midsentence and took a step toward him again.

Her eyes were bright with affection, and Eric could discern that her thoughts had turned amorous. The two had once enjoyed a sexual relationship for a time – especially

during their early years together – and it was clear that Karin would enjoy reconnecting in that way.

“I am sorry, but I cannot join with you,” he denied softly.

She looked away to cover a flash of rejection.

“No, *I* am sorry,” she said, shaking her head. “I know that I am here because you have found great affection for another. I should not have presumed that we could,” she paused, “be as we once were.”

Eric lifted her chin in an affectionate gesture. “At any other time in my existence, I would be honored and pleased to be with you in that way. However, doing so now would cause much unhappiness – for Sookie, for myself, and for you.”

Karin nodded. “I understand. I was simply overwhelmed by seeing you again – overwhelmed because I feel that we have . . .” Her voice trailed off.

Eric waited patiently for her to speak again, intuiting that she needed to be the one to express her emotions, though he could sense some of what she was feeling.

“We have resolved things between ourselves – have we not?” she finally asked. “We have overcome all that has kept us distant over the years.”

He smiled softly down at her. “Yes. I believe any misunderstandings are now gone. I remain,” he paused, “regretful, however, that my complete release of you would have ever been interpreted as rejection.”

“I now understand fully that you were trying to protect me from your maker,” Karin said, her features softer – more vulnerable – than Eric had seen them since she was a youngling.

Eric nodded. "It seems as if—throughout my vampire existence—I have always been trying to protect myself and those I care about from Appius." He dragged his fingers through his moonlit hair. "I pray to the old gods that I knew as a human that he will stay well away from my life—for at least as long as Sookie is a part of it."

"And if you turn her?" Karin asked.

Eric stilled completely at that thought.

He had once gone to desperate measures—severing his "maker status" with his first child—in order to protect Karin from Appius. He'd had to, for he cared too much for his first child to trust that Appius would treat her well. Eric had then gone to great lengths to keep Pamela at something of an arm's length from himself—from his stronger emotions—so that Appius would never understand the depth of his feelings for his younger child.

If Sookie were to become his child, there would be no keeping her at arm's length. But could he release her as he'd done with Karin? Could he let her go?

He frowned deeply at the thought. "Sookie is content with staying a human, and I am not anticipating that her preference will change any time soon."

Karin nodded, intuiting that her maker would give the topic more thought, but that he was not yet ready to talk about it with anyone.

"It is very nice to see you again, my maker. My behavior aside," Karin said somewhat abashedly, "I hope to meet your Sookie—eventually."

Eric smiled softly at his progeny. "I hope you do too, Karin," he said, bending down to kiss her forehead again.

She looked up at him and allowed her affection for her maker to show in its full force; she also pushed her feelings into what remained of their child-maker bond. Though he would never be able to command her again, he *could* feel something of the depth of her love for him in that moment. He sent his own affection and pride back to her.

She nodded in acceptance of his “message” to her and then slowly returned her feelings and her expression to neutral. Eric knew that he was watching his child, Isolde, turn back into Karin the Slaughterer, a persona she’d adopted for practicality, empowerment, and self-preservation.

“I will be nearby,” she said before flying away.

“Thank you,” Eric said, uncertain if she could still hear him, but hoping that she could still feel his gratitude.

He turned to look at the small creek. In asking his child to kill him if it was the only way to stop Appius from making him a weapon against Sookie, Eric was well aware that he was asking *much* of Karin. He dragged his hand through his hair.

“May it not be *too much*,” he prayed quietly, wondering if his old gods were even listening.

He’d not allowed himself to have much faith in them for a very long time. But – for several months now – he’d found himself contemplating them again and wondering if they might not be watching over the world after all.

It was not a mystery to him why he’d suddenly found his willingness to believe in higher powers again.

“Sookie,” he said before propelling himself into the night.

CHAPTER 21: I Got Lucky

Never found a four leaf clover to bring good luck to me

No rabbit's foot no lucky star no magic wishing tree

But I got lucky, yes I got lucky

When I found you, oh yeah!

Songwriters: Benjamin Weisman, Dolores Fuller & Fred Wise

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 16 (Night)

“So – tell me about your night last night – after we talked,” Sookie requested as she propped up her feet on the coffee table and activated the speaker phone Willow had taught her how to use during her break at Merlotte’s that day. She put her phone on the couch next to her.

“It was underwhelming,” Eric chuckled the sound seeming to resonate in the air around her.

“Tell me anyway?” the telepath requested, before getting up, turning on the Christmas tree lights, turning off the lamp, and then sinking once more into her previous comfortable spot on the couch.

“Well – after we spoke – I did a little paperwork and discussed our relationship with Pam. Later, I went to Bobby Burnham’s residence, glamoured him to accept his

dismissal gracefully, and arranged for the changing of any locks he had keys for – just in case he made copies. Finally, I spoke with Colonel Flood.”

“About that Patrick Furnan guy?” Sookie asked.

“Yes,” Eric responded. “Plus, I wanted to ensure that he had no problems with my hiring Christa Larrabee since she is a member of Long Tooth. After he voiced none, I called her. I also arranged for a rotation of two Weres to keep an eye on your brother – as we discussed last night. Then, while I finished up my paperwork at Fangtasia, Christa came down and filled out her new employment forms. So – you see? Quite boring.”

Sookie shrugged, even though he couldn’t see her action. “Wait! You said that you and Pam talked? About *us*?”

Eric laughed. “I was beginning to wonder if you were going to ask about that.”

“Well?”

“The conversation was not a long one,” he returned playfully.

“Well?” she asked again, growling this time.

He chuckled. “Dear one, you must understand that Pam is,” he paused, “used to me being another way.”

“So she doesn’t like the idea of – uh – *us*?” she asked, a mixture of concern and also happiness. He’d addressed her as “dearest” in his letters before, but this was the first time he’d called her by an endearment on the phone.

She found that she liked it very much. She also liked that Eric seemed to have used the endearment without thinking about doing so.

“She is surprised – about *us* – but not disapproving,” he responded to her question. “She is surprised by how committed I am to pursuing a relationship with you – and *only* you – for the foreseeable future. However, she is already coming around to the idea. And – since she quite likes you – it will not take her long to do so fully.”

Sookie chuckled. “I wouldn’t say she likes me – though she has flirted.”

“You amuse her,” Eric responded with a smile in his voice. “That makes you likable in her book. Indeed, I have heard her say that you might make your way up to being her favorite breather.”

The telepath snorted. “Lemmie guess. Ginger currently holds the position,” she deadpanned.

The vampire chuckled heartily. “No! I believe the honor still belongs to Giorgio Armani.”

Sookie laughed. “Figures.”

“So – what of your day?” he asked.

She smiled. “Well – I woke up early today – a little after 8:00 a.m. – and invited Jason over for a quick breakfast since he had to start work at 9:30. I can tell you with certainty that Thalia’s glamour worked. He thinks he was in bed – alone – by midnight last night. And when I mentioned Crystal and Hotshot, he looked a little sick.”

“Good – then he will not be tempted if he runs into the werepanther,” Eric commented.

“Hey – did I ever tell you that I can tell when someone’s been glamourised – from their thoughts?” she asked.

“I picked up on that when you were speaking with Ginger and Belinda about Long Shadow’s theft,” he said quietly – contritely – as he was reminded of how she’d been hurt that night.

“Oh, yeah. I forgot that I ran into Long Shadow’s glamour in Belinda’s thoughts that night,” the telepath returned somewhat pensively, as she recalled the attack as well.

“Sookie, I will do everything in my power to ensure that you are never hurt again like Long Shadow hurt you that night. I was not ready for the move he made,” he added, his voice still full of remorse. “I can only promise that I will *never* be unprepared again.”

“I know you’re sorry, Eric,” she responded with understanding. “And I know you’ll keep me as safe as you can. You already are.”

“Yes,” he agreed.

“I—uh—wanted to let you know that I barely picked up that Jason was glamourised at all. Is—uh—Thalia really good at glamouring or something?” she asked.

“Yes,” Eric responded, “though it is best if you do not share with others that she has an exceptional skill.”

“I won’t,” Sookie assured. “But it might be useful—right? Bein’ able to distinguish between different vampires’ glammers. With Longshadow, things happened so fast. But—if I practice—I might be able to find a—uh—signature to an individual vampire’s glamouring, like there is a signature to a void.”

“Interesting,” Eric commented. “Such a thing might be useful, indeed.”

"Maybe," Sookie shrugged. "Maybe not. Either way, I think it's interesting to be – uh – playing with my ability. I've never really done that – at least, not much. Oh – before I forget – I also talked to Jason about Hadley while he was over here!"

"Did you and he make any decisions?" Eric asked.

"We want to call Hadley some night – maybe on Christmas?" Sookie ventured.

"Do you think we could work that out with the queen?"

"I am sure you could," Eric assured. "I will contact Sophie-Anne to make arrangements."

"Make sure – uh – well," Sookie paused, "that Hadley doesn't have big expectations or anything. Jase and I want to play things by ear. There are some hurt feelings because of how Hadley just took off like she did. And there are a lot more of those from Jason than I would've thought there'd be."

"Oh?" the vampire asked.

"Jase is so laid back most of the time," Sookie replied. "And – honestly – he's always been sort of quiet when Gran mentioned Hadley. Since I usually try to keep out of his head, I didn't know that was because he was so upset at Hadley. He and she were closer as kids – you see. And – when she ran off – he felt the rejection personally."

"And you?" Eric asked.

"I was madder at her for stealing from Gran and for never contacting any of us again. I'm still mad at her for that. When I think about how sad Aunt Linda was when she realized she was going to die without ever seeing Hadley again . . ." Sookie's voice broke a bit as she stifled her tears. "By the end, it was hard to keep Aunt Linda's

thoughts out because they were so erratic and strong, which was opposite of her body," she added sadly.

"I'm sorry," Eric said sincerely. "It must have been a difficult time."

"Yeah," Sookie agreed. "Made more difficult because Hadley was MIA. I'll admit that a part of me will likely never forgive Hadley for the pain she caused and for letting Gran go to her grave without knowing what had become of her eldest granddaughter."

"You do not have to reconnect with her," Eric reminded gently.

"I know," Sookie said with resolve. "But Jason and I agreed to try – and to also try to forgive any past mistakes."

"Does that include her putting you on the Supernatural radar?" the vampire asked gently.

The telepath sighed deeply. "I'll always regret that Gran died because Bill came to Bon Temps to pursue me, which put Gran and me on Rene's radar. But Gran would want me to forgive Hadley, so I can't dishonor her by tryin' to turn Rene's actions into Hadley's fault." She took a deep breath. "Except for Gran bein' gone, I don't regret that the Supernatural world found me. I wouldn't be where I am – *right now* – if it hadn't."

"I, too, am sorry about your grandmother, Sookie. But I am very glad you made your way into Fangtasia that night. I would not be where I am – *right now* – if you had not," the vampire echoed her earnestly.

The two were silent for a moment – and they enjoyed that silence of existing together in the moment, despite the miles that separated them.

“What did you do after your breakfast with your brother?” Eric finally asked.

Sookie grinned. “Delved into my business plan.”

“You sound excited about that,” he responded with a slight chuckle, a reaction to what he was feeling through their blood tie – even from Shreveport.

“I am!” she enthused. “I was even more excited that I understood what I was reading! I was worried that it’d be in – uh What do they call that technical language?”

“Legalese,” he supplied.

“Yeah – *that*,” she responded. “It wasn’t.”

“No. I figured you’d appreciate something more straightforward. I’m afraid that the official paperwork to set up the business and the contracts we form with those you work for will be more technical; however, the lawyer that we will be working with, Desmond Cataliades, will be able to answer any questions that you have – as will I.”

“Oh. Okay,” she said. “Well – I have to say that I like what I’ve read so far!”

“As soon as you settle upon the name, I’ll have Cataliades begin the official paperwork then.”

“Oh!” she exclaimed. “I’ve decided I like Sunset Consulting. It’s not one of the names on the sample business cards, though.”

“But it’s a good name,” Eric responded. “As long as it is not already in use close by, I see no problem with the selection.”

“Cool. Uh – how will I know if it’s in use?” she asked.

"I'm already checking online," the vampire responded, even as Sookie discerned the sound of keyboard keys being tapped.

"Wow! You can check for stuff like that?" she asked. "I need to get a computer and the Internet out here – now that I'll be employed and a college student – so that I can learn about things. And don't you even think about getting me that stuff!" she said preemptively, causing him to chuckle.

"You were *already* thinking about it," she accused playfully, "weren't you?"

"You will have to deal with the fact that I'll be inclined to spoil you," he responded, as his admission that she was right.

"And you will have to deal with stifling those inclinations – most of the time," she returned.

"I'll work on it," he chuckled.

"Honestly, it's nice to be able to get stuff like a computer for myself," Sookie shared.

"I can feel that you are," the vampire paused, "relieved by your new monetary situation, Sookie. I am happy for you," he said sincerely.

"Thank you," she smiled.

"So – there are a few businesses with the name, Sunset Consulting," the vampire reported a few seconds later. "The closest is in Oklahoma."

"Oh – does that mean I can't use the name?" Sookie asked.

“On the contrary, I don’t see an issue with your using it,” he replied. “There would really only be a problem if the name were in use in Northern Louisiana, which it is not.”

“Oh—okay,” Sookie smiled. “Well—I’d like to move forward with that.”

“And will Sunset Consulting be billing Merlotte?” Eric asked.

Sookie giggled. “No, we will not.”

“How *did* your day at work go? Given the fact that you called me before your double shift would have been over, it seems as if Merlotte has continued to behave.”

“Yeah. He feels really bad about what he said to me *and* all the double shifts he’d planned to give me—by the way. So he sent me home as soon as the dinner rush was over.”

“Well—that is something,” the vampire said evenly.

The telepath sighed. “Sam’s still got his reservations about things, but—after we zipped through the interviews today—he couldn’t deny how useful my ability is for—uh—consulting stuff.”

“So—I take it the interview process was a success?”

Sookie sat up, smiling widely—and proudly. “Yep! I know it’s a little thing, but Sam and I talked to six potential servers, and I was able to point him in the direction of the perfect two to hire! Both of them have some experience too. I will be training them on Saturday, and that’s gonna be my last day of work—unless Sam needs me for an emergency fill-in since it’s flu season.”

“You sound very happy that your last planned work day is Saturday,” Eric observed.

“I’m *ready*,” the telepath responded after a few moments of consideration. “And I *am* happy too. I’m excited to start training with my telepathy. I’ve been a waitress for so long that doing something new is exciting! And I’m proud that I was able to help Sam!”

“You should be proud,” Eric said, conveying his pride for her in his tone. “You will have *many* opportunities to help others in similar ways.”

“I know,” she sighed. “Thank you, Eric. Thank you for encouraging me to do this. I—uh—wouldn’t have thought all this was possible. But the plan you wrote makes it seem more than possible.”

“In your new work, there will be times when you become uncomfortable,” he cautioned. “It is impossible to know what could be in people’s minds, and you may find yourself in trying situations.”

“I know,” she acknowledged. “I’ve heard enough thoughts to know they aren’t all pretty. But—uh . . .” She stopped midsentence.

“But?” he asked.

“But you’ll be there,” she said warmly, even as she pressed her cool hands against her cheeks, which had become heated by a pleasant blush.

“Yes. I will,” Eric replied.

The two were silent for a few moments.

“Sookie, I have been uncertain about how to broach a particular topic with you, but I want you to know that more people than just me will be available to help you with any difficulties that arise,” the vampire ventured.

“Why do I get the feeling you aren’t referring to my guards – or Pam?” the perceptive telepath asked.

“Because I’m not,” he sighed. “It is just that . . .” His voice trailed off as he was uncharacteristically unable to find the words he was looking for.

Sookie gave him a moment before probing. “What’s wrong, Eric? Is it really that bad?”

“Delicate,” the vampire replied. “It’s just a delicate topic. And my introducing it could most definitely be interpreted as highhanded – even meddlesome.”

It was her turn to sigh. “Consider me braced then. But I *do* want to hear anything you have to say to me,” she added stalwartly.

“Alright,” he relented. “I have been in contact with one of Dr. Ludwig’s colleagues, a psychologist named Dr. Aphra Smith.”

“Oh!” Sookie said with realization. “You think I need to see a shrink?” she asked tentatively, her tone indicating vulnerability.

“I would not presume to tell you what I think you need when it comes to your mental wellbeing,” the vampire responded honestly. “But Dr. Smith is part Britlingen.”

“Britlingen?” Sookie asked.

“A species from another dimension,” Eric answered. “I cannot risk telling you too much over the phone, but they are rare in this world. Generally, they are paid

bodyguards; indeed, they are very well-paid since it requires much magic for them to come to this world and, once here, they are stuck for decades as their bodies regenerate the needed magic to return to their home world.”

“Wow,” Sookie reacted.

“I have seen two in battle,” Eric said with respect in his tone. “They were magnificent to behold – well worth the price of bringing them to this realm.”

“So – uh – like fairies, the – uh – Britlingens mix with humans and – uh – make babies?” she asked, blushing.

Eric chuckled – as if he could see the pink tinge to her cheeks. “Yes – though such couplings are much rarer than human-fairy pairs. And – honestly – I don’t know if you would be able to hear Dr. Smith’s thoughts or not.”

“That’s why you thought of her? For me?” Sookie asked.

The vampire sighed. “Yes. She understands the Supernatural world, and having someone,” he paused, “more neutral than I could ever be regarding you and your welfare might be beneficial as you begin truly navigating our world.” His voice lowered. “And, of course, there are also the traumas you have had to face during your life.”

The two were quiet for a moment as Sookie realized tears were falling from her cheeks.

“I have upset you,” Eric said apologetically, hearing her almost-silent sob and also feeling her sadness in the blood tie.

“No,” Sookie corrected. “I’m grateful that you thought of this. It’s just—uh—hard to think that I need help. Like lots of Southern girls, I was raised to cover up things that were wrong. And—with my ability—I had a lot more to cover up than most.”

“Even the need that you had to do that—for so long,” Eric said softly, “might be a topic of discussion for you and the doctor—if you wish to meet her.”

“She’d been willing—uh—to see me?” Sookie asked after a few silent seconds.

“She would,” Eric responded. “And you need not decide tonight.”

“I’ve already decided,” the telepath sighed again. “And I’d like to meet with her—just to see. I mean—if I can hear her—the whole thing’s sort of a moot point. But—if I can’t hear her . . .” She stopped for a moment. “If I can’t, it *would* be nice to have someone neutral and knowledgeable to talk to things about. There’s a long list—now that I think about it. My parents dyin’ when I was so young and my uncle’s abuse would be enough. But this last year has added a lot of the list,” she commented sadly.

“I am sorry,” the vampire said, “for my part in any of those items.”

“I know,” Sookie indicated softly. “You know—dealing with things really sounds good. And—there will be more anxieties with my new job, as you said. And our new relationship too.”

“I hope those will be the positive kinds of anxieties,” Eric commented.

“Butterflies,” Sookie smiled. “Yeah. But even those can be overwhelming. I’m so glad that Tara’s back in my life—and Jason too! But there are some things that I just wouldn’t want to share with them.”

“Well—you could rest assured that all you say to Dr. Smith would be confidential. Britlingens are known for an inability to do anything,” he paused, “underhanded.”

“Really?” Sookie asked.

“That is why they are such trusted guards,” Eric informed. “In the course of their duty, they are completely incapable of betraying those whom they serve. Dr. Smith—though only part-Britlingen—is like this.”

“When can I meet her?” Sookie asked with resolve.

“I’m going to give you her number. I’ll text it. That way, you can decide on a time *in your own time*,” the vampire responded.

“Thank you. I can’t tell you how much I appreciate you right now,” she said, wiping a tear from her cheek. “I know it’s weird, but this doctor is like the new driveway!”

Eric could help but to chuckle. “How so?”

“Well. I would have never asked for it. Initially, I wanted to resist the idea of it. But—ultimately—I think it would make my life less,” she paused, “dangerous and—uh—smoother. If I’m the car in the analogy, that is,” she chuckled.

“Your mind is an interesting thing to follow, Dear One,” Eric said.

Sookie’s pulse quickened at that endearment.

“Eric, I—uh—well—I’ve enjoyed talking to you these past few nights. Uh—I know that our first official date isn’t until Sunday, and I haven’t even met with Bill yet, but that all just seems like a formality to me now. I—uh—just wanted you to know

that," she stammered somewhat nervously, "the more I talk to you – the more we share – the more certain I am that you and I could really turn out to be something special."

"I feel the same," he rejoined earnestly.

"Will you come by tomorrow night? Before I meet with Bill?" she asked.

"I will be there as soon after sunset as I can be," he replied.

She sighed with relief. "Good. I've missed *seeing* you. And – uh – I've missed your void being nearby."

"That pleases me," he said. "I have missed feeling that you are close by as well."

They were silent for a moment.

"I'm gonna try to get some sleep," she finally said. "It might be hard to sleep though. I've been tryin' to figure out what all I'm gonna say to Bill tomorrow night."

"Would you like to call me if you have trouble sleeping? We could talk some more, or I could tell you another story about my experiences."

"I'd like that – very much," she smiled.

CHAPTER 22: It's No Fun BEING LONELY

Morning must come

Knowing, knowing there's no one for me

Knowing, knowing there's no one waiting for me

— songwriter: Red West

Bill stood on his porch facing the cemetery that separated him from his beloved Sookie.

He could sense that Eric's little guard dog, Thalia, was between him and Sookie; likely the sharp-eyed (and fucking annoying!) vampiress was looking at him even then.

Needless to say, the Civil War veteran resented that fact, just as he resented the forces at work that were keeping him from Sookie's side at that moment.

He turned and went into the house, going over to the fireplace by which he'd first taken Sookie's body in his home. Of course, their first time—her very first time—had been in her home, not long after Adele had passed away.

He shook his head, truly sorry that the matriarch was gone. Despite the intolerance of most humans Adele's age, she'd accepted him into her home and life. Indeed, Bill was aware that Adele had even given her granddaughter gentle nudges in the vampire's direction. In fact, between Adele and his blood, he'd won Sookie quickly. But—after that—so much had gone wrong.

Bill had, of course, known that Rene Lenier was the killer of the women Jason Stackhouse had been accused of murdering. Though his sense of smell was not his strong suit – only slightly better than a Were – Bill had enough ability to sniff out and then track the murderer – following the slaying of Sookie’s cat. And he’d been able to muddle the scent – so that the shifter could not do the same.

Looking back, he regretted not telling the authorities who the culprit was. He’d intended to catch Rene in the act of trying to harm Sookie – so that he could be her knight in shining armor once again. (Such a strategy had worked so well with the Rattrays, after all.)

However, Rene had unexpectedly murdered Adele. So Bill’s strategy had changed. Instead of being her knight, he became her comforter and her protector. Of course, he could have dealt with the Rene issue at that point, but Bill had made another miscalculation and left the killer free – in case the “knight” angle was still needed, though Bill had attempted to ensure that Sookie was safe by tasking Merlotte with her security when he was unavailable.

The vampire scoffed; the shifter had failed to keep Sookie safe, and Rene had almost killed her. Indeed, Bill still felt that he “owed” Sam for that failure, but – for now – he had bigger fish to fry.

“Maybe I should buy Sookie a new kitten,” Bill mused aloud, knowing that such a gesture would ingratiate himself to her. Of course, there was the Bubba factor now.” The vampire sneered, blaming Eric – rather than the innocent, though dim, Bubba – for the fact that even his idea for giving Sookie a gift was being foiled.

Bill had rarely hated anybody during his existence – and certainly no one so much as Eric Northman!

Even Lorena was often loved by him, though that affection was almost against his will.

Though he was valiantly stifling the pain, Bill acutely felt the hole that had been left behind by the death of his maker. He could not be certain of what had happened because he'd been fading in and out of consciousness that horrible morning at Russell's mansion. What he *did* know was that Sookie and Lorena had fought. Even though they'd done so after dawn, Bill was still amazed that Sookie had somehow come out victorious. He'd later heard – from Bubba once he'd returned to Area 5 to be one of Sookie's guards – that his Lorena's remains had been found in Russell's pool. In fact, Bubba himself had, at first, been blamed for her demise.

Sadly, when Bill pushed his friend to tell him more about what he knew of Sookie's time in Mississippi as well as her activities over the last several days, Bubba had managed to keep his mouth closed. He'd even gone so far as to tell Bill that he could no longer be his friend if he kept asking about Sookie all the time.

In fact, the closest Bill had gotten to knowing anything about the telepath's comings and goings since she'd been back from Mississippi had been the gossip he'd gotten from the biggest town gossip of them all: Maxine Fortenberry. And even she had required a "gentle" glamouring to start her lips flowing.

It was as if Eric had paid the whole damned town to keep information of Sookie from him! And he didn't dare go to more prime sources, like Tara, Jason, or Merlotte.

But Maxine had given him *some* details. He'd learned, for instance, that the shifter had had a blow-up at Merlotte's because Sookie was quitting. Maxine reported that Sookie was going to be working in Shreveport.

Bill sneered, not wanting to believe that his beloved had agreed to work at Fangtasia where fangbangers and vampires alike would paw at her every night!

"I cannot understand how Eric would allow such a thing – even with the way he is!" he said with righteous indignation. Hell – Bill had barely tolerated Sookie working for the shifter, though he'd known that Sookie needed the steady paycheck and that her other employment prospects were limited due to her lack of education.

Bill had contemplated asking her to share his house so that her expenses were limited. He would have taken care of her – just as a man took care of his wife when Bill was a human. However, Sookie had taken on many of the traits of modern women, including the desire for independence. The vampire had hoped to break her of that idea – without completely breaking her spirit in the process.

He looked at the soft rug he'd placed in front of the fireplace. Yes – he'd imagined many a winter night in front of the fire with his beloved.

Nights when she would be seeing to his home and *to him* – just as women did in his time. In many ways, the vampire longed to recapture some of that simpler time, and he knew that he could do so – with Sookie.

"I will still do so," he promised himself softly.

Unfortunately, there had been many roadblocks in his relationship with his beloved. There still were.

One was the queen, an employer whom he admired. However, Bill had balked at the idea of taking Sookie to the queen's court, afraid that Sophie-Anne would give Sookie to her child, Andre, whom Bill knew would become intrigued by Sookie at first sight.

The vampire shook his head. It was ironic that Andre now seemed to be his only ally at court, though he was determined to reestablish his standing with Sophie-Anne.

That was yet another relationship which Northman had fucked up for him!

As if undermining him with Sookie had not been enough!

Bill took several deep, though unnecessary breaths in order to compose himself. He was determined not to let his temper get the best of him, for it would surely get him killed. No – he would be calculated and calm as he got back what he'd lost.

And, then, as he got back at the Viking.

Bill thought about the next night with anticipation.

"Soon, Sookie. I will see you soon," he whispered. He would promise his beloved that he would perform better at being her mate. He would acknowledge that he'd been distant – as he'd let himself become accustomed to her being present – as he'd become lost in his work. His own human wife had once accused him of taking her for granted after they'd been together for a while.

Of course, back then, he'd needed to prioritize the work that had to be done on what had been a fully functioning, though relatively small, plantation. He looked out the large window in the living room. He could almost see the lush fields, almost hear the singing slaves. His mother and wife had treated their workers well, though giving

them their freedom had never entered a Compton mind before the War of Northern Aggression ended. Indeed, after Bill had become a vampire, it had taken him a while to accept that blacks were worthy of full-human status.

Bill sighed. Now, he was ashamed of his once-held belief that one being had the right to enslave another. In fact, it had been his “enslavement” – at least at times – by his maker which had taught him to consider the slaves’ plight.

He felt the ache of his empty child-maker bond. A part of him would always miss Lorena. However, a larger part of him would always be grateful to Sookie for freeing him from her.

“It was fate,” he said with certainty.

Yes – Bill could find no other way to describe the fact that his beloved had been the one to free him from his maker forever.

And – now – he was committed to evolving, to being a more attentive mate than he’d ever been before – to anyone.

For Sookie.

But, first, he had to get her back.

He felt hope where his heart had once beaten. No matter how Eric was trying to manipulate her, she *wanted* to see him the next night. And it was then that Bill would begin repairing what had been damaged.

In his viewpoint, there was actually not a lot to repair. All he had to do was to get Sookie to listen to him and look at the situation rationally.

He was prepared to admit that he'd been distant even before Lorena called him. But he could explain that by telling her that his computer work had needed to be completed as quickly as possible. He would also reassure her that she'd be his priority from now on.

He knew that explaining Lorena away would be more difficult; however, he would make Sookie understand that he had no choice when his maker had called him. He would assure her that he'd never told his maker about her telepathy – as evidenced by the torture he'd endured.

For Sookie.

He knew that his beloved's pity and compassion would ultimately absolve him of having to go back to Lorena for a time. And Bill would make sure that the telepath understood that he bore her no ill will for killing his maker either, though he might hint about just how much it hurt to lose his connection with his maker – if he felt that the information would induce more of Sookie's pity.

The trunk incident had been a traumatic one for them both, and – in many ways – Bill knew that overcoming that would be their biggest obstacle as a couple. Bill was prepared to open up to Sookie more than he ever had about "true" vampire nature. He knew that she might be frightened when he told her just how difficult it was for a vampire to maintain control, especially when injured. However, he ultimately had faith in Sookie's ability to overcome her pain and forgive him.

Bill would simply keep apologizing until she did.

In a strange way, he had Eric to thank for the fact that he even had the opportunity to repair his relationship with Sookie. Had the Viking not pulled Bill from the trunk, the younger vampire had no doubt that he would have raped Sookie.

And, perhaps, drained her.

And, perhaps, turned her.

Bill felt a moment of shame.

He'd been propelled by rage that horrible night in the trunk – as he'd smelled Eric all over Sookie, as he'd picked up the scent of past arousal from her, as well as the stench of Eric's semen.

Never would Bill confess to Sookie the whole truth: that it was rage – and not just starvation – that had caused his behavior in the trunk. Indeed, he hoped to skirt that issue altogether and, instead, offer Sookie *his* forgiveness for any dalliance she might have had with Eric the night before the trunk happened.

“Or any night since,” he resolved with a growl as he recalled the way she'd clung to Eric after he'd taken her bitten body from the trunk. “We will forgive each other,” he determined with a confident nod.

And – eventually – Andre would be able to convince the queen that Northman was not worthy of his sheriff's post. Eric would leave Louisiana – or be killed for his plotting against the queen – and Sookie and Bill could live in peace.

Perhaps, Sophie-Anne would even make Bill the next Sheriff of Area 5.

Of course, Bill didn't really have that kind of ambition – didn't seek that kind of power. He'd enjoyed his work at the queen's court and wished to return there. He

could easily imagine a simple life where he worked on the database and occasionally procured fresh, interesting fare for the queen and her children. Sookie, of course, would be by his side, and he hypothesized that they would marry when human laws allowed for it. Bill figured that the queen would eventually reward his loyalty by offering him permission to complete a bond with Sookie.

Yes – Bill nodded with self-assurance – he would make things right with Sookie, and the rest would fall into place.

But that didn't mean he wouldn't do what he could to help spur on the downfall of Eric Northman. The vampire walked into the kitchen and then into the pantry where he kept some TrueBlood. He stretched out his senses and could not pick up any vampires close to his home, so he quietly bent down to loosen a plank at the foot of the pantry. Behind it was a laptop that held a heavily encrypted addendum to his database, one that included information he'd managed to gather about the most powerful Supernaturals – vampires and others – that he knew of.

Even Sophie-Anne did not know of this side-project.

The only thing that had protected it from discovery – Bill was convinced – had been a concealment spell he'd purchased from Hallow, a witch in New Orleans (who was, ironically enough, one of the subjects in the addendum).

Once he collected enough information, Bill planned to offer the addendum to the main database to his queen in exchange for her permission to be the ultimate master of Sookie's fate, though he knew that he would never use such a label in front of his beloved.

“She would not understand,” he sighed to himself.

What Bill really wanted was to control when and how she interacted with *all* other vampires, including the queen and her children. Such power would help Bill to avoid future Eric Northmans. It would allow him to ensure that no other vampires touched her. It would guarantee that he would be the only one to ever bond with her.

Then, Bill could actually relax and truly enjoy Sookie! And he had no doubt that she would enjoy the lessening of anxiousness regarding her status in the vampire world as well.

Bill used his senses to once again check whether he was truly “alone” and then hurried to his bedroom before proceeding into a large closet – where he could work without the danger of prying eyes watching him through his windows.

“I wouldn’t put it past Northman to spy,” the vampire muttered as he powered up his computer and connected to the Internet through his secure network.

He smiled as he opened an email he’d been hoping to receive. While in New Orleans, Bill had made contact with Hallow. Because of Northman, he no longer felt that *any part* of his own home was private! Thus, he’d asked the rather unscrupulous witch to help him secure the entire residence.

The email confirmed that Hallow was willing to take the job and was even offering to do it for free – if Bill provided her with adequate information about Eric and Fangtasia.

Bill grinned; his luck was changing!

As he read further into the email, he grinned even more widely. Apparently, Hallow had researched Eric and had found him of interest. She planned to settle in Area 5, at least for a while, and demand a portion of the Viking's profits – as well as his body! Bill laughed out loud.

“That ought to keep Northman busy!” he said snidely. Plus, he had no doubt that Eric would give his body to the witch – just to appease her. Hallow, though a little too slender and muscular for Bill's taste, was not completely unappealing, so Eric would not hesitate. Even better, Bill knew that Sookie would disapprove of Eric basically whoring himself out in order to lower the tribute the witch demanded.

After sending a quick missive to Hallow determining a good time to meet with her, Bill went through the steps of opening the addendum to the database, which required several passwords to access and make readable. Once it was open, he quickly accessed the entry he'd begun on Eric Northman.

The Viking was elusive – to be sure. Thus, Bill had not been able to collect all that he would have liked.

However, he had managed to collect a few pieces of potentially useful information.

The name of Eric's maker was one of them.

Rumors that Eric had – as a younger vampire – been publicly abused by that maker was another.

When he'd first learned that information, Bill had felt empathy for Eric, for he knew firsthand what enduring an abusive, unhinged maker was like. Indeed, at one time, he would have resisted using Eric's maker against him.

But that time was past. In trying to steal Sookie from him – in attempting to turn the telepath against him – Eric had declared war. And Bill was ready to use every weapon at his disposal.

“Now all I have to do is track you down, Appius Livius Ocella,” the vampire said as he stared at the screen in front of him.

CHAPTER 23: NEVER ENDING

I bring you never ending, never ending

Never ending, never ending

Never ending, never ending love

— Songwriters: Buddy Kaye / Philip Springer

ROUGHLY TWO MONTHS EARLIER (than chapter 22)

LISBON, PORTUGAL

At approximately two thousand years of age, Appius Livius Ocella was considered ancient, even by vampire standards. As a Roman Legionnaire, he'd honed his strategic skills as a human, and he'd worked to increase those skills as a vampire.

Yet there had always been something missing from his existence.

As a child in Thrace — a piece of Europe which was now considered to be a part of Bulgaria on the humans' ever-changing maps — he'd watched his entire village be razed to the ground when the men within it tried to fight the seemingly unstoppable Roman army.

His people had once been thought of as fierce soldiers, but they'd proven grossly ineffective against the Romans, not understanding their own deficits. Even as a small child, Appius had recognized that his people *should* have accepted Roman rule, rather than fight against it. But his father had been a strong voice for opposing the swarm of

Rome. Appius sneered. The foolhardy man had deserved his fate of crucifixion, which was the “fashionable” way for the Romans to get their point across to their loudest dissenters during that era.

Appius’s mother, whom he could remember was a beautiful woman, was taken by a Roman Legionnaire as a prize of battle; indeed, many of the women had been taken by one soldier or another; sometimes they were shared among the lower ranks. It was not a pleasant time to be a female by any stretch of the imagination.

Appius sneered. He’d never much cared for women in any fashion, not even his own mother, whom he recalled was a stern woman, who did not have much time for him, for she was too busy producing child after child for his father – not that they did him much good.

Still, Appius had witnessed other mothers showing their children at least some affection, especially when they were promising – as was Appius himself. However, his mother never offered him anything resembling love. Thus, when she was taken away, he felt nothing for her plight.

However, he could still recall the sound of her screaming – her begging for a quick death, rather than having to become the sex toy of an enemy.

As for Appius and the other children in his conquered village, their fate depended on the “mood” of whatever soldier came upon them. The one who found Appius was an important Centurion named Marcus Decius. Marcus happened to need a new boy to look after his horses and armor, for his last such servant had been trampled before the battle.

Appius could not remember the name he had before Marcus took him. Even as a vampire, his mind could not quite repair the connection to his 6-year-old self. However, that first name really did not matter, for it was the name Marcus gave him, Appius Livius Ocella, that truly identified and formed him.

Marcus had seen the promise in the young boy from the start, and Appius had worked vigilantly to prove himself to his new master. Marcus had been well-pleased, even arranging for Appius to have a set of papers (forged, of course) that labeled him a Roman, a citizen.

So Appius was Thracian no more. That fact had pleased the young boy, who'd idolized Marcus as a savior, rather than thought of him as a captor.

When Appius neared the human age of eleven, Marcus was named a *Primus Pilus*, making him one of the men who formed war councils. In turn, Marcus made Appius an understudy of sorts to his *optio*, who was a soldier who aided the *Primus Pilus* in matters of strategy and during the battle itself; indeed, it was the *optio's* role to keep the troops orderly and in formation. In his new role as understudy, Appius was taught to read and write, and he was witness to the great war councils of his day. He absorbed strategy as if he were born to it, and – by the time he was nineteen years old – he had become *optio* for Marcus.

Of course, he'd needed to kill the one above him in order to take that role, but Appius had learned stealth by then, so he was not suspected.

It was around that time in his life that Appius solidified his preference for men over women. From the age of thirteen or so, he'd realized that his body was desirable

to many of the soldiers around him, but he was wise and calculating, allowing only important men, such as Marcus, to take pleasure from it. Appius did not have to *learn* to experience his own pleasure from men either – as Eric had needed to do centuries later. Indeed, Appius had enjoyed his sexual experiences with men from the start.

What he'd not enjoyed nearly as much were his sexual encounters with women. His master had ensured that he could participate in the spoils of war once Appius reached puberty; however, taking a woman to his bed had never pleased the young teen, though he'd participated in the defilement of many a captured woman, for it had been expected of him and seemed to please Marcus.

Appius frowned as he recalled the night he'd "met" his maker, who had found him injured on a battlefield almost thirty-five years after Marcus had taken him under his wing. Marcus was long dead by then – killed by a rival Centurion, a coward, who had stabbed him in the back. Appius had avenged Marcus, whom he still considered his "true maker" and had become a Centurion not long after.

He'd distinguished himself by conquering all armies he'd been sent to face – until the last of them.

Appius scoffed at the memory of his last day as a human. His army had been overrun because one of his fellow Centurions had failed to hold his flank. Still – Appius and his men had almost prevailed, even without the help of their so-called "allies." But – just as the line of his enemies had weakened – Appius had been struck in the neck, one of the few places his armor did not cover, by an arrow. Indeed, the gap into which the arrow had glided was almost impossibly narrow, seemingly not a gap at all.

Yet Appius could still recall the pain from the shot – and the shock that he was on his knees and bleeding profusely. The Centurion had been too much of a realist to have hoped for recovery once the blood began to pool into and then drip from the hand he'd used to try to staunch the wound. He had known his death was coming at a fast pace, so he ordered his men onward.

Once they were out of sight, he had lain down in the muck and blood of the battlefield, ready to die.

He could remember how cold he was as he looked up into the stars – sneering at them for supposedly depicting gods and goddesses. Appius held no such beliefs in the supernatural.

Until.

The ancient closed his eyes for a moment. She'd seemingly come from the stars down to him, her eyes glassy and her fangs coated with blood. She'd laughed at him darkly.

"You are the one I must make my child," she'd said, her voice holding a mixture of disdain and inevitability.

And turn him she had.

His maker had been a young vampire then, yet she'd still been powerful, despite her feeble appearance. She'd taught him how to feed from humans with control, even as she'd muttered about how she *knew* that he would *not* follow her teachings.

Indeed, in the two months Pythia kept Appius with her, she often rambled. Periodically, she would have debates – seemingly with herself because she never

invited her child to speak with her – about whether or not it would just be better to kill Appius. She would look at him in her “un-looking way” and tell him that she knew that nothing she did would make him any less of a monster. Apparently, she had “seen” that – even if she treated him with love in an attempt to curb his “foul nature” – Appius would turn out the same. She would also debate about commands that she might give him.

In the end, she determined – again with herself – that the world would be “better” with him in it, though it was clear that she could hardly believe that fact was true.

She cursed her fate for “having” to turn him. He cursed his own for having such a maker.

Yes – Appius had scorned the vampiress who made him from the night he rose a vampire. However, he could not even blame her for being a “bad” maker. What he did blame her for was making him feel unwanted – just as his “human mother” had done. He’d welcomed the night – the sixtieth of his new existence – when she’d looked at him with her “unseeing” eyes and told him that he had learned what he needed to survive and – unfortunately – thrive.

But first she’d spoken words that he’d never forget. His mind drifted, and he could hear her weathered voice in his ears even now that the nights between his release and his current life measured 731,360.

“You are a blight upon this world; nothing I do could change this. Yet not making you would have made things worse. You will cause many deaths and much pain, Appius Livius

Ocella. Yet you will also do good along the way – though most of that good will be unintentional. Ultimately – it is your destiny to live a long time, just as it was my destiny to make you.” His maker shook her head. “Even I cannot fight or stop some things from happening, though you could!” At that point, she’d looked as if right through him. “You will go on to be a maker. I command that you never kill your progeny and that you teach them to survive as vampires to the best of your ability. And I command that you release any that make it two hundred years in your company. I would command you to never harm your progeny, but – if I did” She sighed then, though the sound was anything but “human.”

“If you did?” he asked.

She did not answer. Instead, she continued her farewell speech to him: “The actions you take beyond my commands are your own. It will always be your choice – in any given moment – whether you do good or bad.” She caressed his cheek then, the only “tender” action he ever felt from her.

He resented her for doing even the one and recoiled from the touch.

She cackled at him, and then she sent him on his way with a mere shooining gesture of her withered hand.

Appius opened his eyes and turned his head to look at his child. Alexei was still not a century old, so he could not wake up before sunset. The maker could not help but to worry about how his child would behave when his 200th year as a vampire came and Appius felt compelled to release him. Ironically – similar to his own maker – Appius had spent *much* time second-guessing whether or not he should have changed his younger child.

Though Appius certainly did not believe himself to be the devil his own maker clearly thought him to be, he was not known for his “goodness” either. In many ways, Appius was still as he had been as a human: he took or fought for what he needed and wanted. He enjoyed power and pleasure.

What was wrong with that!?!?

The ancient scoffed. Why his maker thought he was some kind of “blight” was beyond him! Yes – he’d killed humans on occasion, sometimes even because they simply annoyed him. However, it wasn’t as if he created a fucking bloodbath every night!

Of course, he *had* caused them on rare occasions – when he was bored or angry. Or when he needed to teach his eldest child a lesson – or his youngest child needed to be indulged. Yes – he could admit to those events.

Perhaps those isolated incidents were what his maker had “seen” when she looked at him with such derision.

He didn’t fucking care!

What he did care about was his child – his children.

Eric was the first that he “made” – the first that lived, that is. Appius had tried several times to be a maker before Eric, but some vampires had difficulty making progeny; to his despair, Appius was one of those.

But he had more than made up for his deficits with the two he had successfully turned!

The ancient smiled, and his fangs dropped. He licked them as he thought of his first child, his golden Viking. Eric was magnificent, and Appius had desired him greatly at first sight. So Appius had taken him.

Eric had been full of life – yet tightly tied to his *duty* – as a human, so much so that the fledgling resisted the new life that Appius had gifted him with. Still – as commanded by his own maker – Appius had no choice but to teach Eric how to function as a successful vampire. He had spent 200 years of nights doing so!

Along the way, he had also helped his child to overcome his hesitation about fucking men. Indeed, Appius had celebrated inside the first night that Eric fully accepted lovemaking with men – with him.

A twinge of guilt stirred within the ancient. Like himself, Eric had also had clear sexual preferences. Had Appius not desired Eric so much, he might have even let him keep those preferences; he might have not forced his child to accept his own amorous advances. However, it had been Appius's carnal desire for the young man which had compelled him to turn the Viking in the first place!

And it was not like he could just kill the child when Eric tried to reject Appius's sexual advances! The command from his maker prohibited that.

So Appius had trained him – sometimes harshly. It had been Eric's own stubbornness to hold onto aspects of his humanity which had most often caused the child to face Appius's punishments. However, ultimately, Eric had become a model child. The ancient sneered, still bitter that he had felt compelled to release Eric the very night the child had been undead for two hundred years.

He had even tried to resist his maker's command at first, but Pythia was nothing if not powerful—even across centuries and through his resentments of her.

Otherwise, Appius would have kept Eric—likely for centuries more.

Perhaps forever.

Of course, Eric had been more than ready to function on his own by the time he was released. Indeed, of all of his accomplishments as a vampire, Appius was proudest of Eric. On his own, the child had thrived, gaining wealth which exceeded Appius's by quite a bit. Oh—Appius had certainly accumulated more wealth than he let on, but his earning of it was somewhat sporadic. Plus, the elder enjoyed going long periods of time without “working.” And he also enjoyed a lavish life.

Neither of those things was conducive for gaining the kind of bottom line Eric enjoyed.

Or the favors he was owed.

Not to mention that—especially in recent years—Appius had needed to use a substantial amount of his hidden wealth and accrued favors for pay-offs and bribes—to keep his youngest child safe and happy.

He looked again at Alexei, his beautiful, but troubled, child. A hemophiliac during his human life, the young man had been sickly; thus, vampirism had given him a kind of freedom and strength incomparable to his human days.

Admittedly, Appius had indulged him in enjoying this “good health.” However, it was becoming harder and harder to do that without repercussions.

“It was a simpler time then – before vampires revealed themselves,” the elder mused nostalgically to himself as he got out of the bed he shared with Alexei. Unlike Eric, his second child (he didn’t count the ones who hadn’t risen, though there were six others he’d attempted to turn) did not resist any of the facets of having Appius for his sire.

Firstly, Alexei enjoyed sex with men very much; indeed, he was insatiable – to the point that Appius and he relished each other at least once per night, though often much more than that – especially when they combined the act of copulation with feeding. Appius ran his finger lovingly over Alexei’s bare chest. Undeniably, both of them were extremely sexual beings, and nothing pleased them more than an orgy with donors and/or other vampires – all men, of course.

Secondly, Alexei – unlike his vampire brother – had enjoyed feasting on human blood from the start. More importantly, his youngest child had immediately understood a truth that Appius had literally needed to beat into Eric: That being a vampire made him superior to all other types of beings. Oh – the two-natured had their place; indeed, they could even be useful. And fairies – the delectable creatures – were powerful in their own right. Demons also had their uses, though their blood tasted like shit. Others, like Britlingens, had earned his begrudging respect as well. And Appius had even come to appreciate witches for the power that they could wield when properly ambitious or motivated. However, none of these beings rivaled vampires.

Certainly, humans did not! They were useful only for recreation and sustenance as far as Appius was concerned.

The elder frowned in disgust as he remembered how Eric was concerned about the fates of his *human* family members.

The Viking had also bucked the stereotype that his people were rapists and pillagers (though these so-called “evil” practices were not actually as common as modern humans thought). As a human, Eric had been a powerful warrior – in charge of his clan’s “army.” He had led successful raids all of the years that he had been the leader of his men. However, as a raider, Eric had not indulged in the spoils of war in the same way that Appius had learned to enjoy them from Marcus.

By contrast, though Eric had killed men in battle without remorse or hesitation, he had frowned upon “sacking” the target of one of his raids. As a conqueror, he would take all material treasure from a vanquished people, but it was his practice to leave the old men beyond fighting age, the children, and the women in peace. Instead, Eric would offer the widows and the orphans of slain soldiers a choice that was quite revolutionary in his time: the *choice* of whether or not to become a part of Eric’s people group.

He only took the willing!

Of course, it was not uncommon among what were now called the “Vikings” for a conqueror to take women and children as slaves – just as Appius had been taken. Some, like Appius, even rose within the ranks of their new societies to become important and trusted members. What made Eric an anomaly back then was that he would offer mercy to the vanquished – but not in the form of a quick death, like Appius’s mother had begged for.

No! In the form of choice! A choice to live on in freedom!

“Mercy,” Appius practically spit out.

Eric had also been guilty of the crime of mercy throughout his early vampire life, rarely killing his human meals, even before Appius ensured that he learned to contain himself, which the elder did only when he felt compelled by a maker’s command that haunted him still.

He would have liked to have seen Eric really *become* vampire.

“No mercy!” he spat out, creating a fist. “*Especially* not for humans.”

Yes – Alexei understood this fundamental of vampirism from his first night, while Eric had fought it from his.

If anything, Appius had needed to teach his younger child how to hold back. He sighed. The Great Revelation had been a difficult transition for Alexei. In the past, it had been much easier to cover up one of his child’s messier adventures, which Appius had indulged the boy in – as long as doing so did not make too many waves in whatever territory they were traveling in.

Since the Reveal, even the “old school” monarchs frowned upon too many deaths in a region – even though Appius was an expert at making those seem like human-wrought.

Indeed, fewer and fewer kingdoms now welcomed Appius.

“What has you troubled, Master?” Alexei asked, having awoken with a jolt as he always did. All vampires became fully aware as soon as the sun’s journey across the

western sky allowed them to be; however, Alexei did not simply awaken in stillness. He sat upright as if enthusiastic to begin the new night.

Appius looked at the child fondly. "I have heard from the King of Russia."

"When will we leave for there?" Alexei asked enthusiastically. Of all places they'd traveled, the younger vampire preferred his human homeland.

"The king asked that we wait a decade or so before we travel there again," Appius said gently, even as he flooded their maker-child bond with calming feelings.

Despite this, Alexei's emotions erupted.

"Why?" he cried like a petulant child, thick blood tears seemingly leaping from his wide eyes.

Appius soothed his child with gentle touches. "You know how cross the king was with you after our time in St. Petersburg. That was too close to the Reveal to be ignored," he reminded softly. "And it is not as if we will have no amusements. The King of the Philippines wishes for us to visit him again. Don't you remember the fun we had there?"

Tears still falling, Alexei seemed only slightly placated and only for a moment. "But I want Russia! It was just a few children that I ate! Orphans even! Why is the king still so cross?" he whined.

Appius took his child and lover into his embrace. "I will try again with the king in a few months. Winter is coming anyway, and I know you prefer the Russian summer. Am I not right?"

Alexei sniffled. "Summer? We'll go then? You promise?"

Appius sighed. He knew it would cost a pretty penny to “convince” the Russian king to lift his ban on them sooner rather than later. And he was not sure he wanted to invest those pennies.

“Why don’t we go to the Philippines and enjoy our time there. And I will write to the King of Russia again.”

When Alexei seemed ready to push Appius to make a more committed promise, the elder shushed his child. “Come now, my little Lexi,” he cajoled, calling him by the pet-name only he used, “we will have fun in the Philippines. The king is much freer with visitors than the King of Russia, and humans are treated as they should be – as cattle.”

What Appius did not mention was that one of Alexei’s inevitable “slip-ups” would cost Appius much less if it happened in the Philippines – because of the corrupt human *and* vampire governments there. Moreover, decimating a small village of people on one of the smaller, less-populated islands of the country would be fun sport for Alexei – and very easy to cover up.

Appius decided to offer that scenario to his child as a “carrot” for good behavior. The last thing Appius wanted to do was “command” that his child stop mentioning or desiring to be in his old homeland – though Appius would do that as a last resort. He did so hate to see the young one so upset, after all.

“How about this?” Appius began in an upbeat tone. “We shall go to the Philippines and spend a month or so at court. And – while there – we will ask around

in order to identify a nice, secluded village.” He lifted his child’s chin. “Once there, we could have a great deal of fun hunting. Do you not think?”

Alexei’s tears stopped and he smiled widely. “A whole village? A real hunt? Will I be able to do *anything* I want on the hunt?”

Appius smiled tolerantly. “Well – if you give me a few months – perhaps even half a year – to find the perfect place, somewhere without much connection with the outside world, then I will arrange things so that you can have your fun without any rules for a full week!”

Alexei wrapped his arms tightly around Appius. “Oh, thank you, Master. I love you so much!”

Appius frowned. Alexei often spoke of love, but it was an emotion the elder considered to be a weakness. “Child,” he said with a hint of sternness, “do you not remember what I have said about love?”

Alexei looked up at his maker with confusion. “But what am I to call the way I feel about you? You are my maker, and you give me such wonderful gifts.”

Appius patted his child’s cheek affectionately. “You may say that you prefer me more than any other – just as I prefer you more than any other.”

“Even Eric?” Alexei frowned as he named the brother he’d never met.

“Even Eric,” Appius said, though he felt a hint of uncertainty about his words. He wondered if Alexei could feel it too.

“When shall we leave for Manilla?” Alexei asked, seemingly forgetting all about their discussion about proper emotion.

“I will tie things up here, and we will leave in a week,” Appius said. “Now — why don’t you go shower so that we can find a decent meal.”

“No bottled tonight?” Alexei asked hopefully.

Both he and Appius resented the fact that they sometimes had to consume bottled blood in order to satisfy the Queen of Portugal, whose hospitality was waning.

Appius had a rule to leave before any monarch’s hospitality was fully eroded; however, he knew that the queen was frustrated that Alexei had accidentally put someone in the hospital the week before, despite the fact that Appius had “cleaned up” the situation so that no vampire involved was suspected in the matter.

“No bottled,” Appius promised. “We’ll celebrate our upcoming trip.”

Alexei grinned and then kissed Appius deeply before bouncing into the bathroom.

The elder smiled at child’s improved mood. He knew that the Philippines would be good for Alexei, and it would distract him from his fixation on Russia for another year or so. Moreover, if Appius had learned nothing else, it was that his child made more “mistakes” if he was not allowed to indulge *fully* every five years or so. A small village for a week might serve to curb Alexei’s more rambunctious behavior for a decade!

And — if Russia did not work out after that — Appius knew that he could tempt Alexei with a trip to the United States, where Alexei had been longing to travel. Appius had avoided the States for many years because it was more difficult to cover “mishaps” there due to the fact that Appius had very few connections in the New World.

However, he did have a few. Felipe de Castro was one of them. And Freyda, the relatively new Queen of Oklahoma, was the child of a vampire whom Appius called “friend” – well, at least as much of a “friend” as Appius was willing to have.

Of course, Oklahoma was near Louisiana. Appius had long-since contemplated a trip to see his eldest child. Likely because of his bitch of a maker’s command that he release Eric after 200 years, Appius still grew uncomfortable not long after he initiated a visit with his eldest child, a feeling which only increased with every night he spent in Eric’s company, which was why he so seldom visited his eldest child.

But that did not mean that Appius did not long for him. He closed his eyes, thinking about Eric’s body and the kinds of things he enjoyed doing to it. He stroked his cock absentmindedly. “The Philippines will be a good distraction for me as well.”

Appius had never told Eric – or Alexei – of his own maker’s commands. To do so might have made him look diminished in their eyes.

He contemplated once more how he might eliminate his maker so that her final commands upon him would be lifted. However, how does one succeed in killing a seer?

Still, Appius had tried.

Many times.

Yet every machination he had set into motion against his maker over the years had been met with failure. And – invariably – a note would arrive with *her* scent on it.

Her scent and a single phrase. “I am still here.”

He hated her more with every one of those missives!

But—even with her commands—he knew that a short visit with Eric would outweigh any discomfort he would feel. Such visits always had before, and he’d not enjoyed his eldest child since Alexei was turned.

“Alexei,” Appius sighed, even as he heard his child singing a Russian lullaby in the shower. “My beautiful Lexi.”

Appius wondered if—perhaps—meeting Eric might help to “improve” his youngest child. Though Appius loved Alexei’s exuberance, it could not be denied that a little of Eric’s self-control could benefit his younger brother in the long run—especially when Appius was forced to “free” Alexei.

Perhaps, it would be best if Appius started taking Alexei to visit Eric once every decade or so. Maybe he could even pass Alexei’s care onto Eric once Appius’s own 200 years with his child was up.

And, of course, a visit to Eric might be needed anyway—just for *maintenance* with his elder child.

To make sure that Eric had not forgotten “how” to be a vampire.

After all, Appius had, in the times when he stretched out his blood within his maker-child bond with Eric, “felt” that his child was displaying an odd—and troubling—myriad of emotions.

In fact, the last time Appius had checked on his child, he’d felt a sense of fascination, wonder, and affection that spurred Appius’s curiosity. *And his jealousy.*

But Eric could wait. It wasn’t as if he was going anywhere.

“For now – the Philippines,” Appius said to himself before calling a black market “dealer of people.” Such dealers were expensive, but they provided donors who had the delectable combination of high-quality blood and no inhibitions.

He ordered five for the night, knowing that Alexei would be well-pleased.

And then he decided to join Alexei in the shower; thinking of Eric had aroused him, and – if he couldn’t enjoy his eldest child in that moment – he would certainly enjoy his youngest.

CHAPTER 24: Sound Advice

Sound advice we're given, sound advice

Just as sure as your as you're livin'

If your smart you'll think twice

– Songwriters: Bill Giant, Florence Kaye, & Bernie Baum

FRIDAY, DECEMBER 17, 2004 (day)

“You’ll wear a hole in the floor if you don’t stop,” Tara warned as Sookie paced from one end of the kitchen to the other.

In contrast to her friend’s frenetic movement, Tara sat stilly at the old kitchen table, a glass of sweat tea and a piece of banana nut bread in front of her.

“Such an odd turn of phrase; I have never seen a hole worn in a floor from walking. I doubt a human would even be capable,” Willow mused in her other-worldly way as she walked by on her way to the back door. The raven-haired beauty’s startling blue eyes never failed to arrest Sookie’s attention.

The young werewolf and Onawa had been invited to come and go from the house as needed – to see to their bathroom needs.

Not surprisingly, Maria Star had had “concerns” about the guards not “socializing” while on duty.

Sookie had laid down what she called a “New Stackhouse Law”: peeing was NOT “socializing!”

That new “law” determined, Sookie had also invited the males on her daytime security team *and* Maria-Star to use the indoor facilities as well. To the telepath’s shock, Maria-Star had taken her up on the offer, but none of the men had – even though Mustapha and Warren had seemed to genuinely appreciate getting it.

Sookie smirked as she considered the seemingly universal truth that women – whether humans, shifters, or even hard-ass Weres (she wasn’t sure about fairies yet) – preferred to pee somewhere with toilet paper (or a bidet – which was a contraption she’d learned about from her Word-of-the-Day Calendar the previous year). For men, a tree, a rock, or just dirt worked well enough as a toilet. Indeed, Sookie sometimes envied men for the ease of their bathroom habits.

“Later!” Willow said in her breezy way as she basically skipped out of the door. Certainly, Onawa and the young werehawk were the most “sociable” of the guards; however, neither lingered in the house beyond seeing to their bathroom needs. The young women were to remain Sookie’s “Merlotte’s guards,” but seemed happy that her days (and nights) working there would be coming to an end on Saturday. The telepath smiled to herself as she recalled Jason and Hoyt giving mental high-fives to each other the night before when Onawa and Willow had stayed around Merlotte’s after Thalia’s arrival – to “socialize.”

Of course, Thalia still had reservations about Sookie becoming friendly with any of her guards, but the telepath had held her ground.

Sookie knew from her daytime guards' minds that the vampiress had basically laid down *her* own version of the agreement that she and Sookie had made the previous Wednesday night – “Thalia’s Law.” Happily, that version was just close enough to what Sookie had *actually* wanted to be acceptable to the telepath.

And – just as Sookie had hoped – all of her guards had reacted according to their own personalities.

Maria-Star was still all-business and merely reinforced Thalia’s orders that the guards had better not socialize while on duty.

Mustapha, Sookie had learned, was quiet – shy even. She felt certain, however, that – in time – they would become “friendly” enough.

Warren, on the other hand, was quite outgoing – when he wasn’t perched up in a sniper’s nest, that is. The only human on her security team, Warren seemed to store up all of his energy *and words* for when he was “released” from his quiet perch where he was so still that even his thoughts were hard to pick up on!

After Mustapha and Warren had arrived, Tray hadn’t been around again until that morning – when he’d relieved Maria-Star, who had a pack function. Not surprisingly, because of his previous familiarity with the Stackhouses, he was much more casual with her than the Long Tooth pack members that rotated in and out as Maria-Star decided that they were needed.

And then there were Onawa and Willow – both of whom Sookie liked quite a bit, despite their short acquaintance. If nothing else, telepathy gave Sookie the ability to form opinions about people relatively quickly. Both the shifter and the werehawk were

serious about their duty and happy to be employed in work they enjoyed. There was also a genuineness about both of them. Yes – Sookie could see her friendship with both growing over time.

As long as it didn't "grow" during their work time.

With the "ban on all socializing" lifted, Sookie was baking some banana nut bread – Gran's famous recipe – to give to those who were protecting her – for "after" their shifts, of course. Sookie felt that small gestures of appreciation would suit both her and her Gran's memory.

While *not* pissing off the vampiress in charge.

Tara rose to physically drag Sookie to the chair she'd been "using" – though not for very long durations.

"I have to watch the oven," Sookie protested, trying to stand back up and recommence her pacing.

"The timer's on, Sook, and the oven doesn't need to be watched to work," Tara laughed, pushing Sookie back into the chair playfully. "Plus, you promised to listen to me vent about my shit so that we could get your mind off of yours."

Sookie breathed out a long, shaky breath. "I *am* nervous about tonight," she admitted to her friend.

"Tell me something I didn't know," Tara intoned.

Indeed, Tara *did* know. Since that Tuesday morning, the two friends had touched base each day. They'd already had their "breakfast-for-lunch" together and delivered a heaping portion to a grateful Jason. Knowing that Sookie was nervous, her

friend had opted to help her bake that afternoon – even if her help was only as a sounding board and taste-tester.

“Okay,” Sookie said with a laugh at herself, “let’s hear about *your* shit for a while.”

Clearly trying to keep Sookie’s mind off of her impending meeting with Bill, Tara launched into a recap of her abrupt break-up with Franklin Mott, but then quickly followed that up by sharing that she thought Tray was “sex on legs” and then by admitting that her “thing for Jason” was sparking up again because he’d been so loyal and sweet to Sookie lately.

Sookie smiled to herself as she wondered about her best friend and her brother getting together. On one level, the thought of it grossed her out; on the other, the idea of her brother settling down with someone like Tara was quite pleasing. Of course, now Jason was *into* Onawa, and that would complicate things.

As Sookie contemplated how to caution her friend about getting her hopes up about Jason, the brunette transitioned from talking about her “men issues” to discussing her new part-time employee, Jackie, a Bon Temps native, who’d recently gotten a divorce. The fifty-one-year-old was – according to Tara – enjoying the first “paying” job she’d had in her entire life, thanks to a husband who had taken really good care of her *and* his mistress. It was finding out about the mistress that had prompted Jackie to call Sid-Matt. And – though the woman got a very nice divorce settlement – Jackie had decided that a new job could help her get started with her “new life.”

“She sounds like a pill!” Sookie commented as Tara told her that Jackie planned to go on what she called a “divorce-moon” (as opposed to a honeymoon) cruise for Valentine’s Day. Apparently, only singles in their 40s to 60s would be on the cruise, and Jackie was excited about “testing the waters.”

“Oh—she *is* a pill!” Tara agreed. “But I already don’t know what I’d do without her! She’s caught on really fast and helped me cater to her friends—and, therefore, get a more varied clientele. Heck—I wouldn’t have been able to go to Jackson if I didn’t have her!”

“Or be here right now,” Sookie smiled as she squeezed her friend’s hand.

Tara nodded in agreement, remembering well the days (and nights) that she’d had to “man” her store alone because she couldn’t afford a helper. “Oh! I almost forgot! We are startin’ a Christmas sale tomorrow—tryin’ to attract anyone not interested in goin’ to Shreveport for a mall. We’ve been doin’ so well since Thanksgiving that I thought I’d discount a bit more than usual—to try to get rid of some older inventory and drum up a bit of excitement about the store.” The brunette gave the blonde a Cheshire-Cat grin. “I put aside a couple of things you might be interesting in—for your hot date on Sunday.”

Sookie blushed. “You know—Eric and I are just gonna hang out and watch a movie and talk.”

Tara rolled her eyes. “He’s a vampire, Sookie! He’s gonna wanna,” she paused dramatically, “*neck* too!”

Both women descended into a giggle fit at Tara’s bad joke.

One thing was for certain, though; for a few minutes – as the two tried to one-up each other with bad vampire jokes – the telepath didn't think about her impending meeting with Bill Compton at all.

"I'm so glad we saw each other at Josephine's," Tara finally said after returning from the bathroom; her bladder hadn't been able to withstand a particularly silly joke from Sookie, and she'd run – seemingly at vampire speed – to the bathroom to avoid making a mess.

"Me too," Sookie smiled.

"So what did you end up doing after we danced that night?" Tara asked, her expression a little confused.

Sookie wasn't surprised that her friend didn't remember the staking, though she'd still been in Club Dead when it had happened. Of course, the bar had been full of vampires who likely glamoured *all* the human witnesses to forget seeing someone get staked by none other than Steve Newlin.

Sookie couldn't help but to wonder if such a thing ought not to be publicized though – so that humans could begin to understand who were the true villains when it came to vampire-human conflict.

"Sook?" Tara asked when Sookie didn't answer.

"Oh – uh – sorry. Eric and I ended up going to an important vampire's mansion for the night," the telepath responded – not lying, but definitely not telling the entire truth either.

“The king’s?” Tara asked.

Sookie sighed. It seemed that Franklin had told her friend some things about the vampire power structure. The telepath reminded herself that she needed to ask Eric if it would be better if Tara were glamoured to forget all about kings and queens, as well as the existence of Weres.

“Yes,” Sookie responded to Tara’s question. “And that’s where we found Bill.”

Tara nodded in understanding; Sookie had told her what had happened from that point on – though in an abbreviated form.

The brunette frowned. “I’m sorry I brought up Jackson since it brought your mind back to,” she paused, “you know who.”

Sookie chuckled. “You know, Bill’s not Voldemort! You can say his name!”

Again, the friends giggled like schoolgirls and then talked for a while about the Harry Potter books; they’d both read only the first of the series, but were planning to read the others.

In a pause of their light-hearted conversation, Sookie reached over to take her friend’s hand.

Tara looked down at their hands and smiled somewhat sadly. “I remember when it hurt you to do that,” she said quietly. “When the thoughts were too loud for you to touch anyone.”

Sookie sighed and nodded. “I remember too. But I’m glad it’s gotten better, and – unless I’m wrong – by practicing more – instead of shielding – I’m already getting even better.”

Of course, the vampire blood hadn't hurt either.

"I know we talked about this a little the other day, but I really am sorry we stopped being as close. This," Tara gestured between herself and her friend, "is too important to lose."

Sookie sniffled. "I agree." Her face suddenly broke into a wide smile.

"What?" Tara asked.

Not able to hold in her burst of joy, Sookie chuckled. "I just realized how happy I am!"

Tara looked at her skeptically. "Despite what's comin' tonight?"

"Yeah," the blonde answered sincerely. "A month ago—heck! a week ago—I was so sad. I felt disconnected from everyone—and everything. Jason and I were on rocky ground, Sam was doing his silent judgment thing, and you and I hadn't seen each other in weeks. Added to that—I had no idea at all where my relationship with Bill was goin'. I just knew that I wasn't happy with where we were, but," she sighed, "I was too afraid to fully end things."

She took a deep breath and continued. "But now I'm really happy! I've reconnected with you and Jase. I've even settled things with Sam—at least, as much as possible for the time being. I've got a new job to look forward to. I'm gonna be goin' to school. And I've got so much hope in my heart about Eric!" She shrugged. "The Bill thing is gonna be hard; I know that. But—ultimately—he's gonna be a blip in my life. He was my 'first' in tons of ways, but I don't have to let him influence my 'next!'"

"Hell no, you don't!" Tara agreed.

CHAPTER 25: TENDER FEELING

I offer you a true devotion

All life through my love I vow

For this is real, this sweet emotion

This tender feeling I have now

– Songwriters: Bernie Baum, Bill Giant, & Florence Kaye

SIXTY-SEVEN MINUTES BEFORE SUNSET

Eric woke up slightly before his usual time, and – as he'd figured might be the case – he felt Sookie's apprehension.

He sent the telepath a quick text: "I'm up if you need to talk."

The vampire rose from his bed as he used his senses to "reach out." He felt his three vampire bonds as always. And then – through scent and sound – he determined that no beings were closer to his resting place than they ought to be.

Sookie replied to his text after about a minute. "I'll keep that in mind, but Tara was here most of the day, and I'm sort of talked out. Just get here when you can. Please?"

"I will see you five minutes after sunset," he answered before quickly readying himself for his night.

After he showered and dressed, he took some blood from the mini-fridge in the sitting room adjacent to his bedroom and heated it up. He knew that it was essential that he fed well – given the fact that he would likely wish to kill Bill before the night was over.

Not that that desire would be any different from usual.

“I’d better have two bags,” he said to himself, even as he took the first out of his special warming device, which worked much better than a microwave at maintaining the flavor of his heated meals.

Like much of the technology in his home, the item was a prototype developed by an old “friend.”

Truth be told, Eric was like many human men in that he very much enjoyed gadgets, though he tended to keep his most cutting-edge items secret.

For example, his newest gadget was designed by Kenshin, a vampire whom Eric had met in Japan six centuries before. The two had traveled together for several decades. In life, Kenshin had been 武士. “*Bushi*,” Eric said softly, pronouncing the Anglicized version of the word he’d first learned to describe those now more commonly known as the “samurai.”

Kenshin had been quite young – only a decade vampire – when Eric decided to journey to Japan. Not long after he arrived at court, the vampire Emperor employed Eric as an enforcer, and Kenshin – the Emperor’s own child – was assigned as his guide and translator, though Eric had already learned a good deal of the language.

In confidence, the Emperor had asked Eric for a favor – to provide his child with additional training. For – though Kenshin was well-schooled in the art of being a samurai – the Emperor wanted him to learn more about how those in the West fought. Eric did as instructed, and – never one to overlook an opportunity – he learned much from his young companion as well.

And, more importantly, he had gained a friend and ally.

Kenshin, now residing in Manhattan, owned a huge share of Chevrolet; indeed, Eric's first Corvette had been a gift from his friend. Not surprisingly, Kenshin's specific interests had been in the development of technology that would benefit vampires. And he'd managed to do a lot of work in that area even before the Great Reveal.

"What is an automobile," Kenshin had once said to Eric, "if not a traveling safe haven for a vampire?"

Indeed, all of the cars that Eric had purchased from Kenshin over the years had come equipped with an impenetrable light-tight trunk, though – in the case of his Corvettes – fitting in that trunk was a challenge for the large blonde.

Luckily, he'd rarely needed to use his Corvettes as coffins.

Kenshin's latest work was an automobile designed for vampires in Eric's position – older, powerful vampires who did not wish to be confined during the daylight hours they could be awake. Such vampires as Eric, and – now – Kenshin himself, woke well before the sun disappeared.

"If only I'd had you in Jackson," Eric sighed as he ran his fingers over the decidedly "un-flashy" Chevy Impala that he'd purchased from Kenshin just five

months before. The car, a prototype, had windows that did not allow in any sunlight, but would allow a vampire to see out—at least in a limited way. A system of cameras was meant to augment any potential deficits in sight; that system was the part that Kenshin's team was still working to perfect. However, with Eric's eyes, the limited vision allowed through the light-tight windows was adequate, so the imperfect camera system was not really a problem.

Plus, Eric had tasked Molly with tweaking the cameras to improve them, and she was now helping Kenshin improve the system.

Kenshin had confided to Eric that it was his goal to design glass that would allow vampires to *fully* see the sun and daylight again. Indeed, he was partly responsible for the opaque glass already in use in such places as the Pyramid of Gizeh Hotel in Rhodes. For his part, Eric would likely always invest heavily in whatever projects Kenshin was working on.

Eric left his garage with just enough time to get to the Bon Temps city limits by sundown. He owned a piece of land there where he would park the vehicle, and then he'd fly the rest of the way to Sookie once the sun fully set.

After all, he did not want for anyone to have the chance to examine his vehicle. He'd promised Kenshin that no one beyond Molly and others he trusted unreservedly would know about the vehicle, at least not until it was ready to sell to Kenshin's exclusive vampire clientele. Eric couldn't imagine that Kenshin wouldn't charge upwards of five million for the cars. Well worth the price!

Eric chuckled as he started the engine and looked up at the fuzzy dice draped over the rearview mirror.

Kenshin's idea of a joke.

SUNSET

Bill exited his resting place with a sense of hope and confidence.

He'd carefully chosen and laid out his clothing before dawn; now all that was left for him to do was shower and wait an hour.

"Within the hour after that, I will have her back," he promised himself.

FIVE MINUTES AFTER SUNSET

Eric landed softly, and almost immediately, Sookie opened her door to greet him.

Despite their long talks, the two had not seen each other since the previous Monday night, and their smiles indicated their pleasure at being with one another again.

With confident strides, Sookie walked to where the vampire stood in her yard and embraced him without reservation.

He hugged her tightly in return, lifting her up a little and then twirling her around once for good measure.

She giggled as he set her down but did not break their embrace. "I've missed seeing you," she said after inhaling deeply in order to take in his scent.

"I've missed seeing you," he echoed after doing the same.

“Would you do something weird with me? To help me calm down?” she asked.

He moved his upper body back a bit so that she could see his raised eyebrows.

“I did not know that you were into ‘weird’ acts, dear one. However, I will oblige,” he flirted.

She gasped, but then giggled—before nudging his arm a bit. “Don’t get ahead of yourself, Cowboy. I’m just asking you to play Uno with me. It’s a card game.”

Eric chuckled. “I have never played that one.”

“Well—I’ll teach you,” she replied as she broke their embrace and then took his hand; swinging her hand with his in a playful motion, she led him toward her front door. “I figured you’d kick my ass at Trivial Pursuit, chess, or checkers, and Uno’s a game of chance.”

“Uno it is then,” the vampire smiled. “But I will have to leave a few minutes before Bill is due—just to check on the set up.”

Sookie tensed for a moment. “Okay—but till then, distract me by telling me about how you could get here so darned fast!”

“Ah—I shall tell you about my friend Kenshin,” Eric smiled as they took seats at the kitchen table, where the game and a freshly warmed bottle of TrueBlood was waiting.

Though Eric was full from his earlier meal, he drank the beverage anyway, knowing it would give Sookie pleasure that he did so.

FIFTY-TWO MINUTES AFTER SUNSET

Eric smiled as his phone rang.

“Calling for a rematch?” he asked as he connected the call.

“I’m not the one who lost three times in a row,” she returned, a smile in her voice.

“I am convinced that you cheated,” the vampire grinned.

The telepath huffed. “You shuffled the cards *and* dealt them the last two times we played. Get over it! I was just luckier today – *and* for a while now,” she added, her joking tone shifting to seriousness.

“Me too,” he agreed, just as sincere. “Very lucky.”

“Are you close enough to *hear* me?” Sookie asked after a silent moment.

“Of course! I have the phone quite close to my ear,” the vampire smirked.

“That’s *not* what I meant, and you know it,” she returned. She was peering out her window toward where he stood, though he knew that she wouldn’t be able to see him because of distance and darkness. He could see her, however. Her expression showed her mirth at his teasing.

“I can see you, but I can only hear you through the phone,” he conveyed.

He could see her nodding and straining her eyes in his direction.

“I can *feel* you out there,” she confirmed, her smile seeming to pierce through the dark right toward his un-beating heart. “Thalia too. And Bubba. And Padma. And pretty much *all* the two-natured guards and Warren. Don’t you think it’s a bit much?” she asked, her smile shifting to a smirk.

“No such thing,” he said with seriousness. He glanced in the direction of Bill’s home. The inferior vampire had yet to leave it.

“I changed my mind about you being here,” Sookie whispered.

“What?” Eric asked quickly. “Sookie, I have promised to stay away unless Bill does something foolish. Please—I will not be,” he paused, “comfortable if you send me away from here.”

“Wait! No!” Sookie returned. “That’s not what I meant. I’m sorry. It’s my nerves making things come out wrong. I meant that I changed my mind about having you *here*—as in—uh—closer. I want you to be able to *hear* what’s going on, Eric.”

“What of your privacy? Your closure?” Eric asked, his surprise clear in his tone.

“It’s not like Bill deserves that,” she scoffed. “I know I’ll be safe with you as close as you are now. But I was plannin’ to tell you about Bill’s and my talk anyway, and I don’t think I’ll wanna rehash it. So it would be better if you just heard it all.”

“Sookie, he might not speak as freely if he believes that I can hear you,” Eric cautioned.

“Who’s gonna tell him you can?” Sookie asked mischievously.

“You’d lie to him?” Eric asked with a smirk. “Why, Miss Stackhouse, I think my bad influence is *rubbing on* you,” he said suggestively.

“It’s *rubbing off on*,” she laughed at his purposeful mistake in wording. “And you can keep your ‘bad influence’ to yourself, Mister!”

“For now, Miss Stackhouse. I’ll keep all the bad parts of me under lock and key.”

“Except that mind of yours,” she muttered. “And – to answer your question – I *would* lie to Bill. Seems only fair at this point. Anyway, tonight isn’t about him or what he wants. It’s about *me!*”

“I have to say that I like it when you are saucy like this,” the vampire shared even as he moved toward the house. As he cleared the tree line and stepped into the illumination of the new security light Thalia had insisted upon, Sookie grinned and waved at him.

He continued to talk into the phone. “I’ll lurk here and then seem to move away to placate Bill when he comes. He’ll think I cannot hear you, but he truly has no conception of my range.”

“Okay. Thanks,” Sookie said before moving away from the window. The vampire could see her inventorying what was on the coffee table.

“Ever the hostess,” he commented into the phone as he noted the TrueBlood on the coffee table.

“But I didn’t warm it up,” Sookie relayed.

“Oh – the scandal!” he mockingly lamented.

“Gran *would* have a fit,” the telepath admitted with a laugh. “Wait! No – actually she would probably be waitin’ for Bill with her old shotgun tonight.”

Eric laughed.

“Don’t be surprised when I ask him things we already know,” Sookie sighed.

“You want to trap him in his lies,” the vampire observed. “That is a wise thought, dear one.”

“I want to see how far he’ll go with his lyin’, and I’m prepared to use any traps he falls into in order to get the rest of my questions answered.”

“A good strategy,” Eric commented. “Are you ready?” he asked her as he heard Bill beginning the short trek across the cemetery.

Immediately, he felt Sookie’s tension heighten in their blood tie.

“You’ll be close?”

“You know I will be,” he swore.

“And come to me? Right after? Please? Or if I call for you while he’s here?”

“Yes. I will,” he vowed.

“Okay – then I’m ready,” she breathed. “Thank you, Eric,” she said before hanging up her phone.

“What are you doing here?” Bill asked about thirty seconds later as he approached the tree line.

“Sookie has asked me to be nearby. Did you forget so soon, Billy Boy? Tell me – did Lorena inject that noggin of yours with liquid silver – ‘cause you seem *quite* forgetful lately.”

“I haven’t forgotten you will be present on Sookie’s *property* tonight,” Bill soused. “However, I seem to remember that you promised us our privacy.”

“What I promise *Sookie* is between her and me,” Eric said evenly, though his eyes spoke of the dangers Bill would face if he did anything to harm Sookie.

Bill looked ready to argue.

“As it so happens,” Eric spoke, “I *will* be moving back from the house – just as Sookie asked me to do, but know this: if I feel that she is afraid, your privacy will disappear – as will your head. And the rest of you.”

Bill scoffed. “Yes, yes, Eric. I have heard your threats already.”

Eric shook his head. “One night – and I do not believe it will be many nights from this one – you *will* piss off the wrong vampire, Compton. And you will die for it. I truly hope *I’m* that wrong vampire.”

With that, the Viking sped to a spot where he could both see and hear within the house, but where he doubted Bill would be able to sense him well. Then, he watched Bill progress toward Sookie’s front porch in his skulking way.

CHAPTER 26: Indescribably Blue

Having no way to tell you

The pain that I've been through

Oh, my love, you have left me

Indescribably blue

– Songwriter: Darrell O Glenn

The telepath felt her heart beating rapidly, which was no surprise – considering that she was about to confront the vampire who'd almost raped and killed her less than a week earlier.

That was the Bill she was beginning to understand was the “real” one.

However, despite *knowing* that, she felt her nerves keenly, for she was also facing her first love, her first boyfriend, and her first sexual partner. And – for the first time in her life – she was “breaking up” with someone.

Yes – a case of nerves and a heaping helping of anxiety were completely natural, given her situation. But one thing she *didn't* feel when she heard Bill knocking on her door was fear.

And she knew why that was.

It was because Eric was nearby.

It was because she could *feel* Eric's void.

And that feeling outweighed all of her anxiety.

Despite her long work shifts since Tuesday night, Sookie had been able to spend quite a bit of time contemplating *why* she felt that she could – and *should* – trust Eric Northman. In fact, she'd made a list of the reasons. To be fair, she'd also listed the ways he'd been untrustworthy; there weren't many, and all of them had been worms introduced by the King Worm himself – the one at the door. In the end, Sookie's head, heart, and gut were all on the same page about Eric Northman.

And that was a good f-in page!

Even if the Viking was horrible at Uno. She smiled briefly as she walked to the door.

Bill, on the other hand, was a page that needed to be ripped out of the book of her life.

And torn up.

And burned.

Taking a deep breath, Sookie opened the door to the vampire she intended to close the door upon that night.

For a moment, she considered not inviting him in and just speaking with him while the magical barrier that kept him outside of her home was in place. However, Eric had made a fair point. Bill would be much less likely to speak the truth if he felt that others could hear him.

"Come in, Bill," she said stiffly, even as she regarded the down-trodden, guilty expression in his eyes.

She couldn't help but to wonder how much of that look was real – how much of *him* was real.

“Sookie, I am so sorry, darling! You must believe that I never intended to harm you,” he began, even before he'd stepped inside.

“I didn't ask you here for an apology,” she said flatly, turning away from him to walk into the living room. “And I *won't* waste my time watching you grovel for forgiveness, Bill. So don't bother. Furthermore, I *will* rescind your invitation if groveling is *your* purpose in coming here. I asked you to come because I need to ask you some questions, and I need you to tell me the truth. I think that you owe me answers – especially after what happened in the trunk.”

Bill frowned as he took the seat she pointed toward. “Questions?”

“Yes, Bill. I have several. And – after you've answered them – I'm prepared to tell you where we go from here.”

“Yes, darling. I agree that we should speak about our future – *together*. And how we can overcome what has passed between us,” Bill proclaimed hopefully.

Sookie barely kept herself from gagging, even as she tasted bile.

“Questions and answers *first*,” she said determinedly.

“Sookie, I am happy to answer any questions you have,” he said as if he were an innocent – an open book. “But why must Eric and his goons be so close by?”

Sookie forced a chuckle. “Bubba is hardly a goon. And they are close because I *want* them to be – because I feel safer with them nearby.”

Bill had the audacity to look wounded. “Sookie, surely you don’t believe that I am a danger to you! If I’d not been starved and tortured, I would have *never* done what I did in the trunk. I could not help myself.”

Sookie shook her head. “Remember, Bill. I don’t want to hear that kind of kowtowin’. It won’t move us forward.” She took a deep breath. “The truth is that the last time I was in your presence, you ripped a pretty big chunk from my neck. The truth is that I want Eric close because I don’t want to be afraid when I speak with you. If you can’t accept that, you can just leave now, Bill. But—just so you know—when we planned this little meeting, I asked Eric to stay far enough away that he couldn’t hear us. And he promised to keep the others back too—just as long as nothing drastic happens with my emotions.”

Yes—she misled Bill about Eric’s not being able to hear them, but—for once—she felt zero guilt about telling a half-truth. And anyway, her words to Bill were “technically” true, certainly true enough to ensure that he didn’t feel a lie in whatever blood tie they still had.

“Sookie, I hate that you believe you need to be afraid of me,” Bill said, looking like a beaten-down dog, even as his tone seemed designed to manipulate her—to elicit guilt from her.

A week before, he might have succeeded in making her question her own feelings.

“I’m sorry that I feel afraid of you, too,” she returned honestly. “But—right now—it is what it is.”

“And what is it? What are we?” he asked.

“We are going to focus on the questions I have,” she said firmly, refusing to get sidetracked by Bill’s manipulations.

Bill frowned, but then quickly smiled with acceptance. Sookie was beginning to wonder if all of the looks that passed across his face were a part of an act.

“Ask away, darling,” he smiled in a welcoming way.

With difficulty, she ignored her desire to tell him that his endearments for her were decidedly unwelcome. Instead, she gestured toward the cool TrueBlood and then asked her first question. “What exactly *is* your job for Queen Sophie-Anne?”

Bill looked slightly taken aback for a half a second. “Sookie, it’s best if you don’t know about vampire matters,” he responded in a somewhat patronizing tone. “I suspect that Eric has been planting these questions concerning me into your mind. But having knowledge about the vampire world is dangerous for you, Sookie. And I—*for one*—won’t endanger you that way.”

“Answer or *leave*,” Sookie responded resolutely, folding her arms over her chest. Purposely, she’d worn shapeless clothing that was the opposite of revealing. Still, she couldn’t help but to feel a little exposed as Bill looked at her in a penetrating way—as if he were trying to topple her will.

Determined, she held his gaze.

He was the one to break the silence. “What I am doing for the queen is a secret, Sookie—one that could put you in grave danger,” he whispered, not knowing that she

already knew all about the work he was doing, and just wanting confirmation – for both Eric and herself.

They were inclined to trust the queen, but any substantiation – even if it came from Bill – would be welcome.

Indeed, Sookie was a little surprised that Bill hadn't already asked to get his computer equipment and database from the hidey hole he'd made. She figured that Eric and Thalia were the reasons why he'd not asked her about it since Bill had been back from Jackson. And she was certainly expecting him to mention it or simply try to take it before the night was over.

"Dangerous or not, I want to know what are you doing for her. Keep in mind that I want the *whole* truth, Bill," she warned.

"What has Eric said?" he asked defensively. "He's lying."

Sookie shook her head. "Last warning, Bill. Start answering or go."

"The computer I left here when I went to Washington . . .," he began.

"*Mississippi*," she corrected. "When you went to Lorena."

"I did go to Washington – at first. And you must understand that a child must obey the commands of his maker, Sookie! See, you do not understand the vampire world, and it's best if you never do!" he added speaking to her as if she were a child.

"It's a database of vampires," she said flatly, answering her own question.

"How? How do you know? Why do you think that?" Bill stammered out his questions. "You couldn't have set up that equipment or broken through my code!"

She shook her head in disgust. "I knew it was a database before you left. Remember? I saw one of your entries when you weren't paying attention to my presence?"

"Sookie, I"

"Am I right? Is it a directory for vampires?"

Bill nodded. "Yes. And some other Supes. Sophie-Anne believes she can market it. It really is quite a good source of information," he added, puffing up with a little pride. "It was an honor that she asked me to design it."

"And you are the one who collected all the data?" Sookie asked.

"Yes. Well mostly."

"Okay – so why would the queen send you to the boondocks to work on a project like that? Wouldn't it be better if you were somewhere with a lot of vampires – so that you could get more information?"

Bill looked away for a moment, a guilty flicker in his eyes. "Many vampires offer at least some information over the phone, and I pay others to supply me with what they know. I *do* plan to venture to more populated areas in the future."

"What's stopped you?"

"I wanted to be here – with *you*," Bill claimed.

"And why did you come to Bon Temps to start with?" she asked.

"I've told you. My descendent passed away, and I wanted to inhabit my old home," he answered with sincerity. "To connect with my humanity!"

"And Hadley? Did she tell you about *me* before you came?"

If a vampire could have become paler, Bill Compton would have lost all color in that moment.

“Who’s Hadley?” he lied.

“My cousin. The queen’s lover and child,” Sookie responded, her gaze narrowing.

“Eric ought never to have”

“What’s a procurer?” Sookie interrupted him.

If a vampire could have defecated, Bill’s britches would have been ruined.

“Sookie, I Eric is He had no right! You’re mine!”

“You mean you were *sent* here – to Bon Temps – to procure me *for the queen* – right? From my seat, it seems like I was only to be *yours* until you handed me off to her. *Or* until your maker decided to call you to her. Funny – you left your work behind quickly enough to go to her, yet you couldn’t drop it long enough to give me fifteen minutes of your undivided time by the end of our relationship.”

“Sookie, you must know I love you! That I was trying to ensure your safety. Trying to keep you from the queen!”

“Do you also want to ensure my *wellbeing*?” she asked, her voice now steady and void of the bitterness it had held only moments before.

“Of course!” Bill responded quickly, even as he frowned a bit in confusion at the sudden change in her tone.

“Then why didn’t you give me the money from Dallas, Bill?” she asked.

Bill looked as if he’d been slapped.

"I—uh—Sookie, you must . . ." His voice trailed off as he flailed for an answer.

"It doesn't matter," the telepath said with exasperation.

"Sookie, please," Bill returned. "Let me explain."

Sookie chuckled, but the sound she produced actually filled the room with her resentment. "Now that you've had time to come up with an explanation, I don't want to hear it. And do you know why?"

Bill shook his head. In denial? In confusion? To continue stalling so that he could hone his excuse? Sookie didn't know.

"Whatever your reasoning," she began, "you deprived me of money I had earned. Money I'd bled for. But—worse than that—you robbed me of peace of mind when you knew how much I was struggling financially."

"I am sorry," Bill responded, looking down. "But I didn't want you to feel as if you owed Eric."

She scoffed in response. "*He owed me, Bill!* And he paid me! His only mistake was doin' that through you!"

"I would have given you the money," he insisted. "I was already planning to pay your property taxes."

She shook her head as she scoffed again. "Then who would I have owed, Bill?" she accused. "You either wanted me to feel obliged to you or dependent upon you. And you hoped to turn me completely against Eric in the process!"

"Eric is someone you *should* stay away from!" he insisted.

She shook her head and took several breaths to compose herself.

“Eric has a theory, and I believe it,” Sookie said.

“Eric wants you for himself!” Bill said angrily.

“Yes, he does. The question is – do you *really* want me, Bill?”

“Yes!” he averred quickly.

“When did that start?” she asked, keeping her tone void of emotion. “When did you start wanting me for yourself – and not just for some job?”

“Sookie, I I love you!”

“You see – I started with Eric’s theory, but I’ve filled in some other blanks for myself,” Sookie returned. “For example, it seems logical to believe that Hadley – because of her closeness to the queen – talked about her family a bit. It’s no wonder that she might have shared stories about her weird mind-reading cousin.”

“Sookie”

When it was clear that Bill was neither going to confirm nor deny what Sookie had said, she trudged on. “Eric told me about how your job in the queen’s court was as a procurer. I bet Hadley smells sweet – like me? I’m bettin’ you were the one who,” she paused, “introduced her to the queen – weren’t you?”

“Eric! That bastard!”

“Not Eric. I filled in *that* particular blank myself,” Sookie informed. “But Eric did have to tell me what a procurer was – how a procurer *collects* things – people, in this case.”

“Eric is to blame for all of this. He ought never to have”

“Told me the truth?” Sookie asked with irritation. “Yes, Bill, I can see how the truth wouldn’t benefit *you* in *your* procurement of a telepathic pet for the queen.”

“I wouldn’t have allowed that!” Bill proclaimed. “I was doing everything I could to ensure that you retained your independence and could remain – with me. I would have protected you from bonding with the queen or one of her children. We would have been together and happy!”

“But that wasn’t always the plan or your intention – right?” Sookie asked.

“No,” Bill admitted reluctantly, shaking his head. “How did you find all of this out?” he whispered. “I was so careful to not mention Hadley.”

Sookie shook her head as her anger grew. “Don’t focus on how you got found out, Bill. What was your initial intention with me? I need to hear *you* say it.”

“To assess your talent,” Bill said defeatedly.

“Then?”

“If you were as your cousin said, I was to do whatever necessary to make sure you were accepting of the idea of moving to New Orleans.”

“You were supposed to seduce me?”

“Hadley talked about how you loved Southern manners – loved *Gone with the Wind*. Queen Sophie-Anne felt that I would appeal to you. You see – none of us wanted you hurt, Sookie! It was all intended to be like a blind date of sorts. And everything would have worked out as it should have if Eric hadn’t interfered,” he growled.

Sookie ignored Bill's ineffective dig at Eric, and continued her probe. "Was old Jessie Compton killed in order to make way for you?" she asked, looking at Bill closely as she did.

"He was terminally ill," Bill hedged, looking guiltier than before.

"Mercy killing?" She frowned. "Euthanasia must be a novel concept to you."

"No," Bill admitted. "During the war, I," he paused, "*helped* a friend – after a battle – so that he would no longer be in pain. I knew of others who did the same – for those whose wounds left them no chance. It's what I would have wanted for myself."

For the first time that night, Sookie felt a twinge compassion for the vampire in front of her. Under everything, she *did* believe that Bill had once been a decent man; maybe he even still tried to be "good." But she couldn't let herself go down that thought-path – not ever again.

Of course, Bill immediately proved how "not good" he was by trying to manipulate the little bit of compassion he felt from their blood tie. "I helped Jessie to die with dignity. I would have simply moved in with him – glamouring him if needed – if he had wanted to live. It was," he paused, "difficult to harm the last person who carried my name, Sookie."

She frowned, unwilling to fall for his attempt to elicit more pity from her.

"Bill, had you *already* glamourged the Rattrays to attack you – and then me – *before* you met me? Or did the idea come to you after you saw them at Merlotte's?"

The abruptness of Sookie's new line of questioning caught Bill well off his guard, and guilt flashed across his face. "Eric," the vampire growled. Needless to say, his single-word response did nothing to alleviate that guilt.

It was Sookie's turn to growl. "I swear to God, Bill; if you try to blame Eric for one more thing that *you* did, I'll rescind your invitation and tell Eric I don't care anymore if he kills you!" she yelled with venom.

"Sookie!" Bill responded with surprise.

"Answer the question about the Rattrays, or get the 'f' out!" the telepath commanded.

Bill broke eye contact with her and looked down. "I was ordered to insert myself into your life, Sookie. After observing you for a few days, I believed that a blood tie was the best way," he added with a startling mixture of guilt and defiance in his tone.

For her part, Sookie's body shook for a moment. In anger. In resignation. In acceptance that her entire first relationship was built upon a foundation of lies and violence.

A foundation that made her a victim.

Well—she fucking refused to be a victim anymore!

"Why did you undermine the queen?" she asked, once she'd taken a moment to compose herself.

"I didn't," Bill responded with a frown. "Yes—I was delaying taking you to her, trying to ensure your safety—but, eventually, I hoped to introduce you to the idea of working for her," he confessed.

"You *did* undermine her. You passed me on to Eric – *not* the queen – when Lorena ordered you to go to her. I want to know why," Sookie insisted.

Bill was silent for a moment. "I did not want you to have to face the queen without me," he almost whispered.

"Why Eric?" she followed up.

"His interest in you ensured that he'd protect you – even from Sophie-Anne taking you before I could . . ." His voice trailed off.

"Before you could present me to her yourself?" Sookie finished.

Bill nodded. "Yes, but you must believe me when I tell you that I wanted only your happiness. I love you, Sookie. By the time I knew that, so much had already happened, and I was receiving pressure from the queen. I hoped that – once I had the database ready to sell – you would feel ready to move with me to New Orleans. We could have been happy there. We still could be," he said, looking her in the eye for the first time in several minutes.

She shook her head, once again feeling a swell of bile in her throat. "No, Bill!"

"Don't you see?" Bill entreated, almost as if he were trying to glamour her. "I was trying to make the best out of a horrible situation! But I needed time."

"Time?" Sookie asked.

"I needed to complete the first version of the database so that I could avoid going back to being Sophie-Anne's procurer. I was also waiting until Hadley was turned so that you couldn't read her thoughts and find out that your telepathy was already known about before we met. I really *was* working toward a comfortable life for us; I still

am. Imagine it, darling! A life where I could keep you relatively independent – while at the same time placating the queen’s desire for your services!”

“So you used Eric,” Sookie said, shaking her head and knowing that the Viking could hear them. “You didn’t want to be cut out of the life you’d imagined for us in the queen’s court, so you gave me to Eric in hopes that Lorena would want you only temporarily. That’s why you left the database with me too – isn’t it? You didn’t want Sophie-Anne to find it once she knew you were missing. It didn’t have anything to do with Lorena lookin’ for it – did it?” she asked, her pitch rising.

“Sookie, I knew you’d be relatively safe with Eric. And – eventually – if Lorena didn’t let me go, you would pass along my work to Eric, who – in turn – would pass it along to the queen. I am,” he paused, “loyal to her. And to you. And – for all of Eric’s faults – I knew he wouldn’t force you against your will.”

“Unlike you!” Sookie spit out.

“Sookie – darling – you *must* forgive me for what I did in that trunk. I was not myself!” Bill begged.

“I rescind your invitation, Bill!” Sookie said firmly, sitting back in her chair to ensure that Bill couldn’t reach out and grab her before magic drew him out the door.

“Sookie! Please! Don’t!” Bill wailed, though he couldn’t fight the force compelling him to leave.

At a safe distance, Sookie followed.

“Bill, I needed to see you tonight to confirm what I already knew. I needed to see you so that I could tell you that we’re through – that I think it’s better if we don’t try

to be friends or have *any* kind of relationship at all! I don't know you, Bill. And you don't know me. I don't love you anymore either, Bill."

"Sookie, I love you! And I know you love me! Remember, I've had your blood, and you've had mine. I felt your love!" the younger vampire wailed, unable to fight the magic separating them.

"I'm pretty fuckin' positive you can't feel any love from me now!" Sookie screamed. "My love for you was for a fiction, Bill! And it's partly my own damned fault for imagining you were like one of the heroes in romance novels. Maybe you are! You're as much of a fiction as they are!"

"I love you!" he yelled again.

"Frankly, I don't give a fuck!" she said with a strength she'd not known she possessed.

"Sookie, please! Don't do this to us!" Bill wailed, even as Eric ventured forward from the tree line.

The telepath had known that her protector was near all the time, of course. But seeing him made her feel all the better.

"The only thing I ever did to hurt *us* is to open my eyes and use my brain," she said in a soft voice. "We didn't make a good *us*, Bill. In fact, you and I were *never* really an *us* at all. We were a lie."

"I love you, Sookeh! That's not a lie!" Bill insisted, his accent thickening with his emotion.

The telepath sighed. "I meant it when I said that I don't care how you feel. I don't want anything to do with you, Bill."

A red tear fell down Bill's cheek as Eric approached the porch.

"I bet you're enjoying this!" Bill accused the Viking.

"No," Eric said, looking only at Sookie, "I am not." In truth, the Viking was a little surprised at himself that he was *not* enjoying the spectacle before him. Of course, he was all for the younger vampire being out of Sookie's life for good, but he did not enjoy the stress that Sookie was experiencing.

"Eric," Sookie said, seeing the look on the older vampire's handsome face. It was a look of commiseration rather than celebration—a look that compelled the telepath to hold her breath for a moment before her body began to shake again due to the emotion of the night—of the year—catching up with her. "Eric," she repeated.

Instinctively knowing what she needed, the Viking zipped into the old farmhouse and engulfed Sookie in a comforting embrace.

Bill's growl was unheeded as she began weeping.

"Let me in, Sookie!" Bill cried out. "Let *me* comfort you!"

Eric turned a steely look toward the younger, clueless vampire. "Leave Area 5 before dawn, Bill. If I see your face here after that, I will kill you!"

"You cannot . . .," Bill began.

"Oh—I will," Eric warned.

"You'll lose her if you harm me!" Bill returned with spite.

“No. No, he won’t,” Sookie responded, lifting her head from the Viking’s chest. Her eyes were puffed and bleary with tears as she looked at her former love – her former “lie.”

“I want you to leave, Bill. I don’t want to see you again – not ever. Eric’s giving you safe passage tonight, and tonight only. Use it and go,” she entreated before – once again – burying her face into the Viking’s chest.

Though her crying was silent, Sookie’s tears were free-flowing. And Eric knew exactly what she needed from him – *himself*. He also knew that there would be nothing he could do to stop her tears for a while. With all she’d gone through, it had been only a matter of time until she broke down.

That she was doing it with him – on him – made Eric feel something he’d not expected: honored.

“Go,” the Viking said to Bill in an even tone. “Don’t hurt her anymore.”

Bill looked at the two in front of him and knew that there was little he could do to improve his standing with Sookie at that moment. “I need my database work,” he said instead, having decided to cut his losses and leave Bon Temps – for the time being. He could play the Hallow angle from elsewhere anyway.

“It’s not here anymore,” Eric conveyed. “It is in my possession, and the queen and I have already negotiated about what to do with it.”

Bill growled. “No! That is my project! My property!”

“You have no property here,” Sookie whimpered from her safety net.

“Eric, I” Bill started.

“Thalia!” the Viking yelled out.

Not a second later, the petite warrior appeared from behind Bill and was gripping him in a hold so tight that the crunching of bones was heard.

“Escort him home. Give him one hour to collect his things. And then escort him out of my area!” Eric ordered.

Thalia hesitated. “My charge,” she said, nodding toward Sookie.

Eric spared the vampiress a little smile, pleased that she thought of Sookie’s security even before Eric’s orders or the delight he knew that she’d be taking in manhandling Bill until they reached the border of Area 5.

“I have her,” the Viking assured, before using his foot to close the door.

Once they were completely alone, Sookie’s shaking increased to the point that her teeth began to chatter.

She managed to look up at the vampire who was now needing to hold her up in order to keep her from falling. “I don’t know why I’m doing this,” she said, obviously referring to her uncontrolled tears, which were still streaming. “I’m *glad* it’s over with him. Why am I . . . ?” She looked down at her shaking hands helplessly.

The Viking couldn’t help but to notice the empty look in her normally lively eyes, the limpness in her normally strong countenance.

He lifted her into his arms and carried her toward her bedroom.

“Perhaps you simply need to fall apart a little,” he said softly as he lay her in her bed.

She nodded weakly. “Yeah?” she replied – half-statement, half-question.

“I could call Pam to confirm – to see what Dear Abby says on the matter?” he suggested, trying to elicit a smile from her.

He frowned when it was clear that she lacked the energy for even that.

“I’m sorry,” she said instead, as he covered her quaking body with a thick quilt. “You of all people shouldn’t have to be the one mopping up all my Bill shit,” she said, even as large tears continued to stream down her lovely face.

He shrugged. “I’m honored that you feel you can do this with me,” he said earnestly, brushing a piece of hair from her wet face.

Sookie reached out to take his hand, though it clearly took a great deal of effort for her to lift her arm even that much.

Unasked, Eric got into bed with her and drew her into an embrace. There was nothing romantic about it. There was no sexual charge in the air as there usually was between the two creatures.

There was only a sense of need.

She needed his comfort.

And he needed to comfort her.

And they both got what they needed – as they lay together silently in the dark.

CHAPTER 27: Adam and Evil

I'm lonely like Adam, you're evil like Eve

I shouldn't take forbidden fruit 'cause I believe

I'll be heading straight for heartache

I should cut loose and run

But if loving you means heartache

Heartache, here I come

– Songwriters: Fred Wise & Randy Starr

Thalia kicked Bill all the way back to his home – in approximately ten-foot increments.

She was pleased to sense that Padma and Bubba had shifted their positions in order to better keep an eye on the telepath's home. The North Man was with Thalia's charge, but he had priorities other than protection at the moment. Meanwhile, two of the two-natured guards, Maria-Star and Onawa, were flanking her – just in case Bill *somehow* managed to make a run for it.

“That might be fun!” the vampiress thought, licking her lips.

“Please make a run for it,” Thalia sneered, even as she kicked him onto his porch.

He hit a step, so she kicked him again – just to “right” him.

“Fuck you!” Bill said, spitting out some blood. “The queen will hear of this!”

“One hour,” Thalia said evenly before turning her back toward the younger vampire, daring him to try an attack.

She figured that Eric would completely understand if she “had” to thrash Bill Compton for “attacking her.”

Sadly, the inferior vampire went inside without a struggle, though he cursed her and Eric all the way – but only in one language. Thalia scoffed. Bill was old enough that he ought to have traveled and learned a variety of languages. Even vampires in the old days – when travel was difficult and outsiders were looked at with tremendous suspicion – sought knowledge beyond themselves. From her study of Bill Compton, Thalia had learned that he’d lived in exactly two states – Louisiana and Washington-- and had never spent more than a few days in another country.

“Certainly not long enough to learn adequate cursing skills,” she muttered at Bill repeated “mother fucker” for the twenty-third time.

“Unimaginative twat,” she mumbled as she listened to him begin to collect his possessions – suitcases full of khaki pants, Thalia imagined with a sneer. It took Bill only fifteen minutes to load his vehicle, and he kept up his cursing all the way.

Thalia heard Onawa and Maria-Star make a bet about how many times he’d say the phrase “mother fucking Northman” before the vampiress somehow incapacitated him.

Thalia figured *just one more*.

Bill actually managed to look both shocked and constipated when he found her waiting by the driver's side of his vehicle when he lugged out his last load of possessions.

"Keys!" she demanded.

"You can tell Eric mother fucking Northman that I can drive myself!" he growled at his elder – and better.

"Not with a broken hip *and* back – you can't," Thalia smiled, right before she body-slammed the Confederate cum-stain to the ground.

Bill wailed loudly as Thalia flipped him onto his stomach and pressed her knee into his vertebrae. "I like to make the break right *here*," she emphasized, even as a crunching noise was heard.

Bill's arms went limp – as did the rest of his body. However, he still screamed in pain.

"It is *such* a sweet spot," she said calmly as she stood up – with his keys in her hand. "I found it by accident, you know. Too high and the victim can't feel *enough*. Too low and he or she flails around too fucking much. Annoying really. But – if you crush just right – it robs one's victim of movement but not pain." She crouched down to smile at him. "Don't worry. It should heal just enough for you to take the wheel right around the time we get to the border of the Viking's territory."

"You'll pay," Bill coughed out a threat, even as a chuckling Maria-Star lifted the broken vampire into the passenger side of his vehicle.

“Follow,” Thalia said to both the Were and the shifter. “If anything happens, kill him,” she added.

The Were nodded and ran to go get her own vehicle. She knew that Thalia would not need their help, but she respected the vampiress’s thoroughness – just as she admired her skill.

LATER THAT NIGHT

Bill had managed to make it to Baton Rouge, despite the fact that his back was still quite sore (even after a four-pack of TrueBlood) because of what Thalia had done to him.

“Bitch!” he seethed as he finished settling into his light-tight hotel room.

At least, he’d gotten his precious laptop – with the database addendum – out of Area 5.

“And right under that bitch’s nose too,” he laughed, even as he took out his phone and dialed.

He opted to call Andre, instead of Queen Sophie-Anne.

“Compton,” the vampire answered in a clipped voice after a few rings. “What do you have for me?”

Bill frowned. At the moment, he had very little on Eric but his own complaints; however, he knew that Andre was receptive to believing the worst about the Viking. So that is what Bill would tell Sophie-Anne’s eldest child.

“Northman has ordered me out of Area 5,” Bill began.

“Why? What did you do?” Andre asked accusingly.

“I saw Sookie – at *her* request,” Bill said. “So I was not breaking the queen’s rules,” he added bitterly. “Eric apparently took the database from her, and he will not give it back to me.”

“The queen knows of that,” Andre said disapprovingly. “She is allowing Northman to make a copy for his own study and then to present his recommendations about its being sold.”

“What?” Bill demanded. “She would let Northman talk her out of selling the database?! But it will make her a fortune! And what about all my hard work?”

“Do not question your queen!” Andre returned warningly.

Bill took a moment to calm himself. “I apologize; I did not intend to sound as if I were questioning our great queen,” he pandered. “However, I fear that Eric will now try to use the database to undermine her – maybe even sell it to another monarch. Perhaps even Russell Edgington.”

“Do you have proof of that?” Andre asked.

“Not as of *yet*,” the younger vampire said somewhat cautiously – somewhat suggestively. “However, my contacts have told me that King Russell made no waves over Eric’s being in Mississippi – even though he was there under an alias.”

Andre considered for a moment. “Eric and Russell may have a connection, but the recent situation and your supposition do not prove they are in collusion against the queen.”

“Not yet,” Bill reinforced, making sure to keep his tone respectful. “But it is clear that Eric was extremely anxious for me to leave Area 5 for some reason. Without me there to keep an eye on him, he could do anything he wishes! In the meantime, I am sure that he will try to talk Sophie-Anne out of using the database for the profit of Louisiana – likely to buy time as he attempts to peddle it among some of his *Old-World* friends,” Bill suggested provocatively.

“He is already trying to convince her not to sell it!” Andre seethed. “And now – *you* are of no use to me, so I must arrange for another spy!”

“Wait!” Bill yelled as he sensed that Andre was about to hang up on him. “I have *already* made arrangements for Eric to be watched by someone who can get even closer to him than I could have!” he informed quickly, bending the truth quite a bit in order to keep his value in Andre’s eyes. “And my spy will be reporting to *me* so that I can report to you.”

Andre was quiet for a moment, so silent that Bill feared that he actually had hung up the call.

“Who? Is the *telepath* going to be spying for you?” Andre asked incredulously.

Bill scoffed. “No. Eric has turned Sookie against me – for the moment. However, she will soon see through him – as will the queen. With *our* help,” he added beguilingly.

“Who is your spy then?” Andre asked with suspicion.

“A witch—Hallow,” Bill declared, deciding in that moment that it needed to seem as if Hallow’s pursuit of Eric had been his idea all along. *And* that it was much further along than it actually was.

“A witch—” Andre spit out, “especially *that* one—cannot be trusted. If she tries to interfere with one more of the queen’s interests in New Orleans, I will have Hallow and her brother burned at a fucking stake!”

Fuck! Bill had to think fast!

“Yes. I have heard that Hallow has become a problem in New Orleans,” Bill lied. “Getting Hallow out of the queen’s territory is yet *another* benefit of my plan.”

“And what exactly is that plan?” Andre asked skeptically.

“Hallow will approach Northman with an offer.”

“What kind of offer?”

“The kind that I imagine has you perturbed at her,” Bill guessed. “She will demand a share of Eric’s profits at Fangtasia in exchange for her protection.”

“In exchange for not ruining his business, you mean,” Andre growled.

Clearly, Hallow had become more than just a minor annoyance to the queen’s child. Bill knew that he needed to tread carefully.

“Yes,” Bill responded. “The witch also plans to require Eric’s time *and* body as well.”

“Oh does she?” Andre asked with a chuckle. “Well—Compton—I must hand it to you. Hallow would be *quite* the distraction for Northman. But I cannot see how this helps the queen’s interests.”

“Sookie is currently enamored with Eric,” Bill informed. “Once Hallow is in the picture, Sookie will lose any affection she has for him.”

“Ah – so I see how *you* will be helped. What of the queen?” Andre asked again.

“My interests are the queen’s interests. Once Eric shows his true colors, Sookie will turn to me again. And I will bring her to the queen,” Bill promised.

“Are you aware that Northman has *already* arranged for the telepath to work for the queen?” Andre asked sinisterly.

“What?” Bill could not hold in his surprise.

“Ah – so you are unaware that Northman and *your* Sookie plan to open a telepath-for-hire business,” he observed sarcastically.

“But – uh – they can’t! She wouldn’t!” Bill stammered.

“Clearly, you are wrong about what the telepath will do,” Andre chuckled, clearly enjoying Bill’s discomfort. “However, I believe your witch plan *may* have some merit – as long as Hallow finds out what Northman is up to. Hell! I would even welcome her just undermining him to the point that I can argue that he’s so longer competent enough to be Sheriff of Area 5,” he mused. “And getting Hallow out of New Orleans cleanly *will* be a bonus. But – tell me – how will you control the witch?”

“She is an acquaintance of mine,” Bill said simply. “She would not betray me; plus, all of our interests align in this matter. So there is little risk that her actions – no matter what they are – would affect us negatively.”

Andre was silent for a moment. “Fine. Ensure that Hallow begins her pursuit of Northman immediately, and make sure I am informed right away if she finds anything that can be held over him.”

“Of course,” Bill said. He heard a click and knew that Andre had hung up.

“You can still get all that you want – all that you deserve,” Bill assured himself, even as he dialed his phone again.

Hallow answered after the first ring.

“Are you calling with more information?” the witch asked, her tone seductive.

“Yes,” Bill responded. “Are you pleased so far?” he asked about the information he’d emailed Hallow the night before.

“More than pleased. It is a very good *beginning*,” Hallow emphasized.

“I am glad you are pleased,” the vampire said as seductively as he could. “I would like to arrange a meeting with you. As it turns out, I will not be needing your spell for my home – as I am relocating to New Orleans for a while.”

“Leaving Area 5 just before I get there? Moving to New Orleans right when I’m leaving?” Hallow asked with a pout. “I believe I am offended.”

“Do not be. I would rather stay in Area 5 to watch you,” he paused, “work your magic. However, I have been recalled to the capital by the queen,” Bill lied. “However, I hope that you will keep me abreast of your handwork, and – in return – I will happily offer you more information,” he added. “For instance, I can give you some information about Eric’s maker right now.”

“Oh? Is he as delectable as the Viking?” Hallow inquired with interest.

“I do not know,” Bill answered honestly. “However, he could be of use in controlling his child.”

“Wouldn’t a maker wish to *protect* his child – especially from someone like me?” Hallow laughed wickedly.

“Not Eric’s,” Bill said. “From what I know of Appius, he quite enjoys toying with Eric and might make your fun with the Viking even more,” he paused, “profound.”

“And are you in contact with this maker?” Hallow asked.

“That is another reason why I am calling,” Bill said. “Appius is likely in the Old World, but he moves around quite a bit. Thus, his location is not easy to pinpoint. However, I believe that you have the ability to find individuals – through scrying?”

“Yes – but I could not find this Appius without his blood,” Hallow informed.

“What about his child’s blood?” Bill asked, even as he pulled a plastic bag from his suitcase. In it was a fragment of silver with Eric’s blood on it – a fragment Sookie had taken with her from Dallas and kept for some fucking reason! Of course, Bill had smelled the silver and blood. He removed it from where Sookie had hidden it not long after she’d stowed it away.

Initially, he’d thought to throw it away, but had decided to hang onto it, putting it in the same hiding place as his laptop.

He was glad he had it now.

“Now – Eric’s blood is something I *could* use,” Hallow purred.

“You can have it,” Bill promised, “in exchange for that locator spell.”

Hallow was silent for a moment. "You must promise me that the maker will not prevent me from having Eric."

"Oh—I am certain that Appius's presence would only increase your pleasure," Bill assured, though he had no idea of whether or not he was being truthful.

"Fine. Come to the warehouse where I am staying tomorrow evening," she said. "And—perhaps—we could have a little *more* than just a meeting of the minds?"

Bill frowned momentarily, but then wondered why he shouldn't indulge in the witch. That way, Eric would be getting *his* "sloppy seconds."

He frowned again, deeper this time, as he wondered if Sookie had already given Eric that which was always meant to be only Bill's. He shook off that thought, however, knowing that Sookie would not get physically involved with Eric for at least a while.

No—he could not think about Sookie and Eric having sex. He would stop it before it even happened!

"So?" Hallow asked impatiently.

"I was just anticipating our encounter," Bill said, trying to cover up his delay in response, as well as his lack of enthusiasm. "However, I must ask that you not take my blood during our," he paused, "time together."

"Fine," Hallow pouted. "I hope to have free access to a much older vintage soon anyway."

Bill's lips twisted in disgust. The fact that Hallow took and trafficked in vampire blood was one of the many things he'd learned about her. However, he now had no choice but to work with her.

“In that case, I greatly anticipate seeing you soon,” Bill said before hanging up.

“The things I do for you,” he sighed, looking at a picture of Sookie he’d brought with him. “The things I do for *us*.”

CHAPTER 28: Am I Ready

Am I ready, can my heart be true?

Am I ready, to fall in love with you

One love, one girl, one dream shared by two

Am I ready, to fall in love with you

— Songwriters: Roy C. Bennett / Sid Tepper

Saturday, December 18

Sookie woke up feeling much less drained than she would have thought, considering how much she'd cried the night before — how distraught she'd been.

She allowed herself a moment to feel a bit of embarrassment for crying all over Eric the night before, but she found herself feeling mostly grateful that he'd been there.

"Here with me," she whispered, placing a hand on the slight indentation his head had made in the pillow next to hers. She found herself wishing that he was still there — holding her. "Even in your sleep," she mused.

"Your bein' here is probably why I don't feel like a wreck," she speculated.

The telepath had slept in starts and stops for a while as Eric had held her, waking for periods of crying before being lulled back into sleep by the gentle presence of the vampire she'd once thought was incapable of gentleness.

"I was so wrong," she sighed, sitting up.

She cast out her telepathy and quickly found things as expected. Maria-Star was nearest to the house, and Warren was in his sniper's nest. Mustapha was further away, and Sookie tracked his mind for a moment before casting further out to find a couple of other Weres that she was beginning to recognize as "usual add-ons." Sookie would have complained, given the fact that her guard detail was larger than what she and Eric had discussed on the plane, but she had read from Maria-Star that her godfather, Colonel Flood, had asked Eric if more people could be sent since the Colonel saw the situation as an opportunity for some of his younger Weres to gain guard experience, while making a little money. Learning that, Sookie didn't mind the additions so much.

Then Sookie cast her gift upward, "looking" for Willow. Not finding her in the air around the house, Sookie speculated that Willow and Onawa were probably off duty and would show up right about when Sookie needed to leave for Merlotte's.

Speaking of which, Sookie looked at her clock. It read 9:30 a.m. She blew out a loud exhalation and quickly got up. She would be training the two new waitresses that day, and needed to get showered and ready to leave by 10:30 a.m.

The telepath almost missed Eric's note as she determined to start her coffee before showering. However, as soon as she saw it, she put the brakes on her movements and prioritized seeing what he'd said.

Dear One,

I hope that you rested well after I had to seek out my own rest. I took the liberty of calling the shifter to let him know that you might need to cancel your work obligation today. He was

surprisingly civil when I explained that you had confronted Bill. He asked only that you call him if you do not feel up to working.

Also, I took the liberty of checking to see if the part Britlingen therapist, Dr. Smith, was available to speak with you today—if that is something you need.

In frankness, I was at a loss when trying to figure out what I could do for you once I needed to leave you. I found that I wished to continue holding you, and you were one impulse-loss away from awaking with me in your hidey hole, where I am now at rest.

Please forgive any overdoing (or highhandedness) that I may have done in calling the shifter and the therapist. Remember, however, that the choice of going to work is still yours, as is the choice of seeing the doctor.

If you are home, I will see you when I awaken for the night. If not, please call me to tell me how you are.

Yours,

Eric

Sookie sighed and re-read the vampire's words. It was somehow comforting to know that he, too, had been at a loss the night before.

Except he'd somehow known exactly what she'd needed—his arms, his comfort. Himself.

“I probably wouldn’t have minded waking up in the hidey hole,” she thought before cringing a little as she had a flash of being locked in the trunk. “Wait! Never mind – still too claustrophobic to even think about that kind of thing.” She sighed. “I bet you thought about *that* too when you decided not to take me with you.”

Sookie quickly went to what was now a guest room and looked at the floor of the closet where the hidey hole was located.

“Thank you, Eric. I’ll see you tonight,” she said before kissing her palm and then bending down to place her hand onto the hatch to the hole.

“I love you,” she said as she rose.

She was halfway to the kitchen before she stopped in her tracks, realizing what she’d said.

In a bit of a stupor, she progressed to the kitchen and started her coffee.

Did she love Eric? If she did, shouldn’t she try to put the brakes on doing so since it was so soon since they’d even contemplated *beginning* a relationship? After all, they’d not even had their first official date!

However, the words – “I love you” – had fallen from her lips in such a natural way that she’d not even noticed them at first. “Oh crap! What if I let them slip when Eric’s around? What if they scare him off?”

She could just imagine him flying away at top speed. “Runnin’ for the hills,” as Gran might say.

“Fuck!” she muttered before returning to her room and looking – once again – at Eric’s note.

“Dear one,” she said softly. “Yours,” she added, reading the way he’d started and ended his note.

She felt her heartbeat quicken, and she closed her eyes tightly.

“What if he feels the same as I do?” she asked almost silently, almost afraid to put the thought out into the world because it seemed so fragile — so precious.

She shook her head and hurried into the bathroom.

She’d shower. She’d have a cup of coffee — or three. Then she’d decide whether to go into Merlotte’s that day or to ask Dr. Smith for a full-day session in order to prevent *herself* from driving *herself* crazy!

“Good plan,” she congratulated herself as she grabbed clean underwear and a robe.

APPROXIMATELY FIVE HOURS LATER

“Um — hi, Dr. Smith,” Sookie greeted as she opened her front door. “And — uh — thanks for meeting me here,” she added with a shy smile.

After her shower that morning, Sookie *had* felt much calmer. She’d not used her “get out of work free” card either, and she was now glad that she hadn’t. Both of the new waitresses had caught on very quickly, and — by the end of the lunch rush — Sam and she were both confident that they could run their own sections. Following the rush, Sookie had even taught them about the stocking and the cleaning procedures before leaving Merlotte’s at 2:00 p.m. so that she could meet the doctor at 3:00, an

appointment she'd arranged as soon as she realized just how quickly – and how well – the training was going.

From the door, Dr. Aphra Smith, smiled back at the telepath, her greenish brown eyes sparkling with kindness and understanding. "Meeting with you here is easier for me too. In fact, it is rare that I actually meet with a patient at my office. Supernaturals seldom feel secure opening up unless they are on their own turf," she informed as she followed Sookie into the living room, where the telepath had laid out some light food and drinks.

"Oh – uh – I won't mind coming to your office from now on. I don't have a – uh – turf or anything," Sookie shrugged.

Dr. Smith chuckled. "Do not take my statement the wrong way, Miss Stackhouse. I work mostly with the two-natured. However, I have found that almost everyone is most comfortable speaking in a familiar setting." She gestured around the room and then toward the family pictures on the mantle and the wall. "There has been pain in this home, but the love overbalances that pain by a lot." She closed her eyes. "Yes – this is a good place for you."

"You can tell that?" Sookie asked with interest.

The doctor smiled and opened her eyes. "Yes. My Britlingen grandmother is known for her tremendous instincts, though she does not apply them to psychology." She laughed as if imagining such a thing. "Clovache is a skilled warrior."

"Oh? Is she – uh – in this realm?" Sookie asked, recalling the little that Eric had told her about Britlingens.

“Not right now and not for close to one hundred years,” the doctor responded. “But she will be here again soon. She was recently hired by the vampire King of Kentucky and will use part of her time in this realm to see the progress of her part-human line. I have not met her, but look forward to it.”

“Uh—Eric said something about some Supes having really long lives. I’m sorry, but I don’t know much about Britlingens,” Sookie apologized as she motioned toward a chair.

“Part-Britlingens enjoy longer lives than humans and Weres,” Dr. Smith responded. “However, as with part-Dae and part-Fae beings, our length of life is determined mostly by the amount of magic found within us.”

“Can I—uh—ask how old you are, Dr. Smith?” Sookie requested shyly. “I—uh—don’t want to offend you. I just want to learn.”

“I am not offended in the least,” the doctor chuckled. “And—please—call me Aphra. ‘Smith’ is a surname I use only with humans.” She shook her head. “Having no last name makes humans feel uncomfortable, but Britlingens do not use them.”

“Oh—okay. Please, call me Sookie,” the telepath said, gesturing toward the tea. “Would you like some?”

“Yes. Thank you,” Aphra accepted. “And to answer your question, I just turned seventy-three years old.”

“Wow!” Sookie exclaimed, taking in the woman who looked about thirty-five years old.

“My mother, who is half Britlingen, of course, looks even younger than I,” Aphra winked.

“Wow! Uh—how do y’all explain why you stay so young looking?” the telepath asked.

“We must move around every decade or so once we reach adulthood,” Aphra explained. “Since the Great Revelation, my mother and I have contemplated pretending to be vampires so that we can stay settled in a place for longer, but neither of us wants to be limited to nighttime business.”

“That must be hard—gettin’ used to a place and then havin’ to uproot,” Sookie observed compassionately, as she handed Aphra a glass of tea and a plate with a piece of banana-nut bread.

“Sometimes,” Aphra admitted. “But I am often ready to move on when we go. Do not worry about my picking up and leaving here any time soon though,” she assured. “I have built my life in the Shreveport area so that I am social with only Supernaturals. And I recently agreed to a fifteen-year affiliation with Dr. Ludwig. And I would not dare to back out of such an agreement—with one such as her.”

“I don’t blame you,” Sookie laughed a little nervously. “I only met Dr. Ludwig once, but she scared me more than the Maenad who’d been the reason for my needing her help to begin with!”

Aphra smirked. “Ludwig *can* be intimidating.”

The two sipped their teas for a moment.

“So – Mr. Northman said that you would let me know within minutes if you wished for me to be your counselor,” Aphra said, her eyes shining with intrigue. “Tell me – are you able to tell me yet?”

“Did Eric tell you *why* I’d need that time?” Sookie asked.

The part-Britlingen shook her head. “He told me very little actually, except that you might wish for my help. So – did I pass whatever test you had for me?”

“Everything I say to you is confidential – right?” Sookie asked.

Aphra nodded and then pulled a small sphere from her bag.

“What’s that?” Sookie asked.

“It is from the Britlingen world. When turned on, its magic creates a field of covalency around us.”

“Covalency?” Sookie asked.

“In this world, the word ‘covalent’ refers to the formation of bonds between atoms. And that connotation is not far from what the word means in the Britlingen tongue. To us, the concept of covalency is sacred, a trust created between beings that cannot be broken. I have tied my Britlingen essence to this sphere, and it is – quite literally – my bond. On this world, the sphere also has the convenient effect of making anything we say within this room unheardable to the outer world.” She placed the orb on the coffee table and then drew a pattern on it, making it glow a soft, soothing blue light.

Aphra smiled. “Anything you say to me when it is activated could never pass from my own lips without your permission.”

“Wow!” Sookie exclaimed, looking at the light. “That makes what I can do seem pretty ordinary!”

Aphra chuckled. “And what can you do, Sookie?”

Sookie took a deep breath, deciding in that moment that she did – indeed – want to hire Aphra. “I’m a telepath.”

Not seeming surprised at all, Aphra tilted her head to study Sookie for a moment. “Do you know the lineage that created such an ability in you?”

Sookie shook her head. “Eric has some theories. I think he’s leaning toward fairy. He’s even offered to help me make contact with one. But I’m not ready for that right now,” she sighed, swirling her glass in her hands before setting it down on a coaster. “There are other things I want to focus on right now.”

Aphra, too, set down her drink and then sat back in her chair. “Can you hear my thoughts?” she asked curiously.

“No,” Sookie said.

“*That* was the test – yes? If you had heard my thoughts, you would not have wished to work with me?”

“No offense, but no,” the telepath answered honestly.

“I cannot say that I blame you,” Aphra commented. “And I am glad that you cannot hear me.”

“You aren’t completely silent,” Sookie relayed. “I am picking up feelings from you.”

"I'm an empath," Aphra informed. "I emit my feelings to the point that many Supernaturals can, at least, get a sense of them. I imagine that your gift helps you to tune into them. Do you mind? I can block my gift—if you wish. Supernaturals, by rule, are an untrusting bunch, and I find that they are usually much more willing to share if they have a sense of my authentic reactions."

"Thanks for the offer, but no. Please don't shut them off," Sookie said. "Right now, I think it'll be good to get an idea of your reactions to things—uh—just so that I know that" Her voice trailed off as she looked down at her hands in her lap.

"You wish to be certain you can trust me and what I say," Aphra guessed, neither her emotions nor her voice indicating any anger.

"Yeah," Sookie admitted. "I'm sorry. Once bitten, twice shy—you know? Um—*literally* bitten in some ways."

"Don't be sorry," Aphra reassured. "So—I am hired?"

"Yes," Sookie nodded.

"Then we will begin wherever you wish to begin," Aphra said, "perhaps with the biting part."

"You—uh—don't have questions and stuff?" Sookie asked.

"I might as we go along, but not right now. *You* needed *me* today. We can start with *why* that was if you like, or we can start with any part of your story."

"Oh—okay," Sookie said a little nervously, her hands twisting together in anxiety-induced patterns on her lap.

"There is no right or wrong way to do therapy," Aphra comforted.

“Well—uh—do you think there’s a right or wrong way to do love?” Sookie asked.

“No, but clearly you worry that there is,” the doctor observed perceptively. “Do you wish to tell me why?”

Sookie bit her lower lip and nodded. “I thought I was in love with a vampire named Bill Compton. But he turned out to be a fraud. Now, I think I’m falling in love—or—uh—maybe I already am in love—with Eric. And I’m freaking out!”

“Do you fear that Eric is a fraud?” Aphra asked calmly in order to offset Sookie’s high-strung emotions.

“I know he’s not!” Sookie responded immediately—vehemently. “But I *am* worried that I haven’t given myself long enough to get over Bill. I—uh—have seen people do the rebound thing. And I *don’t* want that kind of thing with Eric!”

“You want the *real* thing,” Aphra posited.

“With Eric? Yes. Yes, I do,” Sookie responded, surprising herself with how certain she felt about her words.

“Well—then. Tell me about what you are feeling for Eric so it’ll be easier to tell if it’s real,” Aphra suggested.

“But *that’s* not why Eric was so worried about me! Not why I was so upset yesterday night,” Sookie said, shaking her head. “Uh—actually, I don’t know why I was so upset last night. I was breaking things off with Bill—officially severing him from my life. And I was glad too! Am still glad! And then I just started cryin’ and

couldn't stop." She huffed impatiently. "There are *so* many things to talk about – the trunk, Bill, the queen, Hadley!"

"Things that you think you should deal with fully *before* you fall in love?" Aphra asked perceptively.

"Yeah," Sookie sighed after a moment of contemplation.

The human-Britlingen smiled kindly. "Sookie, I've been a therapist for several decades, and I've never known love to cooperate with an individual's timeline. In other words, it doesn't always wait for us to get our shit together before it hits us."

Sookie couldn't help but to chuckle.

"You have likely heard more brains than I've had clients. Tell me," Aphra said, leaning forward, "what is your impression about how love works?"

"It's hard to say, but – uh – real love is pretty rare," the telepath said thoughtfully. "I mean – people think they're in love all the time, but – yeah – after hearing so many heads, I've come to believe it's rare."

"And what does it feel like? When it's real?"

"It's never the same – not for any two people," Sookie explained, "but there are some things it always has in common."

"Oh?" Aphra inquired with curiosity.

"There's a kind of calmness – a strength – a certainty," Sookie expounded.

"Yes," the doctor agreed with a slight nod, "that corresponds with what I *feel* from those who find reciprocal love."

Sookie looked at her in question. "Reciprocal?"

“Love exchanged – love equally given and returned,” Aphra supplied.

“Yeah – that’s the rare kind.”

“How do you feel with Eric?”

“Freaked out!” Sookie repeated with a shake of her head. “But calm too – like I just know that something about him – about us – is true and right. He makes me feel stronger than I’ve ever felt,” she continued softly. “But I’m scared – scared to believe that I really *am* as certain about us as I think I am.” She shook her head. “What if it’s too good to be true? What if it’s too soon to be true? What if he doesn’t love me back?” she asked the last question in barely a whisper.

Aphra replied softly, her voice warm. “Nothing true could ever be too good, Sookie. And you must have seen yourself that love – perhaps especially the truest kind – can come on like lightening. As for what Eric feels? Well – does that matter?”

“Yes!” Sookie exclaimed. “Of course, it does!”

Aphra chuckled. “Yes. But what I meant was that your feelings won’t alter, even if he does not share them. So you must deal with and face them.” She took a drink of tea as Sookie absorbed her words.

“You’re an empath,” Sookie said.

Aphra nodded.

“You can tell what I feel?”

“Yes,” the doctor confirmed.

“Will you tell me – if I really do love him?”

“If you ask me to,” Aphra said.

Sookie nodded. "I want you to. I know it's cheating, and I won't ask you to help me cheat again. I promise. But I'm looking for the easy way today. I need it," she pled.

The counselor nodded. "Yes. I think you *do* need the easy way today. And — yes — what you feel is love, the true kind. I cannot, however, tell you if Eric feels the same. Even if I knew, I could not share with you the feelings of others. But I can guide you toward the facts."

"Facts?" Sookie asked, still looking a little shell-shocked from the doctor's confirmation that she was in love with Eric — even though she'd not actually needed it to know the truth.

"Tell me why I'm here — how you came to know of me," Aphra requested.

"Eric."

"Tell me why he suggested that you speak with me."

"He's worried about the changes happenin' in my life and about the bad things I've gone through," Sookie responded.

"Tell me *why* he's worried."

"He cares about me," Sookie said softly.

"Do you believe he loves you?" Aphra asked.

Sookie closed her eyes and thought about the question for a moment. A single image came into her mind — the look on Eric's face as he'd pulled her from the trunk. It was the same way he'd looked at her the night before — when he'd scooped her up as she'd fallen apart about another man. "I know he loves me," she declared quietly.

"Then *time* is your solution."

"Time?" the telepath asked opening her eyes.

"In time, you will be ready to tell him of your love. Or he will be ready to tell you of his. Until then, I suggest that you simply enjoy *feeling* it. From what you have said, you two are just beginning."

"Yeah. That's why I'm freaking out," Sookie admitted.

"Beginnings *can* be frightening," the doctor concurred. "But being frightened shouldn't diminish your other feelings, including the ones you have for Eric. Let the fear," she paused, "*happen*. Experience it; that way you can deal with it," Aphra advised.

Sookie contemplated for a moment. "Do you know what I'm most scared of? Losing him altogether. I wouldn't just be losing the man that I love; I'd also be losin' the person that is quickly becoming the most important friend in my life."

Aphra smiled softly. "Perhaps *that* is your answer then – for the short term anyway."

"What do you mean?" Sookie asked. "Bein' afraid I'll lose Eric is the answer?"

"No," the therapist clarified. "And, by the way, that fear you're talking about is felt by everyone who truly loves. It's a fear as old as love itself, so – at least – you need not worry that you are alone in it. What I meant as your short-term answer, however, is the love you feel for Eric *as a friend*. It might be easier – feel safer – for you to speak of that with him if you are not yet ready to speak of the romantic kind."

"Oh. Yeah. Maybe," Sookie considered.

Aphra smiled widely. "I believe you will be just fine, Sookie Stackhouse, though I do think we will have *a lot* to talk about in our future sessions!"

Sookie chuckled ruefully. "Do I seem that messed up to you?"

"Not at all!" Aphra responded. "It just seems that you have been through a lot and will be going through even more in the coming days. And – importantly – it seems that you are *ready* to face that which is in the past, but threatens to hold you back. You are making a brave choice so that you can move into the future as a healthier version of yourself. Those are good things. However – with that being said – I must wrap up our current session."

Sookie glanced at the clock, surprised to see that eighty minutes had gone by since Aphra had arrived. The session had been meant to last only an hour.

"Oh! I'm sorry I kept you," the telepath apologized profusely.

"I would stay longer if Mr. Northman were younger. But – as it is – he will awaken soon."

Sookie frowned. "You know he's here?"

"He called me from here mere minutes before dawn," Aphra shared. "That is how I know. And I am speculating that – since he is quite old – he can rise well before sundown."

"He won't be able to come out of – uh – where he is though," Sookie said, a little disappointed.

“A thick, dark quilt, double folded – at least – and hammered over the window. Duct tape around its edges and another quilt under the door. Get the Weres outside to help, and it’ll be done within ten minutes,” Aphra smiled.

“Huh?” Sookie asked, confused.

“I had a relationship with a vampire once. We were together for a few years, in fact. He was just over five centuries old, so that’s how I know about the getting up early thing. And we often stayed in regular hotels, so I learned all about how to temporarily light-proof places,” she responded.

“Oh!” Sookie said with realization, glancing anxiously at the clock. “I can get Mustapha and Onawa to help,” she said, after “finding” their brain patterns nearby.

“Shall we meet again next Saturday then? Same time, same place?” Aphra asked. “Unless you need me earlier. Then just call me.”

“Oh. Okay. Yes. Thanks!” Sookie responded.

“I will see you then,” Aphra said as she picked up the sphere. She did not turn it off right away though. “Until then, enjoy this time. Young love is precious, Sookie.”

The telepath nodded. “I will.”

“Good,” Aphra smiled as she ran her finger over the orb. Its pale blue light immediately dissipated and then it – and Aphra – literally disappeared!

“Okay – well – that’s one way to make an exit!” Sookie commented before moving into action. She had just the quilt in mind for a quick light-proofing job: the thickest one in the house, of course. And she’d put a dark tarp over it.

“I can’t be too safe with him,” she mused.

CHAPTER 29: THE LADY LOVES ME

She loves me, she loves me not

She loves me, she loves me not

She loves me, she loves me, she loves me

The lady loves me and it shows

– Songwriters: Sid Tepper & Roy C Bennett

Eric woke up feeling the same concern he'd felt when he'd fallen into his day-death.

Concern for Sookie Stackhouse.

Immediately, he used his blood to access Sookie's blood that was within him, and the magic that linked him to her enlivened.

She had been numb the night before, her emotions weathered like an old ship that had been abandoned at sea – tossed-about and broken, but somehow still floating.

In truth, he had no idea what to expect from her emotions now.

"Hey," her voice spoke from right beside his resting place, even as he registered her scent above him and ascertained with some surprise that her main emotion was anticipation.

She was anticipating – *him*.

"Hey yourself," he answered, his voice echoing through the floorboards to her.

“You can come out,” she said, “if you want, that is. Onawa and Mustapha helped me to light-proof the room so you won’t have to stay in there till true dark.”

Her mood turned somewhat anxious – embarrassed.

He would not have her feeling either – not about him.

Not about something she did *for him*.

Though he did not know how she’d made the room light-tight, he trusted that she’d done an effective job and immediately unfastened the latch.

He was met with a lovely sight – her smile, though a tentative one.

“Hi,” she whispered shyly.

Eric smiled at her in return and looked at the room as he climbed out of the cubby before reaching down to pull her up from where she sat on the floor.

Immediately, she placed herself into his arms and held him tightly.

“Are you well this evening?” he asked after a few quiet and comfortable moments.

He felt her nodding against him. “Yeah. Thank you. I still don’t know exactly what came over me last night. Um – I’m sorry; I made a spectacle of myself.”

He leaned back a bit and lifted her chin. “There is no need for you to apologize, Dear One. However, I *can* smell that the Britlingen has been here. Did you not discuss with her why you became overwrought last night?”

She shrugged. “We did. A little. But we – uh – mostly talked about other things.”

Wishing the doctor had helped the telepath with her “Bill baggage,” Eric frowned momentarily, but quickly recognized that Sookie had leave to discuss whatever she wished with Aphra Smith. “Did you find it beneficial to speak with her?”

“Yeah,” the telepath smiled. “She’s the one who suggested how I could light-proof the room quickly.”

Eric nodded. “That makes sense. Aphra was once with a vampire for an extended period of time. That was, I will admit, another selling point in her favor.”

“Because she’d talk me into being with a vampire?” Sookie asked somewhat playfully.

Eric chuckled and smoothed a strand of hair behind her ear. It did not escape his attention that she leaned into his touch.

“In truth, she might be more likely to talk you *out* of vampires,” he chuckled. “After all, she ended her relationship with her vampire because she did not wish to bond with him. Her vampire is a friend of mine, Duncan, and he has not been the same since she ended her relationship with him.”

“Do you know why she ended it?” Sookie asked, though she felt conflicted in doing so. After all, was it really any of her business?

“Duncan never told me the specifics, for – as you know – vampires are, by rule, quite wary of allowing their emotions to show. It was clear that he would have preferred for the relationship to progress – for a bonding to occur. But that is all that I know.”

“How sad,” Sookie sighed.

“I believe he did grieve the ending of the relationship for a while,” Eric said softly. “However, I also know that he bears the Britlingen hybrid no ill will.”

“Where is he now?”

“Vermont. He is the king there,” Eric responded. “From the night vampires came out of the coffin, he has made it his mission to charm every human he meets – so that they will accept and embrace vampires. Indeed, when it comes to vampire-human relationships, Vermont is quickly proving to be the most progressive state! In fact, if you are amenable, he could be one of your earliest clients.”

“Do you know many kings and queens?” Sookie asked curiously.

“The majority of them,” the Viking responded. “Such is the effect of living a long life. There are a few I have not met, but I make sure I learn of anyone who takes a vampire throne.”

“That’s probably smart,” the telepath chuckled. “Are you friends with many? Like you seem to be friends with Russell Edgington and – uh – Duncan?”

“There are about half a dozen monarchs in the United States that I would call myself friendly with,” he observed.

“Is Sophie-Anne one of them?” Sookie asked.

“No. Not really. She and I are not on bad terms – at least, not on my part; however, I find it better to stick with work where she is concerned. There was a time when she seemed to be interested in me sexually, but a sheriff fucking a monarch hardly ever turns out well – for the sheriff,” he shared.

Neither of them mentioned the jealousy that momentarily shot through the telepath.

“So – uh – you rejected her?” Sookie asked.

“I just let it be known that I would not bed her as her sheriff. Ultimately, she was more interested in my service to Louisiana than me, a fact that has suited us both for decades.”

“Until I entered the picture,” Sookie frowned.

Eric lifted her chin so she met his eyes. “No – until she decided to listen to Andre and circumvent the very authority and dominion *she* bestowed upon *me*, but – as we’ve discussed – I believe our conflict has been resolved.”

“So – uh – Aphra knows about bonds?” Sookie changed the subject after a few silent moments.

Eric nodded. “Yes. You could speak with her about them if you wished,” he said softly.

“Okay,” the telepath said. “But would you mind if I asked you some things about them? You’re stuck here till the sun goes down anyway,” she added, biting her lip.

“I will answer any questions you have about bonds,” Eric said as he led them over to the only piece of furniture in the room – a bed. Despite the fact that they’d lain together in Sookie’s bed the night before, both were a little hesitant about climbing in.

“This is silly,” Sookie chuckled after a couple of seconds, even as she lay down and then patted the spot next to her in order to encourage the vampire to do the same.

As soon as Eric got settled, she repositioned herself to lay her head on his strong chest.

“Thank you for last night,” she said softly. “I’m glad you were with me when I fell apart.”

“So am I,” he agreed.

The two were silent for a few minutes.

“A bond is a huge deal – isn’t it?” she finally broke the silence.

“Yes,” he responded.

“And we’re just one exchange away from one?”

“Yes.”

“It sounds like a permanent version of a tie – right?” she asked.

“Yes – for the most part, but it allows for a more,” he paused, “mutual relationship – a more equal one.”

“What do you mean?” she asked, her fingers beginning to trace little circles over his shirt.

His lips twitched into a slight smile due to pleasant feeling of her touch.

“When a vampire completes a bond, an exchange of magic occurs,” Eric explained, “at least the kind of magic that animates vampires. Other species can make different sorts of bonds. Even humans have their own kind – and some would argue theirs are no less magical.”

The telepath lifted her head. “What bonds do humans make?”

His eyebrow rose with his question. “Do you not know, Dear One?”

“Love?” she asked softly.

He nodded as he brushed her hair from her face.

“But other beings love – not just humans,” Sookie pronounced, even as Eric felt something odd from her in their blood tie.

Something warm.

Something comforting.

Something that seemed to be a part of her emotions meant only for him.

“Some Supernaturals believe that any love we feel is inspired by humans – by the bonds we see them make,” the Viking explained. “Others argue that, while Supernaturals who are close to humans genetically – like the two-natured – have the ability to love, the rest of us don’t.”

“What do you believe – about love?” Sookie asked somewhat hesitantly.

“I believe it is gift,” he spoke softly. “A year ago, I also believed that it was one that vampires could no longer experience as humans do.”

“And now?” Sookie asked, biting her lip somewhat nervously as she did so.

“I have changed my mind,” Eric shared openly.

“Why?” she asked, looking up at him.

He shook his head and spoke softly – carefully. “Sookie, you asked that we take what is happening between us slowly. And – it was just last night that you had your closure with Compton. If I tell you why I have changed my mind about the possibility of vampires loving in a romantic sense, I believe that taking things slowly will be

impossible. And I am also concerned that you will – one day – worry that I have taken advantage of your vulnerable state to influence you to” He stopped midsentence.

“Influence me to love you,” she whispered a finish for him.

He nodded. She sat up in the bed and turned toward him, moving her legs so that she was sitting cross-legged. In return, he sat up from his reclined position and leaned against the headboard.

“What if I already love you?” she asked anxiously.

He looked down for a moment and then reached out to take her hand. “Then we would have a human kind of bond already,” he said matter-of-factly, making it clear – even without speaking the words of confirmation – that his feelings mirrored her own.

They were quiet for a moment, content to let silence encompass them as they looked at each other.

“When I told you that I wanted to take things slowly, I thought I would need that time – to be sure about – well – *anything*,” the telepath stated. “Now, I don’t know.”

Eric was contemplative for a moment. “I believe you know that I want you, Sookie. Badly.”

She blushed and nodded.

“I believe that I’ve proven I care for you.”

She nodded again.

“I don’t want to take things slowly,” he admitted, even as he caressed her cheek softly. “I’ve lived a thousand years. And I am an incredibly patient individual for it. However, I don’t want to wait another second – for you.” His voice trailed off.

“Why does it sound like you’re about to say, ‘but’?” she asked.

“Because I am. I want you to be as sure as I am,” he indicated gently.

“Can’t you feel my emotions? Feel how certain I am?”

“Yes,” he relayed. “However, you also feel overwhelmed.”

“I agree,” she responded, looking up at him. “But I think I’m overwhelmed because of how sure I am about you – about us.”

“It is very fast to be so certain,” Eric cautioned.

“But *you’re* certain,” she reminded.

He nodded. “Yes. I tried hiding – suppressing – how strongly I felt for you, but I could not when I felt your distress.”

“When I was in the trunk,” Sookie observed.

“Yes. That one event changed all paths forward in my existence,” he reflected.

“What do you mean?”

“Without that event, I would have continued trying to hide what I feel – trying to convince myself that I did not like having feelings.”

“But you *do* like it?” she asked with some surprise.

Eric took a moment before nodding, his eyes shining with sincerity.

“I find that I,” he paused, “love it.”

She smiled. “I love it too.”

Both looked down at their entwined hands, which were stroking each other playfully, as if they had minds of their own.

“Your hands are cold,” she whispered the obvious.

“Yes. But less so now – than when you took hold of them,” he observed, his words seeming to apply to much more about him than his hands.

She returned her gaze to his eyes, noting what seemed to be a hundred shades of blue in them. “You never finished telling me about bonds.”

He nodded. “We got sidetracked on *human* bonds.”

“And the magic in them,” she whispered. “What kind of magic does a vampire bond have?”

He smiled softly. “I can speak only about what I have heard when it comes to vampires bonding with humans. No vampires I know of have ever bonded with fairies – not even hybrids – so I can only speculate that your heritage might change things a little.”

“Did you want to find out for sure that I’m a fairy?” she asked. “Uh – before we even think about bonding?”

He shook his head. “Speaking with them about this would change nothing. No one I could speak with would know what to expect – if you are, indeed, Fae – for, as I said, no vampire has ever bonded with a fairy.”

“What about a human and vampire?” Sookie returned to the “known” part of the topic – since Eric was right about the “unknown” part being unknowable.

Unless she and Eric bonded.

Until she and Eric bonded – the thought changed in her head.

Eric looked at her a little funny for a moment – as if he'd felt that slight shift in her and wanted to mark it for himself.

To remember it.

"I've seen two types of bonds between humans and vampires; one kind is something I find deplorable."

"What do you mean?" Sookie asked.

"Renfield – from *Dracula* – is based on a real human, just as Dracula is based upon a real creature."

Sookie's eyes widened. "Dracula's real?"

Eric nodded and chuckled. "I've convinced Pamela that I have a fan-crush of sorts on the count. Every year, she tries to get him to come for a visit in order to surprise me." His eyes twinkled. "In actuality, I've met Vlad a handful of times. He's quite boring, and the inspiration for Renfield wasn't even his creature. He belonged to a different vampire." He frowned deeply. "The first known 'Renfield' was created by my own maker!"

CHAPTER 30: GIVE ME THE RIGHT

If you looked deep in your heart

Like I looked into mine

You will find that nothing has changed

Our love was there all the time

– Songwriters: Fred Wise & Norman Blagman

“Shit!” Sookie cursed. “Appius made Renfield!”

“Yes – though that was not actually his name. Appius’s disdain for humans – his feeling of superiority over them – was the perfect fuel for his belief that he could do anything he wanted to a human.” He shook his head in judgment. “Bond-making – *I believe* – is a sacred act. But – as with almost everything else – my maker managed to have a warped vision of it. You see – in bonding – a vampire is meant to share a part of himself or herself with a human. And that magic allows the human to understand the vampire in the same way that a blood tie enables a vampire to have a window into the human’s emotions. A bond also allows the human to find his or her vampire, just as the vampire can find a human through a tie.”

“So the human can feel the vampire? I would be able to feel what you’re feeling?” Sookie asked.

Eric nodded. "Yes. A vampire can muffle a bond to a certain extent – like you are able to build your shields, I'd imagine." His eyes softened. "However, I have come to believe that a vampire is able to show his bonded the intensity of his devotion only if he resists the urge to stifle a bond."

"How do you mean?" she asked quietly.

"You know that vampires are uneasy with feelings, but you are only beginning to understand *why* that is so. Though vampires are immortal and our bodies are constant, our feelings are ever-moving and could make us vulnerable. Even if my own maker had not attempted to," he paused and looked away for a moment, "beat all that I *felt* from me, I believe I would have tried to stifle my emotions to a certain extent. All vampires do."

Sookie squeezed one of his hands, even as he disentangled the other from her grasp and brushed away a tear she'd cried for him.

"I hate your maker," she said softly. "I've never hated anyone I haven't met before, but I hate him."

Eric brushed away another of her tears. "I would hate anyone who hurt you as well, Dear One. However, despite his teaching, I do not view bonds as Appius does. He has bonded several times during his time on this planet – and always with the intention of controlling the human to the point that the human became insane – debilitated – no better than an animal." Eric paused for a moment. "Vampires have known for a while that their blood can cause addiction in a human – if it is taken from a vampire's body and allowed to age."

“V,” Sookie observed.

“Yes,” Eric confirmed. “When drunk directly from a vampire, the blood creates a sense of euphoria – to be sure – but it is not the same as V. Not as corrupted,” he added with disdain.

“And Appius figured this out?” she asked.

Eric shrugged. “Perhaps, he was not the first to do so. I cannot know for sure. But – by the time he made me – he’d had more than one Renfield. He used a combination of his fresh and his rotting blood to form bonds with them. And their addiction distorted all that was meant to be good about a vampire-human bond.” The Viking scoffed. “Of course, Appius never believed that a vampire and a human should bond for affection or mutual benefit. He adamantly believes that humans are so far beneath vampires that *true* bonds are unnatural.”

“And he taught you that lesson,” she whispered.

“He tried,” Eric relayed. “And I will admit that – for a long time – I believed what my maker trained me to believe.”

“What changed your belief?” she asked curiously.

“Distance. Once away from Appius, I saw a very different kind of vampire-human bond than the version I witnessed my maker utilizing. In fact, I learned new ways of doing *many* things from vampires I ultimately admired much more than Appius. Still, I would never have imagined that I would actually desire a *true* bond – until you.”

“You want to bond with me?” she asked incredulously.

He retook her second hand and gazed deeply into her eyes. "I believe I do. But—ultimately—I also believe that whether or not to bond is a decision you and I must make *together*—if the time comes when we wish to make it."

"Because it's permanent?" she asked.

"Yes. And also because I want to ensure that it is something we *both* want very much. A *true* bond is," he paused, "as close to marriage as a vampire gets and is often accompanied by a pledging."

"Pledging?" she asked.

"Pledgings were originally created to be public declarations of bondings. A pledging between two vampires would indicate their commitment to stay partners and mates for a minimum of one hundred years. Such a practice is rare and was once done solely between *true* vampire mates; indeed, these pledgings usually lasted much longer than a century. In the last several hundreds of years, however, most vampire pledgings that I am aware of have had more to do with politics than affection and are not accompanied by a permanent blood bond between the vampires—only a temporary, though annually renewed, blood tie. For a vampire and a non-vampire being, a pledging was meant to be a sign of the non-vampire's rise into a permanent and even respected status in the vampire world; it was an introduction into that world," Eric explained. "The non-vampire would present the vampire with a knife—a symbol that the non-vampire understood the importance of the taking and the giving of blood."

"Do a lot of vampires and humans bond and pledge?" Sookie asked.

“No,” Eric responded. “Before the Great Revelation, it was extremely risky to tell any human of our existence, and such trust would have been a necessary prerequisite for a bond and pledge. Thus, few vampires allowed themselves to develop any true affection for humans, nor did we tend to settle down in any one place for too long, which made relationship-forming even more difficult.”

Sookie nodded in understanding. “It does sound like it would’ve been difficult.”

The vampire looked at the telepath with sincerity. “Dear One, I would not wish to bond with you unless we also pledged. If you,” he paused, “truly become mine, I *will* have others view you with the respect a pledged mate is afforded. I will *not* have you seen as a pet,” he added fervently. “A pledging will also allow everyone to know that you are mine by choice—as I am yours by choice. Such a ceremony would be sacred to me.”

“Wow!” Sookie exclaimed softly—her tone one of awe. “Okay. So—I should view bonding like it’s getting married to you?” she said softly, hesitantly.

“Even more permanent than marriage—as it is currently known to humans,” Eric answered just as softly. “There is no divorcing from a bond or a pledge. There would be no lessening of our blood connection over time. A bond would mean we have committed our lives to one another for as long as we are both in existence. Of course, if the laws ever change, I would have no issues with marrying you in the human tradition too, if you would wish such a thing,” he added.

“Wow!” she repeated. “I—uh—wow! You would?”

He shrugged. "As I said, I view a pledging as a sacred ceremony – and a bond as a sacred oath. I won't lie – to me, a human marriage would be a lesser commitment, though I would have you contented, and I am certain that I would enjoy the festivities." He smiled a little. "I always appreciated such occasions when I was a human, though I understand wedding celebrations have changed a lot. Your brother would likely not expect livestock or gold in exchange for your hand, for instance."

Sookie chuckled. "Likely not – but with Jason, one never knows."

Eric laughed with her for a moment before touching her cheek tenderly. "I know my mind, Sookie. It is only fair that you are aware of my certainty. I would marry, bond, and pledge with you tomorrow. *That* is how certain I am about us. However, none of those three things would be more important to me than our night-to-night existence together. That is the part that would be the most difficult – especially given how stubborn we can both be."

They both chuckled at that, even though Sookie was also fighting tears because of the happiness his words were stirring within her.

"But ultimately," the vampire continued, "those nights with you – whatever they bring – will be the most rewarding and special to me. I have never wanted to spend my nights with someone to the extent that I wish to spend them with you."

"Wow!" she exclaimed again. "Eric, I . . . Really, I . . . But it's all such a big step, and we haven't even . . .," she started.

He hushed her with a gentle kiss – barely a whisper of touch.

Still, even that small touch sent a bolt of electricity through them both.

“You are right that our relationship has not yet begun *formally*. But—even as you suggested earlier—I feel that what is between us is well on its way to blossoming. However, I do not want to rush you into anything. On the contrary, I want for us to enjoy some time that is not fraught with extreme drama. We deserve some calm in order to better understand ourselves and what we are together,” he stated firmly. “It is then that we can fully and truly contemplate these larger and permanent topics. It is then that we will be able to reach conclusions that contain no doubts or hesitations.”

Sookie nodded and sighed in relief—and agreement. “You’re right. But it’s only right that you know that I already feel *so much* for you. I was so scared of admitting those feelings when I talked to Aphra today,” she finished almost shyly.

“You need not be scared,” the vampire said softly, pushing a strand of hair over her ear.

“I know that—now,” the telepath whispered. “I think I’ve realized that—no matter what happens with us as a couple—*we’ll* be okay.” She smiled. “I was freaked out because I already feel,” she paused, “love for you as a friend, but—uh—even *stronger* because, in some ways—because I can talk to you and because you accept me—you’re the best friend I’ve ever had.” She bit her lip nervously, gauging his reaction to her declaration.

Eric smiled at her. “I enjoy being your friend very much, Dear One. However,” he added with a glint in his eyes, “I do not wish to be trapped in the friend zone with the shifter.”

Sookie chuckled heartily. “Don’t worry! There’s *absolutely* no chance of that happening!”

“Good. Then I say that you and I should simply enjoy spending time with one another for the time being. Just you and me – with no meetings with Bill or other issues hanging over our heads.”

“I like the sound of that; I just hope that drama doesn’t come looking for us,” Sookie commented.

Eric smirked. “It likely will – you know.”

She smacked his arm playfully. “Don’t jinx us.”

He smiled along with her for a moment before his expression became more serious. “Through drama and calm, we will find a way to get to know each other as we should.”

“What happens if we *do* get together, but don’t decide to bond, Eric?”

The vampire contemplated for a moment. “We’ll have the relationship we choose, Dear One,” he answered sincerely.

“But you cannot even drink from me,” she frowned. “If you do, we could form a bond accidentally – if you ever needed to give me your blood again.”

His smirk came back in full force. “The magic that has linked us because of our mutual exchanges is already fading. I estimate it will take only thirty-seven days more before I could begin taking your blood – if you are of a mind to feed me by then,” he added suggestively. After that, I’ll only ask that you take a bit of my blood every once in a while – but only enough to keep a slight tie in place. Perhaps a drop or two on

special occasions?” His tone practically oozed with sex as Sookie blushed, certain that he intended these takings on her part to happen during sex.

“Why would I keep taking your blood?” she asked. “Oh—wait. So that you can keep tabs on my location,” she answered for herself. “Yeah—you’re right. I’ll want that extra security.”

Eric smiled at her, grateful that she did not question his motives for wanting to keep a bit of his blood in her as a precaution—and even more grateful that she didn’t need him to even explain his reasoning to her. She knew that reasoning already because she was coming to know *him*.

Ever since she’d looked at him with such faith, hope, and trust as he’d pulled her from the trunk—Eric had been more and more certain that it was his destiny to be with Sookie—to bond with her and pledge with her. Yet he knew her well enough not to rush her—and, more importantly, not to let her rush herself. She’d rushed into a relationship with Bill and now doubted whether any of it was real. The Viking, of course, was nothing like Bill. Also, their relationship would not be based on a foundation of lies. But he was determined that the foundation it was built upon *would be* sturdy—so that it would last the test of time.

All time—if possible.

“So—what shall we do tonight?” he asked her. “It is full dark now.”

“Don’t you need to go to Fangtasia? I mean—our date isn’t until tomorrow night.”

“I had thought to stay here with you – to be your *friend* tonight,” he said before leaning forward to place a gentle kiss on her lips.

She exhaled deeply. “Friends don’t kiss like this.”

“We do,” he smirked, his eyebrows waggling.

“Well – could we look over the business plan together and maybe talk about training? And then I’ll want to go to bed early tonight – well earlier than last night. I’m not tired right now, but I’m sure that dealing with Bill last night, working today, and seeing Aphra will all catch up to me.”

“That sounds good. I’ll fulfill my role as BFF, and we can make progress on getting your business up and running. *And* I can still get to Fangtasia in plenty of time to see to the books so that Pam won’t give me any shit.”

Sookie chuckled, even as she rose from the bed. “It’s *our* business. And you sayin’ ‘BFF’ is just all kinds of funny. Plus, won’t Pam give you shit anyway – for not sittin’ on your throne?”

Eric shook his head. “She knows I am done putting myself on display. I’ve asked her to find another piece or two of eye candy.”

“What?” Sookie asked incredulously. “You’re not gonna sit on your throne anymore?”

Eric shook his head. “No. As I suggested the other night, I have lost interest in enthralling the vermin, and I have no need to use Fangtasia as a,” he paused, “menu.”

Sookie shook her head. “I know you think of the fangbangers like that, but hearing you say that makes me feel a little sorry for them.”

“Whatever for?” Eric asked.

“They really have no idea what y’all think of them,” the telepath responded, reaching out to take Eric’s hand in order to lead him into the living room. “They truly believe that the vampires want them. Hardly any of them even ponder for a moment the idea that they are McPeople to you.”

“I know,” Eric said with some disdain. “I might even pity them if most of them didn’t come back for more night after night.”

Sookie sat down on the couch after turning on the Christmas tree lights. She grabbed the folder that contained her business plan as Eric sat at the other end of the couch. He gestured toward the fireplace. “Do you ever use that – the fireplace?” he asked.

Sookie frowned for a moment.

“Why are you suddenly sad?” Eric asked with concern.

“Just Gran,” Sookie sighed. “She’d always get onto Jason around Thanksgiving to cut some wood.”

“Will your brother not do the chore for you now?” Eric asked.

“Oh – he would if I’d asked him to. Honestly, with everything going on, I haven’t thought of it.”

“May I cut you some? Once you are sleeping tonight? It won’t take long, and I have not performed such a task for another in a very long time,” he said, getting a faraway look in his eyes. “It would be nice to light a fire tomorrow – for our date,” he added.

“Yeah—really nice,” she agreed with a smile.

“So—what questions did you have for me?” he asked, gesturing toward the papers in her lap.

She looked at him with determination. “The first one is really not about the paperwork. It’s about my training. Eric, I’m ready to start learning everything I need to know to be successful in your world.” She shook her head. “*Our* world.”

“Good,” the vampire said with a bit of pride in his tone. “Well—you already know something of kings and queens. Are you up for a crash course in the overall vampire power structure?”

She took a deep breath. “Yeah. I’m ready.”

CHAPTER 31: JUST FOR OLD TIME SAKE

Just for old time sake

Won't you give my heart a break

Let's get together again

Let's relive the time

– Songwriters: Roy C. Bennett & Sid Tepper

“Alright. Let me start off by telling you about the Supernatural Council,” Eric announced.

“Sounds official,” Sookie observed. “And powerful.”

“The Council has endured for millennia. And its members *are* quite powerful,” Eric agreed. “Though there is a variety of Supernatural types represented, most of the members are vampires.”

“Why’s that?”

“Frankly, it has a lot to do with vampires having a consistent population—in relationship with the human population. As it grows, so do we, but not too fast. The two-natured have also stayed pretty proportional to humans, but their lives are short compared to vampire lives. However, other than vampires, the two-natured do have the most members.”

“How many people – uh beings – are on the Council?” Sookie inquired as she sat forward with interest.

“Eighteen overall. Twelve of these are vampires – seven from the European and Asian continents; three from the Americas, North and South; one from Pacifica, which includes Australia and island nations like Malaysia and Indonesia; and one from Africa. Vampires, once installed upon the Council, pretty much stay there – unless they are removed by unanimous ruling of the other members or die the true death.”

“Why so many more from Europe and Asia?” Sookie asked. “Is it because that’s the,” she paused, “Old World?”

“Good question,” Eric smiled. “To answer, let me first offer you a little history. Human history has been recorded for around 5,000 years, depending on the culture and the development of written language in a region; however, beyond two-thousand years, most of that history is sketchy – incomplete at best. Vampires have always used the same language to record history, a language unique to ourselves.”

“Do you speak that one?” Sookie asked.

“I don’t know if anyone does. It is only written. And – yes. I do know how to read and write it. Vampires who care for history and those who wish to understand the seats of power all eventually find a vampire who knows the language and is willing to share it. That vampire teaches the other,” Eric relayed.

“Cool!” Sookie said, fascinated by Eric’s story. “Who taught you?”

Eric frowned. “Appius knew the language, but insisted I should be much brawn and little brain.”

“As if we needed another reason to hate that jackass,” Sookie muttered.

Eric chuckled at her ireful response. “I won’t argue that point, Dear One. After Appius cut me loose, it took me a while to find a place I wished to settle — Constantinople; you would know it as Istanbul. It was there that I learned my first written languages beyond the symbols of my own human folk.”

“Which did you learn?” Sookie asked, entranced by Eric’s history, even more than the larger lesson she was being taught.

“I arrived in Constantinople a few centuries following the last Crusade in the area; by that time, many cultures could be studied with ease, and I learned to read and write Greek, Arabic, Latin, and the vampire language. The latter was taught to me by a vampire scholar named Ahmad.”

“Wow!” Sookie said, shaking her head a little. “How long were you there?”

“Twenty years or so. It was a large city and easy to become lost in. And the vampire population was quite organized. They’d needed to be in order to survive the Crusades. Ahmad was a Council member; he is still, actually. And from him, I learned much of vampire history.”

“Wow!” Sookie laughed at herself. “I can’t stop sayin’ that.”

“It is a feeling that I had too during much of my time in Constantinople,” Eric shared. “It was the first time I threw myself into scholarship. It was where I got my thirst to travel to the East too.”

“So — uh — if written human history is 5,000 years old, then how old is vampire history?” the telepath asked.

“The written language was created about 8,000 years ago, but a few of the recorders of history were ancients by then, so our history dates back to more than 12,000 years ago. The oldest of those texts set down the traditions of the Supernatural Council, which had been newly formed when the writing developed. Indeed, it was the Supernatural Council itself that decided that a written language ought to be created.”

He smirked.

“What?” Sookie asked, noting his amused expression.

“It was vampires’ interactions with the Dae that gave them the idea for a written language in the first place. And – likely – it was humans emulating vampires that later gave rise to the earlier human languages.”

“Sookie chuckled. “So without the Dae, we might all be a bunch of illiterates.”

“That is what they like to say,” Eric chuckled. “Indeed, most Daemons still view this world as a primitive one.”

“Well – uh – whatever the Daemons think, I find it amazing that the Supe Council has been around for as long as it has!” Sookie said with awe.

“I agree,” Eric chuckled. “Given all the changes I have seen during my long life, it is difficult for even me to imagine what the world must have been like when the founders of the Supernatural Council came together. Clearly, they understood that some kind of governing body was needed.”

“This is all so cool!” Sookie enthused.

“Well – then – you will enjoy this tidbit,” Eric said with a twinkle in his eyes.

“At the beginning of vampire history, vampires were actually known by and lived in

peace with humans and other Supernaturals. The secrecy of my kind became necessary only around the beginning of the human Bronze Age.”

Sookie frowned. “I wonder what changed?”

Eric grinned boyishly. “You do not have to wonder. Vampire history spells out the reasoning behind our going into the coffin – so to speak.”

“Wow! What was it?”

“The Supernatural Council agreed unanimously that vampires needed to become secret to humans due to one particular massacre of vampire-kind in the region now known as Germany. A group of humans – a cult of sorts – began to believe that vampires were responsible for a series of crop failures. Once that idea spread, nothing could be done by the region’s Supernaturals to quell the tide of hysteria. Forty vampires met their end in one day, according to the history. Similar incidents had occurred before, but never on such a large scale.”

“So y’all figured humans couldn’t be trusted?” Sookie asked.

“Some still can’t be – especially in a mob,” Eric sighed. “It is a sad testament that the main argument against the Great Revelation involved the study of early massacres perpetrated by fanatical humans who knew of vampire existence.”

“And you were right to worry,” Sookie frowned. “Steve Newlin and his,” she scoffed, “followers would kill every last one of you if they could.”

Eric nodded. “That kind of human has always existed in one form or another. Because of them, the two-natured joined vampires in secrecy when they realized they, too, would be safer as a part of myth only. Other beings stayed more known for longer,

but eventually were associated with the gods humans created for their religions.

Eventually, beings like nymphs and sirens became mythologized. Again, it became safer for them that way.”

“So – uh – gods like – uh – Zeus aren’t real?” Sookie asked after a few moments spent absorbing her history lesson.

“That question is a complicated one,” Eric responded. “Certain figures from mythology are real, but even I am not altogether sure of which ones. Long ago, for example, fairies were more common in this realm, and people – like my own human culture – would worship them as gods and goddesses because of the magic they wielded and the power they displayed.” He shrugged. “I cannot know for sure, but it is very possible that my own culture’s gods and goddesses – Odin, Hera, Thor, and the others – were fairies. After all, fairies of different kinds can use magic that controls the various elements, including the sea, which is important in Viking mythology. Fairies could have lived amongst humans – without seemingly aging – for generations. They could have then returned to their realm or ascended as angels, which the Fae can do.”

“Wow!” Sookie exclaimed, her eyes opening wide. “Angels are real!”

The Viking nodded. “The Christians based their beliefs on them.”

“Wow!” the telepath repeated, again stuck on that word.

“Another theory is that the old gods were vampires,” Eric said with playful glint in his startling blue eyes. “Then again, gods and goddesses could indeed be above us all,” the vampire indicated with another shrug. “Even vampire history cannot pin down a creator, so who knows?”

“It’s a lot to think about,” Sookie frowned. “But—uh—how does it all relate to the make-up of the Council?”

“Ah—yes! Our original topic.” Eric chuckled. “Some of the information doesn’t, but with this topic, it’s easy to go off on a tangent, and your questions make it even easier,” he growled in play, grabbing her foot that she’d stretched out a bit and tickling it lightly.

She giggled and fought his hold—until he stopped his tickling.

“May I?” he asked, indicating her foot.

“May you what?” she returned with some confusion.

“Vampires do not get hurt or sore as humans do, but we enjoy the feeling of a massage nonetheless. I have learned the skill.”

“A Swedish masseuse?” Sookie asked with a chuckle.

“Maybe the oldest on earth,” he responded with mirth.

“Then by all means,” the telepath permitted, wiggling her toes. “Of course, your skill might be lost on me. I’ve never had a massage—for obvious reasons,” she said, indicating her head.

“And I haven’t massaged a human—for obvious reasons,” he returned, referring to the cold temperature of his hands. “It will be new for both of us,” he added, taking off her sock and then pressing slightly into the ball of her feet. “Just tell me if anything is unpleasant. The feet can be,” he paused, “delicate.”

“That sounds a little foreboding,” she said, right before she moaned with pleasure.

“Let us just say that there are many bones in the foot – bones that could be broken – and leave it at that,” the vampire smirked.

“Fine by me,” Sookie agreed. “Just as long as you keep doing what you’re doin’. *Exactly* what you’re doin’. It’s pretty much perfect,” she groaned.

Eric nodded in agreement. “Okay – where was I? Oh, yes! I was about to tell you why Europe and Asia have more vampires on the Council than other regions. In simple terms, it’s a matter of population. Ironically enough, the first vampires to record their history were in Eastern Europe – very near Transylvania, which is in present-day Romania.”

“That would explain all the lore in that part of the world,” the telepath commented.

“Indeed,” Eric agreed and then continued his explanation. “From this central point, vampires spread in various directions. Sometimes, a Council member would move to another region – like Ahmed in Constantinople. Other times, a new region would petition for representation. Interestingly, the vampire population in Eastern Asia – China and Japan specifically – rose much more quickly than the vampire population in Western Europe, though the latter did eventually catch up. The Council members in Europe and Asia are the oldest – with the eldest being 3,800 years old.”

“Wow! How old is the oldest vampire?” Sookie asked with curiosity.

“The oldest known is around 4,100; his name is Menelaus. He lives in Switzerland – in the Alps.”

“That’s old, but I figured there might be someone older – uh – since y’ all get stronger with age and all.”

“We get weary with age too,” Eric said with a faraway look in his eyes. “As far as I know, there are only 10 vampires who are 3,500 and above currently in existence. There are about ten times that many between 2,500 and 3,500; you know one – Russell.”

Sookie nodded, looking duly impressed by the Mississippi King’s age.

“Most Russell’s age whom I know personally have contemplated meeting the sun. Russell told me that he once spent 50 years seriously weighing the pros of suicide.”

“Wow! But he seems so happy now!” Sookie commented.

“He is experiencing a high time – yes,” Eric agreed. “And the sudden changes in human culture and technology these days help to keep the world more interesting. Still, even at my age, I have experienced periods when life seemed almost too tedious to continue.”

Sookie frowned. “I don’t like to hear that. I don’t wanna hear it – not about you,” she finished quietly.

“It happens,” Eric stated matter-of-factly, as if accepting that, he too, might get to the point of suicide one day. “Luckily, for me, the feeling of tediousness has never taken hold for long. But, the older one gets, the more likely it will. Many older vampires simply disappear – likely into the sun.” He shrugged. “Or, perhaps, there is a way that we ascend too, though there is no evidence for such a thing. Still – I like to

believe there is something after all this for vampires, even if it is not a Valkyrie waiting to take me to Valhalla.”

His hand stilled on her foot for a moment as his eyes looked toward the empty fireplace.

“I hope there is too,” Sookie said softly. “Maybe, there’s only one heaven – no matter what kind of being.”

Eric looked at her with a soft smile. “It would be nice to imagine *true* eternity with you – and not just the kind that I already find myself contemplating,” he added meaningfully.

“Eric – uh – it’s – uh . . .,” Sookie stammered.

Eric recommenced his rubbing. “Too soon. Yes – I know,” he said comfortingly. “There will be many things that we will do and say together before we need to have a conversation about your turning, but . . .” He stopped midsentence and frowned.

“But?” she asked pensively.

“You should consider your preferences for an emergency situation so that they can be added to your contract. I am doing all that I can to ensure your safety, but – if something unforeseen happens,” he paused, sitting forward a little, “do you want to be brought over?”

Sookie felt her breath leave her for a moment. “Eric, I just don’t know,” she said after almost a minute of silence.

“If you meet an end in a tragic way, I would wish to turn you. I *would* turn you – unless I had your clear ‘No’ on that matter,” the vampire admitted. “Sookie, you

can always change your mind later – and contracts can be revised to reflect that – but I must have your initial preference before we finish your contract so that it is very clear what can and cannot be done if you are in dire straits.”

Sookie closed her eyes. “What if I’m not ready to give you an answer by then?”

“Sookie, whatever is in the contract, I will consider your answer a ‘Yes’ unless you tell me ‘No’ specifically,” Eric said firmly, looking at her with soft eyes conveying what losing her would already do to him. “If you don’t give me that ‘No,’ I *will* turn you so that I can keep you.”

“I’m not ready to give you a ‘No,’” she said after a moment’s hesitation. She *had* given Bill a ‘No’ – told him that she didn’t want to be a vampire. However, with Eric, something had shifted in her when it came to the Supernatural. When she’d denied Bill before, it had been because she was still denying that she wanted to belong to the Supernatural world at all. Now that she was working to embrace her unique place within that world, the thought of being a vampire no longer “felt” the same way.

Eric sighed with relief. “Your ‘non-no’ is much better than the answer I feared,” he shared.

“When I have a solid answer, I’ll tell you. And – uh – in the initial contract, it can be a ‘Yes’ – as long as it can be changed as needed,” Sookie said.

Eric smiled softly and nodded. “Thank you. And – rest assured – we will put it into the contract that you can change your preference at any time.”

“Okay. And I want to make a list of vampires I’m okay with turning me – in case of emergency,” Sookie said after a few moments. “I could do that – right?”

Eric nodded. "Yes. I believe such a preference should be included in all employment contracts made as well – with anyone who breaks that clause subject to the true death."

"Okay," Sookie nodded. "So – uh – then – if some random vampire gets to me and changes me, he'll be killed, and I can be set free?"

"Yes. Also, such a clause would deter anyone who hires you from even entertaining the idea of turning you," Eric said darkly – as if the possibility inflamed his rage.

"Eric – I won't lie – my final answer might be 'No,'" the telepath shared after a few moments of silent contemplation on both of their parts – her thinking about immortality and him thinking about proving to any vampire who dared to harm Sookie just how fickle immortality could be.

"I will respect and accept whatever choice you make," Eric said sincerely, "no matter how much it might pain me."

Sookie bowed her head slightly. "Thank you."

The vampire squeezed her foot lightly and then put her sock back on before taking her other foot into his large, cool hands. "So – as I was saying about the Council," he returned to the previous topic, taking them away from the disturbing subject of her becoming (or not becoming) a vampire, "vampires in the Old World were its founding members. However, instead of cutting down on member numbers from the Old World as the population spread, it was determined that – if a new region needed representation – the Council would simply grow to suit the needs of the new

population. The Americas share three members. Currently, one is from Canada, one from California, and one from Brazil. Unlike our Old-World compatriots, which stay in place pretty much until true death, the monarchs of the Americas have determined that the kings and queens will vote to renew Council membership – or to change out Council members – every three hundred years.”

Resettling herself after their unsettling conversation about turning, Sookie asked, “What about the other continents? I mean – I get why Australia and its neighbors . . . uh – what did you call it?”

“Pacifica,” he reminded.

“Yes. Thanks,” she smiled. “I get why Pacifica has only one representative since – uh – I’d imagine that settling that part of the world happened later for vampires. But what about Africa? I mean – if y’all moved in all directions from – uh – Transylvania, wouldn’t y’all get to Africa – even before – uh – China?” She blushed. “I think I’m right about the geography and distance.”

Eric smiled. “You are. But quite a few factors caused the late migration of my kind deep into the African continent. Mostly, that delay was related to practicality. Simply put, it is difficult to dig a safe resting place in shifting sands. And – heading into Africa overland from the north – it is difficult to avoid desert. Plus – until relatively recently – sea travel was not something many vampires undertook. When ship travel did become more reliable, parts of the African continent did get settled by vampires. Indeed, there is quite a large vampire population in South Africa. However, because the earliest vampires to venture to Africa stood out or were lumped in with

Colonialists, our position on that continent has always been precarious—though I do not wish to overgeneralize. Some African nations have been quite welcoming since the Great Revelation—the Congo, Sierra Leone, and Ghana, for example. Others are basically ‘no-go zones’ for vampires. The reactions of the African nations are truly as diverse as those nations themselves.”

Sookie sighed. “I admit that I don’t know much about Africa. I mean, we were taught about South Africa and Apartheid in school, and I know a little about Libya from the news. Oh—and—of course, I know more about Egypt and the Great Pyramids because the Egyptian culture is more studied here in the U.S., but beyond that . . .” She shrugged. “I really do hope I eventually learn more.”

Eric smiled as he continued his massage of her foot. “We can travel to the safe countries if you wish. I have spent substantial time in South Africa and enjoy it quite a bit. It would be nice to show that country—and other places on the continent—to you. The natural beauty of the Congo River basin is unparalleled.”

“I’d like that,” the telepath smiled. “But we keep getting sidetracked. So far, I know only about the—uh—twelve *vampire* members of the Council. Who are the others? How many others are there again?”

Eric chuckled. “Yes. We *do* tend to get sidetracked. But there will be time for you to learn all you need to know before we travel to New Orleans when Arkansas visits. And—to answer your question—there are six others. *Almost* half as many as vampires,” Eric responded with a twinkle in his eye.

“Wait. Twelve vampires and then six others *is* half,” the telepath said with confusion. “My math skills aren’t *that* bad!”

Eric chuckled. “No. It is just that one of the other members is a vampire hybrid.”

“A vampire hybrid?” Sookie asked with wonder.

Eric nodded. “The Ancient Pythoness. She was known as Pythia in her human life and was an Oracle, a future seer.”

“Those were real?” Sookie asked.

“Yes,” Eric confirmed. “Though her kind is extremely rare, they are arguably more real than the gods with whom humans associated them.”

“Okay – so, other than her, who are the other five?”

“There are two two-natured beings on the Council at any given time. Currently, there is one from the Old World and one from the New World. The Old-World representative is from a family that has had a member on the Council for almost as long as I have been undead. The New-World representative gets chosen through an election which occurs when the old member passes away or chooses to retire. All packs or were-groupings with over one hundred members get a vote, and the nomination process can become,” Eric paused, “rather bloody.”

Sookie cringed as Eric continued to rub her foot and calf softly, as if to comfort her.

“The last permanent spot on the Council is held by a witch or a warlock.”

Sookie frowned. “Unless I’ve started having math problems, that leaves two slots left. Who has those?”

“The other Supernatural beings of this world do not occur in as large of numbers as the rest of us. Of those beings – some, like Sirens and Trolls, are native to this world. On the other hand, other groups settle here from other realms; these include Daemons and Faeries.”

“So – uh – my likely family roots immigrated from another realm?” Sookie asked.

“Yes,” Eric responded. “These ‘immigrants’ elect one member to the Council. Currently it is a Dae member. The remaining native groups elect the final member. There is a Troll in the position now.”

“Is that – uh – what Dr. Ludwig is?” Sookie asked with fascination.

Eric let out a guffaw. “No! As unexpected as it may be to you, trolls are actually quite pleasant, placid creatures, and no one would *ever* accuse Dr. Ludwig of being that.”

“True,” Sookie giggled. “So – what is she?”

“I cannot tell you,” Eric said with a smirk.

“Why? Is it something you have to keep secret?” the telepath asked.

“No,” Eric chuckled. “I cannot tell you because I honestly cannot pronounce the word for what she is. No one other than her own kind can tackle the damned thing!”

“Really? It’s that hard?”

“Even for my *extremely* talented tongue,” Eric said suggestively.

Sookie blushed. "Can you try?"

Eric cringed and looked as if in extreme concentration before carefully plodding through the longest 'word' Sookie had ever heard.

"Tgmntpnemwoquwinshntnwbaeufrsbpouiaunpauqunkrtnbvwertncvgpt."

Sookie's eyes widened as Eric finished. "Was that really a word?" she asked with a laugh.

Eric shook his head. "No. I know I messed it up – in more than one spot. Ludwig's language strings together an amalgam of sounds that ought not be mixed!" he pronounced with surety and also frustration. "Of course, most of her kind are just as unpleasant as she, so they might have made up their species name just to fuck with the rest of us."

Sookie giggled. "You know – knowing her, I could see that."

CHAPTER 32: Such a Night

It was a night ooh what a night

It was, it really was such a night

The moon was bright, oh, how so bright

It was, it really was such a night

The night was alight with stars above

Ooh, when she kissed me

I had to fall in love

– Songwriters: Steve Glen, David Most & Mike Burns

Sookie's stomach chose that moment to growl.

"Do you require food?" Eric asked.

"It's too close to bed for a full meal," the telepath said thoughtfully, "but I do think I'll have a piece of banana nut bread. Hold that thought," she ordered, looking at his hands, which were still rubbing her foot. "You gave my right foot more time, and this one wants the same attention."

The vampire laughed as Sookie got up – sans sock – and rushed into the kitchen to prepare her snack after making a quick pit-stop in the bathroom to take care of her human needs and wash her hands.

As soon as she returned to the living room and settled onto the couch with her treat and a glass of milk, she presented her “under-rubbed” left foot to Eric and wiggled her toes. The vampire obliged.

“So – what does the Supernatural Council do exactly?”

“It oversees all Supernatural groups – at least to an extent,” Eric responded. “It commissions and oversees judges for Supernatural tribunals and enforcers.” He lowered his voice, though he knew that no ears were close enough to the house to hear him. “Karin has done much work for the Council – as an enforcer.”

Sookie nodded in understanding, as Eric had told her a little about his eldest child during their plane ride.

“More recently,” Eric continued at his normal volume, “the Supernatural Council formed the AVL and other similar groups around the world to help the Great Revelation,” he paused, “go well. The Council also oversees the more significant disputes between vampires, specifically between Heads of State. They manage large inter-species disputes. They had a hand in the development of TrueBlood, and they are currently in the final stages of planning the reveal for the two-natured, which should occur within the next year.”

“Wow! That’s a lot,” Sookie exclaimed.

“Yes. And that is only the tip of the iceberg – believe it or not.”

“Will I ever be dealing with them – the Supernatural Council?” Sookie asked.

Eric nodded. “I cannot be certain, but it is very likely that they will wish to meet you – once they know of you. They may even try to hire you themselves, although –

with a seer as one of their ranks – they likely have little need of a telepath. Also, I believe that the Dae on the Council is a telepath. So, more likely, you will have to deal with one of the Council members or one of their proxies after you work for Sophie-Anne.”

“Why after that?” Sookie asked.

“I speculate that the Arkansas King has ulterior motives in his pursuit of the queen. If you are able to confirm this, Sophie-Anne will have to lodge an official complaint with the Council. If things come to a head and she must kill the king – whose name is Peter Threadgill, by the way – a Council inquiry will take place automatically. Inquiries between kings and queens most often take place at a vampire assembly or summit – where at least one Council member will preside.”

“Does the whole Council decide what will happen – when there’s an inquiry?” Sookie asked.

“No,” Eric shook his head. “The Council member assigned to a summit will oversee the selection of a panel of monarchs and other older, respected vampires to settle all disputes at a particular summit. The selection of that panel is not unlike your jury duty. The Council member draws lots of vampires in the region of the summit to determine the ‘jury pool.’ Any vampire not involved in a dispute is eligible for membership. Sometimes vampires will recuse themselves from certain disputes if they have a vested interest in one side. The panel is like,” he paused, “the human concept of a jury of one’s peers. It is only in the case of a deadlocked panel that the Council

member inserts himself or herself to either make a final decision or opt to take the matter to the full Council for decision.”

“Sounds incredibly diplomatic and peaceful – for vampires. No offense,” Sookie added quickly.

“None taken, and I think that you will find that – at our highest ranks – most vampires have a great desire for order. And for honor,” he said more quietly – almost introspectively.

Sookie was beginning to understand just how important the concept of honor was to the vampire sharing her time.

“And you are right,” Eric continued. “The process *is* quite methodical and orderly. Very few vampires would dare to cause trouble or contest a ruling, especially in high-profile cases. After all, with a Council member overseeing, it is always on everyone’s mind that the Ancient Pythoness – with one call – could destroy any deceiver’s case.”

Sookie shook her head and let out a little chuckle. “Still – it all sounds intimidating to be a part of. It makes me hope King Peter is on the up-and-up.”

“You would do fine giving testimony to a Council member or at a trial, Dearest One,” Eric said supportively. “And I would be there with you in such a case. Plus,” his eyes glinted with mischief, “if we did go to a summit, we could take the opportunity to advertise!” He winked. “We’d have Pam man the booth!”

Sookie’s eyes widened. “What? There’s like – uh – trade fairs at these things?”

Eric nodded in confirmation. "Of course, we won't need such advertising – not really. Plus, I plan to be very selective about your initial clientele. And there certainly wouldn't be any demonstration of your gifts – at least not for the general public."

"Then why the booth?" Sookie asked. "Just to torture Pam?"

Eric chuckled. "No, but that would be fun. Having a booth would raise your profile and help to solidify that we are running a *business* and that you are owned by *no* vampires," he finished forcefully. "Otherwise, others might believe that Queen Sophie-Anne controls you."

"So other monarchs might think they could? Control me? That they could get their very own Sookie Stackhouse?" the telepath asked nervously.

The Viking sighed. "Perhaps. Or – perhaps – some might assume you were aligned with Sophie-Anne's interests. For the sake of your business and yourself, it is best to seem as independent as possible – neutral. Meanwhile, know that I will protect you from any who try anything that would harm you!" he growled.

"I know," she said with a sigh of her own, her voice soothing and confident. "Keep rubbing," she whispered, smiling up at the vampire whose touch had remained gentle, despite his fervor – his passion about *her* safety.

His tension seemed to melt a little, and he did as she requested.

After a few minutes of silence, during which she was lost in her own thoughts (and he was willing to let her be), Sookie took a deep breath and then let it out slowly as she leaned over to put her empty plate on the coffee table. "I have so much to learn

about the Supe world; it's overwhelming sometimes. Everything you tell me makes me think of another twenty questions."

Eric grinned almost boyishly. "Well! This is *excellent* for me!"

"Huh?" Sookie asked with confusion.

"The more questions you have of me, the more time I will get to spend with you."

Sookie giggled and shook her head. "Ever the opportunist?"

"I will plead guilty to that."

"Even without a jury of vampire kings and queens making you?" Sookie teased.

"See!" Eric chuckled. "You are learning already." He glanced at the clock. "But it is approaching the time when you should probably take your rest, Dearest One."

Sookie sighed and then shrugged. "Soon. I do wanna go over a couple of contract things first – if you still have some time."

"Of course," Eric smiled.

After Sookie reluctantly pulled her well-rubbed foot from him and put back on her sock, she grabbed the first set of documents.

"Okay – let's start with the business plan," she said assertively.

Eric smiled at the confidence in her tone. "What would you like to ask?"

"Why isn't my name on the contract yet?" she asked.

"To protect your anonymity – just in case you didn't want to go through with this," he said. "I wrote the initial plan, but – since I had an attorney type up the official contract – I didn't want to include your name."

She nodded. "I thought that might be it."

"Your name will be added when we meet with the attorney."

"Okay. Uh—there is something else. It's about the money," Sookie informed.

Eric frowned. "Please, Dearest One. The one area where I intend to be quite firm is in ensuring that you earn what you are worth."

Sookie cringed. "I really am tryin' to come to terms with my hirin' fee being so high. But I'm not asking about that part. If I'm right about what it says," Sookie paused, pointing to a paragraph that she'd marked with a post-it note, "I'll be makin' a salary *and* being paid per job. That can't be right—right?"

"You'll be paid for each job. And, of course, you will receive a yearly retainer," Eric returned as if he were confused about why she was asking.

"But that's like gettin' paid twice!" Sookie returned, shaking her head. "I really have reconciled myself to accepting five hundred dollars per 'standard read,'" she said, pointing to the language of the contract. "And—after hyperventilatin' a little—I'm okay with the five thousand minimum for a 'large-crowd situation.' But a salary on top of that?"

Eric asked, "Sookie, have you not heard of a lawyer being placed on a retainer?"

The telepath blushed a little. "Yeah. But I have to admit to not knowin' exactly what that means."

The vampire smiled softly. "I doubt the practice is common around here since most people hire attorneys for only a single case at a time."

She smiled at him, grateful that he never patronized or belittled her for her lack of knowledge – not like Bill had.

“Some lawyers are given a sum – usually annually – if a client needs their services throughout the year for a variety of things. For instance, the sum that your own yearly retainer is to be, fifty-thousand dollars, is less than what I pay to three separate human law firms. Two of those are corporate firms and handle business issues for me. The third is a criminal defense attorney who is on stand-by for things like the raid that occurred the first night we met. These lawyers are familiar with my interests – at least the aspects that relate to their work – and having them on retainer means that they will drop whatever else they are working on to deal with my issues. However, when they work, I still pay their hourly fees.”

Sookie’s brow wrinkled as she took in what he was saying. “But I’m not a lawyer.”

“No,” Eric returned. “But, by structuring our business plan this way, you can be assured of the yearly amount – just in case you need time between jobs to,” he paused, “decompress.”

The telepath frowned. “But if I get the yearly – uh – retainer, then why would I also get paid per job. And – uh – this is a company we’re startin’ from the ground up – *together!* And you are putting in all the costs up front to start it ‘cause I can’t.” She shook her head. “Eric, it doesn’t seem right that I’m getting a salary when it seems clear from the business plan that you won’t be getting one. Also – it’s partly my business –

right? And it's not like a lawyer pays *herself* a retainer! Plus, I'm sure that – if we make a profit – we'll have to pay something to the queen."

Eric considered for a moment. "We will make a profit," he said confidently. "And you make some fair points, Sookie. However, I don't need as much return from the business as you do. It is your only source of income and – more importantly – it is *your* talent."

"And those guards outside aren't working for free," she reminded. "Eric, I know that you are planning to take half of what we charge people for my readings, but – with you paying for the guards and *everything*, as well as this retainer thing for me" She paused for a moment. "It just *doesn't* seem fair, Eric."

"Do you have a counter-plan?" the vampire asked, seeing the determination in the telepath's eyes.

She nodded. "Yeah. I like the salary idea because it's something I can count on, but I think I should take less of the overall percentage fee per customer. You should get eighty percent of that to help cover the business costs and the guards and the payment to Sophie-Anne."

The Viking smiled. "Sixty."

"Seventy-five," the telepath countered.

"Sixty-five."

"Seventy it is," Sookie grinned, reaching out to shake his hand.

Eric indulged her in the gesture before leaning forward to kiss the back of her hand.

“Nice doing business with you, Miss Stackhouse.”

She giggled.

“What other questions do you have?” Eric asked.

“Nothing about the business plan. But I do have questions about this,” the telepath said, holding up a much thinner document. “I thought you verbally claiming me – and me agreeing to that claim – was enough for other vampires.”

“I wondered when you would ask me about that,” Eric said of the document in Sookie’s hand. Basically, it was an official claiming document, a rarity among his kind.

“As I told you, a verbal claim of a pet, companion, or asset is generally enough.”

“You’re worried it won’t be with me?” Sookie asked nervously.

The thousand-year-old shrugged. “Honestly, I don’t know. However, I want to cover every base that we can. A claiming document is basically a step between a verbal claim and pledging.”

“I noticed that the contract allows me to null your claim with just a ‘verbal renouncement,’” she said, reading.

“Yes. I do not want you to feel trapped,” he said gently. “*Never trapped.*”

Sookie couldn’t help but to think about her time in the trunk. “You make me feel the opposite of trapped,” she returned, just as softly. “Thank you.”

“You are agreeable then?” he asked, gesturing toward the document. “To my,” he paused, “claiming you?”

“Yes,” she answered, the word meaning much more than the obvious, “I am sure.”

“Would you like to sign everything on Monday night? Fangtasia is closed, and I believe Mr. Cataliades would oblige such short notice.”

“Let me guess; he’s on retainer?” she smirked.

“Yes,” Eric chuckled. “But he’s not one of the three I mentioned before since Cataliades is strictly a Supernatural attorney. Plus, his biggest employer is the queen, so any work for her would supersede my needs.”

“Is it – uh – wise – to employ him? I mean – what if we can’t actually trust the queen?”

“The Dae cannot commit acts of betrayal,” Eric said simply. “Magic prevents it.”

“Dr. Smith said that she could never tell what we discussed because of Britlingen magic,” Sookie mused.

“Similar magical rules bind the Dae to their word. Fairies, too, cannot lie. However, unlike the Dae and Britlingens, the Fae are extremely adept at speaking half-truths. Almost all magical species have rules, however.”

“Like vampires not entering human homes,” Sookie observed.

“Yes,” the Viking smiled, even as he pulled out his phone to send a text to the Dae lawyer.

Less than a minute later, there was an answer.

Eric looked pleased. “I’ll send him the revisions to your pay scale before dawn, and I’ll have him add a clause about dire situations that might lead to your being turned; Mr. Cataliades can make the alterations before we meet. We will meet him at Fangtasia at 9:00 p.m. on Monday – if that is agreeable to you.”

“Sure,” Sookie smiled. “I’m anxious to get started with the training.”

“Okay. How about we plan on your working four nights per week. On one of those nights – you can read my human and two-natured employees and associates. We can do these readings in an office and in a controlled way – varying things like the number of people you ‘read’ at a time and your distance from them. Two nights per week, you can ‘read’ Fangtasia customers.”

“Which will prepare me for crowds,” Sookie said with understanding.

“Yes – in a less than controlled situation,” Eric said. “Also, to be frank, I wouldn’t mind knowing how far the Fellowship has gotten in scoping us out.”

Sookie frowned. “You think they’ve sent spies into your club?”

“I know it,” Eric said confidently and unconcernedly. “Although the vampires of Area 5 rarely,” he paused, “misbehave with humans, the number of Fellowship members in the area continues to grow. It is only a matter of time before they do something violent. My vampires are warned and prepared, but any warning regarding the Fellowship’s specific plans that you could give would be invaluable.”

“You think their target will be Fangtasia?” Sookie asked.

“Yes. Or fangbangers,” the vampire shared. “At least, that is my speculation. I don’t think the Fellowship has reached the level of sophistication to know that going after our human business associates would hit us harder than targeting our more public businesses and what accounts as only about a quarter of most vampires’ food source.”

Sookie nodded. "Okay – so I listen at Fangtasia twice a week and to your employees and associates once a week. What about the fourth night, and why only four? Isn't five work days the standard?"

Eric shook his head fondly. "You are anything but standard, Dearest One. Also, I don't want to overtax your mind. Even three nights of heavy 'reading' might prove to be too much. Your stamina is one element we will be testing as you train. As for the remaining night, I figure that one could be spent with Pam or myself teaching you more about vampires and other Supernaturals. Also, there will be etiquette to deal with, as well as security protocols to develop with Thalia for both your work based in Shreveport and that which we will travel for. And – of course – you will want to take time to register for and enroll in classes if you wish to begin in the Spring semester at the LSU annex in Shreveport."

"You really think I could start so soon?" Sookie asked doubtfully.

"One of Pam's pets is in admissions," Eric winked.

"I wouldn't want special treatment," Sookie frowned. "But . . ."

"But?" the vampire prodded.

"But I'll take it anyway," the telepath smirked.

Eric chuckled heartily, "Why, Miss Stackhouse, I'm surprised you would be so easily corrupted."

Sookie shook her head. "As long as I'm not takin' a spot away from some other student, I'm okay with takin' the leg up. Just – uh – have Pam make sure someone else won't be hurt by the favor – okay?"

“I will make sure of it,” Eric said, assuaging Sookie’s concerns. Not for the first time, the vampire found himself “warmed” by Sookie’s caring nature. Of course, she would not want anyone else to “lose out” just because she’d been helped. As promised, Eric would make sure that would not be the case; however, he would also do what was necessary – glamouring if need be – in order to make sure the Sookie wasn’t held up in pursuing her education. From what Eric knew, attending school had been difficult for the telepath when she’d been younger. He was anxious for her to be able to meet the intellectual potential he saw so clearly from her – every time she thought outside of the box or applied her own brand of logic to a situation. The vampire speculated that a formal education would only help her to flourish.

Sookie yawned widely, interrupting Eric’s train of thought.

“How about I bid you goodnight?” the Viking suggested, rising from the couch and reaching out to take Sookie’s hand.

“Okay,” Sookie said even as she moved to wrap her arms around the vampire who’d managed to ease her mind even more than the trained psychologist had. Indeed, just being with Eric seemed to provide a balm for any troubling thoughts she had.

After a few moments, Eric and Sookie backed away from each other and moved toward the front door.

“Would it bother you if I brought the wood in while you sleep?” he asked.

“No. Just don’t go banging any doors,” she warned playfully.

“I shall endeavor to be stealthy then,” he grinned boyishly.

“See that you do,” she giggled. “Oh hey!” she said as if remembering something. She rushed toward a small buffet table in the dining room and opened a drawer before rifling around and finding a little key. She rushed back to Eric.

“To your heart?” the vampire asked playfully, causing Sookie to blush a little.

“No – to the shed out back. There’s an axe in there – for the wood,” she said.

“I will return the key when I am done,” Eric assured before putting the object in his pocket.

“Thanks,” the telepath said, meaning the word to cover a lot more than the promised return of the little key.

Eric opened the front door and Sookie shivered a little before grabbing a crocheted shawl from an old-fashioned coatrack and wrapping it around her shoulders.

The vampire could smell both Sookie and another female scent on the shawl. As if reading his mind, Sookie informed, “It was Gran’s. It still smells like her, even to my nose.”

Eric acknowledged that information with a nod before taking her hand and leading her out onto the porch.

“What time will you be expecting me for our date?” he asked with a sparkle in his eyes.

“Is 8:00 p.m. too early?” she asked.

“Not at all,” he assured.

The two stood still, just looking at one another for a moment.

“May I claim a goodnight kiss?” she asked, biting her lower lip nervously – but enticingly to the vampire.

Eric simply nodded and bent down toward her. The kiss began slowly, softly. And it remained slow and soft, even as the new couple deepened the kiss to explore each other’s mouths.

Before either could get carried away, Eric pulled back and rested his forehead against Sookie’s in an affectionate way.

“You kiss *really* well, Mr. Northman,” Sookie sighed.

Eric chuckled. “One does not kiss *that well* alone, Miss Stackhouse.”

She reached up a hand to cup his cheek. “No. Not alone at all,” she said meaningfully.

He bent to place one more soft kiss onto her lips.

“We’re totally doing the dating thing all out of order,” she sighed.

“And you feel melancholy about that?” he asked, having “felt” her emotions shift in their blood tie.

“I’m just afraid because I don’t wanna mess this up,” she replied softly. “I mean – can we even still call tomorrow our first date anymore? We were just plannin’ to hang out here anyway. So how will it be any different from tonight?” she asked, her eyes wide.

“Because – tonight I am on my best behavior – my best friend behavior,” he said with a twinkle in his eyes. “Tomorrow night, I plan to wine and dine you.”

She chuckled. "I can't believe that human saying means that much to you." "How about sweep you off your feet?" he asked playfully.

"That I know you can do," she giggled, even as he hovered for a moment in the air.

"I promise tomorrow will feel different for you, Dearest One," the vampire said, serious again. "It will be special because it will be you and I – taking a step forward together."

She nodded, and he felt a sense of peace and resolve come into their blood tie.

"You're right," she said as she yawned again.

"Good night, Dearest One," he said softly.

She smiled and bit her lower lip unconsciously – enticingly to the vampire. "I've noticed that you've gone from calling me Dear One to Dearest One. Why?" she asked curiously.

He chuckled. "Dear just didn't seem enough anymore."

The telepath blushed through the compliment. "I like it, but maybe you shouldn't have skipped the 'Dearer One' step?" she asked with a smirk.

He laughed loudly. "Ah – but I had to!"

"Why's that?" she smiled.

"Because 'dearer' is a comparative word. And there is just no comparing you to anyone else."

Her blush deepened. “You, Mr. Northman, were supposed to wait to sweep my off of my feet till tomorrow night,” she playfully chided. “You’re using up all your best lines tonight.”

“You ain’t seen nothin’ yet,” he grinned boyishly before bending down to kiss her forehead; after that, they leaned – forehead to forehead – against each other for a few moments.

“Night, Eric.”

“Night, *Dearest One.*”

CHAPTER 33: All Shook Up

Oh, well, my hands are shaky, and my knees are weak

I can't seem to stand on my own two feet

Who do you thank when you have such luck?

I'm in love

I'm all shook up

– Songwriters: Otis Blackwell & Elvis Presley

After their goodnight, Eric lingered about ten feet from Sookie's porch. He watched as she turned off her Christmas tree lights. He listened to her climb the stairs and go into her bedroom. Only when she began brushing her teeth did he turn from the house and head toward the old shed where he expected to find tree-chopping equipment.

Not that he needed an axe – especially not given the mood that had been coming over him since the night before.

A rage that he'd suppressed for almost twenty-four hours.

A desire to kill.

To torture the one who had caused Sookie's pain.

From past experience, Eric knew that this kind of rage *would* overtake his other emotions – and soon – if he did not allow it to vent. So he was planning to do just

that – to allow his anger to burst like a wildfire; however, for the moment, he was still holding it at bay.

He did not want to damage anything that Sookie cared about, after all. That would defeat his purpose for suppressing his rage in the first place – for bottling it up into a corner of his mind and his body as he answered his overarching need to comfort the telepath.

To protect her heart as he protected her body.

The Viking glanced back towards the old farmhouse; he had a not-so-fleeting thought that he was glad that Sookie and he did not have a bond at that moment, for – surely – she would be overwhelmed by the ire that he was now allowing to build within him.

An ire he would soon unleash, though certainly not in the way he most desired to.

In the shed, he found an axe – a well-used, but well-kept one. It was one that would do much damage in the right hands – his hands.

Again, Eric glanced at Sookie's home – at the light still on in her bedroom. What would she think of him now – now that his rage was swelling – now that he was imagining all the destruction he could cause with a single axe?

Would she fear him if she could feel him? He wondered.

He wondered, too, if it would not be better to stop the romantic aspect of his and Sookie's relationship; as it was, they seemed destined to become a couple – likely for a

very long time. Eric shook his head to shake off the thought of ending their love story before it could mature.

“There is no stopping destiny,” he said to himself firmly. And – with each passing moment of his existence – he felt more and more convinced that Sookie Stackhouse was an important part of his.

“The *most* important part,” he said softly.

And – if that were true – Eric had to believe that, by the time they bonded (for he *did* believe that they would eventually bond), Sookie would understand and accept *all* parts of him, including the ugliest sides. They were parts he’d promised himself that he would not hide from her, though he doubted she’d ever wish to witness how he could break a being with his bare hands. Or with a weapon like the one in his hands. Yes – he was determined that Sookie would *fully* understand what he was capable of doing – before they bonded. Somewhere in his core, he knew that she would understand that the beast in him came out only when justified.

And he felt like he would be *very* justified in breaking Bill Compton right about then. Eric glanced down at the axe – feeling its weight and balance in his supple, experienced hands. He closed his eyes, imagining all the parts he could hew from Bill’s torso before the younger vampire begged to meet the sun.

Having been allowed some freedom, Eric’s rage began to throb within him – like a beast clawing to come forth – but Eric found the control to hold the beast back as he looked toward Sookie’s home once again. He saw her shadow pass through her bedroom, and then – in the next moment – she was at the window, looking toward him

as if her mostly human eyes allowed her to see him in the darkness. Of course, they did not. However, her un-human telepathic ability told her exactly where he was, and she gazed as if right through him – as if she could see into him. There was a soft smile on her lips. Eric knew that – one night soon – Sookie’s ability to accept that he sometimes appointed himself to be judge, jury, *and* executioner (all at the same time) would be tested, and the Viking was not naïve enough to believe that a *full* understanding would be easy for Sookie. But she would accept it. He could not allow himself to think of any other possibility.

“Accept *me!*” he growled aloud, his control wavering.

Sookie raised her hand briefly to her lips and pressed her fingers against them before pressing those fingers against the glass and turning away.

And – for a moment – Eric’s rage abated.

When she disappeared from his sight, he looked around the shed. There were so many tools there, so many potential weapons that – before Thalia was on the job – could have been used by anyone who wanted to harm Sookie. A shovel. A pitchfork. A sledgehammer. Several other hammers. Nails. Screws. Wrenches. Pliers. Screwdrivers. He growled. Only a rusty padlock had prevented their use against her. The vampire had often marveled at the fact that humans were so careless with what could amount to a small arsenal in the wrong hands. As he looked at the small, pitiful lock that had protected Sookie from that arsenal her whole life, he felt his body shaking as his anger moved to overtake him again.

As he considered all the ways that she could have been harmed.

All the ways that she still could be.

“No! She will not be taken from me!” he snarled, his grip almost cracking the handle of the axe.

Eric knew from experience that he would need to allow dominion to his rage *very* soon—and for a while. A part of him had always feared what might happen if he did not let such excesses loose. After all, there were stories of his own human great-great grandfather going berserker when their village had been raided and his wife had been slain. It had been said that his great-great grandfather had not recognized friend from foe in the hours after he’d found his wife’s broken and defiled body.

Even several generations later, there had been whisperings in Eric’s village, and Eric had known from a young age that—despite the respect his father had earned as a chieftain—some feared that the berserker tendency ran within the blood. Feeling as he felt now, Eric did not doubt that he had the potential to behave just as his great-great-grandfather had—if anyone killed Sookie.

He rumbled—a low and menacing vibration that shook the walls of the weak building—at even the thought of someone killing his beloved. His vision tinged with red as he looked once more to Sookie’s home just as the light was extinguished in her room.

With that light gone and not being able to stifle his rage any longer, Eric allowed his beast full dominion. Barely resisting the urge to tear the little shed to pieces, he sped through the woods around Sookie’s home and went straight to a grove of trees on Bill Compton’s property.

Despite the “red,” the Viking could sense all beings in the woods offer him a *very* wide birth.

Even Thalia.

She was wise to do so, for in that moment, the Viking resembled his usual self very little.

The elements of Eric that were all animal – whether leftovers from his human blood or created by vampirism itself – roared to life as the Viking threw the axe toward a tree, lodging the blade deep inside and splitting the not-so-small arbor in two. However, he did not retrieve the tool. The axe would be waiting for him. Instead, he approached his first actual target – a tree that Bill Compton had once told him that he’d planted himself – when he was a human.

However, no one was there to count the tree’s 164 rings as the enraged vampire ripped the thick oak out of the ground as if it were no more than sapling. With its roots came soil, rock, and even a few other smaller trees as if tributes to help assuage the Viking’s rage. However, he was not satisfied. The rest of the grove of a dozen trees lasted no more than five minutes. Yet Eric’s ire was still not alleviated, so he found another grove. And then another.

The red within him cleared briefly – just long enough to let in the thought that Sookie might like a variety of woods, given the fact that they all burned a little differently, so he “cut” down several large cedars, elms, and maples.

None of them with the axe.

A younger vampire might have feared the shrapnel of destruction – a flying branch, a propelled twig, or even a wayward splinter – anything that might have found its way into the heart of a vampire. However, Eric moved too fast to be in danger – not to mention the fact that his decimation was as surgical as it was savage.

Half an hour after he'd begun, the red had finally dimmed in Eric's vision, and he retrieved the axe in order to begin changing that which he'd ripped from the earth into firewood that would warm Sookie's home.

The animal in him was pleased with the thought of giving his mate a means for warmth.

Eric fantasized that the limbs of the trees were Bill's limbs, and he swore to himself that he *would* loosen the berserker within him if Bill Compton ever dared to hurt Sookie again.

By the time all the pulled-out trees had been turned into firewood, Eric had calmed down. At last, he used the almost-spent axe to finish chopping down the tree that had been its "holder."

He dropped the tool and sat on the stump of the only tree that he'd actually chopped down the "old-fashioned way."

Only then did Thalia venture out of the shadows.

"Sookie will need a new axe," the vampiress said cautiously.

The Viking ignored her comment. "Tell me Bill resisted leaving the area. Tell me you had to punish him," he said without looking at her, his voice edged with the violence still lingering within.

“Sadly, he did not resist enough— though I did,” she paused, “gift him with a total of 23 kicks to get him from Sookie’s property to his home. And then he received a ‘Thalia Special’ so that I wouldn’t have to deal with his shit on the way out of the area.”

Finally, Eric looked up at Sookie’s lead guard and smirked at her. “You’re going to have to teach me how to give one of your ‘specials’ correctly. I always seem to press too hard and dislodge the spine.”

“Well— that can be fun too,” the vampiress smiled sinisterly. She looked around at all the turned-up earth and discarded roots. “I have not seen you like this since that drainer tried to take Pam several decades ago,” she said quietly.

“I am rarely like this,” Eric stated.

“I know. Still— all this is,” Thalia paused, looking around, “impressive— even more so because you had the ability to hold yourself back until an opportune time. That skill has always eluded me— which is why I try not to care about anything too deeply,” she shared, offering a rare insight into her inner self.

Eric did not feel the need to confirm the depth of his care for Sookie, nor did he feel the need to try to deny it.

“I cannot,” Thalia paused, “protect her from emotional pain. But I swear to you the I will protect her from the physical variety,” she finished fervently.

“She is growing on you too,” Eric said knowingly. “It is inevitable, given her spirit.”

Thalia tried to shrug off Eric’s words as if they were baseless. “Bubba was so unnerved by your rage that he took it upon himself to clear away the area next to

Sookie's home where wood has clearly been kept in the past. He'd like to know if you'd like help stacking it there, but he is afraid to approach you. Hell—I was afraid to approach for a while."

Eric looked around at the copious amount of wood and nodded. "I will take some in to Sookie's home and then depart." He pointed to a stack of dry-looking wood. "The tree that," he paused, smirking, "*donated* that wood was already dead when I uprooted it, so the logs will be ready to burn. Have Bubba enlist the Weres if he wants help stacking the rest, and instruct him that any other dry wood is to be placed on the top of the pile so that it can be used first. Finally, make sure Bubba knows that no sound should be made to disturb Sookie's sleep. Otherwise, instruct the Weres to do the chore after she rises."

Thalia nodded. "I'm sure the Weres will not come close while you are still here. They are currently lingering at the perimeter—on the *opposite* side of Sookie's property. Likely, the tales of your prowess will be gossip among the Long Tooth pack by tomorrow."

Eric nodded in acknowledgment.

"I have not sensed *her* yet," Thalia said, looking around. "Do you know if she has been near this place; I would hate to think I am losing my edge.

The Viking immediately knew the vampiress was speaking of Karin. He smirked at Thalia. "How should I know? She eludes me too, and that is exactly why she is here," Eric said. Of course, he had felt through what still remained of his bond with Karin that she had come within a couple of miles of Sookie's home earlier in the

evening; however, Thalia still didn't know that Karin was his child, so he gave nothing away. Nor would he unless Karin made the choice to "out" herself.

"If the Slaughterer does have to end you, it will be odd not having to avenge you," Thalia commented almost casually.

"I didn't know you cared," Eric deadpanned.

Thalia frowned as if displeased that she might, indeed, care. "I believe I like the idea of vengeance much more than I like you," she said dispassionately, clearly comforted by that realization.

"Regardless," the Viking followed-up with a chuckle, "there are provisions for you to continue your current employment through Sookie's lifetime. If I am no longer in the picture, Sookie could be even more vulnerable than she is now – though I hope that, with each job she completes effectively – she will gain an ally." Eric looked at Thalia piercingly. "If I am ended – no matter who does it – I am trusting you and Pam to know how to use those allies in a way that will ensure Sookie's safety and freedom."

The vampiress nodded with understanding but said nothing as Eric gathered up more than enough logs for the next evening. Walking slowly, he took them to Sookie's home and then paused after quietly entering, enjoying the gentle and steady breathing sounds that indicated she was sleeping peacefully.

He placed most of the wood in a holder next to the fireplace, but went ahead and stacked a few pieces with some kindling and newspaper so that a fire could be lit quickly. He then lingered in Sookie's living room for a moment, looking around the space with the eyes of a man hoping to fit into that space in a permanent way. Though

he did not need to breathe, he felt himself matching each of the sleeping woman's breaths, producing the same calm cadence. It was only in that moment that the beast within him – the rage – was truly eased.

For the time being.

The Viking knew – down to his very bone and marrow – that it was not a coincidence that Sookie Stackhouse's mere presence could affect him in such profound ways – even when he was not in the same room as she was.

He took a moment to thank fate and destiny and his gods and her God before quietly returning the key to the old shed to its place. He'd ensure that she had a more secure storage area for her tools as soon as he knew he could get away with the "gift."

After listening to her breathing for another few minutes and then smiling to himself when that breathing turned into a soft snore, he left the home that his head, his heart, and his gut told him he belonged to.

CHAPTER 34: FOR OL' TIMES' SAKE

Before you go walk out on me

Take a look around tell me what you see

Here I stand like an open book

Is there something here you might have overlooked

'Cause it would be a shame if you should leave

And find that freedom ain't what you thought it would be

– Songwriter: Tony Joe White

“What the fuck are you doin’ here?” Alcide Herveaux demanded with anger, though there was a part of him that was very glad to see the woman before him.

Debbie.

The Were had returned to Shreveport from Jackson that night so that he could begin as foreman on a new job his father had been hired to do. Jackson Herveaux *should* have been able to complete the work himself, but a run-in with a bookie two days before, as well as three broken ribs, had changed that plan. Weres healed fast, but not *that* fast. Alcide was none too happy about the change to his own work schedule; however, he’d gotten used to having to cover for his father’s sorry-ass hide!

Alcide had hoped that eliminating his family’s obligation to Northman would solve a lot of problems, and Jackson had sworn that as soon as that debt was clear, he’d

stop the gambling, which he'd claimed he needed to keep doing only to pay Northman. He'd further sworn that the incident with the bookie wouldn't have happened if he'd not been trying to scrape together a payment for Northman. After Alcide told his father that the debt with the Viking had been settled, Jackson promised – for the millionth time – that he'd be changing his ways, but Alcide hadn't believed him. He could no longer emotionally afford any belief in his father.

Speaking of people he could no longer afford to believe in, he took in Debbie Pelt, who'd made herself alluringly comfortable sitting on *his* bed in *his* master bedroom – though they'd once shared both.

He had smelled her, of course. Indeed, though he'd not seen a vehicle at his place, her scent had invaded him from the moment he opened his truck door.

She rose from where she'd been lounging, offering him a coy, seductive smile as she did so.

Alcide tried to stifle having any physical reaction to her at all – but he didn't succeed. He hated himself a little for how easily she rattled his body.

He hated himself a little more because more than just his body was affected by her.

“Answer me!” he said, his voice raised. “What the fuck are you doin' here? And how the fuck did you get in? I changed the locks after I kicked your ass out the last time!”

Debbie's face moved to a pout. "I've left Charles, Alcide. I left him *for you*. I realized when I saw you at Josephine's – with that other woman – that I didn't want to live without you."

"And what makes you think I wanted you back?" Alcide growled, slapping away the hand she was lifting to cup his cheek. "And – more to the point – don't you fuckin' know what Northman will do to you if he finds you in his area?"

"You mean the vampire sheriff here?" Debbie asked innocently. "Why would he care if I'm here or not?"

Alcide shook his head in anger. "Dammit, Debbie! Don't fuckin' play innocent with me! I know your games! God knows I've been forced to play them enough! That woman you saw me with at Josephine's – that woman you tried to kill in my fuckin' parking garage – isn't just some random blonde! Eric fuckin' Northman himself is determined to claim her!" he finished, now shouting.

Debbie's sweet exterior disappeared. "You seem mighty upset about that idea!" she yelled with rage and jealousy. "Don't tell me you actually like that fangbanger cunt!"

"Don't call her that!" Alcide stormed.

"Oh – clearly you *do* have a thing for her!" she taunted. "And clearly you don't like the thought of the little slut sleepin' with one vamp after another," she grinned evilly. "You know – I smelled the blood of *two* of 'em blood suckers in her!"

"I thought you quite liked vamps – given how you and your owl had your nose pressed into Edgington's ass! Not to mention your addiction to V!"

Debbie looked torn for a moment – torn between continuing to fight with him or trying a different tactic. She decided on the second option.

“Cide, I *did* leave Charles. And I left behind that old life too. I just don’t love him – not like I love you,” she said, her lip quivering with emotion. “I want to change, Cide. I want to change for you – for us!”

Whether her emotion and sentiments were faked or real was unknown to even Debbie in that moment.

“And – uh – as of last night, I’m not a part of Russell’s court anymore,” she added, looking at the floor.

“Ah – so *that’s* what this is really about,” Alcide said, suddenly sounding tired. “Edgington threw you out of his court. And I bet Clausen also kicked you to the curb; I can’t imagine he’d turn his back on the king *for you*,” he added bitterly, clearly hoping to hurt her.

Debbie’s volatility rocked her back into anger. “Fuck Charles! And fuck you! I thought I would come here and apologize before movin’ on – and to see if we could give us another try! Clearly, I’m wastin’ my fuckin’ breath!”

Alcide sneered. “Admit it! You came here because you didn’t have anywhere else to go. Tell me – why’d you get tossed from Edgington’s court? It’s your V-thing – isn’t it?”

Debbie slapped the Were with a force that indicated she had some of that ‘V-thing’ in her system even then. “It’s *your* fault I’m in a bind with Russell!”

Alcide rubbed his cheek and left the bedroom in a huff – with Debbie on his heels, of course.

“How do you figure that, Deb?” he asked with a growl as he got a beer from his refrigerator. Briefly, he placed it against his reddening cheek before twisting its cap off.

“*You’re* the one that brought that fangbanger bitch around! Apparently, she’s important enough to some high-up vamps to cause Russell to push me aside like I’m nothin’!” she spat.

“Well – since you pushed Sookie into that trunk like she was nothing – I’d say that you pretty much got what you deserved!”

Debbie broke down into angry tears. “That bitch is the one who deserved pain! Not me!”

Alcide felt his hand twitching to rise; he wanted to hit her so badly in that moment. But he didn’t.

And he hated himself that he couldn’t.

“Just how do you figure *she* deserved it, Deb?” the Were asked incredulously. He raked his fingers through his hair roughly and then took a long swig of his beer as if to drown the flames of his anger.

“She was tryin’ to steal you from me!”

“Steal me?” Alcide asked incredulously. “For fucks sake, Deb! You are engaged to another man!”

“*Were* engaged!” she shrieked. “I told you Charles and I are through!”

“That doesn’t fuckin’ matter!” he yelled. “We are *not* fuckin’ together and haven’t been for a while! Even if Sookie *had* been tryin’ to be with me, it was none of your goddamned business!”

“You are my business! You always have been! Always will be!” She jutted her chin out stubbornly. “And – one day – you will see that. And, in the meantime, I’m not gonna allow you to get entangled with a fangbanging slut!”

Again, Alcide’s hand twitched, and he couldn’t stop it from forming a fist this time. “You’re fuckin’ insane, Deb!”

“Well – if I am, then you need only look in the mirror to know who made me this way!” she accused. “And – it’s not like anything too bad happened to your little girlfriend anyway,” she spat out. “Fuckin’ bitch got out of it with hardly a scratch! On the other hand – now – because of *her*, I’ve lost everything – but you, Cide! Please, baby! Please! Give us another chance. I promise I’ll do better this time – be the woman you want.”

Alcide’s mouth hung open for a moment in disbelief of her attitude – in disbelief that she was seeing herself as the victim in the situation.

“Sookie was almost drained and raped,” the Were said with barely controlled rage. He didn’t add that it was because of Debbie’s antics that Eric Northman had been able to play the hero in the fucked-up situation! Alcide was convinced that, if that hadn’t been the case, then Sookie wouldn’t have been as keen to leave with Northman, nor would she have rejected the offer he’d made to her to stay.

With him.

The Were growled. “Get the fuck out of here, Deb! You ruin everything you touch, and I’m done with you!”

Debbie let out a sob and rushed toward Alcide, trying to fling herself into his arms. He held her off.

“Please, Cide! Don’t turn me away!” she begged. “I love you! I’ve always loved you! And I only left you because you didn’t want to have children with me, and – then – when I saw you *with her*, I just lost it. Don’t you see? She can give you what I can’t! What I’ll never be able to give you! The chance to have normal kids!”

Alcide pushed her away roughly, but guilt flickered across his face.

Debbie had been hoping to see that look and immediately played up her slight advantage over her ex.

She fell to her knees before him, playing the broken woman to perfection. In that moment, she may not even have been acting – at least, not fully.

“I’m so sorry I can’t give you kids that won’t shift, Cide. You know I would if I could!” She shook her head. “I was just so angry when I pictured you and *her* with a perfect little family: the family I have hoped and prayed that you would want with me.” She wept, burying her face into her hands.

Only half of the tears were crocodile tears. The other half were evidence of Debbie’s very real heartbreak. It was that half which compelled her to continue speaking. “I hated you and then myself when I realized that you didn’t want me to be the mother of your children. I love you so much, Cide. With everything I am! And not being with you led me to make horrible decisions. To do horrible things!”

As her weeping prevented her from speaking more, she heard him toss his empty bottle into the trashcan and then get another beer.

“You can’t blame me for all your sins,” he said gruffly, though there was some guiltiness in his voice.

“I know,” she whimpered as she looked up at him pitifully. “And I can’t even blame the drugs – at least not fully. I chose to take them to cover up all the feelings that I just couldn’t deal with – all the pain. But, Cide, I want to stop taking V.” She brushed her tears away with the back of her hand. “I want to start over. It’s why I’m here.”

“Deb, we’re not starting back up!” Alcide said with frustration.

“I know,” she said quietly. “I mean – I’d hoped that you would want me again, but I see now that I’ve done too much wrong to deserve you – to get your forgiveness,” she whispered. “But, please, if you ever loved me – please help me. Help me get off the drugs, Cide,” she begged.

He shook his head. “I don’t see how I can help you with that.”

“Just – uh – give me a safe place to stay while I detox – okay?” she begged. “I can’t do it out in the open. I just – uh – need a little time here – where I’ll be safe from Northman. Somewhere that I can get better – please. You always made me feel so safe.”

He was still shaking his head.

“I swear, I’ll just stay here until the drugs are out of my system. Then I’ll make arrangements to leave the state. I’ll go north!” she promised fervently. “I always wanted to live where it snows – remember? I’ll just go somewhere where no one knows

me. I'll be safe and out of your hair forever. Please, Cide! I know you don't want me. Charles doesn't either," she sniffled. "But if you ever loved me, please help me now. If you don't, I don't think I'll make it," she said with very real fear.

The Were couldn't help but to respond to her with compassion as he took in the very broken form still kneeling in front of him. Yes — she was batshit crazy. But she was also a woman he'd spent a lot of his life loving, and he did have some culpability in her downfall from a sweet young woman full of dreams and aspirations to a drug-addled wretch full of pain and hate.

"I need someone to believe in me, Cide," she pleaded. "I know it's not fair asking you, but I need someone. I'm so afraid I'll die — either here in Area 5 or in some nameless alley somewhere — if you don't help me."

"What about Sandra? Your parents?" Alcide asked, his tone softer than before.

"Sandy's in college now," Debbie sighed. "And I don't want to fuck up her life. And my parents are," she teared up again, "not my parents."

"I know you're adopted, Deb, but your parents love you!" Alcide said confidently.

"Would they still love me if they saw me like this? If they knew all I'd done? What I've become?" she asked before shaking her head. "I can't hurt them by letting them see me like this. I won't. I'd rather die." Her whole body now shaking, she wrapped her arms around herself. "It took all the courage I had left to come to you, Cide. I don't have enough to go to them."

The Were frowned and raked his hand through his hair. "I'll let you stay here for one week, Deb."

She practically launched to her feet and went to embrace him.

He held her off again. "No!" he said firmly. "You can stay here – in the guest room. I'll provide you with shelter and food – if you can stomach to eat it. But that's fucking it! I won't be your lover or your friend. And I won't be your nursemaid through your withdrawal either!" He sighed. "But – God help me – I can't turn you away." He sighed again – this time louder. "I hope you're being sincere, Deb. I hope you detox and start that new life – a better one for yourself. I never wanted you to suffer when things didn't work out with us. And I still don't want you to suffer," he admitted.

"You don't?" she asked hopefully. "Even after all the bad I've done?"

He shook his head. "I have a limit, Deb. This is it. If I find out you're playing me for a fool, you'll be dead to me – abjured."

"I'm not playing you! I swear!" she averred.

"This is it, Deb. No matter what happens – you're out of my life forever after this week."

Large tears began falling from her eyes again. "I understand," she whispered.

"It has to be this way," Alcide said with pity and sadness. "We've been hurting each other for too long. And it has to stop, Deb – for the sake of both of us. Tell me you understand that!"

She nodded. "You're right, Cide. And – again – really – thank you."

He huffed. "You got a bag?"

She nodded. "Yeah."

"Well – take it to the guestroom. And – if you've got any drugs in it – flush 'em. Now! If I find them later, you're gone!"

Debbie bit her bottom lip guiltily, but nodded. "I have some V left – not much, but a little. It's here," she said, taking a vial from her jacket pocket and handing it to him.

Her hands shook almost uncontrollably.

"Is there any more?" he asked after he'd poured the contents of the vial down the sink and turned to find large tears streaming down Debbie's face as she looked at the now empty vial.

"No," she whispered.

Alcide softened a little. "I'm proud of you for giving me this, Deb. Now, I'll make us something to eat while you get settled into the guestroom."

"Okay," she said meekly.

"Oh – and Debbie?"

"Yeah?"

"If you leave this house, I won't be able to protect you *or myself* from Northman. I'm risking my life to let you stay. Don't fuck me over," he warned.

"I won't. I'll prove it!" she said. And – at least in that moment – she spoke sincerely.

Moreover, she *wanted* to believe that she was telling the truth – for Alcide.

For herself.

CHAPTER 35: Got a Lot o' Livin' to Do

Oh yes I've got a lot o' living to do

A whole lot o' loving to do

Come on baby, to throw a party takes two

Oh yes I've got a lot o' living to do

— Songwriter: Benjamin Weisman

SUNDAY (The day of Sookie and Eric's first date)

Sookie woke up feeling better than she'd felt in a long time. The pressure of dealing with the Bill situation was now behind her — as was the vampire himself. Thanks to Eric, she would never have to see him again, a prospect that made her feel something she wouldn't have expected a month before: relieved.

But removing Bill from her life wasn't the only thing making her feel so good.

She no longer had to worry about going to Merlotte's, where she still worried that Sam might revert to his asshole self. For the sake of their now tenuous friendship, Sookie felt that it was better to establish some distance between them — for a while.

Anyway, she had a new job to look forward to!

She had school to look forward to as well!

Her friendship with Tara was stronger than ever — as was her relationship with her brother. And she really did feel that she had some other good friendships on her

horizons – with Onawa and Willow, maybe even Warren and Mustapha, and Christa Larrabee.

She was finally giving therapy a try, and she'd found her first session with Aphra to be amazingly comforting – and helpful. She'd felt lighter afterwards – and not just because of what they'd talked about during that session. No – she'd felt hopeful about all the things that she would be talking over with her therapist in the future. The telepath now recognized that she'd needed one of those since she was a little girl – if not to get over the grief of her parents' deaths or the molestation by her uncle, then to deal with the isolation she'd always felt because of her telepathy.

Yes! Things were looking up! She smiled to herself as she contemplated Christmas. Perhaps, she'd plan a little party.

That thought lit her up even more.

Of course – even with all that was going well and all the positives on the horizon – the best thing in her life was Eric.

She stretched her arms high above her, both to warm up her muscles after a night of sleep and in elation over the night to come. However, she didn't let her feeling of joy stop her from dropping her shields and pushing outward with her telepathy. She spent several minutes with her eyes closed – practicing. She jumped from one head to another, working especially hard to hear specific thoughts from the two-natured guards patrolling around her home. There were five that morning: Maria-Star, Onawa, Willow, and two from Long Tooth. Mustapha and Warren had the day off.

By far, Willow was the hardest of her guards for Sookie to “read” – even when she wasn’t shifted. However, the telepath was able to get the gist of her mood as she chatted with Onawa about Hoyt. Apparently, Willow was smitten.

Satisfied by her “practice,” Sookie texted Tara to confirm that she’d be at Tara’s Togs at 1:30 p.m. to shop for her date outfit that night. Then she texted Maria-Star to let her know the plan so that her guards could do their “guard-stuff” in preparation. She would have told the Were in person – since Maria-Star was on her property. But the head of her day guards was busy speaking with the two Weres from Long Tooth about the patrol patterns she wanted them to make, and Sookie didn’t want to bother her by yelling for her to come up to the house.

The texts sent, Sookie went about her morning routine and then fixed herself a bowl of oatmeal before sitting down with several pieces of paper and a pen.

On the first sheet, she made a menu and a grocery list for a big Christmas meal – just like Gran used to do. She knew that – at the very least – Jason would be happy to participate in a Christmas feast. However, she also figured Tara would come. In addition, she decided that she would invite Warren, Mustapha, Onawa, and Willow to attend the dinner – as long as they weren’t on duty. She’d include Maria-Star in the invitation, of course, but knew that the Were wouldn’t come. She chuckled. She’d also invite Thalia – just to see the vampiress’s expression when she received the offer. Of course, she’d invite Bubba, whom she figured would come, and Padma, whom she figured would not since she’d met her only once so far – and that was literally for only thirty seconds. She would also invite Pam.

And, of course, Eric.

Sookie smiled to herself as she thought of her home full at Christmas. Only a week and a half before, she'd figured that the holiday would be one she'd spend alone. Indeed, she'd been planning to make herself a simple chicken breast for her holiday meal—since a whole turkey seemed to be too excessive for just herself. She'd thought that a day-long marathon of Christmas movies would be “just fine” with her.

But—in truth—she'd been dreading the loneliness that the holiday had been sure to bring.

“Not anymore,” she smiled as she pushed her grocery list aside.

Her next order of business was creating a list of clothing she wanted to get for her new job. She'd already decided that she would be wearing “office clothes” whenever possible, and she figured Tara would have some good ideas about the basics she would need. Ever practical, Sookie wasn't going to break the bank on clothing, so she was counting on Tara to help her find things that could be versatile—things on sale. Sookie also figured she'd need a few “Fangtasia outfits.” Oh—she wasn't about to dress like a fangbanger, but—then again—a sundress wasn't a good alternative if she wanted to be able to monitor the crowds there inconspicuously. She figured that—if there was a happy medium between the black studded collar look and the Sunday church look, Tara would be the one to help her find it.

Of course—her outfit for her date that night would be her main shopping goal that day.

Speaking of shopping, Sookie pulled yet another piece of paper from her small stack and started to make a Christmas list. She decided to talk to Maria-Star about making a trip to the mall so that the Were could start doing her security planning for such a complicated setting.

Finally – after getting another cup of coffee and rinsing her empty bowl – the telepath grabbed the phonebook and began making a list of utilities and contractors that she'd start calling the next week.

For one thing, she needed to research in order to find the best Internet connections she could. She knew that Bill had something top-of-the-line, which meant that it was possible to get high-speed Internet even in “the sticks of the sticks,” as Tara had once termed the Stackhouse home's remote location.

The telepath decided to ask Eric whether he knew anything about getting the Internet and added it to the mental list of topics she was forming for her date that night. Conversation had never been difficult between Eric and her, but – then again – they'd never had an *official* date before, and the telepath had “overheard” many awkward first dates occurring at Merlotte's.

She figured it was better to be safe than sorry.

That thought led her to adding “computer stuff” in general to her mental date-topic list. She knew that she'd need a computer for both work and school, and she knew nothing about them.

After writing down the main telephone company for the region, as well as the companies she knew provided the Internet, as well as their telephone numbers, Sookie

put aside her paper and got up to get a little notebook out of the old buffet. In the yellowed-with-age notebook was the “Stackhouse budget” as well as the revised budget Sookie had needed to make for herself after Gran died.

She traced her fingers over the bottom words on that revised list. She’d called it her “in case you have extra tips, save for…” list. On it, she had a new car – or, at least, a better used car. Oh – she’d not been planning to get a new car right away, but she was realistic enough to know that even her brother’s best attempts to “MacGyver” the vehicle wouldn’t work forever.

With her new salary, a more reliable car was now something she’d be able to easily afford. However, the little second-hand (or third or fourth-hand) Ford Fiesta-type vehicle she’d once envisioned was now replaced in her mind by something a little better – and new! She wondered if an SUV might be more practical as well now – since guards were to be a permanent fixture in her existence. She figured she’d broach that particular topic with Maria-Star and Thalia. After all, there would be no use getting a new car if it wasn’t practical for her new life.

The telepath closed her eyes for a moment. So much was changing, and deciding between types of cars to get was only a little part of that. But – still – it was a thing she’d never imagined herself having to do.

Also, on her “wish list” had been a new roof. The one currently on the house had needed patches three of the last five years. However, Sookie hoped that it might last for a while longer – at least until she could consider a few other repairs and upgrades to her home. For instance, several electrical outlets upstairs no longer

worked. Also, some of the plumbing was not that great (though a part of the house's system had been updated about a decade before when a pipe in the master bathroom had burst).

"Everything other than that part probably needs updated," she muttered to herself. Replumbed?" she asked, wondering if that was even a word.

She shrugged and glanced back at the refrigerator, which always sounded like it was laboring with breath. Indeed, most of the appliances in the house were older than she was! Once upon a time, she'd had nightmares about the hot water heater or the washing machine cratering. Now, she'd be able to get everything serviced or replaced.

It was a load off of her mind, but there would be a lot to do to get things up to snuff!

Another thing she *definitely* wanted to do was to make at least one bedroom fully light-tight.

"Just in case," she smiled to herself as she thought about Eric, perhaps, staying over some night.

"Don't get ahead of yourself, Stackhouse," she muttered, even as a blush overtook her face.

Just then, Sookie "heard" a Were brain approaching on Hummingbird Road. A few seconds later, she "heard" her guards shifting their focus in the direction of that brain.

The telepath honed in on her visitor and immediately smiled upon recognizing Christa.

She also smiled because she seemed to have not only noticed the new person in the vicinity before her guards, but also recognized who that visitor was before they did. There had been a time when – even with her shields down – Sookie didn't allow her telepathy free reign. She'd chained it and then tried to ignore that it was there. However, now that she'd let her "gift" off of its chain, it was proving that it could grow.

She couldn't help but to wonder what would have happened if there had been someone in her life who had told her that – while telepathy might not be something everyone had – it was her "normal," so she shouldn't shun it. Oh – Sookie understood that Gran had been trying to protect her when she encouraged her to hide the fact that she could read people's thoughts. But that protection had come at the price of Sookie never encouraging her telepathy's development. Thus, it had been very much like a limb that had never been exercised, dragging at her – dragging her down – sometimes painfully so.

Now that she was exercising that limb, it was no longer dead weight.

"Forgive the pun," she said to nobody – though she chuckled at the thought of Eric laughing at her silly, vampire-related joke.

Sookie quickly put away what she was working on and got up to go to her front door where Maria-Star was currently escorting Christa. She could feel the other two-natured beings on her property moving back to their previous positions since there was no threat.

One thing was for sure: Although Sookie now knew that she could tell when potential threats were in her area before even the Weres patrolling her property, she wouldn't be able to protect herself from those threats as well as her guards.

In addition to "seeing" Christa's thoughts about her errand, Sookie had also "monitored" the thoughts of her guards as they'd moved into defense mode. Maria-Star, especially, was a tactical machine. The telepath had no doubt that – had Christa been a threat – that threat wouldn't have been long for this world.

"Hi, Christa!" Sookie greeted as she opened the door.

"Hi!" Christa returned, even as she balanced a few items in one arm in order to wave a little. "Mr. Northman sent me to give you some stuff. I'm his full-time day-person now!" she informed exuberantly.

Sookie smiled with her, though she'd already known – of course – about Eric's plans to hire her to replace Bobby. "That's great!" she enthused. "Come on in. Can I get you something to drink?"

"Oh – no thanks," Christa said. "I've already had three cups of coffee this morning."

Christa turned to give Maria-Star a respectful nod before bouncing into the foyer. As the two young women moved toward the living room, Sookie "read" that the Were was extremely pleased by her new position. Indeed, the telepath "saw" quick snippets of Christa's meeting with Eric and felt her elation at receiving the job offer. Then she "felt" Christa's lust as she flirted with Pam as she filled out the paperwork for her new job.

The telepath decided not to dig any further into that line of thinking and easily shielded Christa, even while keeping an “ear” out for any other guests.

“So – Mr. Northman wanted me to come and see you in order to make some arrangements for tonight. She pulled out the top item in her stack. “Um – he mentioned that y’all are just stayin’ in tonight, but it occurred to him that the dress code might be more formal. He wanted me to ask you in order to make sure.” The Were smiled a little. Sookie tuned back in to the Were’s thoughts just in time hear that Christa thought it was “cute” that the Sheriff was taking his date with Sookie so seriously. The telepath also heard that the Were was quite the romantic and liked to see people paired off and happy. She was hoping to have someone care about her as much as Eric seemed to care about Sookie one day.

Sookie smiled at that thought, but still blushed a little as she responded. “Oh – uh – yeah, I was gonna dress up a little.”

Christa nodded and took down a note. “Well – in that case, Mr. Northman would like to arrange for a dinner for you – so that you won’t have to worry about cooking for yourself.”

The Were dug a fancy-looking menu from her stack.

“Oh! Okay,” Sookie said, thinking about the dinner she’d “planned” for the evening – a peanut butter and jelly sandwich. Anything Eric could arrange would be better than that. “It’s sweet of him to think of that.”

“I know – right!?!” Christa said excitedly, but then quickly apologized. “Oh – sorry. I need to get used to being more neutral about my duties. But hanging out with you the other day makes this visit seem social.”

“Don’t apologize,” Sookie said with a smile. “I don’t know what Eric’s said, but he and I are seeing each other. And – uh – we’ll also be working together on a business, so I’m sure you and I will see each other a lot. And I’d really like for us to be friends.”

“I’d like that too!” Christa enthused. “And I promise I’m *much* more formal in my other work for Mr. Northman.”

“I’m sure you are,” Sookie assured as she took the menu. “Les Deux Poissons,” she read.

“Yeah. It means ‘the two fish’ since the owners actually prefer shifting into dolphins when they can. Mr. Northman said that you should select whatever you want.”

“Uh – shifters can do fish?” Sookie asked incredulously.

Christa shook her head. “Actually, shifters are limited to mammals, and dolphins are mammals,” she informed. “I’ve seen them shifted into them, and it’s really amazing! The owners, Mr. and Mrs. Clark, are my best friend’s parents!”

Still absorbing the idea of shifters as dolphins and wondering if Sam had ever transformed into one, Sookie opened the menu and gasped at the selections. “Wow! This looks amazing! And expensive! Where are the prices?”

Christa chuckled. “It *is* amazing; I know because I get to taste-test a lot of the dishes. And – yeah – it is pretty expensive. The Clarks use only the best ingredients,

and their main clientele is Supes. Mr. Northman is an investor; he has meetings there from time to time – whenever he’s visited by important vampires and such.”

Sookie also read from Christa’s thoughts that she used to work at the restaurant, and her efficiency in that job had been why Eric had first hired her for small jobs that Bobby couldn’t do. Christa had been glad for the change because she’d become tired of waitressing.

Sookie almost remarked aloud that Christa and she should form a club of ex-waitresses, but then she realized she’d have to spill the beans about her telepathy if she did. Though she had an inclination to tell the Were about her gift, Sookie held back – just in case Eric had a reason that they should keep the information from his new day-person.

“Everything looks good!” Sookie said after looking over the menu for a few minutes. “Do you have any suggestions?”

“What Mrs. Clark does with a piece of catfish is a work of art,” Christa said without hesitation as she pointed to an option on the menu called “Cajun Catfish.”

“I’ll try it,” Sookie said with a smile.

Christa wrote down the order before suggesting a starter, some sides, a type of wine, and a dessert that would complement the meal. Sookie enthusiastically agreed to them all.

When Sookie went to hand back the menu, Christa stopped her. “Keep it. Mr. Northman said that there might be other occasions when you two will order from there.

Oh—and don't worry about the food staying fresh. The Clarks have a witch on staff—Amelia; she's like a wizard at stasis spells!"

Sookie shook her head a little at receiving that knowledge. "I still have so much to learn about the Supe world," she said.

The Were was clearly surprised by Sookie's words. "Oh—sorry. I didn't know. Just ask if you have any questions. I assumed since Mr. Northman didn't give me any restrictions regarding you that you knew *everything* there was to know about the Supe world."

"Restrictions?" Sookie asked.

"Yeah. Some people Mr. Northman deals with are humans who know only about vampires. Other humans have some additional knowledge; they might know about Weres, for example. He's gotta file with all his contacts in it; it includes their level of knowledge."

"Oh," Sookie said with understanding. "Well—uh—soon, I'm gonna be fully entering the Supe world, so I'd appreciate all I can learn about it." She chuckled. "I have to say that the idea of a stasis spell around take-out food is brilliant though!"

Christa agreed with a nod.

"So—what are all these fancy bloods?" Sookie asked as she looked at the menu's last page. "Do you know if Eric might like one?"

"Oh—he already asked that a couple be included with your order," Christa indicated. "And Mr. Northman also wanted to ask if it would be okay if I brought in some donor blood to store in your fridge."

“What’s wrong with TrueBlood?” Sookie asked.

“Do you really wanna know?” Christa asked with a little smirk.

The telepath nodded.

“Real blood is better for healing if a vampire gets hurt, and it’s also more – uh – nutritious; they have to drink about five pints of TrueBlood to get the same value as one of the real stuff. Plus,” she leaned forward as if telling a secret, “TrueBlood tastes absolutely disgusting according to every vampire I know! I heard two young vampires talking at Les Deux Poissons once; they were arguing about whether it tasted more like crappy cough medicine or spoiled milk.” She shuddered. “Either way, it sounds unpleasant. That’s why most vampires drink TrueBlood only when in public or when absolutely necessary. Les Deux Poissons doesn’t even serve it! The synthetics and real/synthetic blends they do serve are a lot better, but quite a bit more expensive.”

“Oh. I didn’t know,” Sookie said, frowning at the idea that she’d served something her vampire guests had needed to choke down, though grateful that she now knew better.

“It’s not well-known. Even most Weres don’t really have all the details. I only do because I used to waitress at Les Deux Poissons.”

“Well – since it’s better – of course, I don’t mind keeping some here,” the telepath said.

“Cool. There’s some in my car now. Mr. Northman told me that you might not want the bags just stacked in your fridge, so I’ve transferred the blood to old TrueBlood bottles.”

“That’s fine,” Sookie smiled at both Christa’s and Eric’s thoughtfulness – though she wouldn’t have minded the bags. “But will the blood stay good – uh – fresh in the old bottles?”

“Sure! Amelia taught me a little spell. It’s not as powerful as a stasis spell, but I can do it myself, and it does the trick to seal the blood into the bottle so it’ll keep for a couple of weeks. So – um – the only other thing I need to do is give you this. It’s from Pam,” Christa said, standing up from her seat and pushing a bulky manila envelope toward Sookie. “I should probably bring the blood in and then get going – since I’ve got some more errands to run. But I’ll be back this evening to drop off the food – if that’s okay.”

“Sure!” Sookie said, even as she wondered what was in the large envelope from Pam. Sookie didn’t know the vampiress all that well, and what she did know didn’t clue her in to the contents of the envelope, though it looked and felt like a stack of papers of some kind. Of course, that didn’t say much. It might be a pile of Pam’s “crime scene photos,” a selection of explicit sex pictures, a collection of jokes, or an assortment of Dear Abby clippings. On the other hand, it might just be a new draft of her contract with Eric that Pam had been asked to hand off to Christa.

Unfortunately, Christa’s thoughts didn’t help; she was already thinking through her remaining errands in her mind.

Despite her curiosity, Sookie finished her duties as hostess, helping Christa with the blood and then filling the Were’s travel coffee mug – just in case she wanted more

coffee later. She even gave her a hug goodbye and waited for her to start her engine before scurrying back into the living room to find out what was in the envelope.

Sookie took a deep breath, opened the seal, and took out the contents of the envelope. She let out a sigh of relief when she didn't see anything "bad." In fact, a smile quickly spread across her face as she saw several brochures about various LSU programs, a course catalogue, a class schedule, and a new student orientation guide. On the top was a handwritten note from Pam.

Dear Amusing Breather,

My maker is "sweet on you" to the point that my fangs have developed cavities.

And—to add to the nuisance of having to deal with him smiling all the damned time—he refuses to be eye candy for the vermin anymore. Thus, I'm having to shop around for more man-meat—though I am ambivalent at best when it comes to men and their "meat."

See all the trouble you are!?

And—to all I must already do—my maker tasked me with seeing to your expedited acceptance at LSU-Shreveport. Luckily, he informed me about this task with long enough before dawn that I was able to visit my contact in admissions. I still have Abigail's lovely taste in my mouth, which is some consolation for all my trouble. Anyway—between orgasms—we discussed your situation, and I filled out an online application for you myself. Don't worry—all your data was entered correctly from my vault and from a helpful file of information I have gathered on you since my master became so interested. You're welcome!

Oh—and since I have a copy of your school transcript in my file—I'll pass that along to Abigail as well. You're welcome again.

Oh—and I'd rather you not tell Eric about my little file on you. Between us girls, I was just making sure you weren't a succubus.

Speaking of which, I'll have to tell you about our encounter with one of those in 1908. That bitch was crazy! Worse than a Maenad—well, maybe not for you.

Speaking of which, how's the back? Any scarring? Care to give me a taste of your blood when it's not laced with Maenad poison?

Also, between us girls?

Anyway, between my perfect memory and Abigail's ability to access LSU's admission's system from her home, we've got you sorted out. You'll get the official admissions letter in the mail. Blah, blah, formality, blah. Meanwhile, Abigail has waived your placement exams for English and math, but she suggests—based on the fact that you've been out of school for a while—that you start with the most basic classes in those subjects; I assured her you would. Other than that, feel free to enroll for whatever you wish. I took the liberty of earmarking the section of online classes in the schedule—as well as indicating what my subject preferences would be.

For example, might I suggest the History of Human Sexuality? I could be your study partner.

Oh—and Eric wanted me to assure you that your fast-track into school was not won at the expense of another potential student. To be clear—it was not. It was, in fact, won

through my pleasuring of Obigail with my fingers and my tongue with such expert cunnilingus that I should write a textbook. So—you see—I'd be a wonderful tutor for Human Sexuality!

You would certainly receive an A. And many O's.

Pam

Sookie was blushing deep red by the time she finished the vampiress's note. However, it didn't surprise her that Pam was a tremendous flirt even through a letter. Part of Sookie wanted to be mad at Pam for gathering a file full of information on her—including her transcript! But—then again—she could understand why Pam would want to protect Eric.

Sookie felt protective of Eric too, after all.

However, the telepath *did* intend to take a look at Pam's file on her (just to see what could possibly be in it) and then ask her to stop her data collection. It's not as if there was a need to keep up the collection now that Eric and she were together.

The telepath glanced at the clock and saw that it was still only 11:04 a.m. There was plenty of time for her to have a quick, small lunch (she didn't want to ruin her appetite for later), take a shower, and browse through the online classes listing before she went to Tara's Togs.

And that's just what she did.

CHAPTER 36: I Got a FEELIN' in My Body

I got a feelin' in my body

This will be our lucky day

We'll be released from all our sorrow

Leave it layin' along the way

— Songwriter: Dennis Linde

(still) FRIDAY

TWENTY MINUTES BEFORE SUNSET

Eric had woken up about thirty minutes before. By habit, he'd used his blood to feel for his ties. His vampire children were both as expected — and both still dead for the day. His maker was a slight hum within him, but that was all.

Sookie was an amalgamation of emotions with happiness, anticipation, and excitement at the forefront.

Eric shared those emotions; however, to them was added nervousness — a kind of nervousness that the vampire could barely remember experiencing. If he searched his memories carefully, he realized that his current feeling was close to the feeling he'd experienced on the night of his human wedding. He'd had sex before that night, but he'd been worried about pleasing Aude, who'd been his brother's widow. It wasn't even that he loved her; it was that he'd been uncertain about how to behave with her.

Though only sixteen at the time, it had been his duty to marry Aude and to take over the rearing of his brother's children – as well as to father more children with Aude. However, she had clearly been deeply in love with Eric's brother, Leif, whom Eric had revered.

Yes – the night of his wedding had been unnerving for the young Viking. In the end, it had been the older, more experienced Aude who had invited a long talk with him before inviting him to his new bed with her.

They'd come to a mutual understanding of affection and respect, and they'd had a solid, though relatively unromantic, marriage because of it.

Still – Eric had never forgotten the uncertainty he'd felt before she set him to ease.

Even at one-thousand-years-old, it seemed that the vampire could still have moments as an uncertain *man* – as he did not know exactly how to behave on his first night with the woman he wished to spend the rest of his existence with.

Of course, he and Sookie already meant a great deal to each other. Thus, Eric marveled at his own nervousness – confused as to why he would feel it. It wasn't as if he was uncertain about his preference of and feelings for Sookie.

He wanted her, and – though the night ahead was a kind of beginning for them – they'd already "begun" in his mind and heart.

Just as he was comparing his own emotions to the general sense of calm and joy emanating from Sookie, her own state changed to one that matched his own.

Immediately, the vampire felt comforted, and he chuckled to himself.

They were *both* nervous – clearly anxious for (and anxious about) their first “date.” Eric felt no hesitation from Sookie, however – nothing to indicate that she’d changed her mind about “them.”

“Butterflies?” Eric asked himself in wonder as he named the human feeling that he’d been almost certain that vampires were incapable of feeling. He chuckled again. He’d just have to add that emotion to all the other new ones Sookie Stackhouse had awakened in him.

He found himself enjoying the novelty of the feeling, enjoying the fact that he no longer felt the inclination to “hate having feelings.”

SUNDOWN

The nerves had not hit the telepath until she was putting on the beautiful deep purple dress she’d been hesitant to even try on that afternoon. In fact, Tara had had to order her to do so since purple was not a color Sookie generally gravitated toward. However, the eggplant hue (as Tara had called it) and 1950s cut of the garment complemented both her skin tone and her figure. As a bonus, her eyes looked remarkably blue as soon as she put on the dress. Indeed, the purple seemed to find shades within her eyes that had never been found before.

Quite literally, seeing herself in the dress had taken Sookie’s own breath away.

She hoped to make the vampire in her life catch his – especially since breathing wasn’t something he needed to do.

It wasn't as if the dress was scandalous or anything. It just fit well—as if made for both her body and her personality. Though it made her “girls” look fantastic, it had a modest sweetheart bodice with capped sleeves; thus, there were no issues with her wearing a bra, which Sookie needed to keep those “girls” in check. The fitted top cinched in at her waist, and the skirt flared in a full A-line, accentuating Sookie's hourglass shape. The dress ended at her knee, and when she spun, the dress was given life.

Yet as the telepath looked into the mirror with her hair and make-up looking just how she wanted them to look and her dress looking even prettier than it had in the store, butterflies started to dance in her tummy.

“It's our *first* date,” she told the mirror—as if she were realizing that fact for the first time.

Her nerves ratcheted up a bit more when her telepathy picked up the change of shift between her two-natured guards and her vampire guards.

If the vampires were out and about, that meant that Eric was on his way!

Sookie took some deep breaths and distracted herself by focusing on Maria-Star's report to Thalia, which included a brief discussion about the security the Were was already putting in place for the trip to the mall Sookie planned to make Tuesday morning.

Sookie was almost able to laugh as she witnessed Thalia's sneer through Maria-Star's thoughts when the Were mentioned that the mall trip was for Christmas

shopping. Sookie decided in that moment that she'd be getting Thalia *The Grinch that Stole Christmas* as a gift that year.

Unfortunately, Maria-Star took her leave, leaving no discernable thought patterns in Sookie's range – though her own “thinking” of the word “discernable” distracted her for a moment or two as she made a mental note to add a new Word-of-the-Day calendar to her shopping list since she was pretty certain that Arlene and she wouldn't be exchanging gifts that year.

Sookie frowned. The redhead's thoughts had become less friendly when it became widely known – thanks, in part, to a conversation Bill must have had with Maxine at some point – that Sookie had quit Merlotte's in order to take a job working with a vampire. The telepath scoffed. Of course, Bill hadn't been “in the loop” about what her new job actually entailed. Indeed, he'd likely gotten his initial gossip about her quitting Merlotte's from Maxine – before twisting it into something that seemed unsavory and then feeding it right back to the town gossip so that she could spread the juicy new intel on “Crazy Sookie.” As it was, many in town now assumed that she would be working as a waitress at Fangtasia, and most of them figured that “waitress” and “fangbanger” were synonyms when it came to the vampire club.

Arlene sure did!

“If she were my true friend, Arlene wouldn't have a problem with me being a waitress at Fangtasia or a fangbanger – as long as it was what I wanted!” Sookie muttered with exasperation. Like so many small-minded people – Arlene just couldn't seem to get past her preconceptions. And, sadly, the redhead hadn't even had the

decency to follow up by asking Sookie about what her new job really involved. She just assumed.

And she assumed *the worst*.

And that made Sookie both angry and sad. Still – as with Sam – she hoped that Arlene could get over her prejudices, and Sookie did intend to try to set her straight about her new life. But in “overhearing” Arlene’s assumptions, Sookie had also heard even more disturbing thoughts: like the thought that Arlene had always felt like Bill Compton should have wanted *her* and not Sookie; and the thought that Bill *had* to have chosen someone ‘damaged’ like Sookie only because he wanted to use her; and the thought that Sookie *needed* to be brought down a peg or two; and finally the thought that Arlene was happy Bill and Sookie’s relationship seemed to be at its end because she still wanted to entice the vampire to *her* bed.

Sookie shuddered. “She can have Bill!” she said aloud, shaking her head. “Actually, no she can’t; thank God he’s left town, or he *would* have used her to get to me,” the telepath sighed, acknowledging the kind of manipulation Bill was capable of. “Arlene might be a little mean at heart, but she doesn’t deserve him,” she added softly, still talking to herself in the mirror.

In fact, as with all the people she *really* “listened” to, Sookie had learned that Arlene was “Complicated,” she said aloud, completing her thought.

Being a telepath – and one who had finally used her gift *fully* for the last week – Sookie had learned a lot about Arlene, things she’d never found out before because of her rule to try to keep out of the heads of her friends and family. At the root of almost

every negative or “nasty” thought Arlene had about someone else was fear and sadness due to her own situation.

She feared not being able to take care of her kids. She feared having another child with another man who wouldn't stick around. She often recalled her lonely, long hours in delivery rooms as she went through the pains of childbirth without a man at her side to hold her hand. She envied women who had men like that – men whom they could count on to be there for them. Arlene had never known that kind of love; she'd never even seen it up-close as her own mom had been a single parent with six kids from six men: two from failed marriages; three from failed, though long-term, relationships; and one from a one-night-bender when Arlene's mother had drunkenly slept with more than one man. That night had produced Arlene, whose mother was only partly certain of her paternity because only one of the men she'd been with had been a red-head (she didn't remember his name though).

Sookie closed her eyes; in truth, along with the not-so-good, she'd found a lot to admire about Arlene – and a lot to pity. She'd been treated like a burden by her mother, but she'd grown up to be hard-working and responsible – as best as she could. When she'd followed in her mother's footsteps by getting pregnant at a young age, she reacted without bitterness. Instead, she opened two savings accounts: one for Lisa's college and one so that she could save up to move away from the town she'd grown up in. She wanted a fresh start, and she was resolved to give her child a life that was better than her own: a life where – above all else – the child always felt loved and wanted. It took Arlene a while to accomplish that goal; in fact, she had a failed marriage and another

child before she could. However, she had kept saving for her dream, even as she'd added another savings account for Coby when he was born.

Sookie knew that the day Arlene was in a position to move to Bon Temps was the proudest of her life. She knew that Arlene still put as much as she could into her kids' savings accounts each month.

And – most importantly – she knew that Arlene had succeeded in making sure that Coby and Lisa knew that they were wanted. They were good kids, and – though Arlene couldn't afford luxuries for them – they *did* feel loved. Arlene, on the other hand, didn't feel so loved, and that was the root of her pain. Rene Lenier's presence in her life had screwed her up even more – because she felt guilty for letting a monster have access to her kids. Now, Arlene worried that she'd never find someone to be with her – to love her. In a way – she had counted on Sookie always being single so that she wouldn't be by herself in singleness. Yes – a big part of Arlene was glad that Bill and Sookie were no more – because it meant that Sookie was alone again too.

The telepath shook her head. Of course, Arlene didn't know that Sookie was anything but single in her mind – and in her heart. It didn't matter that it was only her first date with Eric; she was the opposite of being “back on the market” to keep Arlene company.

“First date,” the telepath said, her anxiety coming forward again as her thoughts returned to the upcoming night.

After a few composing breaths, Sookie shook herself a little and then laughed at herself for her nervousness – though that laughter didn't quite quell her butterflies. Still, she managed to put on her shoes (she'd decided on a nice pair of flats for comfort).

"Heels wouldn't make much of a dent in our height difference anyway," she chuckled as she took one last look in her mirror.

She glanced at the clock, wondering what she could possibly do to distract herself until Eric arrived so that she wouldn't get too wound up again. Ultimately, she decided that she'd check the table she'd set for her and Eric's meal.

Of course, it was already perfect. She'd pulled out Gran's "good china" for the occasion since Eric had gone to the trouble of arranging such fine dining for her. She'd also pulled out the only two remaining crystal glasses from Gran's collection.

Indeed, she'd had to get the stepladder in order to fish them out of the corner of the top-most cabinet in the kitchen (the one above the refrigerator), which was where they'd "lived" ever since Jason had broken the rest of the set when he'd decided that Gran would somehow accept him playing with his new ball in the house on Christmas day when he was ten years old.

Sookie could still remember how sad Gran's thoughts had been about losing most of the set which had been passed down to her by her own grandmother. Jason – to his credit – had realized her sadness (despite his usual cluelessness) and hadn't argued about his punishment of losing the ball for a month. He'd also helped Gran clean up the mess and had been overjoyed when two intact glasses had been found among the broken ones.

Gran hadn't taken any chances with her two remaining glasses after that. However, Sookie had decided that keeping them in that unseen corner of the world wasn't any better than risking them being broken.

The comparison of those fragile glasses to her own life – as she ventured from the corners of her small town into the limelight of the Supe world – didn't escape her. However, she was trusting Eric to keep her from breaking. In fact, she knew that he would have to be shattered himself – before he ever allowed her to be hurt.

That thought scared her; Eric seemed so strong – unbreakable – but she knew that he *could* be broken – and that she was one of his vulnerabilities.

“He chose you,” she said to herself softly. “You’re choosing him.” She nodded to herself; Eric might be willing to sacrifice himself for her, but she would do the same for him. She just hoped that – somewhere in the cosmos – someone would be watching their backs so that neither one of them would have to make the ultimate sacrifice.

Shaking off that thought, Sookie lit the candles on the table, and then she went into the living room and turned on the Christmas tree lights before glancing at the wood next to the fireplace. She chuckled as she thought about the mountain of wood stacked neatly at the side of the house. Eric had cut enough for three winters!

And she couldn't have been more grateful. Along with the wood waiting to burn, Eric had also preset a fire. She'd decided to wait for him to light it.

As she glanced around, looking for something else to do, Sookie “heard” Thalia's signature void moving quickly toward the road. Within the next few seconds, Christa's mind came into Sookie's range with Thalia's void tracking her.

The telepath chuckled. Though her gift seemed to make her more aware than Weres in some ways, it was clear that Thalia's senses still had more range. Sookie knew that the vampiress would be gratified to learn that – if she ever told her.

Meanwhile, Sookie was grateful that Christa was there with her food. That would be another distraction as she waited for Eric to arrive.

CHAPTER 37: I Slipped, I Stumbled, I Fell

I look at you and wham I'm head over heels

I guess that love is a banana peel

I feel so bad and yet I'm feeling so well

I slipped, I stumbled, I fell

— Songwriters: Fred Wise & Benjamin Weisman

Eric parked his corvette, even as a smiling Christa waved at him before getting into her vehicle. Though the Were had been working full-time for only a couple of days, Eric was already grateful he'd taken Sookie's advice about getting rid of Bobby. Why he'd not done so before really did come down to the fact that vampires could get very stuck in their habits sometimes. Plus, Bobby had not been inefficient at his job—just a pain in the ass at times. And, of course, there had been the fact that he annoyed Pam, which amused the Viking to no end.

However, Christa would be better in several ways since she could easily complete errands that bisected the human and Supe worlds. Plus, she was telepath-approved. And, ultimately, Bobby was not. That was good enough for Eric.

Moreover—given how quickly she got settled into her vehicle and started her engine—she clearly knew when her services were no longer required for an evening.

Bobby would have likely been prattling on about how “well” he’d completed the relatively simple duties he’d been assigned.

The vampire walked around to the trunk to get the flowers and wrapped gift he’d carefully placed there earlier. Despite Sookie’s fiercely independent nature – and her general hesitation when it came to taking gifts – he speculated that she would appreciate the small tokens he had for her.

At least, he hoped.

Suddenly, he felt nervous again – even as he registered that his feelings were mirrored within the woman who was now waiting for him just inside her door. However, that door was already open, and – as the vampire saw her – he wondered if he would ever be able to take his eyes off of her again. Awestruck, he closed the trunk and moved toward her.

And that was when – for the first time in a thousand years – the vampire tripped.

It was only a slight misstep really, a little stumble over a relatively large piece of gravel that had “rebelled” from its place in Sookie’s new driveway.

Sookie’s expression turned from nervous anticipation to surprise to mirth in less than a second.

As for the vampire, he too was surprised by the unfamiliar lack of control over his body, but he quickly recovered and zipped up to his “date” on the porch.

“If your intention was to sweep me off my feet, Miss Stackhouse, you succeeded. You always look beautiful; however, in this moment – to know that you have dressed

like this *for me*. What man would not stumble at such a vision?" he said sincerely as he bent down to softly kiss her cheek.

His sudden appearance within a few inches of her and his sweet declaration worked together to cause a blush to flame Sookie's cheeks – despite his cool lips on one of them. "Thank you. You look beautiful too – uh – handsome," she corrected as she took him in.

After he'd heard from Christa that Sookie intended to dress up for the night, he'd selected a gray suit and paired it with a button-down black shirt. Sookie was clearly appreciative of the fact that he'd left a few of those buttons undone.

"I feel like a nervous teenager," she admitted when he caught her staring at his chest.

He chuckled and ushered her inside, guiding her with the hand that wasn't holding the courting tokens he had brought for her. "Imagine that same feeling in a thousand-year-old."

She looked up at him with surprise. "You feel like that too?"

"Yes," he admitted simply as he handed her the flowers.

"They're amazing," the telepath smiled as she looked at the bunch of yellow daffodils and white Gerber daisies before bringing them to her nose.

"I learned something new when I chose them," the vampire volunteered.

"Oh?" she asked.

"I knew, of course, that various flowers meant different things, but I have never had reason to look up the meanings."

“You picked them for their meanings?” Sookie asked with surprise.

Eric chuckled. “No.”

“Huh?” the telepath asked, clearly confused as she led them toward the kitchen.

“I initially picked them because they reminded me of the sun – of you,” he informed with a heartfelt smile. “However, I didn’t want to accidentally get you items that would convey a negative meaning.”

“There are flowers that do that?” Sookie asked with curiosity.

He nodded, his eyes full of amusement. “Apparently, I must give you purple hyacinths if I need to beg for your forgiveness or pansies if I wish to declare war! Oh – and you will never receive a yellow carnation from me!” he said with feigned horror.

“Oh?” she asked playfully. “And why not?”

“They symbolize disdain,” he informed.

“Really?” She giggled. “Well – I don’t like carnations anyway. They’re pretty, but they remind me of funerals,” she said, her smile quickly falling to a frown. “So – what do these mean?” she asked of the flowers in her hand as she tried to turn her thoughts from the last time she’d smelled carnations – Gran’s funeral.

Eric felt and guessed at the reason for her momentary sadness. He responded to it by bending down to place a light kiss on her forehead before answering her question.

“The daffodils are quite appropriate for this night – as they refer to new beginnings.”

Sookie smiled widely, her previous sadness eclipsed by a very different feeling: hope. “What about these?” she asked of the Gerber daisies. “Actually, this kind of flower is one of my favorites, but I’ve never known what it meant.”

“Innocence,” Eric responded.

The two looked at each other and then shared a little laugh. “I don’t know if that one really applies to *all* the thoughts I have about you,” Eric said suggestively.

“Why, Mr. Northman,” the telepath flirted back, “what kind of girl do you think I am?”

“Hopefully the kind that is having a few naughty thoughts of her own,” he chuckled.

She blushed again, but made no denial as she put the flowers on the table in order to get a vase from under the sink.

“Wait,” the vampire entreated when it became clear what her purpose was. “Open this first.”

“I specifically remember us havin’ a talk about gifts,” she scolded playfully.

“You cannot blame me for falling back to what I remember of courtship,” he said, his eyebrow rising.

“Oh?” Sookie asked curiously.

“In my human days, an interested man would take gifts to a woman he wished to court; to not do so would have been considered an affront – an insult. Of course, gifts were taken to the family of the woman too, but I don’t really want to offer your brother goats or chickens. Maybe a 12-pack of beer?” he added playfully.

Sookie laughed at that thought. “Actually, he’d probably like that. Alright, let me check out the damage,” she grinned, holding out her hand for the gift.

Eric bowed in a courtly fashion as he handed her the beautifully-wrapped package. Excited, she made quick work of the wrapping and pulled out a beautiful glass vase. Sookie gasped as she spun it around to look at the swirling patterns of different shades of yellow.

“The flowers will eventually wither and die,” the vampire said softly. “So I wanted you have something that I could refill for you.”

“If you ever need forgiveness?” she asked, wiping a tear away due to Eric’s thoughtfulness. “Or want to declare war?” she added with a little smirk in order to lighten the mood.

“Exactly,” he chuckled before clearing the packaging away and taking notice of the beautiful table Sookie had set for them. “This looks lovely, Dearest One,” he said.

She smiled proudly, but a little shyly. “Thanks. It’s Gran’s good china and crystal. I guess mine now,” she sighed.

Eric nodded. “Are you hungry?”

Sookie answered eagerly. “Yes!”

He chuckled at her enthusiasm.

“Don’t make fun,” she scolded as she arranged the flowers in the vase and added water before putting them on the table. “I ate light and early because I didn’t want to spoil my dinner. And my mouth’s been watering ever since Christa came by to take my dinner order. Thanks for that—by the way.” She gestured toward the kitchen counter where a small box was set. “She said the stasis spell would last for a few more hours as long as the box wasn’t opened.”

“But why wait?” Eric asked as he went with her into the kitchen to get their meal set up.

Two hours later, the new couple had still not put in the movie they’d decided upon, opting instead to continue talking.

Their meal had been delicious for both – with Eric enjoying one of the new blood concoctions from the “designer blood” company he co-owned. Meanwhile, Sookie had moaned her way through her meal, causing the vampire to have to shift quite a few times as he hardened at the sight and the sounds of her.

Of course, she had no idea of her effect and apologized several times before he finally made it clear that her eating in front of him did not bother him in the least. At one point, he’d thought that he would have to get up and drop his pants just to prove how much her eating did NOT disgust him.

He’d left dinner with a new appreciation of the magic worked at Les Deux Poissons, as well as a new reason to kill Bill Compton. Just because the Antebellum asshole was too “delicate” to stomach being around human food didn’t mean that he should have led Sookie to believe that all vampires were like him. Eric had needed to clarify that only a few scents actually bothered him, and he’d laughingly told her that garlic wasn’t one of them. That had led the two of them to a discussion of the foods he didn’t like the smell of, which included almost anything that had been burned and items with too much turmeric or sage.

As he'd come to expect of her, Sookie had listened to the little details he'd shared with interest and a slew of questions. And they'd kept their conversation away from business for the most part.

Indeed, the closest they'd come to "shop talk" had been when she'd asked him his opinion about Internet providers and computer equipment. Ultimately, after Eric had told Sookie about Molly's prowess with computers – both in building them to fit the needs of a specific customer and equipping them with the highest security possible – the telepath had agreed that getting a "Molly Creation" was a good idea, as long as she'd be the one paying for it. Respecting Sookie's need for independence, Eric didn't argue. Instead, he merely offered to see if Molly was available for a short meeting the next night – after they met with the demon lawyer – so that she could get a sense of what Sookie wanted. He also put in his two-cent's worth about Internet in rural areas since he'd arranged for Internet access for a couple of his more secluded properties. Again, he'd offered to put her in touch with a company who could get her "connected" in the most secure way possible, and they'd agreed to share the cost – since the guardhouse he was going to be building would need the connection too.

That had taken the two to a brief discussion of that guardhouse, and he had taken into account her preferences about its location. Ultimately, Sookie decided that it would be best if the house was placed on the other end of her property from her own home. It was currently rough and overgrown in that area, but access to the road behind the cemetery would be easy to make, and the guards would have their own entrance in and out so that the telepath's day-to-day existence would be affected very little because

of the new house. Since the Weres and other guards were already parking along that backroad, the house location made even more sense.

A little more time was taken discussing how the house would look, and Eric was surprised to learn that Sookie was actually quite interested in architecture. That led to them talking about the classes offered at LSU on that topic, as well as joking about Pam's quick work in getting Sookie admitted – though the telepath did hold back the information about Pam having a file on her.

After that, Sookie listened with rapt attention as Eric talked about some of the buildings he'd witnessed being constructed.

"Wow! The Sistine Chapel!" Sookie enthused as he told her about his time in Rome.

"I wasn't there for the painting of the ceiling," he qualified. "Back then, the building of churches was a decades-long project."

The telepath shook her head in wonder. "I can't wait to see places like Rome – all the history!" She smiled. "Gran would have been thrilled that I get to travel. She always wanted to do it herself, and she loved history! But she was sort of stuck in Louisiana because of lack of money." She sighed. "She didn't mind though. She threw herself in the history that she could see up close – the history of this part of the world. And she loved my grandfather and the life they shared a lot."

"I regret that I was not more," Eric paused, "direct in my interest for you when we first met."

She lifted an eyebrow in challenge. "Your interest seemed clear enough."

He chuckled. “Well—yes. *That* kind. But I wish I had tried *this* back then,” he said, gesturing toward the fire he’d lit for them earlier.

“Tried—uh—a fire?” she asked.

“Courting,” he clarified. “Of course, things were complicated because of Compton, but I could have done more back then—if I’d not been in my own way. I could have met your grandmother—Gran—maybe even found a way to stop her from,” he paused, “being murdered.”

“Oh,” Sookie said—the interjection sounding more like a breath than a word.

“What I’m saying is that I would have liked to have met her,” Eric said sincerely—even as he reached out to take her hand.

Eyes glistening a little, but tears not falling, Sookie looked at their entwined fingers and then at him. “She was an amazing person.” She smiled a little. “She wouldn’t have wanted goats or chickens either though.”

Eric laughed loudly, thankful that Sookie could speak about her deceased relative without her tears overtaking her.

He had no way of knowing that that was the first time the telepath had done so.

“You would have had to help me know what she would accept as I courted you,” the vampire said.

“That new driveway would have probably made you a saint in her eyes,” Sookie chuckled.

The two continued to talk casually—her about her life with Gran and him about the places he’d been.

At 1:00 a.m., the conversation finally lulled a little, though not uncomfortably.

“Would you like to put the movie in?” Eric asked. “I don’t want to presume how late I can stay.”

“You could stay the night if you wanted,” Sookie said, though she blushed as soon as she realized what her statement had sounded like. “I mean—I’m not tired, and I like having you here, and . . .” When she tried to wring her hands together, Eric moved to hold them both.

“Dearest One, I have no expectations of sex tonight.” He grinned. “I may not have lived as a human man for a thousand years, but I know that you are the kind of woman who would wish to give her body only after you are certain of a commitment.”

“What if I am certain?” she asked, despite her blush. “Would a girl—from you time—have waited if she were certain?”

“Usually, she would wait for her wedding night—if she were from one of the higher-class families from the village. But it was not unheard of for a betrothed couple to,” he paused, “become impatient.”

“Are you impatient?” Sookie asked him, biting her lower lip.

The vampire considered for a moment. “No. Not impatient. I look forward very much to making love to you when you are ready, but I will wait for you to be ready. And—though I like very much the feelings I am getting from you through our blood tie—I can also feel a little hesitation from you.”

“It’s not that I’m not sure—about us,” Sookie insisted quickly. “I just . . . I . . .”

“No explanation is needed, Dearest One,” Eric assured softly. “After all, it is only our first date,” he added mischievously.

“It feels like our fiftieth and our first – all rolled into one,” she responded.

“And *that* is likely the reason for your hesitancy,” he guessed. “After all, things are not going as either of us would have expected two weeks ago.”

Sookie nodded in agreement.

“So – a movie?” he asked.

“Do you – uh . . . ?”

“Do I what?” he asked, smoothing a strand of her silky hair behind her ear.

Sookie gestured toward the old record player in the corner of the room. “Do you like to dance?”

“You wish to dance with me,” Eric realized, a soft smile quickly playing on his lips.

She nodded, even as her cheeks betrayed another blush – though this one was more muted than the last.

“I’d love to,” the vampire said, leaning forward to kiss her cheek before rising to go over to the record player.

He held up an Elvis record. “I like this one – but better not,” he chuckled as she came to stand next to him. “We don’t want the real one to get upset.”

She nodded in agreement as he selected a Patsy Cline album.

Clearly knowing how to use old-style record players, Eric quickly had the machine turned on and the record loaded. Right before he placed the needle, Sookie let out a nervous laugh.

“You know--the first time I slow danced was with Alcide – at Club Dead.”

Feeling no affection from her for the Were through the blood tie, Eric was able to prevent himself from feeling jealousy at her words.

“It sucked too,” she chuckled. “Not because he was a bad dancer – though he *did* have to count in his head as we moved around the dance floor.”

Eric chuckled at that. “Why did it suck?” he asked curiously.

“I was dancing with him to be able to better hear people’s thoughts around the room,” she shared. “It sucked because I couldn’t let myself enjoy it.”

He gently placed the needle and rose from his crouched position, offering her his hand.

“Then it is my great pleasure to have *this* dance, Sookie Stackhouse – the first one you can *absolutely* enjoy.”

She took his hand as the first notes of the song “Crazy” played. And she did enjoy herself as they danced to that song and many others. In fact, they danced – sometimes holding each other closely and sometimes swaying as they kissed one another – until the dawn was only about an hour away, and Sookie was practically asleep against his body.

He lifted her into his arms when her legs seemed ready to give out and chuckled at her sound of protest.

“One more dance,” she requested somewhat groggily.

He chuckled. “You are practically asleep on your feet, Dearest One, and I must go.”

“You won’t stay?” she asked.

“If we are to meet the Demon at 8:00 p.m., I need to go to my home tonight so that I can do some work both before I rest and when I awaken,” he explained as he carried her to her bedroom.

“Okay,” she said, though it was clear she was a little disappointed. “Is it weird that I miss you when you’re not here? It’s not like you’ve been here much, but since Friday” Her voice trailed off.

“I miss you when I am not by your side as well,” he said softly as he placed her into bed. She’d changed out of her dress and heels into something more comfortable hours before – when it became clear that she desired to literally dance the night away. He’d insisted that she – at least – not risk blisters on her feet. She’d also visited the bathroom about thirty minutes prior, so he did not ask her if she needed to address her human needs before laying her down.

She looked up at him with sleepy eyes. “So I’ll see you tomorrow evening at 8:00 p.m.?” she asked.

He nodded in confirmation. “Yes. Thalia is already aware of the meeting and will escort you to Fangtasia.”

“Okay.”

The vampire went to rise, but Sookie’s hand on his stopped him.

“Give me a goodnight kiss?”

“With pleasure,” the vampire smiled as he bent down to softly kiss his almost-sleeping beauty.

“I love dancing with you,” she whispered.

“I love dancing with you too,” he agreed.

“You know what else I love?” she asked, now clearly half asleep. *Mostly asleep.*

“What?” he asked.

She didn’t respond as she drifted into unconsciousness. However, he did feel her emotions; he’d felt them all night.

They were clear to him.

“And I love you as well,” the vampire whispered before leaving her room. He quickly made sure the fire was out completely and then shut off Sookie’s Christmas tree lights. Then he used his preternatural speed to clean up the dining room that she’d so carefully prepared for their date.

He took special care when cleaning the dishes Sookie had told him belonged to her grandmother.

After taking one more look around the house and finding nothing amiss, Eric put back on his jacket and left the house.

“I saw,” Thalia said from the shadows. “I saw you trip,” she clarified, her tone much more gleeful than Eric had ever heard it before – except when she was in the midst of a battle.

“I had good reason,” he said, neither denying that he’d done exactly that nor taking the vampiress’s bait.

She chuckled. “I suppose you did.”

“See her safely to Fangtasia tomorrow night,” the Viking requested of the being to whom he’d most entrusted Sookie’s wellbeing.

She simply nodded before backing into the woods once more.

The Viking picked up the rock that had been the agent of his tripping – though not really the cause of it. Seeing such a beautiful sight as Sookie, he may very well have tripped over thin air. Still he decided he’d take the object with him as a reminder of the night.

The most perfect one he’d spent thus far as vampire or human.

Somehow, he knew his future nights would only get better – as long as the reason he tripped was a part of them.

As long as nothing else tripped him up.

CHAPTER 38: LET'S BE FRIENDS

Don't be afraid, you and I were made the same little one

And I know what it's like when you feel left out of the game little one

But if you take this helping hand that I lift

Then we can smile together, let's be friends

— Songwriters: Chris Arnold, David Martin & Geoff Morrow

MONDAY NIGHT (thirty minutes after sundown)

Thalia had never been one to take any chances with her charges on the rare occasions when she'd worked as a guard.

The *very* rare occasions.

In actuality, she'd happened upon very little worth guarding during her long life. And — even when she had — her services had rarely been asked for.

Most beings were too afraid to ask.

But Northman was different from most beings. And the prospect of protecting his telepathic beloved had intrigued the vampiress.

After all, she'd never protected a telepath before. Hell — she'd known only a few telepaths — all demons — and they didn't often need protecting. The woman currently sitting in the passenger seat was certainly *not* a demon.

“Maria-Star informed me that you are contemplating the purchase of a new vehicle,” the vampiress said, even as she pushed down on the gas pedal of Sookie’s old, prone-to-stuttering car. It lurched in answer to her lead foot.

Given how Thalia was testing the old car’s limits, it was not a shock to the telepath that the vampiress was interested in that topic of discussion.

“Yeah,” Sookie confirmed.

“Maria-Star reported that you are even seeking advice – as to the type of vehicle to purchase?” Thalia asked with an odd kind of amusement in her tone.

“You’re surprised?” Sookie asked.

“I thought I would have to find a way to break this insufficient vehicle. Tell me – is it as old as I am? Or older?” the vampiress asked sarcastically.

Sookie rolled her eyes. “It’s what I could afford when I couldn’t find any better, so don’t diss my rust bucket!” she said in defense of her vehicle. “And – for the record – it’s worked well enough to suit both my needs and my means. Now that both of those have changed, I’m getting’ a new one, but this one will be plenty good for Holly.”

“You would pass this thing on to someone else?” Thalia asked with disgust.

Sookie huffed. “Holly’s car broke down three times in the last month. This one will be better for her, or it can at least be back up when she needs it.” She glared at the vampiress. “You’ve lived long enough to experience times of need – I’ll bet. So don’t be mean-spirited about those still facing tough times.”

A sincere smile momentarily graced the vampiress's lips – or, at least, Sookie thought it did. It happened so quickly that Sookie might have been mistaken.

“You disapprove of my attitude,” Thalia said evenly. “You think me a,” she paused, “snob?”

“No,” Sookie responded. “I think you’re just looking at this car as a liability right now – because of your job. And I get that. But that doesn’t mean it doesn’t still have value – to someone.”

Thalia was silent for a moment. “I suppose it does have a kind of value – to someone *else*.”

Sookie shook her head – knowing that Thalia’s slight retraction was all the victory she’d be getting on the topic.

“So,” the telepath said, “given the fact that you brought up the subject – I figure you do have some input?”

Thalia nodded. “Your,” she paused and smirked, “*boyfriend* has an associate who specializes in vampire-centric vehicles. These have handy accessories, like bulletproof glass and explosive-resistant bodies.”

“Geez! You can’t think I’ll need that!” Sookie cried out.

Thalia shrugged. “In his fleet of vehicles, there is an SUV that includes two light-tight spaces. Such a vehicle could be useful. And – to be frank – the difference in cost from a normal SUV would likely be negligible.”

“How do you figure?” Sookie asked skeptically, even as she pondered the idea that a light-tight cubby (or two) might be a handy thing indeed to have in her vehicle.

“Eric’s friend would sell you the vehicle at cost. A human dealer would aim to squeeze every possible penny out of you. Protecting you would be easier if you had a vehicle that could hold more people. It would also be useful to be able to shove you into a safe place if human bullets began flying,” she added with clear disdain for the objects. She was truly old-school, in that she preferred fighting with sword and fang.

After all, for Thalia, it was so much more satisfying to be close to an enemy, rather than too far away to see his or her eyes during a kill.

Sookie sighed from the passenger seat, drawing Thalia out of her memory of a particularly challenging battle – an up-close-and-personal one, of course.

“Get me a price and a picture of the car, and I’ll think about it. Practicality is important, but I *do* want something that I like the look of,” the telepath said stubbornly. “I’ve fantasized about bein’ able to buy a car of my own for too long to get something I don’t really like!”

“I will have the information ready for you to review tomorrow,” Thalia returned, her tone indicating that she felt Sookie’s agreement was a foregone conclusion.

“I have a question,” the telepath asked, her own tone demonstrating some nervousness.

“What is your query?” the vampiress asked.

“I don’t want to offend you accidentally, but why is it that you and Eric haven’t suggested I take a drop or two of *your* blood – so that you can track me?” Sookie asked a little hesitantly.

Thalia was silent for a moment; indeed, she didn't seem to have a reaction to the question at all.

"You don't have to answer," Sookie said nervously. "And I *do* apologize if the question's not appropriate."

"I was considering the idea of it," Thalia stated flatly. "I had not done so before due to your belonging to another. Being able to track you *would* be useful. However, feeling your emotions would *not* be welcome," she emphasized sternly.

"Oh—I didn't think about that," Sookie said.

"Still—the idea is not without some merit," the vampiress stated. "However, the North Man might react possessively." Thalia glanced at Sookie. "I will consider this. Bubba might also be a candidate to give you blood. He is good at tracking."

"Oh—well—I didn't mean it as a suggestion," Sookie frowned. "It was more of just a question really—because I was wondering."

"Do not discount or hold back on such questions," Thalia stated as she guided the car into the right lane since their exit was approaching. "However, speak to the North Man if you wish to pursue the matter. If you do, you have my leave to inform him that I would *consider* giving you a drop—just enough to get a sense of your location and the faintest idea of your emotions. You would need more from Bubba because he is young."

Sookie frowned, uncertain if she actually wanted to bring up the matter to Eric.

Thalia was smirking at her when the telepath looked her way. “For someone who brought it up, you seem to find the idea of taking my blood – or Bubba’s, for that matter – distasteful.”

Sookie let out a small laugh. “Maybe I just don’t like the idea that I might get kidnapped or something in the first place.”

“Or you would rather limit the vampires who can track you,” Thalia suggested.

“I admit I don’t like the idea that Bill’s blood is still in me,” the telepath sighed.

Thalia inhaled deeply. “It will be out of you soon – in less than a month. I, too, will be glad when it is gone from you.”

Sookie nodded in agreement. “Amen to that! As for the thought of you and/or Bubba’s blood?” She frowned again, more deeply than before. “I honestly don’t know why I’m having a negative reaction to the idea.”

“Do you not?” Thalia asked knowingly.

“No,” Sookie returned. She hadn’t missed Thalia’s meaningful tone. “Why? Do you know something?”

“Eric has told you that he believes you to be part-Fae – correct?” she asked.

Sookie nodded.

“Would you like to hear of what I know about the Fae?” the vampiress queried.

Sookie nodded again, her curiosity peaked.

“They are devious, pointy-eared pricks for the most part. They have powerful magic. Despite complaining about their population decreasing, they kill each other in seemingly endless civil wars. Oh – and they have been known to sacrifice one of their

own kind in order to capture or kill vampires – since we become practically useless when high on their blood.”

“They sound pleasant,” Sookie said sarcastically.

“They are ruthless,” the vampiress answered with some admiration. “They are also quite possessive when they choose a life-mate,” she added. “Such a choosing is rare among their kind, but – when it happens – a bond of blood is made. If you *are* Fae, which I believe you are, and if you have chosen the North Man in this way, it is natural that you would resist the idea of sharing blood with any other – even for pragmatic purposes.”

“Even if I’m only part-fairy? I’d be able to choose a – uh – life-mate?” Sookie asked.

“I am uncertain of a hybrid’s capabilities,” the vampiress said honestly. “I tell you only what I believe I have already witnessed.”

“And what’s that?” Sookie asked softly.

Thalia glanced over at the telepath. “If you have to ask, you are not yet ready to hear the answer. If you simply want confirmation of what you already *know*, then I am not the best place to seek your answers.”

Sookie pondered Thalia’s words, as well as the information she’d told her about fairies. Then, she recalled the discussion that she and Eric had about the various kinds of bonds and magical exchanges that could be made. Though Eric wasn’t certain how a bond would work between them – given her ancestry – it stood to reason that whatever was in her blood *would* try to assert itself in some way – to claim Eric. She smiled.

“You like the thought of your blood connecting to him in more than a human way—in more than a vampire way,” Thalia perceived, having seen the telepath’s smile.

Sookie nodded her admission.

“Well—then—you should take all this information into account before you ultimately decide whether you want to voluntarily take another vampire’s blood. Indeed, your body might reject that blood,” the vampiress cautioned.

The telepath nodded. “Thank you, Thalia. I—uh—have one more question that I want you to think about.”

“What is it?” the vampiress asked, sensing Sookie’s nervousness had risen again.

“Tonight—for my contract—I’m gonna give the lawyer a list of vampires I give permission to turn me if something dire happens and Eric can’t get to me.”

“You wish to be turned?” Thalia asked with surprise.

“No!” the telepath answered quickly. “Not necessarily. I don’t know. I’m thinking about it. But—until I’m sure—I’ve told Eric to do it—but only if the worst happens. But—uh—there’s gonna be a list of acceptable vampires—like I said. You’re gonna be on it, though that doesn’t mean you’d be required to turn me or anything. I just want you to know that you’re on the list, and I hope you’ll give—uh—the idea some thought.”

The vampiress looked at the telepath with surprise. “You would allow me to be your maker.”

“You’re not my first choice,” the telepath answered honestly. “But—to be honest—you’re my second.”

“Why?” Thalia asked, dumbfounded.

“Because I have a feeling you’d teach me what I needed to know and then cut me loose as soon as humanly – I mean vampirely possible – and that you wouldn’t take away my choices. That’s why I’m letting you know that becoming my maker in the first place will always be *your* choice,” Sookie said as Thalia parked.

“I understand you,” the vampiress said simply – before getting out of the vehicle and testing the air to make sure there were no threats in the region.

“What’s that?” Sookie asked, as she gestured toward a parked vehicle. “I’ve never heard anything like it.”

“There’s a demon in the driver’s seat,” Thalia answered as she opened Sookie’s door. “One of the lawyer’s nieces. Can you hear her thoughts?” she asked the telepath quietly.

Sookie shook her head. “Her mind is like static. There’s another one inside – but – uh – with him, I can sense a mood. He’s – uh – bored.”

Thalia scoffed. “With you around that’s not too likely to last.”

To say that Mr. Desmond Cataliades, Attorney at Law, was rotund was something of an understatement. Indeed, as Sookie noticed that the gentleman seemed to be made up of a collection of circles (one for his head, one for his chest, and one for his belly), she was glad that “rotund” had been on her word-of-the-day calendar at some point. Otherwise, she wouldn’t have been able to describe him accurately.

Heck – even his arms and legs seemed more like tubes than limbs!

But what was leaving Sookie mystified was not his oddly-shaped body (well—odd by human standards). It was the circle of surprise that his lips had formed from the moment he'd first seen her.

“Cataliades!” Eric said loudly, looking at the attorney with some confusion in his eyes. He'd never known the demon to be anything other than professional, and—certainly—he wouldn't have expected him to ogle Sookie.

Or any client—for that matter!

Desmond Cataliades tore his gaze from Sookie. “She? *She* is the telepath? I was expecting a demon hybrid. I wasn't expecting . . .” His mouth gaped again.

A growl was heard behind Sookie, a growl that seemed to echo around the club as its maker moved in front of her charge. “Are you a threat to this woman!” the petite vampiress demanded.

The demon began shaking his head quickly. “Of course not, Thalia! It's just that,” he looked at Eric, “you didn't include her name with the paperwork.”

“As I told you before, that omission was to keep her identity a secret for as long as possible,” the Viking said, still confused at the demon's reaction. For his part, he'd moved to stand next to Sookie, who had reached out to take his hand and who was obviously worried about the reactions of all the Supernaturals in the room.

“Now—just what the hell is causing your behavior to my . . .,” Eric paused and looked at Sookie.

“Just *his*,” Sookie emphasized, looking up at him. Despite the tension between Thalia and Cataliades, Eric and Sookie shared a moment and a knowing look, which marked the significance of Sookie accepting Eric’s claim of her in a public way.

“Mine,” Eric agreed matter-of-factly before looking back at the demon, whose lips momentarily retook their round shape.

Mr. Cataliades shook his head a little as if waking himself from a daydream. “I am sorry. I just” Again, he pierced Sookie with his yellowish-green eyes. “You look exactly like your grandfather.”

CHAPTER 39: LOVE COMING DOWN

*I know now how it feels to be afraid
I don't know what I'd do if you go away
This would sure be one lonely old town
For a man's so busy going up in the world
That he couldn't see love coming down*

— Songwriter: Mark Chesnutt

“You knew Granddad Mitchell?” Sookie asked about the only grandfather she’d ever known.

“No,” Desmond Cataliades answered with a shake of his head, his expression paling noticeably.

“Oh!” Sookie said with understanding. Her mother’s father had died of pneumonia before Michelle Stackhouse had walked her first step, but that didn’t mean that the demon attorney hadn’t known him. “I forget that Supes can be older than they look. Did you know my mom’s dad, Jack Morningside?” Sookie asked, using the name she’d rarely had an occasion to say.

“Figures that she’d have kin with *that* name,” Pam snarked from behind the bar, where she’d been watching the action like it was a tennis match.

“I did not know Mitchell Stackhouse or Johnathan Morningside,” Desmond said in a low tone.

Sookie’s eyes widened – as did Eric’s.

“I – uh – I’ve only ever heard my mom’s dad called *Jack*. How – uh – *why* would you say Johnathan?”

“I helped your grandfather run a background check on Michelle Morningside when she became engaged to his son,” Desmond returned.

“Why would Granddad Mitchell do that?” Sookie asked with curiosity – and more than a little confusion. “And how would he know you? And why did you say you didn’t know him a second ago?” she continued questioning him.

The demon looked at Sookie helplessly for a moment and then gestured toward a table. “We *should* sit for this,” he emphasized as his gaze turned to Eric, his eyes almost pleading with the vampire to allow them a moment of reprieve to reshuffle. “Better yet, we should speak – in private,” he rethought, glancing at Pam and then Thalia.

To his credit, the demon seemed to know better than to ask Eric to leave.

However, Thalia growled and planted her feet, clearly not liking the idea of leaving her charge.

“I will not harm her,” the demon assured calmly. “Indeed, I make the vow to my forebears,” he added loudly and with formality.

Immediately, the air in the room seemed to get hotter as if an oven had been momentarily opened to it.

Sookie gasped.

“A demon oath,” Eric said for her benefit even as he squeezed her hand. “From this point on, he would be struck down before he could harm you,” the vampire added, looking at the demon with curiosity. “Such oaths are rarely taken, for they are permanent.”

“Okay?” Sookie said confused, even as she noted that the air had gone back to normal.

Eric looked at his child. “Has Fangtasia been swept for listening devices this evening?”

She nodded. “Of course. And even if some were missed, the witch, Amelia, created this privacy spell.” She held up a Tupperware container.

Sookie couldn’t help but to laugh at the object. “Do all witch spells come in Tupperware?” she asked, thinking of the containers that had held her food in a stasis spell the night before.

Eric chuckled at her reaction. “Not all of them. But—to be honest—Tupperware is a convenient conveyance for transporting a privacy spell. Once the lid is lifted—the room where it sits will *seem* to be silent to anyone listening from outside of it; moreover, surveillance devices will also be useless. I’d second-guessed ordering it, thinking I was being overly cautious to have it; now it seems the device is fortuitous.” He gestured toward Thalia and Pam. “We will go to my office since the privacy spell will last longer in the smaller space. You two stay here.” He glanced at the demon before looking back at Pam. “If you sense that I need you through the bond, do not hesitate. And bring Thalia.”

Pam nodded, and – though Thalia looked very unhappy about letting her charge out of her sight, given the demon’s odd behavior – she did not move to follow when Eric guided Sookie toward the back of the club after Pam had tossed her maker the Tupperware, an action which caused another nervous giggle from the telepath.

The demon followed them pensively.

Eric motioned for Mr. Cataliades to enter the office first and then motioned for him to sit. The attorney quickly squeezed himself between the arms of the chair and placed his briefcase at his feet before pulling an already damp-looking handkerchief out of his pocket. As Eric closed the door and guided Sookie to the couch – where they could sit next to one another – the demon tried to sop up the sweat that was dripping from his brow. When it became clear that his small handkerchief wasn’t up to the task, he pulled a not-so-small towel from his briefcase.

“Sorry. The oath takes quite a bit of magic, and I am only part-Dae,” he said a little winded, though managing an apologetic tone.

Eric made a show of opening the Tupperware.

Again, Sookie noticed a change in the air as the magic filled it; she’d noticed a similar – though smaller – “feeling of magic” the night before when she’d taken her food from the container Christa had delivered it in.

“Desmond, what the fuck is going on?” Eric asked, using the demon’s first name, which he only uttered when the two were alone. For him to use it in front of Sookie signaled to the demon that the vampire intended to hide *nothing* from the woman at his

side – not even little insights into his relationships with others that were not known even by his own child.

It took Desmond a moment to take in that unexpected turn of events. “I am sorry for my reaction, Eric,” the demon apologized, still sopping up sweat. “I was surprised – *shocked* even – when you walked into Fangtasia, dear,” he added, looking at Sookie with a kind smile.

The Southern woman was used to older gentlemen using endearments with her, and – since the demon’s endearment held no *double-entendre* (a word she’d learned from her trusty word-of-the-day calendar) – she wasn’t bothered by it. What did bother her was why the demon seemed so interested in her.

“*Why* were you surprised?” she emphasized pensively. The look in the demon’s eyes told her that she wasn’t going to like what he had to say. Goodness knows she’d been trying to pry his thoughts from his brain, but all she was getting was static.

Until.

A thought shot into her own mind like an arrow.

“*Are you with the vampire by choice?*” Mr. Cataliades’s voice rang in her head – clear as an unwelcome bell. “*If not, simply shake your head, and I will help you escape him during the daylight hours tomorrow.*”

“What? No!” Sookie responded aloud – and loudly – as she jumped to her feet. “I mean – yes! I *am* with Eric by choice! And where the hell do you get off goin’ into my head like that! Stop it! Or this meeting ends right now!”

Eric's fangs clicked down as he stood next to Sookie. "What happened?" he demanded.

Mr. Cataliades actually looked relieved and leaned back into his chair, still sopping his brow. "I projected to Miss Stackhouse in order to make sure she was yours by choice. I offered to rescue her from your clutches during the day tomorrow if she was not," he added with a playful twinkle in his eyes.

Eric growled. "What the fuck, Desmond?!?"

The demon shrugged. "I did not wish to take her *now*; that's why I would have waited until tomorrow. I would truly have hated having to harm you to save her, Eric – even though I would have *had* to place her needs above yours in this case," he added casually. "Of course, if I needed to take her with me now, I would have tried. Nargal would have been angry to have to go against you; he does so enjoy sparring with you when he's in the realm." The demon moved the towel to mop on the back of his neck. "Plus, he hates it when I call him to this realm with no notice; of course, I wouldn't have stood a chance against you without his help," he rambled. "Not with Diantha outside; I cannot call her like I can my brother, you know," he said conversationally.

"What the F?" Sookie demanded, echoing Eric's question. "What's a Nargal? And what the hell gave you the audacity to say – *think* – stuff like that at me!?"

'Audacity' had not been from her calendar; she'd learned that one because Gran had always used the word when scolding Jason.

“Nargal is my half-brother – a full demon. And – for the record – I *am* truly sorry, dear. However, I am your guardian, so – you see – the task of looking out for you *is* mine,” the demon shared.

Sookie sat down quickly – and heavily – with Eric following.

“Guardian? Explain!” the vampire ordered, even as Sookie yelled out, “Guardian! What do you mean?”

Again, the demon’s face held a look of apology. His gaze took in Sookie’s face before moving to the entwined hands of Eric and the telepath. He could not help but to marvel at the relationship that clearly had formed between them. He shook his head and refocused on the eyes of his previously unknown charge.

“I must begin by telling you about something that occurred more than half a century ago,” the demon started. “Only then will you understand.”

Sookie frowned, but motioned for him to go on.

“Give the abridged version,” Eric ordered, feeling Sookie’s impatience and confusion in their blood tie. He did not like that she was so disconcerted. It made him feel the same.

Desmond nodded. “I will try to be quick. I regret that the story begins with information you may find troubling, dear.” He sighed. “The man you knew as your grandfather on your father’s side, Mitchell Stackhouse, was not your biological grandfather.”

“What?” Sookie gasped. “Wait! You *aren’t* tryin’ to tell me that Gran was” Her voice trailed off when she couldn’t bring herself to say aloud the word she was thinking: “unfaithful.”

“Your grandmother, Adele, was twenty-two years old when Fintan Brigant, my closest friend and ally, first spied her. She captivated him.”

“Brigant,” Eric whispered, his eyes widening.

“Yes. One of the twin sons Niall had with his human wife,” the lawyer confirmed to the vampire, who knew well the Brigant name.

“What is it?” Sookie asked, having sensed the tension rise in the vampire next to her.

“He just confirmed that you are part fairy – and part of the Fae *royal* family,” Eric said softly, squeezing Sookie’s hand comfortingly.

Sookie looked back at the demon. “Keep talking,” she said after a few seconds of trying to re-ground herself in the moment – in *her* reality and not in some kind of odd Disney movie.

“Fintan – Finn as I called him – was enthralled by Adele. And he enthralled her as well,” Desmond conveyed.

“Gran wasn’t like that!” Sookie charged. “She wouldn’t!”

Desmond sighed. “Any human woman would have succumbed to Finn; he had the Fae ability to captivate. Generally, he could control that ability, but he could not do so around Adele; from first sight, she enraptured him. You see – she was his *Charmaleé*.”

“His what?” Sookie asked.

“*Charmaleé*,” Eric echoed. “For humans, the closest translation is *half-soul mate*.”

Desmond nodded sadly. “Yes.”

“Half?” Sookie asked with confusion.

“It happens when a fairy finds a perfect mate for himself or herself, but that mate could never return the same kind of affection. It is an inequality of love that no time could ever change and no magic could ever alter. Finding one’s own soulmate is a rare enough undertaking as it is,” Desmond explained. “To find it, but to have no hope of reciprocation is a tragedy. Arguably, a curse much more than a blessing.” He shook his head sadly.

“Wait. How would Finn have been able to tell all that from first sight?” Sookie asked, unconsciously glancing at Eric.

A look of understanding – almost revelation – came to Desmond. “Fairies are one of the few kinds of creatures who can know in an instant if they have found their *Charmaleé* or their *Charmali*, which is a full soulmate. They sense them with their light.”

“Light?” Sookie asked.

“The magic that animates them.”

“Fairy spark,” Eric commented.

“The light is a component of the spark all fairies have. It is what takes them to the Summerlands when they pass from their corporeal bodies. It is also what can allow them to become angels,” the demon explained for Sookie’s benefit. “It helped Finn to know his other half in an instant.”

“But he wasn’t *her* other half?” Sookie asked, still a little confused. “How is that possible?”

Desmond sighed and shrugged. “It happens sometimes – especially when one has a twin, as Finn did.”

Sookie felt herself becoming sad for Fintan, and the vampire next to her gripped her hand just a bit tighter in comfort and support.

“Finn despaired when Adele was drawn to him like a moth to the flame – not because she truly wanted him – but because she was enthralled by his allure,” Desmond continued. “He went against his instincts to have her right then and there; instead, he came to visit me in New Orleans. There, he asked that I investigate Adele, and I did. I ventured to Bon Temps, and,” he glanced at Eric, “using my telepathy, I learned much of what there was to know about both Adele and her husband, Mitchell.”

“You are telepathic?” Eric questioned.

Desmond nodded in confirmation. “That is information not many are privy to.”

“I understand,” the vampire said with a nod. Despite his own long-term friendship with the demon, that information had not be shared. The vampire rightly guessed that Desmond had spilled that particular bean because Sookie sat by his side. He was also beginning to suspect that Sookie’s own telepathy might be related to Desmond’s, though he held his questions and waited for the demon to continue – willing to allow his old friend to tell his tale in the manner in which he thought best. At least, for the moment.

Desmond looked at Sookie with a softened expression. “Your grandmother was beautiful, but there was a sadness to her as well, for she longed to become a mother. She and her husband had tried for a while before Mitchell learned that he could not father children because of a disease he’d had as a child. After speaking with Finn about what I’d learned, he asked me to present a proposition to Adele and Mitchell.” He raked his round fingers through the thinning hair on his round head.

“What proposition?” Sookie asked.

Desmond sighed. “Finn had too much honor and — yes — *love* for your grandmother to present his offer in person, for he did not trust that he could control his allure around Adele or Mitchell, given his feelings for her. Even if he just presented his idea to Mitchell — without Adele there — he worried that his own desires would transfer to the man, so I was tasked with presenting Finn’s proposition.”

“What proposition?” Sookie repeated, this time impatiently.

“Finn wished for *time* — time with Adele. Specifically, he requested one week per year for ten years. During that week, Adele would live as his wife, and — in return — Finn promised two children,” Desmond said, wiping a tear from his eye. “I told Finn that such time would only hurt him. However, he would not be talked out of attempting to make the deal. For their part, your grandparents denied him at first, though thoughts from both of their heads told me that they were tempted by the idea of children. The Gods help me — I preyed upon that desire. And then I told them the other part of Finn’s plan.”

“What part?” Sookie asked.

The demon sighed. "I told them that magic could be used to cover up Mitchell's memory of the deal entirely. However, Finn asked that Adele be allowed to remember him and *all* that had passed between them – but *only* when they were together – during their week. Other than that, Mitchell and Adele would truly believe the children were theirs, and they would experience no strife due to infidelity. I left them my card. It was three months later that they contacted me to agree to the proposition."

Sookie was shaking her head in denial. "Gran would never . . ."

Desmond interrupted gently. "*Never* is a long time, my dear. From what I could discern, Mitchell had to talk your grandmother into accepting, but accept she did." He paused for several seconds as if losing himself in his memories. "Adele and Finn spent their weeks together in a house I own on the Gulf; everyone in Bon Temps, including Mitchell, believed that she was visiting a cousin each year." He paused. "From Finn's first visit with Adele, your father, Corbett was produced. From his third, Linda was conceived." He patted down his neck with his small towel again. "Finn became a shell of himself once his tenth week with her was over. He watched her and his children from afar, but never approached her or them – as was part of their agreement." His eyes took on a faraway look. "I knew them as a couple – your grandmother and Finn. Adele, when with Finn, really did come to love him in a way, though she remained affected by his allure to a certain extent. Finn could not prevent that. He was haunted, however, by the fact that her affection stemmed from her pity for him. You see – I told Adele and Mitchell *why* Finn was so enamored with Adele. I explained the concept of

the *Charmaleé* to them. Adele had a," he paused, "very compassionate heart, so when she was with Finn, she tried not to hold back with him."

"And when she wasn't?" Sookie asked.

"As I said, she did not remember Finn at all when they were not together. She and Mitchell also did not remember that Mitchell couldn't father a child. For fifty-one weeks of the year – at least for the first ten years after the deal was struck – they both believed to their core that the children belonged to *both* of them. It was only ten weeks total that Adele *knew* Finn – knew the father of her children. After those weeks were spent, she had no remaining memory of him. Mitchell and your grandmother were," Desmond sighed, "happy and very much in love with one another."

"And Fintan?" Sookie asked.

"He contented himself with watching over your family from a distance. And, not able to do anything else, he made it his aim to ensure that the Stackhouse family remained unknown to the Fae world, which had become dangerous for hybrids by then. However – unbeknownst to him – he had already made what turned out to be a grave error."

"What error?" Sookie asked.

CHAPTER 40: MAKE ME KNOW IT

You say you wanna hold me

And stick to me like glue

Well hearing's deceiving

And seeing's believing

Make me know it do

– Songwriter: Otis Blackwell

Mr. Cataliades looked down, his whole body slumping forward. In that moment, Sookie wondered if he might circle his round body completely – like a roly-poly or an armadillo.

When the demon looked back up, his eyes were filled with pain and rimmed with tears. “Finn trusted his twin brother, Dermot, with the secret of his love for Adele – at least part of it. He and Dermot were – at one point – extremely close. Dermot happened upon Finn not long after he had completed his second week with Adele; Finn was despondent, and Dermot offered comfort – a sounding board. Still, Finn did not share everything. He told Dermot only that he’d found his *Charmaleé* and that he’d spent a week with her the year before. He spoke about his son, but he did not tell Dermot about the deal he’d struck to see Adele multiple times. He worried that

Dermot might interfere – either preventing Finn from continuing the bargain or interfering with your grandmother’s life – in *his* way.”

“What was *his* way?” Eric asked.

“Less honorable than Finn’s,” Desmond responded flatly. “Finn knew full well that Dermot was *fully* capable of removing any impediment that stood in Finn’s way – anything that interfered with his brother’s happiness.”

“Grandpa Mitchell?” Sookie gasped.

Desmond nodded and then frowned deeply. “Finn regretted telling Dermot anything about Adele almost immediately. To make sure that Dermot didn’t get any misguided and violent notions about how to help him, Finn convinced Dermot that he would get over his sorrow and move on – that it was better if he did so. Indeed, he told Dermot about his decision to marry a full-blooded fairy. He also shared his intention of being faithful to that fairy. And he was – except for eight more visits with Adele.” The demon’s expression darkened. “It was many years later that Dermot shifted alliances and told his new master, Niall’s brother Rogan, about Finn’s affair and son. Because Finn did not tell Dermot everything, your father’s was the only life taken – when Rogan ordered the assassination.”

Sookie’s mouth gaped in shock, and Eric pulled her to him in comfort.

“Assassination?” Sookie whimpered.

“Yes. Rogan sent his favored assassins, Neave and Lochlan, to murder your father. Luckily for you, Finn was able to stop the malefactors from learning anything else about his progeny.”

“How?” Eric asked as he pulled Sookie closer into his body.

“Finn was gifted in creating illusions. He was too late to save Corbett – and your mother. However, he was in time to produce an illusion for Neave and Lochlan. Because of that illusion, they believed that Corbett and his wife had no children. And they never learned of Linda or of her child, Hadley, either.” Desmond frowned deeply. “Expending that much magic weakened Finn. I wish to the gods he’d come to me until he could recover; instead, he went after Dermot to seek vengeance for the deaths of his son and daughter-in-law. Finn did not survive,” Desmond said, swiping many tears from his cheeks. After he died, the magic he’d used to cloak his human family’s existence from Niall lifted, so Niall knows about you. However, until tonight, I believed you would be of little to no interest to him.”

“Why until tonight?” Eric asked.

“A mistake on my part,” the demon sighed. “I had believed that none of Corbett’s lineage carried the spark of the Fae.”

“But Sookie does,” the vampire commented.

“She does,” the demon nodded. “Finn lied. He told me that neither of his children inherited his spark; he also told me that the children of those children were also lacking the spark of the Fae. I believe that keeping that information from even me was his last attempt to ensure Sookie’s safety. Had I known of her, Finn knew that I would have sought her out in order to make sure she was protected – and to make contact when she turned fifteen,” he added.

“Why then? Why wait?” Eric asked.

“Because of the one aspect of the deal between Finn and the Stackhouses that I’ve yet to tell you about,” Desmond sighed, the apology returning to his eyes.

“What aspect?” Sookie asked, even though Eric felt that she feared the response. He held her closer, pride surging at her courage to face whatever came. He also found himself longing for the ability to comfort her through a bond.

In that moment, the blood tie didn’t seem enough – not nearly enough – for the Viking.

“Finn had only one hesitation about fathering Adele’s children,” Desmond conveyed. “He worried that those children might inherit his fairy spark, though such an occurrence is by no means guaranteed in a one-quarter fairy. However, a spark can skip a generation. Indeed, with Finn, it skipped *two* generations.”

“But it skipped only one with Sookie,” Eric responded with a confused look.

“Yes. As I said, I did not know about Sookie before. However, I did know of the other individual in Finn’s line to inherit the Fae spark, Hadley’s son – Hunter,” Desmond relayed.

“Hadley has a child?” Sookie gasped.

Desmond nodded. “He is quite young, but I knew right away he had inherited Finn’s light, just as I saw it – as I *see* it – in you.”

Sookie’s mouth gaped at the news that she had a nephew.

The demon continued, “After Finn died, I vowed to examine subsequent members of his line – at least through his great-great-great-grandchildren – just to be sure they did not inherit his light. My investigators found out about Hunter two days

after he was born; I immediately checked to see if he had the spark. He did, so I arranged for a guard. One of Sophie-Anne's children, Andre, visited him once – not long before the child's first birthday – but that did not concern me too much since the boy was way too young to be displaying signs of his telepathy. However, when the guard scented that fairies had been nearby, I had the guard extract and hide Hunter and his father. Now, Hadley has no idea where they are, though I've tried to keep my ears open in case she shows sudden interest in reconnecting with her child."

"She hasn't yet?" Sookie gasped.

"No," Desmond returned sadly. "In fairness, I used magic to imprint memories into both Hadley, who was still human at the time, and Remy Savoy's neighbors."

"What memories?" Sookie asked.

"The recollection of Remy Savoy and Hunter leaving their small town because Remy had a good job opportunity up north. Later on, I learned that Hadley took the situation as a sign that motherhood was something she was never meant for."

"The queen knows about Sookie being a telepath; Hadley told her," Eric informed. "Indeed, a vampire – Bill Compton – was sent to procure her."

Desmond's eyes widened, and he growled. "I did not know that."

"Well – at least the queen did not openly advertise the fact that she had plans to procure a telepath," the vampire muttered.

"And Hadley must not have spoken about Sookie or her ability in open court,"

Desmond mused. "If she had, I would have known of her before now."

“What about Hunter?” Sookie asked with concern. “Andre might see him as a little potential telepath to use.”

Desmond frowned. “Even if Andre is thinking about that possibility, he hasn’t acted on it or sought out Hunter – not that he would be able to find him now.”

Sookie sighed with relief. “So he’s safe?”

The demon nodded. “As safe as I can make him. He and his father have new identities, and his father has a new name as well – since Remy Savoy is an uncommon name and could be too easily traced. Richard Jacobs and his son, Hunter, live in North Carolina. Remy – Richard – has a good job, and Hunter’s guard will contact me if there is a threat.”

Sookie nodded. “Okay. Good. That’s good. I don’t want anyone to try to procure him,” she added bitterly.

“Is Sophie-Anne an issue now – for you?” the demon asked Sookie, his hands rolling into fists as if he would kill the queen with his bare hands if she was a threat.

Sookie shook her head, even as Eric answered. “At this time, we do not believe so. Sookie’s going into business, her contract with me, and my official claiming documents for her were meant – in part – to deter any intentions Sophie-Anne may have had to force Sookie to become a member of her court.”

Desmond nodded. “Clever. The queen is neither overly cruel nor unwise; hiring Sookie on occasion will be seen as preferable to her compared to going to war with you.”

Eric nodded in agreement. "It seems clear that Andre put the queen up to trying to poach Sookie from my area; however, I don't think Sophie-Anne would have approved of taking Sookie's liberty. Compton was sent to," the vampire paused and looked down at Sookie, "woo her so that she would be willing and happy to accompany him to court. Sophie-Anne claims that she was trying to play match-maker, as opposed to trying to force Sookie's fealty."

"That sounds like the queen," Desmond conveyed.

Sookie spoke up, "Wait! A while ago, you said that you moved Hunter and his dad because fairies had found them! They weren't the ones that killed my mom and dad – were they?" she asked worriedly.

"No," Desmond assured. "The fairies were Niall himself, as well as one of his grandchildren, Claudine Crane."

"Niall's not a threat then?" Sookie asked.

"He would not be an intentional one," Desmond assured.

"Could – uh – others in the – uh – family find us – since Niall can find us?" she asked worriedly.

Desmond smiled with almost paternal pride. "Excellent question. Unless in an *official* guardian role – which would have to be arranged for by Niall himself – a fairy can only sense his or her kin if it is in a straight line of succession – in this case, from Niall to Finn to Linda to Hadley to Hunter. Finn's siblings, for example, would not have the ability to sense members of his line, nor would anyone else in Niall's family. I believe that Niall took an interest in Hunter because he, too, sensed the spark in him."

“Wouldn’t he just be able to find Hunter again then?” Sookie asked. “Why move him?”

“Another good question,” Desmond smiled. “The truth is that I cannot stop Niall from seeking out the boy, but – after moving Hunter – I contacted the fairy prince to ask him to avoid the boy for the time being, unless he was prepared to take over his protection.”

“And?” Eric asked.

“Niall expressed his desire to wait,” the demon responded. He looked at Sookie pensively. “I am sorry that I did not know you had the spark too, my dear. If I had, I would have asked his intentions regarding you as well.”

“I have no idea if he’s tried to make contact with me,” Sookie frowned. “For all I know, he’s come to Merlotte’s to eat.”

“I can project an image of him – if you’d like,” Desmond offered.

Sookie nodded. “Okay. And – uh – project the person you said went with him to see Hunter too.”

Desmond smiled and nodded. “Clever suggestion.”

Eric couldn’t have agreed more.

“I don’t know him,” Sookie said after a moment. “And someone with long, silver hair like that would definitely stand out in Bon Temps. I don’t know her either,” she said, shaking her head.

“Likely, he checked on you from afar – as he did with Hunter,” Desmond speculated. “It is probable that he is waiting for your spark to mature before actually approaching you – so that you can travel to Faerie.”

“Huh? My spark mature?” Sookie asked.

“That will occur when you are around thirty years old – give or take. At that time, you will become able to use any magic that you have inherited from your Fae kin, and you will be able to cross into the Fae realm if you so choose.”

“Magic,” Sookie gasped. “What?”

Eric tightened his hold upon her in order to provide comfort and support.

Desmond sighed. “The Brigants have several distinctive magical traits. Finn could teleport. And I have already told you about his ability to create illusory and concealment spells, as well as his allure. He also had the ability to transform any weapon held by an enemy into fairy dust. However, there are other family traits you might develop as well.”

“I can’t . . .” Sookie closed her eyes tightly. “I *really* can’t think about this right now,” she said almost pleadingly.

“This *is* a topic that can be put off for a while,” Eric soothed her.

“I never even thought to seek you out, Sookie, because Finn told me you had no spark not long after you were born,” Desmond said after a few silent moments. “Thus, I had no reason to suspect you had inherited my telepathy.”

“Yours?” Sookie muttered with confusion.

“As I said, Finn worried that the spark might be carried on, and he wished to arm any of his descendants who possessed it. To do this, he asked for a favor from me. Working with a witch named Octavia Fant, Finn developed a potion that would cling to Adele’s blood – to her DNA really. It would pass to her decedents, but lie dormant unless activated by a Fae spark.”

“And once activated?” Eric asked.

“The bearer of the spark would eventually develop the gift of telepathy so that he or she could better sense any danger that might come his or her way. According to the deal between Adele, Mitchell, and Finn, any child with the spark was to be told of his or her lineage and trained beginning on his or her fifteenth birthday.”

“Why wait?” Sookie managed to ask, even though she was quite literally stunned by the demon’s words.

“Fifteen was determined to be the age at which a child could keep the secret of his or her lineage – from Adele and Mitchell,” Desmond informed.

Eric’s fangs snapped down in anger. “But it was when Sookie was a young child that she *most* needed help with controlling and understanding her telepathy!” he seethed.

Desmond frowned. “Control it? But the telepathy was supposed remain latent – inactive – until you reached your fifteenth year. That is why I had no concern about Andre learning that Hunter was telepathic at so young an age.”

“It was never latent,” Sookie said, sounding a bit broken – *and a lot tired* – despite the new word she’d just added to her vocabulary. Normally, she would have given

herself a mental high-five for already using “latent” correctly in a sentence, but she simply didn’t have the energy to do so.

Desmond gasped. “But the spell was *very* specific about that! You were *not* to develop the gift until you turned fifteen!”

“The spell went wrong. My – uh – shields *did* get better around that time though,” Sookie said hauntedly. “Until then, I couldn’t really keep any thoughts out, though I had learned by then to be surer of what was a thought versus what was said aloud.”

The room was silent for a moment as Eric held Sookie tightly. He could feel her sorrow – and her bitterness. He couldn’t begrudge her either emotion.

“Child, you have every right to hate me for what I unintentionally did to you,” Desmond finally said, looking down in shame before looking back at Sookie and then Eric. “I offer reparations – either in blood or goods,” he said solemnly.

Eric shook his head. “She won’t take your blood – though I wish she would allow me to make you suffer, demon!”

“Eric!” Sookie said, placing her free hand onto his arm. The other was still holding his. “He’s your friend!” She sighed. “And he didn’t know. Fintan lied to him.” She looked at Desmond. “Speaking of my grandfather, why didn’t *he* help me with my telepathy? You said he kept an eye on us. Why didn’t that eye see that I was a telepath from the start – long before I turned fifteen? Why couldn’t that eye see that I was suffering?”

Desmond shook his head. "I don't know for sure. I do know, however, that Finn kept his distance, so he might not have known. And – even if he did – the agreement he made with your grandparents could *not* be broken because it was sealed in magic. You could not be approached until you were fifteen. He was likely biding his time until then."

"Why not tell you? Let you help me?" Sookie asked.

Desmond shook his head. "I am trying to figure out the answer to that question as well. I wish I knew why he did not tell me you had the spark. He would have felt it – even from a distance – as soon as you were born. Maybe he worried about letting anyone know – due to the rising unrest in Faerie. Maybe he knew about the spark but not the telepathy." The demon sighed. "I am sorry that I cannot give you all the answers you seek about him; however, I *can* tell you that he was a good man. He was flawed, but good."

The telepath shook her head. "What about Hunter? Is his telepathy already activated?" she asked.

"I don't know. But I will find out – now that I know about yours," Desmond said with regret in his tone. "His guard has no knowledge of anything regarding Hunter's background and no orders to contact me about anything – unless it concerns his safety."

"What kind of guard do you have for him?" Eric asked.

"A Britlingen," Desmond shared.

Eric nodded in understanding. "She would watch and protect only, but would show no initiative in doing anything beyond the specifics of her contract."

"Correct," Desmond said.

"How old is Hunter?" Sookie asked, her haunted tone back.

"He would be three now," the demon relayed.

Sookie shut her eyes tightly as if to shut out memories. "He will already be very confused about what he can do, but—if he can get help now—he won't remember much. Can his shields get—uh—activated early?"

"I will speak with Octavia," Desmond promised. "Regardless, he will not suffer as I can see that you had to suffer," the demon added with sorrow, even as he wiped a tear from his yellow-green eyes.

Sookie looked at Eric with uncertainty in her own eyes. "Do you still want to go into business with me? Do you still want . . . ?"

The vampire cut her off with a soft kiss. "I understand your need to ask, Sookie," he said after he ended the kiss. "But—please—do not doubt me."

"Okay," she said with a little smile before looking at the demon. "Do you have the contracts?"

The demon nodded. "They need only the addition of your name upon them. However, I feel obliged to tell you that if you should become known to the world at large, Niall's enemies may come for you."

Sookie sighed and looked up at Eric. "What do you think?"

“I think that Desmond’s retribution to you should be supplying you with a Britlingen guard of your own. Fairies would not get by Thalia – not that many would try. However, your two-natured guards could be outmatched by fairies such as Neave and Lochlan. I wouldn’t want to take the chance. I would simply get you one myself; however, you would probably kill me – *finally dead* – once you found out the cost of her.”

“How much?” Sookie asked with trepidation.

“Nothing I could not *and would not* afford,” the vampire assured. “But – if Desmond does it – then you will not feel guilty for having the guard.”

“How much?” the telepath asked again.

“It will cost less for a demon – since Britlingens prefer being paid with a mineral from the Dae realm. To keep a Britlingen guarding you for your lifetime, it would cost me about half a billion dollars,” Eric responded.

“Billion?” Sookie mumbled. “With a B?”

“Yes,” Eric responded.

“You’re that rich?” she followed up.

He chuckled and nodded. “I could afford several Britlingen guards for you before I felt it in my accounts. I told you that Pam could not even spend all of my several fortunes.”

Sookie shook her head. “You’re like Bill Gates rich!”

“Not quite that much,” he chuckled.

“I will arrange for a Britlingen to guard you immediately, my dear,” Desmond said after a moment. “It may take up to a week, however, to get her here.”

The vampire looked at Sookie. “You will let me double your day-guard until then?” he half-asked and half-pleaded.

“Yeah,” she agreed, reaching up and cupping his cheek.

Desmond reached into his bag and pulled out some parchment. His hand hovered over the document for a few moments. “Any changes to the contract or claiming document other than the ones specified earlier?”

“The stuff about turning,” Sookie said to the demon.

“Ah—yes,” Desmond said. “Eric mentioned you would have some limitations regarding who could turn you in case of emergency. Do you have a list of names?”

“Right now, it’s only Eric, Pam, Thalia, or Bubba,” the telepath stated. “And—even then—only if *they* are okay with it.” She looked up at Eric. “I’ll tell them—ask them—about it—okay? But no ordering or commanding them.”

“Okay,” the Viking assured with a kiss to her forehead.

Again, Desmond hovered a hand over the contract. “Is that all?”

Eric looked at Sookie, who nodded.

“We are ready to sign them,” the vampire informed.

“Wait. Shouldn’t we—uh—read them first?” Sookie asked. “After all, you did say that the queen was Mr. Cataliades’s main client. No offense,” she added, looking at the demon.

“None taken,” Desmond said, looking completely relaxed for the first time all evening. “However, in addition to my oaths, you should know that you will be my *priority* client from now on. And I—hereby—accept my duties *as your guardian* since Fintan is no longer able.”

Again, Sookie felt the air in the room stir as magic was unleashed.

“What exactly does that mean?” Sookie asked skeptically.

“Whatever you wish it to mean,” the demon said sincerely. “You have clearly chosen a path for both your professional and private lives, and I will not interfere, my dear; however, I hope to— one day — earn your trust to the point that you come to me if you need anything. And— if you are willing — I will speak with you about your telepathy in order to ensure that you understand all that you may do.”

“I won’t be able to start hearing vampires— right?” she asked apprehensively.

Desmond shook his head. “Our ability to hear the undead is sporadic at best.”

Sookie startled a bit, something the vampire did not miss.

“I heard you once,” the telepath confessed. “I heard Stan from Texas, too.”

“How horrible were my thoughts?” Eric asked with a smirk.

“You wanted to possess me— *really* bad,” Sookie shared with a little smirk of her own.

“Ah— just the usual then,” he winked at her. “Can you return tomorrow night, Desmond? That will give Sookie the opportunity to read the contract.”

“Wait,” she said, looking up at Eric. “He *can’t* be misleading us? No chance at all?”

“No chance,” the vampire confirmed. “He would, quite literally, be struck dead if he were.”

“Good enough,” the telepath said.

“Excellent!” Desmond exclaimed. “The sooner Eric’s claim is officially, the less worry. Also, would you mind if I had Diantha join Sookie’s guards until the Britlingen arrives?”

“That would be acceptable,” Eric responded.

“Excellent!” the demon enthused. He held out the rolled parchment. “Just touch these with your true intention,” he instructed Sookie.

“Huh?” she asked.

“No one can be forced to sign a Dae-originated contract,” Eric informed, even as he placed his free hand onto one parchment and then the other.

“So just touch it?” Sookie asked.

“Yes – if you are choosing freely to sign the contracts, the magic will do the rest,” the vampire assured.

Nodding, Sookie used her freehand to touch first one and then the second scroll.

Desmond closed his eyes for a moment even as Sookie – once again – sensed the presence of magic. “They are sealed,” he stated. “And – remember, Sookie – you can change the clause about being turned or null either contract any time you wish. However, if you are being forced or you are not completely sincere, then the change will not go into effect.”

“I understand,” Sookie nodded.

Desmond looked at the vampire and then back at Sookie. “Now – if it is permitted – I would like to speak with Sookie – for a few minutes longer. *But in private.*”

CHAPTER 41: MINE

Mine is a heart

That beats for only you

Mine is a love

That always will be true

For ever more

Beyond the end of time

I will be your love

Promise you will be mine

– Songwriters: Sid Tepper, Roy C. Bennett, & Camille Charles Saint Saens

Eric tensed, as did Sookie. “Anything you wanna say to me can be said with Eric here, Mr. Cataliades,” she said firmly.

Desmond was silent for a moment. “I believe that is true. Yet I still ask for a moment of privacy, Sookie. Perhaps, I do not deserve it—haven’t earned it—but I ask.”

Sookie looked up at Eric.

“It is your decision,” the vampire said. “But I have known him a long time; the demon is trustworthy.”

The telepath took a moment to consider. “Okay. I’ll talk to him. You’ll be able to feel it if I get too freaked out? Even through the privacy spell thing—right?”

“Yes, I will feel you,” the vampire assured. “But – even if I couldn’t – the privacy spell will dissipate quickly once I open the door.”

“Wait! You’re gonna project to me anyway?” Sookie asked the demon.

He nodded.

“Then Eric doesn’t have to leave for us to have privacy – now does he?” Sookie challenged.

“No – he doesn’t,” the demon said with a little smirk.

“Then he stays,” she said decisively. “But I’ll give you permission to project your thoughts to me.”

The demon nodded, his expression displaying something akin to pride. “You can project back as well.”

“Okay,” Sookie acknowledged, letting her shields fully drop.

“Ready?” Desmond asked.

She nodded, her nervousness causing Eric to squeeze her hand in support.

As soon as she dropped her shields, she began to hear the demon lawyer. “*You have the spark, Sookie. Tell me – do you believe that Eric is your soul mate – your Charmali?*”

Immediately, Sookie’s expression clouded with anxiety.

“Demon!” Eric said warningly, having felt Sookie’s distress.

“It’s okay,” Sookie said aloud. To Desmond, she thought, “*You don’t think he’s my half-soulmate thingy – do you? I mean – I don’t know anything about how all this works! How can I be sure?*”

"No – I do not think Eric is your Charmaleé," Desmond assured, emphasizing the final syllable of the word. *"However, I do sense your worry about this topic, which is why I wished to speak with you about it; I believe I can ease your mind. You see – I am an empath – in addition to being a telepath."*

"Oh – uh – did you not want Eric to know that? Is that why you wanted to speak with me without his hearing?" Sookie asked.

Mr. Cataliades shook his head. *"No. Indeed, now that your and Eric's lives are connected, I do not have an issue with his knowing about all of my abilities, my dear. So feel free to tell him. After all, the Viking will want to account for all of my skills being at his disposal – just in case."*

"In case?" she asked.

"In case he must go to war to protect you," the demon responded, his voice in her head soft and hesitant – as if he did not want to upset her. *"I don't think that will happen, but that doesn't mean that Eric won't wish to be prepared for every contingency. He will place me upon that gigantic chess board he keeps in that strategic mind of his,"* Desmond said, his tone now indicating his amusement. *"It is important that he knows I am more of a rook than a pawn. You may also assure him that my brother Nargal would come – if need be – to help to protect you."*

Sookie was a little taken aback by the offer. *"Uh – thanks."*

"You're welcome, my dear. As I said, I do not think an all-out war for you will break out. What I am worried about most in this moment is the anxiety I felt from you when the subject of a Charmaleé was discussed – especially as it befell Fintan."

"I was worried that kind of thing might run in the family," Sookie admitted pensively.

"It doesn't work that way," Desmond said with a twinkle in his eyes. "Perhaps, I can quell you fear."

"Quell?" she asked.

"Dissipate. Make it go away," the demon responded without judgment for her limited vocabulary.

She nodded her thanks. "Okay – well I'd appreciate all the help you can give me with the – uh – quellin'."

The demon smiled. "If you tell me what you felt upon first seeing Eric, I believe that I can help you confirm that he's your Charmali," he offered.

"Okay. Well – when I first saw Eric – I was shocked a little. I mean – he's beautiful, but he also had this presence that was captivating. Part of me felt like I'd been hit by lightning," the telepath answered honestly. "But – then again – it seemed like everyone at Fangtasia was havin' the same reaction to him. Plus, I tried to pretend I hadn't felt anything at all since Bill was there. And – of course – Bill's blood helped with that. At least, I think it did."

"You had Bill Compton's blood?" Desmond asked inhaling deeply and then growling. "When? Did he force you?"

"It's a long story," Sookie sighed.

"Show me then," Desmond suggested.

"How?" Sookie asked.

"Just think the memory at me, and I'll see it," he instructed.

Sookie closed her eyes and thought about the night she'd met Bill – the night she'd "saved" him from the Rattrays. And then she thought about the night that the "Ratts" attacked her. Finally, she recalled the part of her Friday-night conversation with Bill when he'd confessed to glamouring the "Ratts" to attack her so that he could get his blood inside of her.

"I'll kill him," Desmond growled, his fists clenching.

"Get in line," Sookie chuckled. *"And – anyway – Eric banished Bill from Area 5, and I banished him from my life. If he tries to enter **either** again, Eric's gonna take care of him, and I'm not gonna care how he does it!"*

Desmond nodded and unclenched his fists. *"So – Bill's blood may have affected your first meeting with Eric."*

Sookie shrugged, but nodded.

"Yet you still felt something when you first saw Eric?" the demon asked.

Sookie nodded in affirmation. *"A **lot** of something. Could I just project that memory to you too?"* she asked.

"It would not work. I would not be able to feel the power of what you felt then," he returned with regret.

She sighed. *"I know I felt something – something big. I guess it really doesn't matter if Eric's my soulmate though. What I feel – whatever it's called – is more than enough."*

The Demon smiled softly. *"Though I am empathic, I lack the ability to sense the presence of soulmates, for that is more complex than simple emotions,"* Desmond conveyed. *"But I can sense that there is **great** love between you and Eric. Something stronger – from the*

both of you – than I commonly feel from mates. I believe you recognized him as yours at first sight – though you would have had no way of knowing what was happening.”

“Wait. I thought you said my magic wouldn’t kick in until my fairy spark matured,” she challenged.

“The magic that connects the souls is innate, so it is not limited by your age.”

*“Is there any way to be absolutely, 100% positive that what Eric and I have is **not** one of those one-sided soulmate things?” Sookie asked pensively.*

Desmond nodded. *“As an empath, I felt Finn’s emotions after he met Adele; his emotions were a jumble of love and sorrow because of the Charmaleé. I feel no such conflict in you. In addition, I feel Eric’s love for you. It is,” he paused, “unrelenting, something which I believe could indicate that his soul is matching yours – a love for a love.”*

“Love,” Sookie whispered the word even in her own head.

“Your love for him is deep, my dear, and it is not conflicted as Finn’s was for your grandmother. You should trust your love for him – Charmali or not.”

“I know. I do. And – uh – thanks,” Sookie thought sincerely. “To be honest, there would have been a time when I would have doubted my feelings because I’ve had Eric’s blood. And I would have likely let those doubts make me miserable,” she added critically.

Desmond glanced at the vampire warrior. *“I have known Eric for almost a century. I choose my friends and alliances carefully, and I’ve never regretted choosing him for one. I am sorry I upset you earlier – by offering to take you from him. You must understand – the idea of a fairy and a vampire being together – the idea of a vampire claiming a fairy hybrid as Eric has*

tonight” He paused for a moment. *“Well – it was a foreign notion to me and one that took me by surprise. I worried he might have glamoured you.”*

“I can’t be glamoured,” Sookie shared.

Desmond smiled widely. *“Ah – excellent! I worried that part of the telepathic gift might have been lost – since the spell was not 100% effective. Rest assured that – after witnessing your closeness and your emotional connection with the Viking – I will do nothing to interfere with your relationship. On the contrary, I will do all that is in my power to protect it – since it clearly means so much to you. I have known you only a little while, and I can already tell that you are special. And I can attest from experience that Eric is worthy of you – though your Fae kin might beg to differ.”*

“I know he is,” Sookie said aloud, even as she squeezed Eric’s hand. *“And any Fae kin that don’t like my choices can kiss my derriere!”* she added telepathically.

“Good!” Desmond said aloud, rising. *“I really hope that we can get to know each other, Sookie. I see much of Finn in you, and he requested that I be your guardian – a godfather of sorts – should anything happen to him.”*

“Wait!” Sookie said, causing the demon to sit again.

“Yes?” he asked.

“I’m beginning to understand the reasons why Fintan Brigant couldn’t have relationships with my family.” She gestured to the air around her with a swirl of the hand not holding Eric’s. *“I’ve felt the magic that binds Supes to their oaths. But I need to know something. Would you or Fintan’s dad have ever had *anything* to do with any of us – my brother, my cousin, her little boy, or me – if none of us had the spark thing?”*

The genial look that had been covering Mr. Cataliades's face faded. "No."

"And do you have any interest in my brother or Hadley?" Sookie asked.

"No," the demon repeated, though he looked slightly ashamed for his response.

"Would your offer to be my godfather stand if I wasn't a telepath? If I didn't have the fairy spark?" she asked, barely audibly.

The demon could only shake his head in the negative.

Sookie sighed. "I appreciate your help and your honesty, Mr. Cataliades, so I feel like I need to be honest with you. It's cool that you're getting me a Britlingen guard. I appreciate that you're sending your niece to help out till she gets here. I appreciate that you're protecting Hunter too. And thanks for tellin' me the truth about my family. Oh—and if Eric ever wants to call you in for any legal stuff or because we need to use the guardian thing for any strategic reason, then we'll do that. But I don't see us gettin' to know each other beyond that—at least, not anytime soon. Even if I were *only* human, I'd still have Fintan's blood in me—just like my brother and Hadley do. *That* should have been enough to warrant a visit from you or my fairy great-grandfather after Fintan passed. Because it didn't—well" Her voice trailed off as she gripped Eric's hand tightly.

For his part, the demon looked crestfallen but nodded. "I will follow your lead then. And I will ensure that you have updates on Hunter so that you can see him if you wish."

“I’d appreciate that,” Sookie said softly as the demon nodded to Eric and then bowed in Sookie’s direction. Somehow managing to make no noise as he moved – despite his large body – the demon left with his head hung low.

As soon as he was gone, the tears began to fall in large drops from Sookie’s eyes as the knowledge she’d gleaned about her family and the emotions she’d felt about it all caught up to her.

Eric brought her into his embrace and held her tightly.

And – as much as he hated her tears – he didn’t try to stop her crying them. Her emotional roller coaster throughout the last several days and nights was certainly enough to justify them.

Finally, Sookie looked up at him with sad eyes. “Thanks for still wanting to be with me and for still wanting to go into business together.”

He shook his head. “Not doing so was never a thought.”

“Well – we wanted an uncomplicated time. Guess we’re not gonna get that – huh?”

He chuckled. “It doesn’t look like it. Would you like for me to contact Niall? I have my own ways of doing so – around Desmond.”

Sookie shook her head. “I want some time to get my head around everything before I even consider that. And – honestly – I’m leaning toward a big fat ‘no’ anyway. If I didn’t have a spark, he wouldn’t want anything to do with me either.”

Eric sighed. "I understand your perspective, Dearest One. And I'm not going to try to talk you out of your viewpoint about Desmond and Niall, but they are both steeped in very similar notions about family ties."

"Niall had kids with a human woman. I don't understand why he'd ignore his human kin or *their* customs about family. And Mr. Cataliades *is* part human, so he should know better too." She shook her head. "And – beyond all that – it's gonna take me a while to come to terms with the deal that Gran and Grandpa made with Fintan." She sighed loudly. "I guess Grandpa Mitchell's not really my Grandpa. I'm not even a Stackhouse," she added ruefully.

Eric lifted her chin and looked into her eyes. "Of course, you are. And – I believe that your grandfather is still as he always was – as you knew him to be. He believed himself to be your grandfather. It is he who raised your father and your aunt. It is he that loved such a woman as your Gran."

"Maybe Gran wasn't such a saint though," Sookie groused.

Eric shook his head. "Did you ever actually believe she was? In what you have said about her, she seemed headstrong and opinionated – stubborn."

Sookie gave him a glare. "Are you implying I'm like her?"

"Absolutely," the vampire said with a chuckle. "However, you also suggested that your grandmother was accepting, loving, devoted, and hardworking. Her fault seems to have been that she longed for a family more than she clung to her fidelity. The man who loved and married her was clearly also a good man. He – no doubt – understood how badly she wanted a family. And he sacrificed in order to share her –"

even knowing that he would not remember doing so.” He shook his head. “I will admit that I am too selfish of a creature to ever consider doing what he did.” He looked at her seriously. “Thus, Dearest, if you want children while we are together, you will have to either adopt them or do the artificial pregnancy thing. I could not bear to think of you conceiving a child with another,” he added, clearly upset at the notion.

Sookie could have taken his words as an order or a mandate regarding her reproductive choices, but she understood well where Eric was coming from. The thought of his being with someone else made her upset, too. Plus, she knew she wouldn’t want to conceive a child with someone she didn’t love.

“You don’t have to worry about that,” the telepath said with certainty. “I’m not at a place in my life where I’m thinkin’ about having kids.” She shook her head. “I might be like Gran in some ways, but being a mother was never something I yearned for to such extremes. It’s hard for me to imagine the lengths she was willing to go to. And I do feel sorry for Fintan – for Gran and Grandpa too.” She paused. “I will admit that I would have been a lot more upset if I’d learned that Gran *remembered* Fintan – if she’d held back that knowledge from me on purpose in order to protect the secret of her affair.”

Eric nodded in understanding. “Because that affair could have helped to explain your telepathy.”

Sookie nodded. “Gran was accepting of me – despite my,” she paused, “differences. And it’s comfortin’ to know that she wasn’t able to remember what might have made me that way. Plus, it seems that – to the best of their ability – Fintan, she,

and Grandpa Mitchell tried to protect any of their kids and grandkids that were born with a fairy spark – though I have my doubts that telepathy was the best way to do that.” She sighed. “They just didn’t know that the potion cooked up by Mr. Cataliades and Octavia wouldn’t work right.”

Eric could feel how tired Sookie was. “Shall I take you home?”

“I think Molly’s here to meet with me. I felt a baby void come in a while ago. And I already feel bad about making her wait,” Sookie said, wiping her eyes with her sleeve.

“She can come another night,” Eric responded.

“No. I’d *like* to meet with her tonight – to get the ball rolling on my Internet and my computer. It’s what I was excited about when I came here tonight – well, that and seeing you,” she blushed a little.

Eric smiled and then stood, before leading her toward a tiny private washroom that was attached to his office. She’d never even noticed it was there, probably because it was accessed by more of a panel than a door. Inside, there was a sink, a small shower, and some shelves with towels. Obviously added with a vampire in mind, the washroom held no toilet.

As if reading her mind, Eric said, “If you need to use the lavatory, you can use the one for employees. Pam says it’s better than the public one. However, I thought you might like to wash your face and freshen up before you meet with Molly.”

“Thanks,” Sookie said sincerely. “Will you go tell Molly I’ll be out in a minute? And make sure it’s convenient for her to stay – okay?”

Eric nodded in agreement, knowing that Sookie wouldn't be pleased if he simply ordered his subordinate to stay regardless of her convenience. Politeness was an attribute he would have to work on when it came to working with Sookie; asking Molly to stay – rather than telling her to do so – would be a start.

The vampire bent down to kiss Sookie's forehead in comfort.

She shook her head and pointed to her lips. "I need one here too."

Eric chuckled and did as requested, bending down further to press his lips against hers. Their kiss was soft – not exactly chaste, but not into the territory of making out either. The sweep of his tongue against hers was gentle. And hers answered in whispers as well. Still, she was breathless when she broke the kiss.

"Thanks," she smiled up at him. "I really needed that."

He nodded and left her to splash water on her face. He was not surprised in the least to see Thalia standing in the hallway, ready to guard her charge now that the demon was gone.

"Diantha?" she asked, her brow raised. "She didn't leave with her uncle; she's currently loitering outside – humming 'Bohemian Rhapsody.'"

Eric spoke in a low voice so that only she could hear, though he planned to give Pam the same information later. "Mr. Cataliades has a connection to Sookie and has a vested interest in her safety. Fairies were involved in her father's death. Diantha will be joining the guard detail for a while."

"So she is part-Fae?" Thalia half-asked and half-stated.

“She is the great-granddaughter of Niall Brigant, and he knows about her existence. It was Rogan’s henchmen, Neave and Lochlan, that murdered Corbett and Michelle Stackhouse. Niall’s enemies may not know of Sookie at this point, but – if they learn of her” His fists clenched.

Thalia nodded in understanding. “Even those two deranged fairies wouldn’t come after Sookie at night – not with vampires protecting her.”

“But during the day,” Eric said, “fairies might get around even the best of Were guards. So Diantha will help until the Britlingen Cataliades’s is hiring arrives.”

Thalia could not keep the surprise from her face. “A Britlingen? Will you keep the rest of us on then?”

Eric chuckled. “Don’t worry. You will keep your job as the Head of Security for Sookie. And the others will keep their places too. The Britlingen will answer to you. However, I want her to keep concealed for the most part; in fact, I want only Sookie’s closest guards to know about her.”

“So that potential enemies do not know about her either,” Thalia remarked with a smirk.

Eric nodded. “Yes – a secret weapon that cannot be foreseen by an attacker is a potent asset.”

“True,” the vampiress nodded, showing a little fang.

Eric left the hallway to quickly have a word with Molly, who was sipping a TrueBlood and tapping happily away at the keyboard in front of her. She took out her earbuds as Eric approached.

“We were delayed with Sookie’s contract, and she wishes to know if you still find it convenient to meet with her tonight. She will be ready soon,” Eric said.

Molly shrugged. “This is all I’ve got goin’ on tonight,” she said, swinging her legs back and forth in a very human-like movement – an action that reminded Eric of just how young she was as a vampire and just how young she’d been when she was turned. Indeed, he’d punished her maker – who’d turned her both against her will and prior to her eighteenth birthday (which had become the minimum age of turning in the decades leading up to the Great Revelation) – with the true death. Then – after learning of her propensity toward computers – Eric had tasked Maxwell Lee with fostering her. The young one had thrived and was extremely loyal to both her adoptive maker and her sheriff.

Pam was giving Eric a questioning look as he moved away from Molly, even as the young one put back in her earbuds. To appease his child, Eric took Pam to a corner of the bar and almost silently informed her of what was going on.

Pam’s reaction had been to laugh heartily. She’d – thankfully – come just short of congratulating Sookie for being the “best show on television” when the telepath had emerged from the office area.

Feeling her determination throbbing through the blood tie, Eric watched as Sookie introduced herself to Molly. The two quickly began talking about computers and the Internet, and Sookie’s excitement level rose as Molly started typing a list of things Sookie would need on her new computer, which the vampiress promised would be done within hours. Molly also said that she could pull together a “tech team” to get

Sookie up and running with Internet access the next night. After their conversation, Sookie was relaxed and even more excited as the two talked about the telepath's plans for school.

As he observed, Eric found himself extremely glad that Molly had stayed and even more impressed with Sookie than he'd already been. And that was saying a lot. He'd felt her emotional turmoil as Desmond had spoken with her – both out loud and telepathically. However, as upset as she'd been, she was coping and moving forward. Such determination garnered only respect from the Viking.

"You look like a lovestruck teen," Pam snarked in Swedish.

Eric gave her a sideways glance. "I am simply enjoying witnessing her blossoming, Pamela."

The vampiress looked at Sookie and nodded. "Yes. She is more confident than before – surer of herself. More comfortable in her own skin." She licked her lips with appreciation.

Eric rolled his eyes.

"Of course, that does not negate that you do look like a lovestruck teen," she challenged.

"Lovestruck – yes," Eric acknowledged.

"At least you admit it," Pam smirked.

With Thalia driving Sookie's car behind them, Eric drove Sookie home in his Corvette. She'd fallen asleep only five minutes into the trip. He nodded to Bubba, who was sitting on the porch, as he carried an un stirring Sookie toward the house.

"I'll get the door for you, Mister Eric," the younger vampire offered quietly.

The Viking nodded. "Any issues while we were gone?" he asked.

Bubba shook his head. "Nah. One of them Weres scared away somethin' I was hopin' would be my dinner, but — other than that — it's been quiet as a mouse out here."

Eric nodded again and continued his trek to take Sookie to her room. He laid her down gently.

"Don't go yet," she said groggily, reaching out a hand as soon as he'd turned to do just that. She opened her eyes a little. "Unless you need to."

"I don't," he said. "I was even so bold as to bring a duffle bag so that we could go directly to Fangtasia from here tomorrow — *if* you honored me with an invitation to stay in your cubby."

She chuckled. "That *was* bold, Mr. Northman. Here, give me a hand," she said as she sat up and then he helped her to her feet; clearly, she was still almost asleep on her feet.

"Just because I stay doesn't mean you have to stay awake," he assured.

"I just wanna put on comfy sleep clothes and brush my teeth," she said. "Then would you mind if we just — uh" She gestured toward the bed. "Would you mind just holding me till I fall asleep again? I'm sure it won't take long."

“I don’t mind,” the vampire assured. While she was going through her nighttime routine, he zipped to his vehicle to get his duffle and then zipped back to the room where the cubby was located. There, he also put on more comfortable garments—having made selections that he figured Sookie would view as “appropriate sleep attire”: a pair of lounge pants and a Fangtasia T-shirt. He was back in Sookie’s room, waiting in her bed, when she emerged from her bathroom.

She half-chuckled and half-yawned as she climbed in next to him. “Vampire speed is pretty darned cool.”

“It is,” he agreed as she laid her head onto his chest and snuggled into him. “I love how you’re cool,” she sighed, placing a kiss on his chest through his shirt.

“And I love how you’re warm,” he said as she drifted away from consciousness.

The End of *The Boot*

Cast

The wonderful Sephrenia has provided most of the cast banners! I supplemented other banners in order to "fill out" the cast. Banners are included for both featured & mentioned characters.



Figure 2: Alexander Skarsgård



Figure 3: Anna Paquin

Vampires

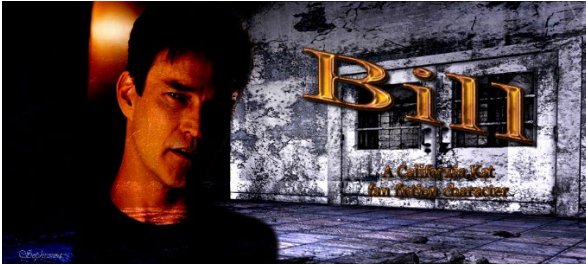


Figure 4: Stephen Moyer as Bill Compton



Figure 5: Margot Robbie as Karin (Isolde)



Figure 6: Summer Glau as Thalia



Figure 7: Kristin Bauer as Pam

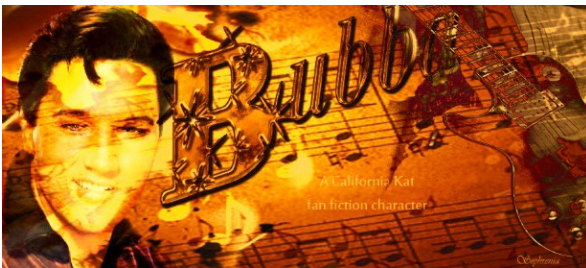


Figure 8: Elvis as Bubba (in my dreams)



Figure 9: Hiroyuki Sanada as Kenshin



Figure 10: Lauren Ambrose as Queen Sophie-Anne Leclercq



Figure 11: Lindsey Haun as Hadley



Figure 12: Paul Bettany as Andre



Figure 13: Clive Standen as Wybert



Figure 14: Clive Standen as Sigebert



Figure 15: Pierce Brosnan as King Russell



Figure 16: Elisabeth Shue as Betty Joe Pickard



Figure 17: Ralph Fiennes as Appius Livius Ocella



Figure 18: Skandar Keynes as Alexei



Figure 19: Mariana Klavemo as Lorena



Figure 20: David Krumholtz as Stan Davis



Figure 21: James Frain as Franklin Mott



Figure 22: Ryan Eggold as Maxwell Lee



Figure 23: Raoul Max Trujillo as Longshadow



Figure 24: Sonakshi Sinha as Indira

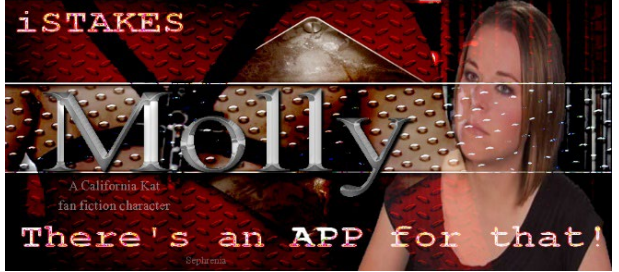


Figure 25: Tina Majorino as Molly

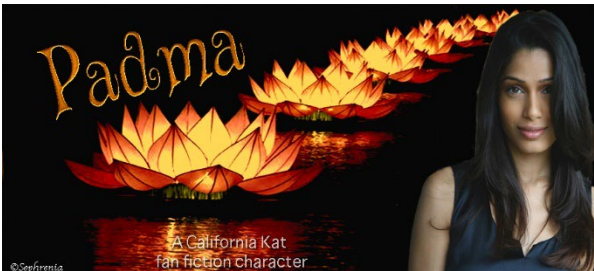


Figure 26: Freida Pinta as Padma



Figure 27: Norman Reedus as King Peter Threadgill

The Two-Natured



Figure 28: Joe Manganiello as Alcide Herveaux



Figure 29: Brit Morgan as Debbie Pelt



Figure 30: Sarah Shahi as Maria-Star

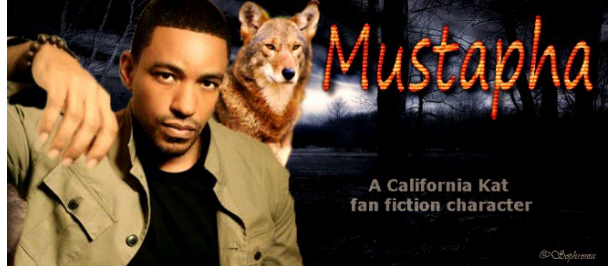


Figure 31: Laz Alonso as Mustapha



Figure 32: Karina Lombard as Onawa



Figure 33: Alexandra Daddario as Willow

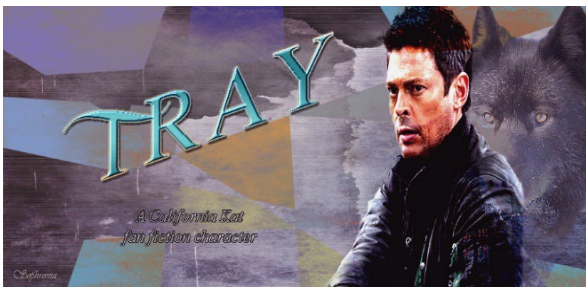


Figure 34: Karl Urban as Tray Dawson



Figure 35: Sam Trammell as Sam Merlotte



Figure 36: Viggo Mortensen as Colonel James Flood



Figure 37: Dermot Mulroney as Calvin Norris

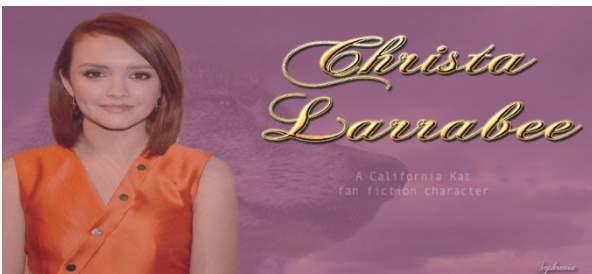


Figure 38: Olivia Cooke as Christa Larrabee



Figure 39: Robert Patrick as Jackson Herveaux



Figure 40: Linda Purl as Barbara Pelt



Figure 41: Steve Rankin as Gordon Pelt



Figure 42: Jennifer Lawrence as Sandra Pelt



Figure 43: Michael Cudlitz as Charles Clausen

DEMONS / the Dae

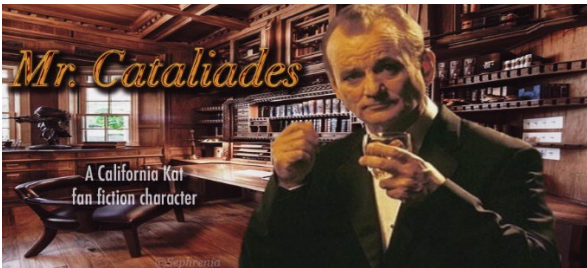


Figure 44: Bill Murray as Desmond Cataliades



Figure 45: Zoey Deschanel as Diantha

FAIRIES & Part-Fae

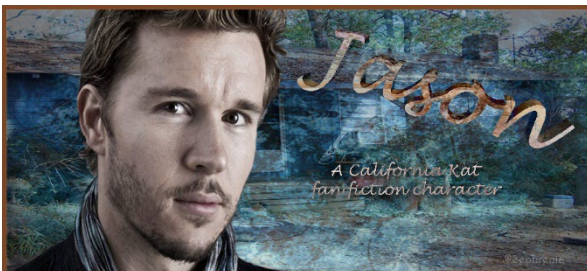


Figure 46: Ryan Kwanten as Jason Stackhouse



Figure 47: Liam Neeson as Niall Brigant



Figure 48: Gerard Butler as Fintan Brigant



Figure 49: Neil Hopkins as Claude



Figure 50: Max Charles as Hunter

WITCHES & WARLOCKS



Figure 51: Elliot Page as Amelia Broadway



Figure 52: Lisa Bonet as Octavia Fant



Figure 53: Gabrielle Anwar as Hallow

Other Supernaturals



Figure 54: Marcia deRousse as Dr. Amy Ludwig

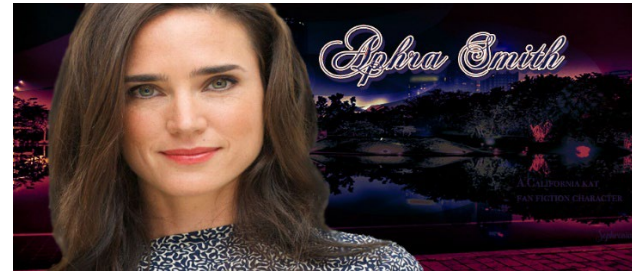


Figure 55: Jennifer Connelly as Dr. Aphra Smith

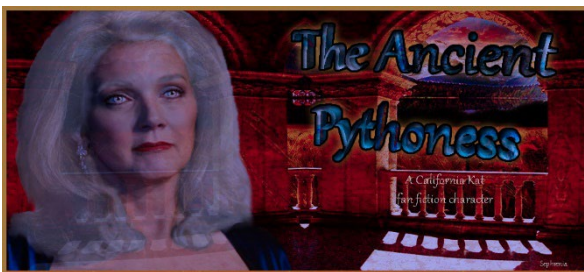


Figure 56: Lynda Carter as the Ancient Pythoness (Pythia)



Figure 57: Michelle Forbes as Maryann Forrester

Humans



Figure 58: Morena Baccarin as Tara



Figure 59: Edgar Ramirez as Warren



Figure 60: Lois Smith as Adele Stackhouse



Figure 61: Nelsan Ellis as Lafayette



Figure 62: Michael McMillan as Steve Newlin



Figure 63: Lauren Bowles as Holly Cleary



Figure 64: Carrie Preston as Arlene Fowler



Figure 65: Dale Raoul as Maxine Fortenberry



Figure 66: Lynn Collins as Dawn Green



Figure 67: Stephen Dorff as Remy Savoy



Figure 68: Michael Raymond-James as Rene Renier



Figure 69: Cheyenne Wilbur as Bartlett Hale

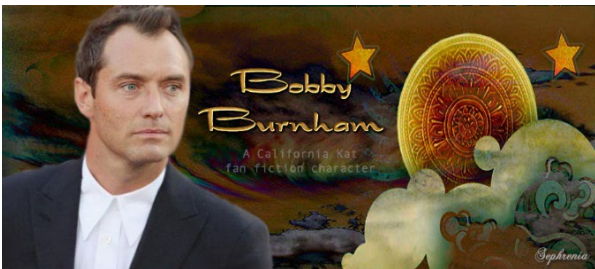


Figure 70: Jude Law as Bobby Burnham

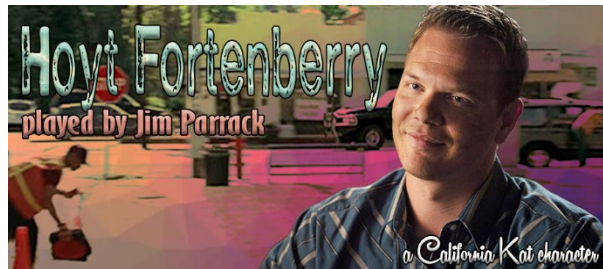


Figure 71: Jim Parrack as Hoyt Fortenberry



Figure 72: Todd Lowe as Terry Bellefleur



Figure 73: Theo Alexander as Talbot



Figure 74: Jeremy Sumpter as J.B. du Rone



Figure 75: Tara Buck as Ginger

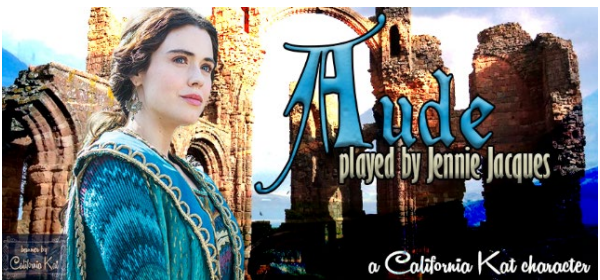


Figure 76: Jennie Jacques as Aude