



The Trunk

by California Kat

Part 1 of the Trunk Trilogy



Figure 1: Banner by Sephrenia

Story Description

Being thrown into the trunk by Debbie Pelt forced Sookie to the realization that there was no longer any time for her to put off answering the hard questions in her life. But will she have the opportunity to enact the epiphanies she makes while waiting for Bill to "wake up" in the trunk? And what of Eric? Will feeling Sookie's terror make him more or less regretful about the feelings he hates having?

Inspirations

This SHORT is different from my usual, as it was inspired by two wonderful readers: valady1 & ncmis12. Basically, I looked at their ideas and noticed that they were both set around the trunk incident in *Club Dead*. I decided to do a story beginning with that incident, based on SOME of their suggestions, though I did change certain things. I hope that both ladies are happy with the outcome. Below are the requests they made.

Request Number 1 (from valady):

I have at least one idea that I would like to see made into a short story. In Club Dead, the infamous trunk scene. Would love to see you write a story where Eric gets there in time to save Sookie (and if you want to have him accidentally off Bill, that would be a nice bonus).

Request Number 2 (from ncmis12):

Another idea if you are still looking for ideas. [According to one of your other stories,] if Bill had not raped her, Sookie would have broken up with Bill and allowed Eric to court her. So what if Sookie parked the car in the garage and just left Bill there in the trunk and did not look inside. Then Debbie would not have been able to toss her in. Instead she went to get some dinner and wait for Eric. Then Eric shows up and drives her home. That would be an interesting story, that I had not seen written!

Disclaimer

All publicly recognizable characters, settings, etc. are the property of their respective owners. No profit has been made from this work. The author is in no way associated with the owners, creators, or producers of any media franchise. No copyright infringement is intended. The events in this story have been inspired by *True Blood* and the *Southern Vampire Mysteries* book series.

TABLE OF CONTENTS



Chapter 01: Bridge over Troubled Water

Chapter 02: Forgot to Remember to Forget

Chapter 03: Barefoot Ballad

Chapter 04: Faded Love

Chapter 05: There's No Tomorrow

Chapter 06: All I Needed Was the Rain

Chapter 07: Gently

Chapter 08: Shake, Rattle and Roll

Chapter 09: Hound Dog

Chapter 10: Flip, Flop and Fly

Chapter 11: If You Think I Don't Need You

Chapter 12: It Ain't No Big Thing (But It's Growing)

Chapter 13: Pocketful of Rainbows

Chapter 14: Rip It Up

Chapter 15: Steamroller Blues

Chapter 16: It's a Matter of Time

Chapter 17: Alright, Okay, You Win!

Chapter 18: (Now and Then There's) A Fool Such As I

The Cast

THE TRUNK



Chapter 01: Bridge over Troubled Water

When you're down and out

When you're on the street

When evening falls so hard

I will comfort you

I'll take your part

— “Bridge over Troubled Water” (songwriter: Paul Simon)

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 12, 2004

To say that Sookie Stackhouse was freaked out was an understatement. She glanced nervously into the rearview mirror of the white Lincoln that Eric Northman had managed to get for her for the task she was carrying out.

She saw nothing suspicious — *except* for all the other cars around her. For all she knew — and given her luck — they were all full of people out to harm her!

“How do people in movies always know when they’re being followed?” she muttered to herself. “Is there a trick to knowing what cars really are suspicious?”

She scoffed and looked around. The large Lincoln Town Car she was currently driving actually looked “suspicious!” It was obviously pretty old – likely more than a decade past its prime, maybe even two. Heck! Even her little yellow “beater” had a CD player. The Lincoln had only a cassette player and dials that reminded her of the ones in the station wagon her parents had owned before their deaths.

The station wagon that had been washed away during a flashflood.

The one that became her parents’ first coffin.

Sookie shook off that sad thought for one much less emotionally charged. She wondered where Eric had managed to get the vehicle so late the night before.

Borrowed, stolen, or bought?

“Commandeered?” she asked as she glanced in the rearview mirror again – even more nervous than before.

If the car had been stolen and a police officer found her, she wondered how she could possibly explain the situation to him or her.

“You see, officer, a Viking stole this Lincoln for me so I could haul a Civil War vet from a king’s mansion. Oh – and please don’t open the trunk till dark. Otherwise, all the efforts I’ve put into my current mission will have been wasted. Thanks so much!”

She laughed at the absurdity of her own words – and at herself for saying them aloud – even as she glanced in the rearview mirror again. The Were who’d been at the

gate of King Russell Edgington's estate had seemed suspicious of her – or maybe he was still “cagey” from the fact that the full moon had been the night before. Either way, she felt as if she needed to be cautious.

Extremely cautious.

“In case of emergency, break glass” cautious!

After all, her life had been teaching her all kinds of lessons lately about being vigilant about her safety.

The stake in her gut had simply been the last.

But what if her shields hadn't been down before that incident? What if she hadn't been scanning the thoughts of others enough to pick up the thoughts of Steve Newlin and his crony as they planned to stake Betty Joe Pickard, Russell's second-in-command?

“Betty Joe would be dead,” Sookie answered her own question.

Of course, another good question was why she'd stepped in front of a stake meant for a stranger, a stranger affiliated with someone who was allowing Lorena to torture Bill in any old way she chose?

Maybe *that* was the question Sookie needed to answer *first*.

As affable as King Russell seemed, the truth was that the Were sent to kidnap her had had to come from somewhere.

Someone *ordered* him to come after her.

“Lorena must have tortured information about me from Bill,” Sookie reasoned.

“And then Lorena passed that information along to Russell. But do they know that

'Sookie Stackhouse' is a telepath? Or did they just think that I knew where Bill's computer thing was? Maybe my name's already out there in the Supe world because of the Dallas thing? It's not like there are many people who have the name 'Sookie.' Why couldn't I have a name like Mary Jones? And why the hell am I talking aloud to myself? Okay – screaming to myself?!?!” Sookie cried out as she slammed the palm of her hand against the steering wheel and once again looked in the rearview mirror.

In a moment of irony only God could have created, Elvis's rendition of “Bridge over Troubled Water” came on the only radio station she'd been able to tune into in the old car.

Sookie contemplated turning off the song, but – in deference to her friend – she resolved to keep it on, sparing Bubba a thought and hoping that he was okay.

Of course – *not* turning off the song was doubly difficult, as her parents had *literally* died because of a “bridge over troubled water.”

“Bubba would understand,” Sookie said as she looked at the radio console. Not seeing an off switch, she spun the volume knob counter-clockwise until the car was silent.

The negative of that silence, however, was that the events of the last few days hit her as hard as – well – as hard as Lorena had hit her just a little while ago.

“I killed her,” Sookie said to the car behind – a completely unsuspecting Toyota that still managed to make her paranoid because it had been following her for about a mile.

“Vampire blood,” she whispered, even as she stretched out her mind to try to capture the thoughts of the person behind her. Vampire blood had always helped her with her disability – whether it was in shielding her mind-reading so that no thoughts would come through or increasing her range.

Living in a rural area, Sookie didn’t often drive in anything that could be considered “traffic,” but speeding south on Interstate 55, she could hear the jumbles of many thoughts, whirling around her mind. In similar situations in the past (when she wasn’t driving), either she would simply let the inevitable migraine form and pray for sleep, or she would (once she had shields) raise her defenses as tightly as she could and pray that they would hold up.

She’d never actually *tried* to read a thought from another car.

At 65 miles per hour.

While driving.

“But vampire blood could help me,” she told herself, even as she was able to zero in on the thoughts of the man driving the car behind her.

“BAP!” came his thoughts. “BAP, BAP, BAP!”

“BAP?” she asked, even as she probed, wondering if distance and rate of travel were affecting her ability.

“Buns, apples, peanut butter!” the man said. “BAP! Don’t forget BAP! B. A. P.”

“A grocery list,” Sookie sighed with relief, even as she admired the man’s strategy for remembering the items his wife had told him not to forget at the store. She

even managed a little laugh as the man thought that “BAP” would be the sound of the ear boxing he’d get if he forgot what kind of apples his son liked.

Apparently, there was only one kind he would eat.

“Pink Ladies?” Sookie asked herself, never having heard of that kind of apple before, but thinking she might want to try it based upon the man’s recollections of it.

Of course, when the man’s thoughts drifted to a “pink” part on his own “lady,” Sookie quit listening immediately.

She’d once heard that men thought about sex every seven seconds. That simply wasn’t true – unless they were drunk or sitting in the middle of Fangtasia. No. In actuality – while men thought about sex more than women did – they didn’t do it nearly as often as one might think. However, when a man inevitably did switch to the carnal, Sookie knew to “switch off” the channel of his mind as soon as she could.

Because of her telepathy, she was in the unique position to *know* that no one needed to see men as they saw themselves mid-sex-act! And – *most definitely* – no one should be subjected to their thoughts as they remembered such acts. Having heard things like “one hole is as good as any other” or “it got better once we were doin’ it doggy style” had – understandably – made her pause when it came to relationships with men.

A vampire lover had seemed to be her salvation.

Once again, she looked in the rearview mirror. The vampire in question was currently resting in the trunk only a few feet away from her. After his torture by his maker – who was both sadistic and insane, according to Sookie’s short interaction with

her – Bill Compton had managed to help her help him into the trunk before he succumbed to his day-death.

“Though Eric’s blood did most of the work,” she sighed, thinking of the vampire who’d given her his blood just the night before so that she’d be strong enough for the task ahead.

And so that she’d heal from the stake-attack!

She shook her head. She might have been the mind reader, but Eric Northman seemed to be a psychic at times; after all, he’d anticipated the fact that she’d need every ounce of blood she could get from him to a.) heal from her stake wound; b.) kill Lorena; c.) hoist Bill up and help him into the trunk of a car during the day; and d.) not go insane during the getaway part.

“Okay – so ‘D’ is still up for debate,” she muttered.

Of course, if the question of her sanity was up in the air, the status of her relationship with Bill Compton was up in the stratosphere!

She sighed as she allowed herself to contemplate a possibility more terrifying in some ways than the prospect that someone was following her.

A prospect worse than a stake to the side.

“What *am* I to Bill?” she asked.

“What is he to me?” she followed up, her voice now wavering. “What do I really want him to be to me anymore?” she tagged on.

Ironically, it was her burgeoning feelings for Eric that had caused her to question how she felt about Bill.

If she still felt anything for him.

After all, she'd been worrying that her softening feelings toward Eric – her almost-inescapable attraction toward him (if she was being honest with herself) – had originated from the moment she'd sucked the silver out of his body in Dallas.

The moment his blood had entered her body.

"But I was already beginning to trust him," she sighed to herself as she remembered the hours after Luna had helped her escape from the Fellowship of the Sun church.

It had been *Eric* waiting for her at the hotel. He'd been Johnny on the Spot as he'd – *oh so very carefully* – pulled glass shards from her body and treated her wounds.

His fangs hadn't even come down!

After Dallas, when her relationship with Bill was anything but simple – considering the fact that he'd gone "hunting" after the attack on Stan's nest instead of making sure that she was okay – Eric had come through for her once again.

By attending an orgy with her!

"I'll never look at pink Lycra the same," she sighed to herself. Of course, the night before – as her back had been to Eric's front as he'd fed her his blood – she'd gotten an even "bigger" indication of what the Lycra had been trying to restrain.

"A lot bigger," she whispered.

And then she snorted.

"But is bigger really better?" she asked.

And she wasn't talking about the size of her lovers' nether regions.

At least, not just about *them*.

"*It*, I mean," she muttered.

Because Eric couldn't be counted as her lover – could he?

"Maybe he could?" she asked herself in the rearview mirror. After all, he'd had his fingers inside of her and would have likely had more inside of her if Bubba hadn't interrupted – *saved* her from her own desires.

She shook her head. No – she wouldn't count Eric as her lover – not *yet*. In baseball terms, he'd gotten only to second base. Or was the use of the fingers on certain "parts" considered third base?

Sookie frowned. Honestly, she thought that there should be five bases in the sex analogy – or maybe batting should be counted.

"Yeah, it should," she nodded, though no one could see her.

"The batting is for kissing," she said definitively. "How well that is done determines where the batter goes from there. First base for touching above the waist. Second for touching below the waist. Third for kissing and or sucking all the good parts below the waist." She blushed. "That means fourth is for the actually deed." Sookie sighed. Certainly, she'd been in enough women's minds to know that they all thought about the baseball analogy once in a while. Indeed, most women were consistently worried about which "base" was appropriate for the various dates they went on, for few of them wanted the men (or the women) in their lives to consider them to be "loose."

She scoffed. If her brother were judged in the same way, the town would have kicked him out as a harlot by then!

Regardless of double standards – *or baseball* – the fact of the matter was that Bill Compton had been the only “boyfriend” she’d ever had.

Though a lot of people in her small town still thought of her as a “slut” for having had him.

Of course, because she *wasn't* actually a “slut,” she had no other boyfriends (or lovers) to liken Bill to – at least not directly. However, she could think about his actions in comparison to what other women “thought” about their own experiences.

But she had wondered about the validity of such comparisons. After all, Bill was a vampire, and vampires – *like her* – were “different.” But, then again, their presence in her life was the closest thing she’d ever had to the experiences of “normal” women. She couldn’t “hear” their thoughts, so – like any “normal” woman – she’d had to base her assessments of them on only what she could see.

And on what they did.

And on good, old-fashioned “chemistry.”

Then again, Gran had once told her that “chemistry” wasn’t necessarily the best indicator of longevity.

Plus, the whole “chemistry” thing could be all out of whack if Bill’s blood had been affecting her as much as she was worried that Eric’s was.

“It’s all so fuckin’ complicated!” she complained over her shoulder, as if the dead-for-the-day vampire could hear her.

“But maybe good, old-fashioned common sense is what’s needed here,” she spoke at a more level tone. “Maybe the good, old-fashioned chemistry question should be shelved for the time being.”

As Sookie exited the Interstate and got onto the street that would eventually take her to Alcide’s apartment, which was still a good fifteen minutes away, she looked into the rearview to see if anyone had followed her.

She breathed a sigh of relief as no other cars exited where she did, though she’d feel a lot safer once she was in Alcide’s apartment.

Then again, there was a part of her that didn’t want to leave Bill “alone” for the day. She intended to park in the underground garage that serviced Alcide’s apartment building, but – even with Eric’s blood – there was no way she could get Bill from the trunk to the elevator and into Alcide’s place, where there were no light-tight places. Indeed, leaving Bill in the trunk would be the safest bet for him. The question was whether or not she should stay in the car and “guard” him until sunset. Not that she could do much by way of saving him if a bunch of Russell’s Weres came looking for him.

Instead of forcing herself to return to her contemplation of her and Bill’s relationship, Sookie wondered what the likelihood of Russell’s people finding them would be. Sadly, the latter topic was the easier one to deal with in that moment.

“Because my life bein’ in danger again is better than the broken heart I’ve been workin’ on,” she mumbled to herself.

The truth was that she very well might be found by Russell's goons, but there were some very big "if's" involved in such a scenario.

For one, the Weres in Russell's employ would only know there was something amiss *if* they found Lorena's remains and/or noticed that Bill was missing. And she didn't get the impression that they would be bothering the place where Lorena had been holding and "caring" for Bill.

And, even *if* they were alerted to a problem, they would have to connect the issue to her. In their eyes, she was a mere human, after all. And she'd been Russell's "guest" the night before. There would be no reason for the guards to think she had killed and/or kidnapped a vampire.

Right?

Of course, *if* they did suspect her, they would have to be proactive enough—or care about vampire affairs enough—to choose to come after her before consulting with their employer.

Or they might be more inclined to track her immediately—in order to impress their boss.

The question was: Could they find her?

The answer was likely "yes."

"Given my luck," she muttered.

They'd know what she was driving. They might very well know that she'd gone to Club Dead with Alcide the night before. It would make sense, then, for them to start

their search at Alcide's place. And *if* they did, they'd look in the parking structure and find the car.

"Dammit and Fuck!" she yelled hitting the steering wheel again. "Why can't it be nighttime?" she added, looking at the sky. The large puffy cumulous clouds there seemed to laugh back at her.

She sighed. "You know Gran would wash your mouth out with soap for cussing!"

Of course, though Sookie had always taken her Gran's lessons to heart, and she'd had enough respect for her elder not to do things like cuss in front of her – Sookie understood well just how much people said profanities in their heads.

Still – she had to appreciate Gran's consistency. She would box Jason's ears, just as she would box Sookie's – if they slipped up and used a curse word in her presence.

Making the turn onto Alcide's street, Sookie found herself grateful for GPS.

"Grateful for Gran's teachings too," she sighed.

As an adult, Sookie could truly appreciate her grandmother's lessons – but she especially appreciated the uniqueness of them.

Gran had been from a generation of women who often held beliefs that were anything but "progressive." But, while Maxine Fortenberry was wistful for the "good old days" when black folks "knew their place," women would "stay home and raise children," and gay people "were safely tucked into closets" (and vampires into coffins), Gran celebrated each and every difference she came upon.

That was probably why she accepted having a granddaughter who was so very different.

Gran was also progressive when it came to sex. She didn't dislike Jason's actions because he'd had sex before marriage. What she disapproved of was the fact that sex seemed to mean nothing more than physical pleasure to him. Sookie also knew from Gran's thoughts that she had disapproved of the double-standard women faced. She had felt that it was wrong when women were labeled as "whores" or "sluts" for behavior that was called "sowing one's wild oats" in men.

And – as for her feelings about Sookie's sexuality? Gran wouldn't have been bothered by Sookie losing her virginity before marriage.

What *did* bother the elderly woman was worrying that Sookie might never experience love because her telepathy interfered so greatly with the amount of contact she could have with a man – a human man. Indeed, Gran had been almost as excited and grateful as Sookie had been when her granddaughter couldn't "hear" vampires.

Soon after she'd told Gran that Bill was "silent" to her, Gran said two things about love that were fated to be Sookie's last lessons from her: that the man she loved should put her first and that the man she loved should accept her just as she was.

Gran had let on that the first thing wasn't so easy for anyone to do, and she'd even indicated that she'd failed to put grandpa first a time or two.

"But that's what forgiveness is for," Sookie sighed as she repeated the words that Gran had told her.

It was the second qualification about love that Gran said Sookie couldn't compromise on. She said that there might be "little things" that she wanted to change about her mate. For example, Gran had shared that she'd always wished that Grandpa would learn to put his trash into the waste basket, instead of on the kitchen counter, which was only one foot away. However, she said that the person Sookie loved shouldn't want to change the fundamentals of who she was. Nor should she want to change the fundamentals of who he was.

Sookie had figured that Gran was talking about her curse—her telepathy.

But Sookie didn't have any more time to think about that as she pulled into the parking structure for Alcide's building. Indeed, she re-tasked her mind for only telepathic duty as she drove cautiously around the narrow corners of the garage, moving toward the lowest level.

On the first level down, she heard a woman tired from work and ready to crash into her warm bed.

Sookie could empathize.

On the second level down, she heard a teen who'd taken his parents' car without their knowledge and hoped that he wouldn't get caught.

She couldn't empathize.

Also, on the second level down, she heard an older couple who were on their way to JCPenney because the man had gotten a gift-card for his birthday. He was contemplating getting a new pair of slippers and some underwear. The woman was

hoping they'd be home before it began raining – as thunderstorms were in the forecast for the late afternoon and night.

As Sookie parked on the third level down, which contained much fewer cars than the other two levels, she stretched out her telepathy as far as possible – to the point that it caused her some pain.

There was nothing suspicious.

She breathed a sigh of relief and looked over her shoulder toward the trunk. “Bill, you and I both know that if Weres come, we'll both be either taken or dead before nightfall. So I'm gonna go to Alcide's and wait it out. There's some TrueBlood in there for you. And I'll come back after dark with more blood – hopefully with Alcide so that he can make sure you don't do anything destructive while you're tryin' to heal.”

Feeling good about her decision, Sookie kept her shields down and hurried toward the elevator.

There was just one “if” she'd not considered, however.

What *if* Alcide wasn't home?

As it turned out, he wasn't.

And Sookie didn't have a key.

“Fuck!” she yelled out to the empty hallway.

Author's Note: Some of you might remember that Sookie had been given a key to Alcide's place in *Club Dead*. I have changed that little detail for the purposes of this narrative. There might also be a few other details that change here or there. It's been a

while since I've read the books, and my memory isn't always so sharp. I hope you will forgive any discrepancies up to this point in the story. Of course, going forward, I will be changing A LOT!

Chapter 02: I Forgot to Remember to Forget

*The day she went away
I made myself a promise
That I'd soon forget we ever met,
Well, but something sure is wrong,
'Cause I'm so blue and lonely.
I forgot to remember to forget.*

– “I Forgot to Remember to Forget” (songwriters: Stanley A. Kesler & Charlie Feathers)

Debbie Pelt felt her body tingling – a sure sign that she wanted to shift.

Or that she needed a fix.

Of course, she'd shifted the night before – at the full moon.

But her night of running and then partaking in a larger-than-normal dosage of her current drug of choice hadn't fully alleviated the aggression inside of her body – aggression that was now focused upon the woman Alcide had brought to Club Dead the night before!

As if he'd wanted to steal Debbie's thunder!

Her engagement to Charles Clausen *should* have been the major news of the night! Not Alcide's new whore!

“Likely, the whole thing was the woman’s fault!” the werefox said to herself as she parked near the elevator which would take her to Alcide’s apartment.

“Yes, it was *her* fault,” Debbie seethed.

“And *his*,” she added to herself.

After all, Alcide had run off with his tail between his legs to Shreveport after their last break-up, which had been caused by Alcide’s rejection of his obligation to add to the ranks of the two-natured.

Apparently, Alcide had been content to be with Debbie – enough to marry her even. But he’d not wanted to be the father to her children, and that fact had cored the werefox.

Debbie sighed. She could recognize that Alcide’s “rejection” had caused such an intense reaction in her because of her background, but that didn’t excuse him from shirking his own duties to his pack.

Debbie had been abandoned by her biological parents, but had been lucky enough to be adopted by a caring Were couple, Gordon and Barbara Pelt, who didn’t care that she was a werefox. Unable to produce his own children due to a childhood accident, Gordon had always lamented not being about to fulfill his duty to his pack.

That was why he and his wife had been ready and willing – enthusiastic even – to take in any two-natured orphans in their area. Debbie and her sister Sandra had benefitted from their generosity.

For all intents and purposes, Debbie and Sandra belonged to the Pelts, and the couple had tried to make sure that their daughters felt attached to their pack too.

Thus, when Debbie's beloved had summarily decided for the *both* of them that he didn't "like" their nature enough to want to perpetuate it, she'd been flabbergasted! She'd asked if he would prefer adopting, perhaps having been inspired by her own parents.

But he'd said "no."

He'd said that he didn't want to raise a two-natured child. He'd assumed she would feel the same or capitulate to his desires.

She didn't.

She hadn't.

Debbie shook her head as she got out of her car. She inhaled deeply, picking up a recent scent from Alcide's new paramour.

The werefox growled.

"You shouldn't even care about that bitch – or Alcide," Debbie told herself as she traced the scent to a late-model Lincoln.

But she *did* care.

She just didn't want to.

"Vampire?" she asked herself as she sniffed around the trunk of the vehicle.

She frowned in confusion.

"Why would Alcide's girlfriend have a vampire in her trunk?" She moved closer to the Lincoln and could smell vampire blood. "What has your little human gotten you into, Alcide?" Debbie added with a judgmental shake of her head.

The truth was that – despite everything – she would always care about Alcide. He was her first love, after all. She couldn't help but to wonder what their lives might have been like if they could have just come to a compromise about children.

“And I tried,” she muttered.

As a matter of fact, she'd been willing *not* to have children of their own – a huge compromise for Debbie – if only they could adopt any abandoned two-natured children that came onto their radar. Alcide had refused to even consider that.

So Debbie had issued an ultimatum.

And, when Alcide hadn't budged, she'd left him.

And then gotten back together with him.

And then left him.

And then gotten back together with him.

And then left him again.

And again.

Rinse and repeat.

Debbie frowned. She couldn't even remember all the times she'd broken up with Alcide, but she knew that – along the way – she'd been labeled as “indecisive” by their friends.

“Flighty” had been the next label.

And then “a little unhinged.”

But the truth was that she'd loved Alcide more than *almost* anything. Except for the idea of motherhood.

Perhaps, Alcide's disgust at the latter idea *had* made her crazy.

She closed her eyes and sighed.

Somewhere along the line, she'd turned to alcohol to help her get through the lonely nights when she and Alcide weren't together.

Then cocaine.

Then meth.

Eventually, she met Charles Clausen, who seemed to want her and who wanted to father her children. That man had worked for Russell Edgington.

And he was into V.

After that, she *did become* the labels that had been given to her by her and Alcide's friends.

No – she became worse than those labels.

The rational part of her knew this – knew that she *should* move heaven and earth to leave the lifestyle she'd fallen into.

To save herself.

But, without Alcide waiting for her on the other side of sobriety, she didn't have the motivation to change her lifestyle.

Thus, a "little" insanity became more.

And her rationality became less.

She could acknowledge those facts. After all, she'd felt herself slipping from the person her parents had raised her to be.

Sometimes, she'd even welcomed that slipping – for the numbing of her “self” had been preferable to feeling heartache all the time.

So she no longer cared about being rational; she no longer stifled the jealousy and anger she felt when she thought about Alcide. What she wanted – *all* she wanted – was to take away everything “good” from her ex because he'd forced her to choose between motherhood and him.

Moreover – at some points during their relationship – he'd committed an even larger sin against her. He'd tried to convince her to hate her own nature – even though he knew that she'd already had to work very hard to like herself, given the fact that her birth parents had not wanted her.

But, during her later teen years, Debbie *had* succeeded in feeling worthy because of her adoptive parents. She'd been a good student and was even taking college courses when she and Alcide got together. She'd wanted to be a teacher.

She'd imagined a whole sphere of happiness with Alcide by her side and children all around them.

Family that would give her life more purpose and happiness than she'd ever hoped for as a child.

Fellowship with a close-knit pack.

Comfort in her own skin.

The life she'd wanted had been a simple one – a pure one. And – for a while – Alcide had seemed like the perfect choice of mate: steady, honorable, and – most of all – two-natured so that they could understand one another.

But Alcide, as it turned out, wasn't willing to foster anything that Debbie *needed* to tick.

Instead of supporting what she was, he'd tried to convince her that being Were — or werefox — wasn't "natural."

Wasn't normal.

He'd told her that she was selfish for wanting to inflict a dual-nature upon innocent children.

A part of Debbie would always hate him for making her feel like "what" she was wasn't *wanted* by him or the world.

Yet she couldn't stop loving him either.

Indeed, she knew that — despite her new fiancé — she was still unhealthily obsessed with the Were that had first stolen her heart.

Of course, the V didn't help to squelch that obsession. If anything, it amplified it.

Debbie inhaled again, forcing her drug-addled brain to focus on the nuances of the scent coming from the trunk of the Lincoln this time.

"I know this scent," she whispered.

Her fiancé, Charles, had helped her to get a job with King Russell Edgington, but as a new employee, she tended to get the "shit" assignments. One of those had been cleaning up the bloody messes created by Lorena Ball, a vampire who seemed to be squatting in Russell's territory more than she was adding to it — at least, in Debbie's opinion.

Lately, the messes had originated from Lorena's own child, a vampire by the name of William. Debbie frowned, trying to recall if she'd ever heard a last name for the vampire. She hadn't. But some of them didn't seem to have last names.

She took her phone out of her pocket and dialed.

"Charles?" she asked as an out-of-breath voice answered the call with a muffled and frustrated, "What?"

Debbie ignored the tell-tale signs that there were actually *two* out-of-breath people close to the phone—just as she'd always ignored Charles's propensity toward fucking almost anything with a pulse.

He'd told her—very early on in their relationship—that she was his "favorite," but that taking V "freed" him to enjoy pleasure as it came to him. He was fine with her seeking pleasure elsewhere too, but Debbie had been faithful to him—just as she'd always been to Alcide when they were together.

Despite what Alcide might have thought—despite what Charles currently thought—Debbie believed in fidelity, for it was one of the cornerstone tenets she'd learned through the example of her parents.

Debbie closed her eyes tightly. Her parents had been faithful to one another for decades, and would have never insulted each other by claiming that their "nature" caused them to stray. She frowned. She knew that her parents were worried about her and wondered why she allowed herself to stay with a man who cheated on her in such a cavalier way.

The answer was simple. Unlike Alcide – Charles was proud of being two-natured. And – unlike Alcide – Charles wanted Debbie to mother his children.

And, most importantly – unlike when she was with Alcide – Debbie now felt shame a whole lot more often than she felt self-worth.

And shame made her feel as if she deserved to be cheated upon.

“Deb?” Charles asked. “You still there?”

“Yeah. Uh – I’ve found something Russell might be interested in.”

“What?” he asked, sounding slightly intrigued.

“You remember that vamp Lorena was torturing?”

Charles chuckled. “Oh – we had fun with him the other day – didn’t we?”

Debbie cringed a bit as she recalled the previous Tuesday.

Or had it been Wednesday?

Whatever the day, they’d been tasked with keeping William awake during the daytime, and they’d silvered him relentlessly – every time he was about to succumb to his day-sleep. Debbie remembered most of that day only in a haze – as she and Charles had feasted upon many vials of V. Of course – right before sunset – it had fallen upon her to clean up the bloody mess, for Lorena liked to start with a pristine “canvas” each night.

“Yeah – uh – speaking of that William guy – could you make sure the garage is clean by tonight?” Charles asked. “I know it’s your day off, and I promised you that Helene would do it, but I’ve been told that she’d busy.”

The fact that Debbie heard Helene, who was a werehawk, giggling in the background made her stomach turn.

“So – what’d you find out that Russell would be interested in?” Charles asked.

“I could be at the mansion at sunset to let him know all about it.”

With Charles’s words and the self-serving intent behind them, Debbie had what Oprah would call an “Aha moment.”

Aha! Charles will never really put Debbie first in his life! Hell – she’d be lucky if she found a ranking in his top ten priorities, given his friends, his other women, his vampire king, and his addictions.

And his dog!

Aha! Even if he did want to be a father, Charles would make a horrible one!

Aha! She might be able to convince Alcide to breed with her if she tried a little harder.

Aha! If she told Charles about William and the matter proved beneficial for Russell, her fiancé *would* take all the credit!

And she’d have to clean up the damned garage like a maid!

Aha! She wasn’t about to clean up any more vampire messes!

“Uh – I figured Russell would want for Lorena to be kept happy, so I thought I’d call and see if you had Helene’s number – so that I could offer my help to her,” Debbie lied.

“Well – it’s good you called then,” Charles said. “But I don’t see how this is information that Russell would need,” he added a little suspiciously.

Debbie quickly responded. “Well – I was – uh – hoping that you could mention it to him. You know – that I’m willing to go above and beyond for his guests?”

Charles sighed. “Now – we’ve talked about this, Deb,” he began. “I can’t be showin’ no favoritism. But I’ll make sure to mention to Betty Joe that you came in on your day off – if it comes up.”

“Oh – well – that’s all I could ask for,” Debbie responded, feeling her affection for the wereowl deflate even more as she realized he would do no such thing. He would be more likely to prop up his lover than his own fiancé in the eyes of their vampire superiors! She decided to change the subject. “Uh – where’d you end up last night?” she asked. “You didn’t come home after we shifted.”

“I crashed at David’s house,” he responded quickly. “We had a crazy flight last night. Went all the way to the Tennessee state line and back.”

Debbie cringed, knowing that her fiancé was lying to her. She didn’t doubt that he’d had a “crazy flight,” but – from the sound of things – it had culminated in his fucking a werehawk instead of his fiancé!

“Hey – you hear about the crucifixion tonight?” Charles asked, grabbing her attention.

“Huh? No,” she responded.

“Apparently, Doug and ‘em found a vamp sniffin’ ‘round right before dawn. Doug said he seemed harmless ‘nough. Simple even. They locked ‘im up in one ‘a Russell’s cells but didn’t hurt him none.”

“So why would they crucify him?” Debbie asked. “Doesn’t sound like Doug thought he was much of a problem.”

“You know the king. Likes to make an example every now and then – especially with trespassers. And it’s been a while since we had a good roastin,’” Charles chuckled. “Doug figured he’d get the ball rollin’, and – if Russell wants to be merciful – it’s not like much effort goes into building a cross and stackin’ up a pile of wood under it. But here’s the kicker!” Charles exclaimed, obviously coming to the meatier part of his gossip. “Couple hours after sunrise, someone found some blood near the pool. Vamp blood! And guess whose remains they found when they took off the pool cover?”

“Whose?” I asked, looking at the trunk. I had a guess already.

“Doug said it was hard to tell ‘cause she was already decomposin’ like vamps do, but they could smell it was Lorena. When they looked in the garage, they discovered that her little whippin’ boy was missin’. Doug figures a group came to rescue him and that Bubba got left behind.”

“Bubba?” Debbie asked, realization dawning on her. She’d been to Louisiana enough to know that a simpleton vampire named Bubba was likely the King of Rock & Roll himself!

“Yeah. Funny – huh. Doug says the name fits the idiot. Anyway, once Russell finds out ‘bout Lorena being dead and her kid – I can’t remember his name – being missin’, we figure the crucifixion will definitely be on! Doug figures Russell might even reward us with some of the good shit.”

“V,” Debbie said almost wistfully.

“Maybe straight from the tap of poor Bubba before we string ‘im up,” Charles returned gleefully. Again, Debbie could hear a feminine giggle in the background, and it certainly wasn’t David.

In that moment, Debbie Pelt made a choice.

She would be the one taking advantage of her current situation.

She would break into and hotwire the Lincoln she was, even then, looking at.

She would take William back to Russell’s lair, arriving at the mansion just after dark so that she wouldn’t risk Doug or Charles taking the credit for her find.

She would implicate Sookie in the matter, for – other than William’s scent and the residual odor of his maker – only Sookie’s scent was fresh around the car. Alcide’s scent was nowhere to be found!

And, then, *she* would help Russell avoid an “international” incident by cluing him in that he had Elvis Presley in custody! Of course, Russell *should* have been able to recognize Bubba, but Alcide had once shared the rumor that Bubba was very particular about the monarchs and sheriffs he would work for. Apparently, the vampire was as eccentric in un-death as he had been in life. Thus, it was possible that Russell had never met Bubba, and – if that was the case – Debbie knew that the monarch would owe her one for saving him the embarrassment and other potential repercussions of “assassinating” a king who was even more popular than himself!

“Deb?” Charles asked, breaking her from her musings. “You still there, darlin’?”

Debbie sneered, wondering if she should immediately cut her losses with Charles. She imagined herself breaking up with him right away – over the phone even!

She wondered if he would even be upset – or if he'd go right back to fucking Helene.

Seeing Alcide again the night before had made Debbie remember what a “good” man was like. If only Alcide would get over his hang-up about children, he'd be perfect. And – once his little tart was out of the way for vamp-napping William – Debbie figured she could try *again* to persuade Alcide that adding to the pack was his duty.

“Deb?” Charles asked again, this time with irritation clear in his tone.

“Yeah. Just thinkin’ about what supplies I might need to clean things up in the garage,” she lied, as she finally answered her fiancé. “I’ll see you at the crucifixion – if not before,” she added.

“Yep, babe. See ya!” Charles said, hanging up. Of course, Debbie could hear a female cajoling him for “one more time” before he did.

Debbie thought for a moment about how much more satisfying it would be if she could slam the phone into a receiver, but she had to settle for pushing a button and then forcefully putting her cellphone into her jeans pocket.

“Why did I ever settle for Charles,” Debbie asked herself as she went to her car to get what she needed to break into the Lincoln that smelled of vampire and Alcide’s whore.

“Oh – yeah – Charles seemed to have an unlimited supply of V,” she answered herself.

Debbie thought about Alcide. Was his slut with him even then? Were they fucking in his apartment?

The werefox was of half a mind to go up and interrupt them.

But she stifled that impulse; she knew that the smartest thing to do would be to take the vampire immediately so that she could get him to the king right after sunset. Then, Russell could take care of Alcide's "friend," Sookie. And Debbie needn't be implicated.

"I'll find a way to keep Alcide out of it too," she said to herself softly. "And he'll be grateful," she added with a smile.

She frowned, however, when she wondered if Alcide was somehow involved in whatever Sookie was doing with the vamp. She shook her head. Her ex-lover had no love-lost toward vampires, but that didn't mean he'd help to kidnap one. More likely, Sookie was somehow using or deceiving Alcide. Maybe *she* was a V dealer and had taken the vampire in the trunk as "product." Maybe she was working with whomever had killed Lorena.

"Doesn't matter," Debbie said to herself as she looked around the garage to make sure she was still alone. Once certain that she was, the werefox pulled a long tool from the duffel bag of supplies she'd brought from her car. With a smooth, practiced movement, she quickly had the driver's side door of the Lincoln opened. She unlocked the back door and placed her bag inside before looking around again.

She felt her body twitch slightly as she was able to discern the scents of Sookie and William more acutely.

Smelled his blood more acutely.

Vampire blood.

She'd had a good-sized dosage of V the night before, but—like any addict—she was always wondering where and how she'd get her next score.

Of course, V became a more potent drug in some ways when it had been out of a vampire's body for at least a few hours. But a different kind of euphoria was created by drinking it directly from the source. The feeling just didn't last as long, nor was fresh blood addictive. Like a fine wine, vampire blood got "better" with age.

Or worse—depending upon one's perspective.

"But it'll take the edge off if I drink just a little," Debbie reasoned to herself.

"And no one will know if I take a little taste," she added, even as she determined that opening the trunk wouldn't expose William to direct sunlight. She saw a lever next to the driver's side door that was labeled "trunk" and pulled it. Immediately, she heard the latch disengage and then walked quickly to the back of the car. She pulled out her knife and cautiously lifted the lid of the trunk. As expected, there was no movement from William, who had been wrapped up in a blanket.

It didn't take Debbie long to get one of his arms free and a wound opened on his wrist.

She was sucking down the vampire's sweet nectar when the doors to the elevator opened—revealing Sookie!

"How lucky!" Debbie smiled sickly after swallowing her mouthful of blood.

"You can be part of my gift to Russell Edgington!"

She dropped William's bleeding wrist and sped toward her prey.

Author's Note: Debbie's addiction to V was more of a *True Blood* narrative than an *SVM* narrative, but I've imported it to this piece because it fit with what I wanted to do from this point on. That said, in the show, Russell is a major cause of the V addictions of his Weres, but in this story, he's not as much of one.

Chapter 03: Barefoot Ballad

'Cause when I kick my shoes off and I kick my blues off

With a barefoot ballad, you just can't go wrong

—“Barefoot Ballad” (songwriters Lee Morris & Dolores Fuller)

FIFTEEN MINUTES EARLIER

The day before, Alcide had offered her a key to his apartment, but Sookie had turned him down because she couldn't think of any reason why she would need it; after all, she'd planned to be with him while she was in Jackson.

“Why didn't I plan on bein' staked and having to spend the night in the vampire king's mansion?” she muttered to herself sarcastically.

Sookie huffed. She didn't bother to pound on Alcide's door; her telepathy had already told her that no one was inside of his apartment.

By some miracle, Eric had grabbed her purse off of the floor at Josephine's, and she quickly opened it to phone Alcide, berating herself for not calling him from the road. She growled when she realized her cheap cellular phone was deader than a vampire and then chastised herself again for not remembering to turn it off. She knew from experience that it quickly ate up its battery life—even when it wasn't in “roaming” mode.

Sookie sighed long and hard before weighing her options.

The first idea she had was to walk to Janice’s hair salon. There, she could wash up a bit – at least her hair. Plus, Janice would have a phone (and Alcide’s number, since Sookie hadn’t memorized it), so Sookie could call her Were friend and let him know about the vampire in his parking garage.

Sookie looked down at the ill-fitting clothing she’d been given by Bernard, the vampire who’d been flirting so shamelessly with Eric the night before. Clearly, Russell didn’t have many (if any) female houseguests, for she’d been given a T-shirt and a pair of sweats that clearly belonged to a male – likely Bernard himself. She’d needed to roll the waist-band of the sweats to make them stay on her body, and the T-shirt was quite loose – which was probably a good thing since she didn’t have a bra. As she looked at the thick socks on her feet, she grunted. Bernard had had no shoes to offer, so she’d had to operate in just socks during her rescue of Bill – since her high-heels weren’t exactly “stealth friendly.”

As it turned out, it had been a good thing that she’d left them off, for they wouldn’t have been “fight-with-Lorena-friendly” either.

Still, she’d managed to make it to the car with her heels; she’d wrapped them in the shawl that Alcide had given to her – which had also somehow made it from Josephine’s to Russell’s mansion (probably also due to Eric). She sighed with frustration at herself for leaving the bundle (with her shoes) in the Lincoln. If she was going to trek the ten or so blocks to Janice’s salon, she would have to do it in her heels – despite how ridiculous she would look.

Of course, she could just drive the Lincoln to the shop, but she was reluctant to do that because Bill seemed somehow safer in the parking garage (since it was underground) than he would be elsewhere. Sure – he was under a blanket in the trunk – but she’d not exactly been thorough in making sure he was wrapped tightly because she had been in a hurry! Plus, the thought of just a blanket and a potentially un-light-tight trunk being the only things protecting Bill from the sun was not comforting to the telepath – despite the fact that clouds had started to gather from the west.

But – then again – parking the car somewhere like behind Janice’s business might make Bill safer in some ways. After all, Russell’s Weres probably wouldn’t think to look there – even if they did come looking for Sookie.

On the other hand, she didn’t want for Bill to awaken hungry in a more highly-trafficked area, such as that in which Janice’s shop was located. Indeed, Sookie realized that she’d been counting on Alcide being with her when she opened the trunk that night – just in case Bill wasn’t fully in control.

The vampire hadn’t seemed violent and he’d not tried to bite her as they’d made their way to the Lincoln that morning, but the very fact that it had been daytime might have been responsible for his docility.

No – if she went to Janice’s business, she would walk there. Sookie wasn’t about to endanger more people than was necessary in case Bill’s injuries drove him to look for fresh blood. Plus, the last thing vampires needed was for people to capture a video of a rabid, blood-covered vampire with their cellphones!

She cringed at that thought, even as she looked at the floor in front of Alcide's door.

Honestly, a preferable idea over walking ten blocks – *in heels* – was just sinking down onto the floor and waiting for the Were to return. She could visualize herself leaning against the doorjamb and taking a nap, and that thought seemed pretty good to her in that moment!

However, what if Alcide didn't come home before nightfall? Would she be able to control Bill?

Additionally, what if one of Alcide's neighbors thought she was a vagabond – which (she had to admit) was exactly what she looked like in that moment – and called the police?

Speaking of neighbors – another option was to start knocking on the doors of Alcide's neighbors. If she could find someone willing, she could use his or her phone. If the neighbor had a copy of the Yellow Pages, then Sookie could look up Janice's business's number. From Janice, she could find out Alcide's cell phone number and call him.

Sookie sighed, continuing to weigh that option. But walking ten blocks (even in ill-fitting sweats and heels) seemed preferable to knocking on random doors since, given her luck, she would knock on the door of a troll or something!

"And then there'd be a damned riddle to solve!" she muttered wryly.

Another option would be to drive the Lincoln (with Bill) to Bon Temps and have Sam help her. She considered that for a few minutes before remembering that (because

of an abysmally slow shift) she had only five dollar bills in her purse – certainly not enough for the gas she'd need to get to her hometown.

The final option she considered was just returning to the Lincoln and waiting out the day. She could sleep in the car and check periodically to see if Alcide had returned; she recalled him saying that he had meetings that day, but figured he'd be home at around 5:00 p.m.

Hopefully.

She frowned. It had been only a little after 9:00 a.m. when she arrived in the parking garage. The thought of being alone in the car all day wasn't appealing in the least – despite the fact that she'd been contemplating staying in it to guard Bill not half an hour before. Plus, she *really* didn't want to risk Alcide's not being present when Bill woke up, so she needed to figure out how to contact him before nightfall.

She sighed and looked at the floor again before determining that her best course of action would be to go grab her shoes from the Lincoln and then walk to Janice's salon. That way she wouldn't have to worry about the car – or whether the trunk was completely light-tight.

Ideally, Janice would help her get in touch with Alcide, who would give her some advice about the safest course of action from there. And – if her luck turned – she might even find a diner on the way there because her stomach was growling loudly!

She found herself grateful for the five one-dollar bills in her wallet. She figured that she'd, at least, be able to get a bowl of soup and some bread.

Of course, as she contemplated her rumbling stomach, she couldn't help but to think about all the "ones" she was missing out on because she'd not been able to work for the past few days.

She found herself hoping – *more like praying* – that her fee for Dallas would arrive soon; indeed, she wondered if it would be bad manners to mention the payment to Eric. Property taxes were coming up, and she'd also been trying to tuck away a little bit of money to hire an accountant to help her with her taxes that coming April. Losing Gran and inheriting the farmhouse – with its mortgage – was going to make her taxes so much more complicated than they'd ever been before, and math had never been her strong suit.

"I'll forgo the soup," she sighed to herself, even as she hoped Janice might let her take one of the apples that was kept in a bowl on the front counter of the salon.

Having made her plans, Sookie wearily made her way to the elevator; she couldn't help but to feel the weight of fatigue hitting her. It had already been a long day, and it couldn't have been past 9:15 a.m.

Even before the elevator door slowly creaked open, she knew that she wouldn't be alone for her ride down. A woman and her son had entered the elevator on the floor above her. The little boy had awoken with an ear infection, and his mother was worried about his fever, so she was glad that his pediatrician had been able to fit them in for an emergency appointment.

As she stepped onto the elevator, Sookie contemplated asking to borrow the woman's phone, but then discarded the idea because Janice's number would have to be looked up, and the woman was in a hurry.

Also, the woman had begun assessing Sookie as soon as she entered the conveyance. Indeed, she was wondering if Sookie's shoeless state had anything to do with the stains on her socks – stains that looked suspiciously like dried blood to the woman.

Sookie had only one thought: *Fuck!*

She looked down. It was a testament to how messed up her life had become that she'd not noticed the blood until that moment. She hadn't been able to help getting some of Bill's blood on her socks as she'd helped him to the car. Or – it could have been Lorena's blood. Thankfully, the rest of the clothing she was wearing was black so that any blood she'd gotten on the sweats was not showing.

"Red mud," Sookie said with a forced chuckle when the woman thought about calling the security guard for the building to have him check out Sookie. "I managed to step in a *big* patch of it, and – since I didn't want it on my boyfriend's carpet – I took my shoes off."

"I hate the soil around here," the woman observed, satisfied by Sookie's explanation. "I'm from Ohio where the dirt's brown – like dirt ought to be. Here – you never know what you might get."

Sookie nodded. "You're right about that."

The woman and her son got off on the first level of the parking garage, and Sookie sighed with relief when no one was waiting to get onto the elevator from there; she didn't need more questions about her bloody socks! Frustratingly, the door didn't seem anxious to close. The telepath—her shields completely down so that she could monitor her surroundings—hit a button that indicated that it would cause the elevator doors to shut faster. But those doors still took their time squeaking to a close. Indeed, Sookie had previously noticed that the elevator in Alcide's building was slow at just about everything it did, but taking the stairs had seemed too daunting, considering how tired she already was *and* the fact that she had a long walk ahead of her.

In heels!

Because she'd not done it before, Sookie pressed the G-3 button for the lowest level of the parking garage and then leaned tiredly against the wall of the elevator.

However, she didn't allow herself to completely relax. Instead, she pushed out her telepathy to the point of almost pain in order to monitor the minds in the garage. She didn't hear anyone close to her as the elevator passed level G-2, but—as it approached G-3—her heart felt like it was falling into her stomach.

She sensed a being of the two-natured variety, and she knew *exactly* who it was!

By no means was Sookie an expert at distinguishing one Were or shifter from the next, though she was beginning to sense Alcide's mind better, even if his specific thoughts (unless they were targeted directly at her) were no more than reddish, swirling noises in her mind. Still, his mind was getting "familiar," just as Sam's seemed "familiar" to her now. Since she'd learned about what he was, Sookie could also

distinguish that Sam's mind was different from a werewolf's mind. She couldn't quite explain that difference, but it was something she innately recognized.

Debbie Pelt's mind had been different from any other two-natured being she'd encountered. Sookie figured that the difference was because she was a werefox instead of a werewolf or shifter. Debbie's thoughts were tinged in violet and orange, and there was a strong echo of sorts within them. Undoubtedly, she was easier to "hear" than Alcide and Sam. Indeed, she was like listening to a human who was yelling through a tunnel.

But the nuances of the differences between two-natured creatures were not at the forefront of Sookie's mind as she looked frantically at the buttons on the elevator.

There were nine buttons for the floors of the building's apartments. There were three buttons for the garage floors. There was a button labeled "call." There was a "door-open" button that would hold the doors open if needed. And there was the "door-close" button that she'd pressed repeatedly not thirty seconds before.

"Fuck!" she muttered to herself as none of the buttons seemed able to *stop* the elevator from inevitably opening at G-3!

For a moment, Sookie contemplated hitting the "call" button, but held back. Likely, the call wouldn't even be answered for a minute or two and – even then – what would she say? "Hey there! A werefox wants to kill me. Could you send help? And – oh – she's thinking about how good my vampire boyfriend – actually *ex-vampire* boyfriend – tastes right now. Oh – and the ex is the vampire in the trunk of the white

Lincoln. He was starved and tortured by his maker – who I killed earlier today – so watch yourselves with him.”

Likely, anyone answering her call would believe her to be a teen playing a prank!

Or an escapee from an insane asylum.

No – the call button didn’t seem like such a good idea right then.

Nor did Sookie hold out any hope that Debbie would be out of position to see her! From the nature of the werefox’s thoughts, it seemed certain that she was at the Lincoln’s trunk, and the vehicle was parked in a space only twenty feet or so from the elevator – a space with a clear line of sight to the elevator!

Where there was *absolutely* nowhere to hide!

Sookie braced herself mentally – and physically – as the elevator door began to creak open. She had already pushed the button for the top floor before it was done opening. And then she began pushing the “door-close” button. She tried to keep herself calm, and she did a decent job of it – at least until the elevator door seemed to stall – fully open – and she saw Debbie turn toward the elevator, her teeth stained red with having just taken blood from Bill.

The telepath saw the recognition in the werefox’s eyes and “heard” the murderous, jealous rage in her thoughts.

Yep – her attempts at calm were gone after that!

Frantically, Sookie kept pushing the button that would protect her from the rabid-looking werefox – at least for a while. She had no idea what her next move would

be once the elevator doors closed – *if* they closed in time – but she was hoping for a chance to plan something.

Of course, the old elevator doors seemed to be deciding which side they were on – before they lurched. But they still weren't closing!

“Please just fucking close!” Sookie muttered urgently, as Debbie dropped Bill's limp arm and licked her lips.

The werewolf was clearly savoring the thought of an upcoming hunt, and time seemed to stop as the two women looked at each other. Sookie hit the “door-close” button again before retreating toward the corner of the elevator when she saw Debbie's eyes go from brown to yellow in a split-second.

Finally making their choice, the elevator doors started closing, even as the werewolf grinned and then charged.

A single question rocketed through Sookie's mind. Which was faster: a werewolf on V with a grudge or an old creaky elevator?

As if by some miracle, it seemed as if the doors were now *all in* on being on Sookie's side – as they neared each other. Fearing that if Debbie pushed the “up” button, the doors would open again, Sookie leaned forward to press the “close-door” button again. And she kept pushing it in a flurry.

But just as Sookie felt certain that the elevator doors were closed, a hand thrust inside the elevator. On instinct, the telepath moved to try to push it out again, but her effort was futile as a second hand joined the first and then worked with its partner to peel open the now-complaining elevator doors. Once again, Sookie retreated toward

the furthest corner of the elevator. She had no weapons, but she'd had vampire blood and intended to fight for her life.

For what it was worth.

As Debbie's face came into view, she almost seemed to be foaming at the mouth even as she smiled sinisterly.

Dropping her purse, Sookie raised her hands, praying to God that her first fist-fight would go her way – praying to God that a telepath with an ancient vampire's blood could beat a V-addled werefox.

“Oh – good! You want to play!” Debbie panted excitedly as she stepped inside the elevator. Sookie realized that the werefox intended for the doors to close – that she *wanted* to trap herself into the confined space with Sookie.

The telepath didn't want to play *that* game. Desperate, she lunged toward the “call” button, but Sookie was headed off by a blow to her head.

She teetered on her feet, trying to stay upright. But then there was another punch, and this one made her world go black.

Chapter 04: Faded Love

It was in the springtime that you said goodbye

I remember our faded love

– “Faded Love” (songwriters Bob Wills & Johnnie Lee Wills)

Even when Sookie was finally able to open her eyes, her world was still black; moreover, the space she was in was much more confined than the elevator had been. She tried to move, but found that she could only wiggle a little. Her hands had been tied at the wrist behind her back, and her ankles were also tied together. As she squirmed, she bumped up against something solid – something covered with a blanket: Bill.

She was in the trunk!

Grunting and struggling against the ropes that tied her, Sookie tried her best to kick against the interior of the trunk.

Immediately the lid opened, and Debbie Pelt came into view, her eyes still lit yellow.

“Would you like to spend your remaining hours unconscious? Or would you prefer to *dread* them?” she cackled as Sookie continued kicking and yelled for help. The werefox only smiled wider. “Rest assured – very few people park down here. No one will be able to hear you – especially not after I’m done with you.”

“Let me out!” Sookie begged. “Please!”

“I think you look good in there,” the werefox giggled as her eyes faded to their natural caramel color. “Of course, you’ll look even better once the vampire wakes up and takes what he wants from you. You really can’t imagine how much pain he’s suffered over the last few days and nights. And he’s had only TrueBlood and animal blood to see him through it. He’ll think he’s died and gone to vamp heaven when he wakes up and smells something as sweet as you.”

“Debbie, please. Don’t do this?”

“Don’t do what? Get rid of the woman who’s tryin’ to steal my man from me?” she asked angrily.

“But you’re engaged to *another* man. Alcide isn’t yours!” Sookie insisted.

Apparently, that was the wrong thing to say considering the slap against Sookie’s cheek.

“Alcide *is* mine! He will *always* be mine!” Debbie screeched, even as Sookie kept her shields down and pushed out with her telepathy, despite the fact that her head was pounding from the concussion Debbie had given her earlier – not to mention her fresh wound to her cheekbone. Unfortunately, Debbie had been right; there was no one close enough to hear either the deranged werefox or her victim, though Sookie readied herself to scream her lungs out again, nonetheless.

As if she was the one who could read minds, Debbie pulled a bandana from her pocket and bent over toward Sookie, clearly intending to use the object as a gag.

“Please!” Sookie cried out—pleaded. “I *know* Alcide isn’t mine.” She felt tears on her cheeks as she continued speaking. “Bill is my boyfriend. I came to Jackson to free him, and Alcide was just helping me.”

Debbie looked confused for a moment, but then laughed almost madly. “William? That’s perfect then! Your vamp boyfriend is gonna be the one to kill you, especially when he smells how rank you are.”

It was Sookie’s turn to look confused. “Rank? With blood?”

“Not just that—though it’ll *help*,” she snickered. “But I really meant that you smell *much* more strongly of a *different* vamp than this one,” Debbie said, as she took the blanket from around Bill and then wrapped it around Sookie’s body—hindering her mobility all the more. “This will limit any noise you can make in here—unless you’ve decided that you want me to knock you out again,” she grinned.

“Why will smelling more like another vampire matter?” Sookie asked with fear in her eyes. Plus—she was stalling, desperately trying to think of a way to convince the maniacal werefox to let her go.

“Vampires are territorial—very, *very* territorial. This one hasn’t been fed much for the last several nights,” she said, nudging Bill’s motionless body. “When he wakes up, he’ll want a meal. And—if you are his *girlfriend* as you claim,” she laughed, “then his hunger will double when he smells that you reek of another vampire. Not to mention how angry he’ll be that you betrayed him.”

“But I didn’t betray him! And Bill loves me! He would never . . .,” Sookie began.

“Try telling that to yourself when his fangs are in you – when he’s *raping* you,” Debbie emphasized. “Now that I’m close to you both, I can tell you’ve had his blood. Did you know that he can *feel* your emotions? Knowing what sick fucks vampires are – he’ll probably *enjoy* feeling your terror and pain. He’ll want to punish you for the other vamp’s blood – the other vamp’s scent. And *especially* for the remnants of your being aroused by that *other* vampire recently,” she added airily.

“Really?” Sookie asked, hoping to keep Debbie talking – praying that someone would descend to the lowest level of the garage.

“Oh – yes! William here will be feeling your anguish and terror as he kills you. As he does *worse* than kill you!” she exclaimed as she moved to tie the bandana around Sookie’s mouth.

The telepath’s scream of “NO!” got caught up in the cloth.

“So,” Debbie grinned, after Sookie was gagged, “do you want to be conscious for what’s coming?”

Sookie thought about that question for a moment as the direness of her situation hit her harder than Debbie’s punch had.

She could tell by Debbie’s eyes – and by the werefox’s more coherent thoughts – that she was *certain* that Bill would kill Sookie as soon as he woke up. The question was whether Sookie wanted to spend her last few hours awake or unconscious.

The fighter in Sookie didn’t want to give up. Maybe someone would pass close enough by the Lincoln for what little muffled noise she might make to matter.

“Sleepy time?” Debbie asked.

Sookie shook her head, indicating the negative.

Debbie chuckled darkly. “To be honest, I wouldn’t have knocked you out anyway. I enjoy the thought of you *suffering* for the next,” she paused and looked at her phone, “eight hours. That’s how long it is to sunset – give or take. So you’ll have plenty of time to think about how you ought *never* to have crossed me!”

Sookie struggled against her bindings and tried to scream out her plight, but the noise she created was negligible at best, and Debbie celebrated the telepath’s futility.

“You know – I was gonna take you and the vampire both to Russell Edgington so that *I* would be the one rewarded for a change,” she mused. “But Charles would have probably found a way to insert himself into the situation – to take credit,” she growled. “And who knows what you might have said to implicate Alcide.”

Sookie shook her head, desperate to indicate that she wouldn’t say anything about the Were who’d escorted her to Jackson.

“Vamps have ways of finding things out,” the werefox responded to Sookie’s wordless pleas. “Plus, it’ll be better this way. After William kills you, any connection back to Alcide will be severed. Anyway,” she sighed, “I have another way to ingratiate myself to King Russell – one that doesn’t require the effort of hauling you to the mansion *or* the risk that Alcide will find out I was the one who turned you over to the king.”

Again, Sookie shook her head, pleading with her eyes. Certainly, finding herself in the king’s custody wouldn’t be good. But it was preferable to almost-certain death – at Bill’s hands.

“You have a *long* day ahead of yourself,” the werefox grinned, her musing clearly over. “I hope that the torture you will feel in this trunk is just as bad as what you will experience when the vamp wakes up. Actually, I bet it’ll be worse,” she added with a wink.

And then Debbie slammed down the trunk lid, leaving Sookie in darkness once more.

EIGHTY MINUTES BEFORE SUNSET

Thunder boomed overhead, seeming to rattle the Lincoln and certainly jolting Sookie out of the restless nap she’d managed to fall into after what seemed like hours of struggling against her bonds—hours of trying to make any noise she could.

Debbie had been right about the lowest level of the parking garage getting very little traffic. Sookie had seen with her own eyes that there were far fewer cars down there when she’d parked. That morning, the telepath had been happy about that—but that was *before* she’d been locked into the trunk.

She scoffed against her gag, but immediately regretted making the noise because her throat was raw from trying to scream.

Of course, it was human nature to try to get out of a dangerous situation, so—for many hours—Sookie had done all that she could think of, including trying to bite through the gag!

But her best hope for rescue had come around 1:00 p.m. when someone finally parked near her on level G-3. From the parker’s thoughts, Sookie knew that the man—

just returning home from work – was thinking about getting a meal, watching the news, and then taking a nap.

The telepath had waited until she figured that he was as close as he was going to get to the Lincoln. And then she'd screamed against the gag. Moreover, she'd twisted her blanket-burritoed body to the point of agony in order to make the loudest sounds that she could; for all her efforts, she'd managed to create only light thuds against the metal of the trunk.

But – by some miracle – the man *had* heard her!

Ten feet or so away from the Lincoln, he'd stopped to consider what could be making the odd bumping sound. She'd seen in his thoughts that he'd actually looked right at the trunk!

And she'd hoped, even as she'd continued her attempts to make noise.

But hope was as fickle as chance, for it was – at that very moment – that the very first thud of thunder from an impending storm had been heard. Consequently, the man had determined that the noise had simply been a precursor to the thunderstorm before he'd turned toward the elevator. He didn't give the Lincoln's trunk another thought!

Still, Sookie had continued to make as much ruckus as she could – long after the man had ascended in the creaky, *slow-as-molasses* elevator.

Other than wearing herself out from futilely screaming whenever anyone was in the elevator or on parking level G-3 or even G-2 (because she'd been hoping for echoes), Sookie had spent her seemingly-endless (but all-too-short) time thinking – contemplating *many* things that she'd put off considering for so very long.

Too long – as it turned out.

She didn't know if it was the most random thing – or the most expected – that quite a few of her thoughts had been about Scarlett O'Hara, the heroine she'd always adored from *Gone with the Wind*.

Oh – Sookie had seen the flaws in that movie since she was a teen. Indeed, there were parts that seemed to romanticize the horrible practice of slavery! But she'd never been able to stop herself from loving the film overall.

Or its lead character.

But – as she lay in the trunk – she reassessed her adoration. “Why did I love Scarlett again?” she asked herself through the gag.

As ridiculous as it might have been, she found herself reviewing the character – like a film critic (or a psychologist) might. Scarlett had been spoiled and privileged – *and* popular. The exact opposite of Sookie. Scarlett had “decided” she loved someone – Ashley Wilkes – empowering herself to go to whatever lengths necessary to get him. The last trait sounded familiar to Sookie.

Indeed, she'd thought she loved Bill Compton so much that she would have risked anything for him; she *did* risk *everything* for him!

But she'd learned the wrong damned lesson from her film idol!

As an adult, Sookie could judge Ashley Wilkes for being weak – for being a douche, really. But, as a girl and then as a teen, Sookie had just seen Scarlett fighting for what she wanted most – love.

Maybe it was Scarlett's hapless – hopeless – pursuit of love that Sookie had identified with. Scarlett had, after all, been just as inept at love as Sookie in many ways. And, of course, they were both stubborn – sometimes to their betterment and sometimes to their detriment. Oh – there were differences between them – beyond the size of Sookie's bust-line or the color of their hair. It hadn't been telepathy that had proven to be Scarlett's greatest foe; instead, the film's heroine had been forced to act and adapt to the various struggles that war had brought with it.

And when those struggles became too much – well – she would find a way to deal with them *another day*.

Another negative lesson Sookie had picked up.

Inarguably, Sookie had always loved the idea that tomorrow could bring with it a different version of life. Moreover, she'd always esteemed Scarlett for finding ways to exist in that new version. But, in the past, Sookie had found herself torn between admiring Scarlett for staying ever-committed to the supposed "true love" of her life (Ashley Wilkes) and wanting to kick her for not recognizing that Rhett Butler was ultimately so much better-suited for her.

Rhett – who was so dashing. And liked her for her.

Rhett – who recognized her fire. And liked her for her.

Rhett – who saved her whenever she couldn't quite save herself. And liked her for her.

Rhett – who gave her credit when she *could* save herself. And liked her for her.

Rhett – who tried to give her love, even though he was clearly uncomfortable with “feeling.” And liked her for her.

That rogue sounded an awful lot like Eric Northman.

But Rhett, ultimately, lost some shine in Sookie’s eyes – thanks to a discussion she’d had with Lafayette during their early days working together at Merlotte’s – a couple of years before her friend had been murdered. Sookie felt a tear fall down her cheek as she recalled that Lafayette’s blood had been found in a trunk – a trunk that had been her friend’s first coffin.

She trembled as she recalled what she’d “heard” from Mike Spenser’s disturbed thoughts – that Lafayette had already been dead when he was thrown into that trunk. Sookie was not dead yet, but she was feeling more and more certain that she soon would be – that authorities would soon be able to find much more than just “traces of blood” in the Lincoln’s trunk.

A trunk that would be *her* first coffin.

More tears fell from her swollen eyes as she thought about other snippets of the thoughts she’d “heard” from Lafayette’s killers’ heads. Lafayette had enjoyed the orgies the group had – up to a point. He’d tried to leave the last one he attended when most of the others there became violent. But Mike Spenser and the other men wouldn’t allow him to go because he was the only “bottom” there. They’d brutally raped him and then decided that they had to kill him so that Lafayette couldn’t turn them into the police. Sookie closed her eyes, hoping to God that – at least – his death had been quick.

Her eyes stayed shut as she wondered how much like Lafayette's death hers would be. Would it be quick? Or would Bill take his time punishing her – as Debbie had implied?

Earlier during that long day, Sookie had denied Debbie's theories. Bill would not bite her – right? For one thing, he was still too weak – right? Right: he'd barely been able to help her get himself to the trunk that morning.

Also, the blanket would protect her – right? Right: even if Bill could get to her neck, he couldn't get through the thick comforter to rape her. Hell – when she'd stolen it, she'd even noticed how high-quality the textile was. The King of Mississippi wouldn't have bought cheap bedding!

And once Bill had drunk just a little blood, he'd be able to come back to himself enough to realize that he was hurting her – right? Right: Bill would be disoriented at first and his bite would hurt, but – contrary to what Debbie claimed – he'd respond to her fear and pain by pulling away.

Then – he'd get them out of the trunk, free her from her bonds, and drink the TrueBlood Eric had provided to finish healing. Sure – he'd have questions about why she'd had more of Eric's blood. But she'd explain her staking; she'd explain that she was weak and needed all the strength she could get to help Bill escape Lorena's clutches.

And then Eric would show up and they'd all go home.

"Yes," Sookie had *tried* to tell herself, "the worst that would happen was that she'd be a little anemic for the next several days. Right?"

Of course, there had only been so long that Sookie had been willing to believe the lies she'd tried to sell herself. They were too expensive; they would cost her the last opportunity she would likely ever have to be brave enough to face the truth.

The truth was that Bill had been weak that morning because he'd been tortured and denied adequate blood, but he'd *still* been strong enough to stand and walk sluggishly to the car trunk (though with Sookie's help). And the sun had been up then! During the long day, his body would have begun healing – now that he was not being silvered. Come nightfall, he'd be plenty strong to attack the human in the trunk with him: a human who smelled of blood from the wounds Debbie had inflicted upon her body.

The truth was that a blanket, a T-shirt, and a pair of loose sweats wouldn't prevent Bill from raping her – if that's what he wanted. She'd seen vampires tear through things much stronger than cloth. And it's not like she could do anything to struggle against him – not with her wrists and ankles bound.

The truth was that, if Bill was in a bloodlust, she didn't trust that he could pull himself out of it – perhaps, not even if he *did* have an inkling of who she was. He'd once told her that fear and pain could be strong aphrodisiacs for vampires and that some vampires (he'd implied vampires like Eric) liked the taste of it in the blood.

The sad, ironic truth was that she wouldn't have been worried if Eric were the one next to her. She somehow knew he would keep control of himself.

With her.

But Bill would almost certainly be a shark in the water, and the trunk was a very small tank. She had little hope that he would do anything other than attack without thought or pity.

And – once he had her blood – Bill would want more. Hell! Bill had told her – warned her – enough times that vampires equated blood with sex. Sookie couldn't help but to remember that there had *never* been a time when Bill and she had had sex that there'd not been blood involved – *her* blood.

She shivered at that thought – and she felt a little used. A little like the fangbanger she was in so many people's thoughts.

She shook her head. Feeding a vampire wasn't something that made her ashamed. It was recalling that her relationship with Bill had become little more than feeding and sex during their last weeks together. She'd tried to tell herself that the change had occurred only because of his work on his computer project. Or only because every couple eventually dropped out of their "honeymoon" period. But – now that she refused to lie to herself – she made herself remember the way that Bill looked at her at times: like she was a bother to him. Or the way he was no longer interested in holding her after he'd had his meal and his pleasure. Or the way he'd seemed impatient anytime she tried to start a conversation with him.

He'd begun to *treat* her as a fangbanger – even if that's not how he'd actually seen her.

And – though she'd not wanted to recognize it – she'd *felt* like a fangbanger at times: disposable, but handy. Yet, despite the fact that she'd felt like that sometimes,

she'd stayed with him. Only now was she certain that Bill wasn't good for her – just as Ashley Wilkes was never good for Scarlett. Bill and Ashley – intentionally or not – had done much more harm than they'd ever done good in their respective “heroines’” lives. Yes – finally in the darkness, waiting to die – Sookie was glad that her relationship with Bill would soon be over – one way or another.

Or would it be? Sookie quivered.

Debbie had managed to leave Sookie with a parting thought that was snaking itself more and more into the telepath's consciousness. Indeed, Debbie's own mind had graphically imagined what she thought *would* be happening to the telepath: William would awaken like a rabid dog. He would smell blood and lunge immediately for Sookie's neck. She wouldn't even be able to scream into her gag before William's fangs ripped into her vocal cords and his hands ripped through the fabric so that he could satisfy *all* of his needs.

Chillingly, the last thoughts that Sookie had picked up from the werewolf as she'd driven away had been about “odds.” Apparently, if Debbie had someone to “bet” with, she would wager that Sookie would be drained *before* Bill “finished” with the sex part. Morbidly, Debbie had thought that all vampires and fangbangers were necrophiles anyway – so what did it matter? And as she'd driven her car past the Lincoln, the werewolf had wondered whether Bill would have the presence of mind to turn Sookie. That thought had amused the werewolf.

But it horrified Sookie.

Would the trunk simply be her *first* coffin of *many*? Would Bill force her to become his child – just so that he could keep her forever?

Chapter 05: There's No Tomorrow

There's no tomorrow, there's just tonight

– “There’s No Tomorrow” (songwriters Christopher Difford & Glenn Tilbrook)

Sookie’s body shook inside of her blanket cocoon, and it wasn’t from the cold; it was from the thought of Bill being her maker.

However, he’d never seemed to want to be that; in fact, he’d always seemed to disdain the notion of becoming a maker – probably because his own was so bad.

Still – during her time together with Bill, it was only natural that Sookie had thought about what might happen if they continued their relationship. She’d get older, after all. Meanwhile, he’d stay the same. She sighed even as she opened her eyes to the darkness of the trunk and tried to make out the lump that was Bill’s body.

Humans gave lip service to sentiments like, “I will love you forever.” Of course, the “forever” part was a nice thought in some ways. But – then again – *humans* wouldn’t really have to see that commitment through beyond a half century or so. She wondered if vampires ever made such declarations – since they technically could live forever – or at least, further into forever than any human could.

Would Bill try to “love her forever” if he drained and turned her?

The best evidence of her true feelings about that idea was the fact that her empty stomach lurched, and she spent several minutes dry heaving against her gag.

She could accept – part of her had already accepted – the idea that Bill would take her blood by force.

She could accept – part of her had already accepted – that she was powerless to stop Bill if he raped her.

She could accept – part of her had already accepted – that Bill would be pitiless and brutal.

She could accept – part of her had already accepted – that the pain she would feel in the minutes after sundown would be immeasurable.

She could accept – maybe even forgive – Bill’s violence against her.

But she knew that she could *never* forgive him if he made her his child.

The telepath closed her eyes again – tighter than even before – and trembled with fear and dread.

How many choices would Bill take away from her before his vision of “forever” was finally brought to fruition?

Sookie felt a new stream of tears as she tried to force herself to return again to memories of her conversation with Lafayette about *Gone with the Wind*. Perhaps she was being a coward, but in that moment, she needed to avoid hyperventilation. And she knew that it would be easier to think about the movie – in clinical terms, of course – than to contemplate her current situation or the horrifying prospect of becoming Bill’s child to command as he saw fit.

The telepath attempted to take deep, steady breaths, but her gag prevented that to a certain extent. Finally, however, she regained control of her breathing as she lost herself in memories.

She recalled the day that she and Lafayette had spoken about the 1939 movie as if it were yesterday. She and Gran had been among the last people she knew to get a VCR (heck – by then, most people had transitioned to DVD players), but the women had always been on an extremely tight budget. They’d found an “almost-new” VCR at the second-hand store for only ten dollars! They’d splurged. And, as luck would have it, *Gone with the Wind* had been among the used tapes for sale at the store.

The women had had to wait almost a week after that – for Jason to come to Sunday supper and hook up the contraption. And then they had to wait another full week because they didn’t have one of the required wires, and Jason couldn’t find – or make – the time to bring it mid-week.

Finally, however, the Stackhouse women had found themselves with a working VCR in the early evening of the Sunday almost two weeks after they’d found their prized VCR; to celebrate, they’d decided to pop some popcorn, turn off the lights, and pretend they were at the movie theater – a place where Sookie had never ventured for obvious reasons.

Their movie of choice had been *Gone with the Wind*.

Not surprisingly, when Sookie arrived at Merlotte’s the next day and was prepping for the lunch shift with Lafayette, she had been so excited that she’d

mentioned the VCR find and the movie. What was surprising was that Lafayette had reacted swiftly and negatively.

“That movie’s ‘bout the most fucked up thing I’s ever seen!” he’d criticized.

Initially, Sookie had figured that her friend’s reaction related to slavery, so she’d made it clear that she thought that the sentimentalizing of that kind of culture was wrong, but that she enjoyed the love story.

However, it turned out that Lafayette had more trouble with *that* part than he did with the slavery part.

“Girl, I’s loves me a good love story more than most, but that story’s ‘bout as fucked up as Luke and Laura on *General Hospital!*” he’d scoffed. “My momma loves *them* too, but did you know that they’s first time havin’ sex was rape?” He’d shaken his head with derision. “I used to watch *GH* with my momma every summer. ‘Course I was too young to have seen how Luke and Laura gots together, but I sure ‘nough fell in love with them as a couple. Then I finds out ‘bout the rape.” He shook his head. “*That* shit fucked me up – made me question lots ‘a shit I thoughts ‘bout love. And when I saw *Gone with the Wind* for the first time, it just pissed me off all over again!”

Sookie had frowned at her friend. “But there isn’t a rape in the move.”

Lafayette had looked at her incredulously. “Oh – yes they is! What do you call the scene where Rhett’s drunk and gets all pissed at Scarlett? You think that his carryin’ her up the stairs as she struggles is romance? What with her kickin’ and yellin’? Hells no! I don’t care that they was married and that she was actin’ a fool or that he was

drunk! He raped her and she woke up all smilin' 'bout it. Turned my fuckin' stomach!"

Sookie had reacted to Lafayette's words as if she'd been punched in the gut, even as she'd realized that he was right.

Of course, her outspoken friend had had more to say.

"What pissed me off the most was that I'd liked Mr. Sexy Ass Butler up till then. Hell – he was the only likable one in my humble opinion! I blame that hack of a writer – Mary, no Margaret somebody or other! Yeah, Rhett was a scallywag – sure 'nough – but he was a *de-lucious* one. And everythin' up till that scene screamed that he loved Scarlett more than life itself, though he might have never admitted that shit out loud. And then little Miss Margaret made him turn into something he wasn't – made him take Scarlett by force. Yep! *That right there* pissed me off more than almost anything – 'cept Scarlett wakin' up with that big smile. Least Rhett seemed to realize that he'd let himself become a monster that night. Least *he* felt guilty 'nough to leave outta shame. Least *he* acted like he'd done wrong when he took a second chance with her, but everyone else seemed to sweep that rape right under the carpet. Scarlett and her sweepin' shit to the next day!" he'd fumed.

In addition to his ranting, Sookie had heard from Lafayette's head that his mother had been raped once – and that horror had led to her first mental breakdown. He couldn't understand why she still loved *General Hospital* – especially Luke and Laura – or *Gone with the Wind* for that matter.

As Sookie lay in the trunk listening to the thunder rolling above her, she wondered what it said about her that she'd continued to enjoy *Gone with the Wind*, even though she'd agreed with Lafayette's interpretation. Of course, she'd also tried to talk herself into believing that somewhere between the staircase and the bedroom, Rhett had calmed down and Scarlett had given consent.

Maybe she'd continued to cheer for Rhett because he *had* ultimately redeemed himself. Maybe it was because Scarlett had redeemed herself too when she *finally* realized that Rhett was immeasurably better than Ashley Wilkes.

Maybe it was because Rhett and Scarlett had both made enough mistakes to break the world, but they couldn't ever break each other.

Of course, she'd also always imagined that Rhett and Scarlett would find their happiness in the "tomorrow" that the heroine clung to. And she'd not believed for a moment that Rhett no longer gave a damn about her.

However, she wondered if she'd interpreted the ending of the movie incorrectly – if she'd missed the fact that Rhett was truly done with Scarlett.

He ought to have been done with her. But – then again – she'd given him a second chance, despite his doing something unthinkable to her. Or – maybe – he'd walked away because she'd never seemed to "get" that he'd raped her. Or – maybe – he'd felt just as raped – on an emotional level – by that point.

In the swirling world of her mind, Sookie also found herself questioning Scarlett's reaction at the end of the movie. After all, she'd just realized that she loved Rhett. But she didn't put up an immediate fight *for* him – as she'd done for Ashley

Douche when he'd told her that he was going to marry Melanie. No! Scarlett had put it off – as if she had an infinite number of “other days!”

“Other days” ran out.

Sookie opened, but then closed her eyes again; strangely enough, having them closed made the world seem less dark than the trunk. “Scarlett *should* have run after Rhett at the end,” Sookie mumbled into the gag.

She *should* have fought for him.

“*Rhett* was worth fighting for,” Sookie mumbled, even though the minimal sound she produced irritated her swollen throat more than it already was. It didn't matter; she realized that her words were worth saying – worth being *sounded*.

Scarlett had fought for the wrong man for way too long, just as Sookie now understood that she'd been fighting for the wrong man. She'd gotten it into her head that Bill Compton was her best option – maybe her only option – likely because he'd initially presented himself as such. She'd stubbornly believed that things could eventually be perfect between them – if she just held on.

In other words, she'd committed Scarlett's sin: failing to recognize that the so-called “bad boy” was actually the *better* boy for her because the so-called “good boy” was a waffling weakling!

She sighed, focusing on the Viking as memories starring him flooded her mind.

Sookie couldn't help but to smile. As vulgar and inappropriate as Eric's flowers to her had been, they'd made her smile – and then laugh to herself – as she'd lain in the hospital bed following Rene's attack. She'd been surprised that she could still laugh

after learning that her friend's fiancé had been the one who'd killed Gran, Tina, Dawn, and Maudette. She'd been even more surprised that she could laugh after having had a glimpse at Rene's thoughts regarding how he desperately wanted to kill her – and worse.

And then Eric had appeared hovering outside her hospital window. His expression had been difficult for her to decipher, for it had been full of so many of the “feelings” he tried so hard to conceal.

By then, he'd already saved her life once – during the Long Shadow incident. But – back then – she'd still believed Bill's narrative about the Viking as if it were gospel.

She should have believed the *facts*. For instance, Bill hadn't even been in town when Rene had attacked her because he was trying to secure the position of Area 5 Investigator so that he could better protect her – not from Rene, but from Eric.

Had she ever needed to be protected from Eric? No!

She had needed protecting from the serial killer who had already taken the lives of her co-worker, her cat, and her grandmother. Sookie scoffed. It was as if Bill had wanted her to be harmed.

Had he? She couldn't help but to wonder.

Or was Bill just thoughtless when it came to caring for others?

Meanwhile, Eric had done all that she'd allowed him to do when it came to protecting her.

He'd killed Longshadow when he'd attacked.

In Dallas, Eric had shown up as Leif. Looking back, Sookie recognized that he'd been watching over her.

It had been Eric – not Bill – who had thrown himself over her when Stan's nest had been attacked.

It had been Eric – not Bill – whom Sookie had trusted to take her to and then see her through the orgy when she'd wanted to clear Andy's name and discover who had killed Lafayette.

It had been Eric who had been compassionate when Bill had basically pensioned her off to him – despite the fact that Eric benefitted from Bill's action.

Eric had appeared as Leif again in order to look out for her in Jackson.

And, *again*, when the man who was supposed to be looking out for her had run off (following his nature), Eric had stayed by her side and made sure she received healing after she was staked.

Sookie didn't want to blame Alcide for shifting and running off after Newlin. Similarly, she'd forgiven Bill for following his vampire nature and prioritizing his need for revenge and blood over her well-being following the attack on Stan's nest.

But it said something that Eric Northman had been the one to stay with her during both situations.

"He really is a Rhett," Sookie mumbled.

But he was a Rhett *without* the scene where he lost control and forced himself upon the heroine.

He was a Rhett who had smelled her blood in the water more than once, but had placed himself between her and potential sharks.

He was a Rhett who had carefully and tenderly taken the glass from her body in Dallas without ever even attempting to take her blood. But – more than that – he was a Rhett who tried to comfort her after her ordeal in the Dallas Fellowship church.

In sum, he was a Rhett who gave a damn about her – despite the fact that she'd been fixating upon her own version of Ashley Wilkes. And that made Eric better than his fictional counterpart.

Plus, he was 100% real!

But could she be better than Scarlett? Could she recognize the man – vampire – who was best for her before it was too late?

Wasn't it already too late?

After all, given her current situation – waiting to die in the trunk – it seemed futile to “pick” Eric.

He'd never know.

But that didn't mean she wasn't going to make her choice.

She opened her eyes and tried to look for Bill in the dark once more. She wouldn't waste trying to speak the words to him, but she thought them at him – *for herself*: “Bill Compton, I'm officially breaking up with you.”

A tear slipped from her eye. “Thank you,” she continued thinking in her mind, “for being my *first* in a lot of things. Most every girl is disappointed that her first love cannot last forever, but – because of you – at least, I had a first.”

The telepath let those thoughts and her positive feelings fill the trunk for a moment. “I forgive you,” she continued thinking at him, “at least for what you are going to do – as long as you don’t turn me. But I don’t forgive you for all the rest of it. I don’t forgive you for hiding things from me and lying to me – especially about Eric. I don’t forgive you for taking advantage of my naivety and my grief – especially when you took my virginity the night of Gran’s funeral. I don’t forgive you for taking me for granted and making me feel like a fangbanger at times. In fact, I need you to know that, from here on out, I’m gonna think of you as a stranger because I don’t think I really know you at all.”

She closed her eyes again.

As another rumble of thunder passed overhead, Sookie mentally closed the chapter of her life that had been Bill Compton. Even if a miracle happened and she lived on as a human, she knew that she would keep it closed.

If, however, she was turned by Bill that night, she was determined that a separate and a *different* book would be opened – one in which she would do all she could to gain control within her new existence. She would also test her maker to see if any of the “honorable” qualities he portrayed himself as having actually existed. If they did, he’d treat her with compassion. He’d help her learn without forcing anything upon her. He’d release her to her own life as soon as she was capable of living it. And he’d never try to manipulate her to love him. If he treated her well, he’d earn a friend and a good child; if he didn’t, she would just hope that Eric would stake him.

No – she *trusted* Eric to.

Because Eric would know that she'd be miserable if Bill turned her – only to try to warp her to his will. To fashion her into his ideal Southern Belle.

To hell with that!

“Eric,” Sookie said into her gag before feeling more tears on her cheeks, “I want to give you a chance,” she swore, despite the fact that her raw throat could now make very little noise. But the words meant enough to justify the pain of them.

“I'd give *us* a chance,” she further promised. “I have faith in you, and that says everything – now, at the end – doesn't it?” she mumbled before a fit of painful coughing rattled her body. Her crying had caused congestion in her nose, so breathing became labored for her for a few minutes, and she felt as if she might slip from consciousness, but another loud blast of thunder shook her awake.

After a while, Sookie felt – once more – able to breathe more freely, though her lungs were still burning.

“I'd be better than Scarlett – *for you*. If we fall in love, I'll fight for you. I promise,” she choked out, though she was barely capable of producing a noise.

She ended those hard-fought-for words with more coughing.

But she spoke one more time against the gag nonetheless. “See you soon Lala. See you soon Gran.”

After that, she figured she was done with words.

She'd said her piece.

But she knew she would not die in peace.

Chapter 06: All I Needed Was the Rain

I'm 'bout as low as I can go

I don't really mean to complain

Now all I needed was the rain

Rain, rain, rain, rain

– “All I Needed Was the Rain” (songwriters Sid Wayne & Benjamin Weisman)

TWENTY-THREE MINUTES UNTIL SUNSET

Eric Northman had awoken sixty minutes before, and – ever since his eyes had popped open – he’d been trying to keep himself from rattling apart.

Of course, at over a thousand years old, the vampire was well-used to waking up before sunset.

In general, Eric greatly enjoyed the forty or so minutes of late afternoon and dusk that his age afforded him – even if he could not venture outside of whatever light-tight space he’d died in. Inarguably, he was also luckier than older vampires, for holes in the earth, caves, and crypts had been mostly replaced by bedrooms with books and other amusements by the time he was old enough to enjoy more than ten minutes of what vampires called “extended time.” And, of course, the developments of various technologies had brought with them telephones, radios, televisions, computers, and the Internet.

Hell! He'd never admit as much to Pam, but he had enjoyed quite a few serial programs during his "extended time." There had, for example, been a game show on television called *The Match Game*, which had – during the 1970s – been broadcast during his "extended time." He'd often chuckled at the "star" panelists, who were undoubtedly drunk much of the time. Indeed, he'd used to believe that drunken humans could be very funny – *before* opening Fangtasia, that is. Now he just found that drunkenness encouraged them to be brazen idiots.

Of course, his "extended time" was not all spent following radio and then television shows that Pam would have ridiculed him for (*if* she knew about them). On the contrary, when he was masquerading as a human, Eric had made it a point to initiate as many phone calls to "other humans" as he could before sunset. Though stuck inside, he could also use his "free" time to work or to plan, and – though he cared deeply for Pam – he liked having some time when his blood was at "peace." Indeed, except for the "distant" presence of his three blood connections (because Appius and Karin were too far away from him to pick up their emotions and Pam was still dead for the day), he was "on his own" when he awoke. In fact, Eric sometimes wondered if the opportunity for "alone time" was one of the main reasons why most older vampires enjoyed needing less sleep than their children. Simply put, being "alone" was a luxury of sorts for anyone with a blood connection.

In addition to age increasing Eric's "extended time" year by year, a good storm could afford the thousand-plus-year-old even more time awake before the sun officially

set. However, waking up *eighty-three minutes* before that time was quite abnormal—even for him.

He had felt, for lack of a better word, “uncomfortable” — another anomaly — when he had woken up.

Despite (or perhaps because of) this discomfort, he had taken an extra moment to gauge his immediate surroundings.

Weres patrolled the property, and there were four humans in the mansion — all grouped in what was likely the kitchen. He could hear only one other vampire moving around, likely Russell (since he was quite a bit older than Eric); however, like him, the king would be confined to his light-tight space.

Still disconcerted — despite ascertaining no immediate threats — Eric had quickly freed himself from Bernard’s “snuggly” grip. As Leif, Eric had needed to pretend to be attracted to Bernard in order to secure clothing and the car for Sookie, but he hadn’t had to like it.

In fact — even if he had been going through a man phase (which he wasn’t) — Bernard wouldn’t have been Eric’s type; he was simply too hairy. Indeed, the Viking had experienced very few “man phases” during his years. In fact, he could count them on one hand — on *three* fingers.

Of course, the time he’d been *required* to spend with his maker was a *forced* phase that he liked to note with his *middle* finger.

In addition to teaching Eric how to be an effective (if reluctant) lover for another man, Appius had also taught him that avoiding most human feelings was necessary for a vampire.

Acceptable feelings included anger, indifference, and amusement.

Rage wasn't allowed because it made one sloppy.

Fear wasn't allowed because it made one erratic.

Caring wasn't allowed because it made one vulnerable.

Love *certainly* wasn't allowed because it made one a fool.

Eric had been a good student, learning to keep his emotions at an even keel — rarely allowing them to skew too positively or too negatively in any direction.

On the rare occasions he had — as a youngling — allowed his emotions to be “carried away,” he'd suffered his maker's “training regimens.” Thus, it was safe to say that he'd perfected the art of living as numb as he could.

Even with his vampire children, the Viking had always been extremely careful. He'd turned Karin to curb the loneliness he'd felt after Appius had told him to seek his own fate. But — back then with his first vampire child — Eric had followed Appius's training-regimen example in a very strict manner. The only thing he'd not done was to require Karin's physical servicing of him. Indeed, he had remained physically aloof as he'd taught her all that he knew about being a successful vampire.

He had allowed himself to enjoy her company *only* to a certain extent and to gain fulfillment *only* through her training and in seeing her become more and more powerful — acceptable “feelings” on his part. But that had been the end of what he'd

allowed himself to feel. And, when she had been ready to survive on her own, he'd given her independence. Indeed, he'd insisted upon it when he began to worry that Appius might try to use his child to punish him.

Pamela had been more difficult to not feel strong emotion for, and – ultimately – Eric had “failed” with her – though only *after* they'd moved to the New World so that distance could mask (at least to a certain extent) his affection for her. Certainly, Pam amused him. And that was fine, according to Appius's rules.

However, there had been more to Eric's feelings for his younger child. The Viking also *cared* for her profoundly, and he had “missed” her whenever she'd been away from him. Because of this, he'd been “happy” for the excuse to call her to his side when he'd needed a partner for Fangtasia.

Affection, care, longing, happiness – these were not acceptable to his maker, and too many of the feelings (especially all at once) might have drawn Appius's attention – even from half the world away. Thus, Eric habitually focused on only his “acceptable” feelings for his younger child: pride, loyalty, and amusement.

Just in case Appius happened to “check in.”

With Sookie Stackhouse, the rules his maker had set for him had been difficult to follow.

Impossible to follow, in fact – as his self-imposed discipline slipped every time he interacted with her.

The first night he'd seen her, he'd *felt* as if something in him had been awakened. Perhaps that something had been “possibility.”

Indeed, Eric could truly say that he'd never felt anything like what he felt with Sookie. As a human, he'd experienced mostly the need to follow through with his duties. He'd shadowed the behavior of his father and older brother. But his days as a human had been difficult – harsh even – and he'd been made hard-hearted because of the era during which he'd grown up. Indeed, by his people, the *heart*, wasn't viewed as significant beyond one thing: If it was beating, it was good.

Notions of “love” were not associated with the organ.

Nor were such notions viewed as important.

On the contrary, Eric was taught to serve those above him and to watch over those below him. After his elder brother was slain, he took over his brother's duties, becoming heir apparent. He also became husband to his brother's wife and father to his brother's children. For the boys – he made sure they received what training was appropriate for them. He left the girls in Aude's capable hands.

Not that it had mattered, but he had been pleased that he “liked” Aude; she'd been a solid woman and partner. He'd enjoyed bedding her – but not more than he'd enjoyed bedding any woman who would accept his advances. He'd felt pride when his *own* first child had been born, but he'd known that he could not show the boy of his loins (Leif) favor, so he'd stifled that pride by taking his eldest (his brother's first-born) on a hunt soon after. Indeed, he'd *consciously* spent less time with Leif, counting on his brother's children to oversee their younger brother – as was tradition.

When Aude had died trying to deliver their third child, Eric had not shed a tear for her. Instead, he'd gone about his duty. First, he'd tasked one of his sisters with

taking over the immediate care of all his children. Then he'd seen to Aude's (and the never-born infant's) funeral rites. Finally, he'd conferred with his father about his next steps – his next wife.

Looking back, he knew that he had felt *care* for his family. But he'd been taught not to feel too strongly. Thus, the “foundation” Appius had found drunk on that lonely road – on that fateful night – had been an easy one for the Roman to build upon.

Indeed, Eric had made fun of notions of “romantic love” when they'd first come into fashion. He'd found them impractical – a fad.

Certainly, impossible for him.

Of course, the inquisitive vampire had studied “love.” He'd read the poetry that supposedly represented romantic notions at their best. He'd glamoured and questioned those who claimed to feel “true love.” At the end of his studies, he'd been convinced that “romantic love” was nothing more than “lust” combined with delusion.

It was a human *affliction*.

Thus, he'd *certainly* never expected to be “shot with cupid's arrow.” He'd told Pam more than once that he'd rather be staked by it – than *diseased* by it!

But, then, Sookie Stackhouse had entered his bar in her flirty, though innocent sundress, infinitely more beautiful than the red flowers adorning her garment. The odd thing was that Eric could have named hundreds of women who were more physically attractive than Sookie. He'd bedded many of them.

But that hadn't stopped him from immediately thinking that she was the most exquisite of them all. In fact, his and Sookie's altogether-too-brief interaction that night had *more* than solidified his interest.

Of course, never having felt anything like he was feeling before, Eric had been suspicious that Sookie might be a witch. Still, he'd *longed* to have additional interactions with her. If killing Long Shadow to protect her had been a shock to him, wishing to care for her after her Fellowship church "visit" had been a situation he would never have imagined himself living.

But live it he had.

Not surprisingly, in that Dallas hotel, it had been almost as if he'd been watching a *different* vampire carefully remove the shards of glass from Sookie's body, even as he assured the telepath that she *would* be well.

But it had not been a different vampire.

Indeed, it had been *he* who had rushed to Dallas in the first place— not because he didn't trust Sookie to do the job that she'd promised to do in finding Farrell, but because he'd worried that she'd do it *too* well, risking herself.

In the end, he'd been right about that. But he *shouldn't* have cared.

He also shouldn't have felt what he did when the attack had occurred upon Stan's nest. Sookie had yelled out a warning. At that moment, Eric *should* have sped away to safety, but— instead— he had used his own body to shield Sookie. He *shouldn't* have done that. And he *certainly* shouldn't have felt intense fear that she'd been harmed until he could confirm that she hadn't been.

And less than a week later – *never* should he have placed himself into a situation involving a Maenad (at a Maenad-“sponsored” orgy no-less)! But he hadn’t hesitated – *for Sookie.*

He also shouldn’t have followed Sookie to Jackson. But – here he was: again, pretending to be Leif.

The night before – when he’d felt her pain through their weak blood tie – he’d wanted to raze any threat against her. But his priority had been staying *with* her – not avenging her injuries.

What the fuck was that all about?!?!

As the wolf had run after Newlin and his cronies, Eric had stayed with Sookie (once again denying his vampiric instincts to hunt) in order to ensure that Russell and his people wouldn’t “accidentally” kill her.

And it wasn’t because he’d sent her to Jackson. No – he’d just *felt* the need to be *with* her.

Felt it acutely.

Feelings: she seemed destined to find them within him – to draw out emotions that he’d never even believed in before.

He felt as if he’d been “increased” because of those feelings, but he also felt vulnerable to them.

What if the feelings strengthened? What if they continued to change him? What if they consumed him? What if Appius took notice of them – of him? And what if his notice affected *her*?

It was these questions that had added *fear* to his repertoire of new feelings.

But the most difficult question of all? *What if he lost her?*

It was *that* question that had been driving him to the point of insanity since seconds after he'd awoken that night – that *day* – when he'd realized the source of his disquiet.

The source of his awaking unnaturally early.

Yes – Eric generally enjoyed waking before other vampires. He could do work in peace, surf the Internet mindlessly, or simply plan his night. Or he could watch a human television show. Lately, he'd been into MASH, for he'd been intrigued by the various ways that humans dealt with war through humor – a concept not unknown during his own time.

But the war within him at the moment had brought him to his knees – emotionally (for the past now-sixty-seven minutes) – and, for the first time, *literally*.

Sookie's pain – growing more acute by the minute.

Sookie's fear.

Sookie's fatigue.

Sookie's resolution – despite how tired she was.

Sookie's hopelessness – despite her resolution.

Sookie's dread.

It was the last of her emotions that had ultimately caused him to crumble downward.

Her pain was manageable – based upon the sensations of the injuries Sookie currently had, Eric knew that she could be easily healed. It was the realization that she

anticipated and was trying to steel herself to “accept” more pain that had him most concerned. Feeling dread himself, he rose to his feet.

He gauged the upcoming night. Though the storm was hiding the sun to a certain extent, Eric knew that it was still up – that it would not set for another sixteen minutes. Based on Sookie’s distance from him, he figured that he could be to her five minutes after that.

Twenty-one minutes in total.

Of course, the Viking had called Herveaux as soon as he’d awoken. The fucking Were hadn’t fucking answered! Eric had been forced to leave a fucking message – informing the Were of Sookie’s intended plan and of the fact that her location seemed to be roughly where Herveaux had his apartment. However, save an “On my way,” that the Were had texted thirty minutes before, there had been no additional missive.

Eric had contemplated calling the human police – and would have if Sookie’s physical pain had been worse. But he was certain of neither her exact location nor her current predicament. And human authorities tended to make Supernatural situations worse.

Then Eric had spent a good deal of time cursing himself for not arranging back-up protection – or a fucking full-time guard – for the telepath!

Having paced until Russell’s fine carpet was likely rutted, Eric occupied himself for a minute or two by dressing, careful to leave none of his possessions behind. And then he began pacing again.

When he felt an increased jolt of fear from Sookie at six minutes before sunset, the Viking did something he'd never done before: he left his resting place before nightfall, counting on the storm to obscure the sun from the windows in the hall.

His instincts immediately called upon him to scurry back to known safety, but he ventured closer to the nearest windows, and there he saw the storm that he'd been hearing – the storm that was mirroring Sookie's emotions in many ways.

The Viking vampire did not “feel” himself making a decision, though he registered that he was moving toward a side door he'd discovered in the mansion the night before.

He knew that he shouldn't, but he opened that door and looked toward the sky.

A single break in the clouds, and he would be vulnerable to the sun.

A let-up in the storm, and he would be finally dead.

He recognized what he *ought* to do – turn the fuck around!

But he lifted off into the sky instead. He followed Sookie's dread, unable to allow himself to feel it a moment longer than he absolutely had to.

He followed it because of the myriad of emotions in her.

Because of the fathomless emotions in himself.

Emotions that were only inside of him because of her.

He flew through the storm with little care that it was the *only* thing preventing him from being burned. He knew that he was not at his fastest because the sun was still above the clouds, but he didn't care about that either.

He *should* have cared – for his *own* well-being.

Above all else.

He should have landed and dug into the earth to ensure that he would not be harmed by the day.

And, given Sookie Stackhouse's effect upon him, he *should* have celebrated her dread – her hopelessness – her pain.

But he did none of those things. Instead, he mustered his strength to fly faster.

Sookie had “slept” with Bill only one time – in Dallas.

And she'd been napping when he'd awoken there. So she'd never experienced him “coming to life.”

Of course – without a doubt – her current situation was different than her time waking up with Bill in Dallas.

Then, Bill's first noise had *not* been a feral growl.

Sookie's first thought after he'd awoken in Dallas had *not* been that she was urinating on herself out of fear.

However, she did *not* allow her last pain-free moment to be spent feeling embarrassed that she'd lost control of her bladder. She knew enough about anatomy to know that worse things would be happening once Bill killed her.

Bill's rattling growl seemed to last an eternity, but it likely lasted only ten seconds or so.

After that came the pain.

Bill seemed to intuit the sorest part of Sookie's throat, for that was exactly where he bit down—hard. She couldn't help but to scream into the gag, making the pain even worse as Bill literally began to shred the blanket that was separating her body from his.

In his efforts, Bill shred the bindings around her legs as well, so Sookie kicked for all she was worth, but that movement hurt almost worse than Bill's bite, as her legs felt as if they were being attacked with thousands of needles.

On some level, Sookie knew that fighting would only make her blood flow into Bill's mouth faster, but she couldn't help but to do what she could—useless though it was.

She felt her top being ripped off and then desperate hands crushing her breasts.

She thanked God that she was beginning to feel light-headed as Bill took another long drag of her blood and then took ahold of the waistband of the borrowed sweat pants.

"Please, just let me pass out," she prayed—pleaded—soundlessly, no longer able to make any noise other than a mixture of gurgling and choking.

Speaking of sound—time seemed to stop for a moment as Sookie heard a roar echoing from nearby. Her weary brain took the noise for thunder—thunder so close that she figured the storm had somehow entered the garage.

After that, she heard another loud booming sound, but her mind couldn't find a comparison for it.

And then she heard the squeaking, scraping sound of peeling metal.

And – suddenly – she felt the weight of Bill being ripped from her body; she wondered if her throat was going with him.

She blinked at the fluorescent light that had suddenly entered the trunk until she found herself looking at the outraged face of Eric Northman.

But she wasn't afraid.

On the contrary.

For the first time since she had been put in the trunk by Debbie Pelt, she *knew* she would live through the night.

She'd longed for him, wanted him, prayed for him.

And he'd come.

Chapter 07: Gently

Gently your eyes met mine

Tender, trusting, true

Gently your hand took mine

Thrilled me through and through

– “Gently” (songwriters Edward Lisbona & Murray Wizell)

Eric allowed himself only one-quarter of a second to enjoy the cracking noise of Bill Compton’s bones as they broke against the concrete wall into which he’d been propelled.

And the cracking was *significant*; at least nine of the sideburn-wearing shithead’s bones had broken if Eric’s ears were accurate (and they always were). The Viking just hoped that one of those “bones” was Compton’s sorry excuse for a cock!

But Eric didn’t check on his “supposed” subject; he had more important things to worry about than Bill fucking Compton!

During the minutes before he’d gotten to Sookie, her fear had become a living—and impossibly breathing—thing within him, causing his whole body to vibrate as he’d drawn nearer to the parking garage.

Despite the thick clouds, it had taken him 1 minute and 4 seconds past the “official” sunset time to reach Sookie because he’d been unable to travel at his full speed before the deadly orb had disappeared to the other half of the globe.

Still – he'd never been more thankful for a storm.

Indeed, Ran, the Norse goddess of storms, was due a kick-ass tribute from him; that much was for certain! Ran's thunderstorm's clouds had protected him *and* allowed him to get to Sookie while she still drew breath.

Once in the parking garage, it had taken the Viking less than a second to determine the situation.

He had not hesitated to rip off the trunk lid and to rip Bill out of Sookie's radius – after he'd ascertained that the younger vampire had released his fangs from Sookie's neck in order to confront his interrupter.

But the thousand-year-old vampire *did* hesitate – now – as he took in Sookie Stackhouse's condition.

Her borrowed clothing was shredded from the waist up, exposing much of her flesh. Her sweatpants, though stretched, were still intact.

From the pallor of her skin, Eric knew that she had lost at least two pints of blood. From her wheezy breaths, he could tell that her windpipe was heavily damaged and at least two ribs were cracked.

Bruises – some several hours old and some freshly made – peppered her body everywhere the Viking could see.

Her arms were bound behind her.

Her mouth was gagged with a filthy and garishly designed piece of cloth.

Bill had left a large gash near her jugular – but his aim hadn't been true enough to give her a fatal wound.

Relief flooded the Viking; Sookie's condition could have been so much worse.

One more minute, and she would have been raped.

One more after that, and she would have been drained.

The Viking closed and then opened his eyes, dueling with the emotions within him that were compelling him to succumb to his "vampire" instincts and rip Compton to shreds.

But Eric pushed those instincts aside, focusing on a deeper drive—a more primal urge.

More than the beast of him wanted to kill, the best of him wanted to protect.

Sookie—the woman he desired to make his own—needed him.

Compton would wait.

Indeed—even if Eric had to delay his wrath until after Sookie had died (whether of natural fucking causes or because she chose to be turned), he *would* take Compton's head—but only *after* he took all the other parts of him.

Slowly.

But—for the moment—the Viking continued his quick assessment of the telepath, for he did not want to do more harm than good by moving her.

When he found Sookie's eyes with his gaze, her blue orbs captivated him as he took off his shirt and used it to staunch the flow of her blood from her neck wound.

He saw relief in those eyes.

He saw hope.

And—most significantly—he saw trust.

“Jesus fuckin’ Christ!” came the voice of Alcide Herveaux from behind him.

Inept though the Were had been the night before, Eric had texted Herveaux right after he’d woken up and sensed Sookie’s agitation. The tardy two-natured twit had been too late to save Sookie, but perhaps he’d shown up in time to do some good.

For a change.

For what *little* it was now worth.

“Is your apartment unlocked?” Eric asked gruffly.

“Uh—no,” Alcide answered, “but I have the key.”

“Give it to me,” Eric insisted, even as the vampire blocked the Were’s view of Sookie’s bare chest.

“Uh—okay, but—uh”

“Secure Compton,” Eric ordered.

Alcide seemed ready to argue as he tried to move around Eric to get to Sookie.

“Do as I say, or I *will* end you *now*! Don’t doubt it!” Eric growled.

Alcide returned the aggressive noise, but then nodded before shoving his keys into Eric’s palm.

Moments later, Alcide turned toward Bill’s still crumpled body, and Eric turned back to Sookie, gently tearing through first the gag and then the wrist restraints.

“I’m going to pick you up now,” the Viking spoke with a gentleness that seemed foreign to him, even as he continued to hold his shirt over her neck wound. The tear to her flesh was jagged because of Bill’s rabid bite; however, the blood flow from Sookie’s

body was already mostly stopped because of the pressure of the fabric and the residual vampire blood in her body.

Yes – her condition could have been much, *much* worse.

“Okay,” Sookie said, her voice raw.

Eric couldn’t help but to notice all the destroyed fabric around Sookie – fabric that was undoubtedly from the comforter that had been on her bed in Russell’s mansion. Having been so distended by Bill’s violent attack, Sookie’s sweatpants barely stayed up as he pulled her to him, cradling her so that her bare chest would not be visible to the other Supernaturals in the parking garage. He moved quickly toward the elevator.

“Not that way,” Sookie croaked out, her eyes pleading as she glanced toward the conveyance.

Eric nodded, even as he tilted his head down to brush a kiss onto her forehead.

“Not that way,” he assured as he went to the stairs. It would be faster for him to fly up the stairs anyway.

Indeed, within a minute, he had Sookie in Alcide’s apartment; he carefully laid her onto the bed in the room where her scent was strongest.

Within another minute, he had covered her with a blanket and had her drinking from a bottle of water as he took a closer look at her neck wound. From her rasping breaths and bruise patterns, he also confirmed that she had two cracked ribs, though her lung was not punctured. Based upon the bruising around Sookie’s collarbone, the Viking also posited that it was fractured as well – likely by Bill’s “amorous” grip.

Eric strove to keep himself calm. “Sookie, your wounds are not life-threatening, for Compton did not hit any major arteries or veins when he bit into your neck; you are,” the vampire paused, “lucky. But the neck wound will need stitches, and you have some broken bones. I could take you to a doctor or call Ludwig. Or I could heal you.”

“You do it – as long as it won’t make me a vampire,” Sookie managed to whisper, remembering the choices she’d made in the trunk.

By some miracle, she *had* been given a second chance; actually, it seemed to be a third chance. Or a fourth. Or a fifth.

She couldn’t be sure, for she was currently too tired to count all of her brushes with death. However, she wasn’t too tired to feel intense gratitude toward the vampire who’d saved her from the latest of them.

Saved her from quite a few of them, actually.

Of course, in truth, Eric Northman wasn’t a miracle; a miracle – as Sookie had been taught – wasn’t explainable. Though deeper than she’d ever given him credit for being, Eric was the very real and very physical “explanation” behind why she still had a beating heart.

Just as he’d been the night he’d staked Longshadow.

Just as he’d been the night they’d confronted the Maenad.

Just as he’d been in Dallas.

Just as he’d been the night before when she’d been staked inside of a Supe bar with vampires all around.

Indeed, he'd made a habit of being near whenever she needed him most.

And she wasn't about to insult him by turning down his offer of healing.

Though clearly surprised by her decision, Eric spoke, "You don't require enough blood to turn you, but—even if I heal you—you need to decide how far you want me to go."

"What do you mean?" Sookie asked after taking another soothing drink of water.

"There are more conservative options. For one, I could merely rub blood onto your neck wound and then bind your bone breaks. They are minor and would heal in a week or two because of the remaining vampire blood in your system. Ludwig could come to your home and follow up with this.

"A slightly less conservative option is that you could ingest my blood so that your internal wounds—including your broken bones and the interior trauma to your throat—would heal quickly. However, your neck wound would heal only from the inside—even if I also rubbed blood or saliva onto it, rather than licking it. The bruising on your body would fade, but the gashes where Bill bit would leave a scar."

Sookie frowned. "Why not just lick my wound? Like the vampire last night did?"

"Two potential reasons," he responded somewhat cautiously. "The first is that you just underwent a trauma, and my getting close enough to properly salve the wound might be uncomfortable for you."

She started to shake her head, but the pain prevented her. The vampire quickly gave her another drink and then checked her wound to make sure it was not bleeding more (due to her movement) than it had been.

“I trust you, Eric. I don’t think it would bother me if you healed me like that,” she said softly, so as not to tax her throat.

Eric bent down and placed a soft, careful kiss on her temple. “I thank you for that trust, Sookie. But you have shown reticence in taking or receiving vampire blood in the past, and I don’t want to push you when your body *could* heal itself – given time. Also, you must keep in mind that my licking your wounds – thereby ingesting your blood – in such quick succession to your taking my blood would almost certainly count as an *exchange* of blood, and that would take us one step closer to a blood bond.”

“A blood bond? How’s that different from what we have now?” she asked, her voice still incredibly raw, despite the water she’d been drinking.

Eric frowned in surprise and then growled. “One day, I *will* kill Bill Compton,” he muttered to himself, causing Sookie to cringe.

“Please,” she whimpered, “I don’t want his blood on my hands – no matter what he did.”

“I won’t kill him tonight. I promise,” the vampire assured as he kissed her forehead again and rechecked to make sure that the bleeding from her neck wound was still curbed. He took an unneeded breath. “But if he hurts you again . . .”

He didn’t complete his sentence; he didn’t need to. His meaning was perfectly clear.

“What’s a blood bond?” Sookie asked again, focusing on his eyes and trying to draw him past the murderous rage that was in them.

In truth, part of her wanted Bill Compton dead because of how he’d hurt her — how he’d intended to hurt her far more. But she refused to give in to that base part.

At least not until she’d healed.

And bathed.

And rested.

And had some coffee!

“A bond is a *permanent* blood connection,” Eric informed. “It is similar to a blood tie, but will not fade over time. A bond is formed if enough of your blood is in my body while enough of mine is in yours. It generally takes about three exchanges — give or take — to create a bond. And these must be made within a certain period of time — usually within a few weeks or months, depending on the strength of the vampire. I thought you knew this; I thought Compton would have told you.”

Sookie didn’t dare shake her head, for fear of aggravating the wound that Eric was still pressing his shirt against. So she simply frowned in response to his comment.

“He didn’t. Do I have a bond? With him?”

“No,” the Viking responded. “You currently have blood ties with both Bill and with me, but no bond. I took your blood following the Maenad attack, and you took mine in Dallas. That exchange was close enough — and of sufficient quantity — to create a blood tie between us. You had my blood in quantity last night, but I didn’t have yours, so we are only one-third of the way toward making a bond. You are closer with

Compton. If he gave you his blood now, you would, perhaps, form one – though the presence of my blood could have muddled the process. Bill would be able to tell, however.”

Sookie shuddered. “But he *didn't* tell me – any of this.”

“I’m sorry,” Eric said sincerely.

“I don’t want a blood bond with him,” she half-whispered and half-whimpered.

“Then it won’t happen,” Eric said with certainty. “I’ll make sure of it.”

“Thanks,” she said with a cough, spurring the vampire to encourage her to drink more water.

“Our blood tie? That’s how you knew I was in trouble?” she asked once her throat seemed to be slightly less on fire.

He nodded in confirmation.

“What would change about our tie now if we exchanged – so that you can heal me better? So that I won’t scar,” she asked, as Eric once again checked the wound to make sure Sookie and he had time for the rest of the current discussion. The last thing he wanted was for her to go into shock due to blood loss! Luckily the wound looked a lot worse than it actually was since Bill had not connected with her major blood vessels.

That fact could be explained in one of only three ways as far Eric was concerned. First, Compton might have recognized that it was Sookie in the trunk on an instinctual level, causing him to “take it easy” on her, even as he was compelled to feed because of his injuries. Second, in his frenzy, Bill might have simply “missed” hitting a prime target. Third, the younger vampire might have been aware enough to *want* to

“prolong” the experience in the trunk – to have time to rape and cause maximum harm to his victim before ending her and, perhaps, turning her. If Eric ever confirmed that the third possibility was the truth, Bill would learn whole new definitions for the phrase “maximum harm.”

Needless to say, the Viking was willing to use all of his many years and experiences to hone those new definitions.

Eric refocused on Sookie. “Sookie, if you just took my blood, nothing would change as far as our blood tie went – *unless* I had your blood in the near future. Your wound would close, your broken bones would heal, and you’d feel stronger, but here . . .,” he trailed off in a whisper, motioning toward her neck. Clearly the thought of her carrying a scar bothered Eric very much.

“On the other hand,” he continued after a moment, “if I just licked your wound, there would be no scar, but you’d be weak for a while because your blood loss would still be a factor.”

“Like last night? After Ray Don healed me?”

“Yes.”

“Okay,” Sookie said in understanding. “And if you *did* lick the wound – even if I didn’t take your blood too – the blood tie would get stronger?”

“Yes. For you took in my blood last night,” he clarified. “But the tie wouldn’t be made permanent – not unless we exchanged for a third time.”

She thought over his words for a moment. “What time period are we lookin’ at? Before any tie we created would fade?” she squeaked out, recalling that the Maenad attack was only a few days before she took Eric’s blood in Dallas.

Eric encouraged her to drink more water, as he continued to press his soiled shirt against her neck to ensure that the wound stayed stable.

He shrugged. “I am not certain, for I’ve never created a bond with anyone other than my vampire children. My blood is strong though, and I took much of yours to help remove the poison of the Maenad. Your blood was still within me when you took mine in Dallas, but if a week or so more had passed between the Maenad attack and the attack on Stan’s nest, then the first tie between us would likely not have formed.”

Sookie nodded. “I’m glad it did.”

“I am *very* glad as well,” he responded with a soft smile, even as he tried to categorize the feelings that were currently coming from her – as well as those that he was experiencing.

“What do you think will change if we complete a second exchange – if you fully heal me now? And would you even want any changes?” Sookie asked, keeping her voice low because of her sore throat. She was clearly determined to make an informed decision, something that Bill hadn’t prepared her to do when she’d been *his*.

Again, Eric had the urge to kill the younger vampire – both for what he’d done and what he’d *not* done regarding Sookie.

Another night – he promised himself.

No matter how long he had to wait, he *would* have that night.

And – oh would he enjoy it!

“If you are hesitant, you could simply take my blood now; that would not increase our tie. I would simply not lick your wounds,” Eric reminded, his voice somewhat gruff with an emotion he couldn’t name. “A full exchange would make our tie stronger, and – yes – I *would* like that.”

Sookie’s eyes widened. “You would? Really? Why!?!?” she exclaimed, despite the soreness it caused to her larynx.

Immediately, he was tipping the water to her lips.

“I wouldn’t even consider it with anyone else,” he said, his eyes intense. “As for ‘why,’ it’s difficult to explain. But I want to protect you – for your life, Sookie. *All* of it.”

“Oh!” she said with surprise – as if realizing for the first time that the vampire in front of her had a depth of thousands of fathoms. “Eric, I . . .,” she began.

“This is a longer discussion for another time,” he said when her words stalled. “You are not bleeding much right now, but it would be best to get you healed immediately – in whatever way you choose. Plus, I can feel your physical discomfort. And I can only speculate that some of your wounds relate to how you got *in* to the trunk to start with.”

Sookie barely tilted her head in a nod of confirmation. “Debbie Pelt – but that’s a story for another time too.”

Eric nodded – mentally adding another person to his “to kill” list. “Soon. We will discuss her soon.”

“Okay. So—uh—I might be missing something, but it doesn’t seem like much would change about our blood connection if we did the whole shebang—if we exchanged,” she commented after taking in more water.

“On the surface, it would not. You would be *fully* healed: both the *inside* parts of you—including your throat, fractures, and capillaries—and the *outside* parts of you—notably where Bill bit. As for our blood tie, I would have a better sense of your emotions and location than I did before. And our mutual attraction would likely increase. Nothing more.”

“Mutual? Uh—increase?” she asked a slight blush making its way to her cheeks.

“I believe it is mutual,” Eric smirked (though he tried to keep that expression somewhat in check). “I am not, however, certain that my attraction for you *could* increase beyond what it currently is. But finding out might be,” he paused, “pleasurable.”

Sookie swallowed hard and coughed. Eric was waiting to offer her more water.

“What would *you* do if you were me? Would you do the *whole* exchange?”

Sookie asked him.

Eric looked somewhat surprised that she was seeking his advice on the matter—that she would trust him not to mislead her. “I cannot make your decision for you, Sookie. My own opinion is biased by my own desires. I *do* want you to—at least—take my blood. You’ll feel better and stronger, and—though there will be a scar—it will not be too noticeable. But as I suggested before, I find myself feeling almost compelled to heal you for reasons I cannot fully name—reasons that I do not,” he paused, “fully

comprehend myself. But I do know this: I *don't* want you to have to carry a scar from this night, and I *do* like the idea of a stronger connection with you. Of course – that connection would fade in time – which would basically restart the blood-tie process. Meanwhile, I *swear* that I would not force a bond upon you. If it influences you at all, I vow here and now that I will not take your blood again – until our current tie fades; however, I will leave open the option of giving you my blood if the need arises.”

A few moments of silence passed between them as Sookie contemplated Eric’s words and his vow.

“And if I offered my blood?” Sookie asked in a whisper.

Eric seemed dazed by her words for a moment before he responded. “I’d refuse your offer until I *knew* you were certain. I’d never want to take away your choice, Sookie.”

“I know,” the telepath smiled, a look of certainty in her eyes. “And thank you. I want to heal. I *don't* want a scar – not from tonight. Not from Bill. And I don’t want the pain of cracked bones.” She coughed. “I want the exchange.”

Eric smiled softly and nodded, even as he smoothed her hair behind her ears with a gentle touch.

“I don’t think I could take the kind of sexy stuff that happened last night though,” Sookie trembled, her voice sounding small. “Bill was tryin’ to . . .” She stopped midsentence.

“I know what he was attempting,” Eric said in a quiet, though steely tone. “And – I swear – your healing tonight will be just that: a healing. Nothing more.”

Sookie nodded as Eric positioned himself over her neck and took off the cloth covering her wound. To keep his promise to the telepath, the vampire concentrated upon the anger he felt over Compton attacking Sookie as he licked her wound and took in her delicious blood. He hated that both times he had tasted her had been after she'd been injured.

He also hated that she had needed two major healings in as many nights. He cursed himself for his part in putting her into a dangerous situation and swore to find a way to keep her safe.

After he was satisfied that the exterior portion of her throat wound was closed completely and would not scar, Eric brought his own wrist to his mouth and bit before offering the wound to Sookie. Looking him in the eye, she drank as he caressed her cheek with the slightest of touches.

Her expression was one of gratefulness and – strangely enough – *comfort* as their blood tie strengthened. As he'd promised, the tie wasn't made permanent, but the vampire could instinctively tell that it would take only one more exchange for it to be so. In that moment, he could not stop himself from yearning for that – from desiring that she would one day “feel” his emotions as he could experience hers.

The ancient ached to connect with the singular woman in front of him in a way that was – for lack of a better word – more “equal” than he'd ever connected with anyone before.

And still her eyes were on his; he wanted to drown into the sea of them. The previous night, he'd had his fingers inside of her body as she'd writhed in passion

against him. But that moment had not been half as intimate as the one they were currently experiencing.

So – of course – there had to be an interruption. And – since Elvis wasn't "in the building," a "hound dog" filled in.

Author's Note: As I understand and am portraying blood ties/bonds in this piece (based on the "book universe"), exchanges don't have to be simultaneous, and three equals permanence. But – at the same time – a blood tie can fade over time. So – for my purposes – three in relatively close succession (within weeks or months) creates a bond. Also, in *Club Dead*, Sookie's stake wound leaves behind a scar, despite the healing she receives. I've determined that Bill's bite is not as severe of a wound as the stake wound; thus, saliva would keep it from scarring. However, blood alone would not stop the scar from forming. Anyway, the whole blood tie/bond thing is a bit muddled in the books (not to mention the differences in the show). I hope readers will give me a bit of license in my interpretation and forgiveness for any inconsistencies.

Chapter 08: Shake, Rattle and Roll

You make me roll my eyes

And then you make me grit my teeth

Well I said shake, rattle and roll

I said shake rattle and roll

.....

Well you won't do right

To save your doggone soul

– “Shake, Rattle and Roll” (songwriter Charles Calhoun)

“What the fuck are you doing?!?!” Alcide demanded from the doorway of Sookie’s room.

“I am healing her,” Eric said simply as Sookie licked his closing wound.

“And does she know that you are *also* well on your way to forming a blood bond with her?” the Were growled.

“*She* does,” Sookie answered for herself, her voice sounding much stronger than before. She looked up at Eric. “Thank you – again.”

“Is the pain gone?” the vampire asked, trying to ignore the panting Were, who’d now stepped into the room.

“Yes. Will you take me home? Please.”

Eric nodded and brushed another piece of hair behind her ear. "I will see to the arrangements for the trip if you want to shower and get your things together."

Sookie nodded, clearly feeling much stronger. "Yes – a shower would be nice. I'll be ready in fifteen minutes?"

"Do not rush yourself; I will be waiting when you are ready," the vampire said with a smile, before rising from the bed and ushering Alcide out of the room – though the Were seemed reluctant to leave Sookie alone.

Still, Alcide clearly recognized that he couldn't best the vampire, so he wisely followed when Eric led him to the kitchen.

"Is Compton secured?" Eric asked through clenched teeth.

"He's in the apartment next door. It's empty," Alcide explained.

"I can scent him, and that's not what I asked! Is. He. Secured?" Eric asked again, this time emphasizing each word as if he were talking to a child.

Alcide shrugged and shook his head. "No need. Once he – uh – realized what he'd been doing, he was calm. He feels guilty – I think – at least, as much as a vampire can," he tagged on sarcastically. "And he – uh – had quite a bit of Sookie's blood and then the TrueBlood from the trunk, so he's not a danger to anyone."

"Not anymore," the Viking scowled. "The name Debbie Pelt is in the file of information I have on you. She is an ex-girlfriend of yours – correct?" Eric asked the wolf.

"Yes," Alcide responded cautiously--questioningly.

Eric hissed, “*She* is the one who is responsible for Sookie being in that trunk with Compton. When I woke up, I could already feel Sookie’s terror. I can only imagine how long she’d been in there – waiting for Bill to awaken. Where were you this morning? This afternoon?”

“I had work!” he insisted defensively. “I came as soon as you contacted me.”

Eric shook his head. “Your *primary* work in Jackson was to protect Sookie during her time here, yet you failed – *again* – as you did last night at Club Dead.”

“You can’t possibly blame me for last night!” Alcide defended.

“I do. I blame you for letting yourself be distracted to the point that Sookie was in harm’s way.”

“Hey! She’s the one that put herself in the path of that fucking stake!” the Were barked defensively.

“Maybe so, but – if you had been by her side – you could have prevented her from being stabbed with it.”

Alcide growled. “*You* didn’t stop it from happening either, you bastard!”

“No,” Eric said softly. “I made the mistake of enlisting *your* services – for ten thousand dollars’ worth of your father’s marker per day, I might add.” He scoffed. “And you didn’t even *try* to protect Sookie when she was bleeding in a roomful of vampires!”

“There was a full fuckin’ moon!” Alcide yelled. “What did you expect?”

“I expected you to behave like the *firstborn* of one of the strongest males in your pack! I expected you to demonstrate control! And – today – it would have been nice if

you'd at least checked on Sookie! But you did not! Instead, your ex-girlfriend and one-time fiancé attacked her, tied her up, and left her for dead in that fucking trunk! And for that, Ms. Pelt's days are numbered. You're very lucky I'm not numbering yours as well – yet!"

The Were growled. "Don't you dare threaten me or Debbie!"

"I don't misjudge a person often, but I made a mistake with you." Eric shook his head. "If you were the Were I'd thought you were when I gave you the assignment of protecting Sookie, I wouldn't be the one threatening that bitch; you would be foaming at the muzzle to take care of the situation yourself!" the vampire sneered. "I would have supported you for your pack's leadership – when the time came. But now I will look for someone better."

"You? You have no say in pack business!" Alcide seethed.

"I have say in *all* Area 5 business," Eric returned, though he refused to let on that he and Colonel Flood had a *much more* cooperative relationship than anyone (other than Pam) knew. They maintained a "professional distance" – for the sakes of both of their positions (because of archaic power struggles and grudges neither of them believed in) – but they were both wise enough to understand that creatures within the supernatural realm needed to work in concert. Eric had once hoped – as had the Colonel – that Alcide could eventually become a good packmaster. Oh – Alcide had been struggling against procreation since he was eighteen, and his father left a lot to be desired, but the younger Herveaux had seemed quite promising indeed. Flood would

be even more disappointed than Eric to learn that was not the case – that his judgment was lacking.

“I am going to have a brief word with Compton,” the vampire informed the Were. “Meanwhile, you are going to prepare some food that Sookie can take with her. However – if you go within ten feet of the bathroom she is using or her bedroom – I *will* return and make Sookie *very* disappointed in me.”

“How so?” Alcide challenged.

“She will be angry if I have to snap your fuckin’ neck,” Eric growled as he got into Alcide’s face. “Don’t you think her trauma has been great enough today?”

“She’s the one who put herself into the path of danger by getting involved with vamps, and it was a vamp that almost killed her tonight!” the Were returned in a low hiss. “I would have been willing to get her out of that life; I *still would be.*”

Eric’s expression was as hard as stone. “Make Sookie food. Stay away from her. And *don’t* allow any threats – including your crazy ex-girlfriend – to get anywhere near her for the next ten fucking minutes. Those are your orders; *after* you fulfill them, I will rip up your father’s marker, and your family and I will have *no* further interactions!”

“You can’t make me stay away from Sookie,” Alcide responded defiantly.

“*If* she initiates contact with you, that is her choice, and I will not interfere. If you, however, initiate it – if you attempt to hurt or manipulate her or to use her to get over your fixation with the woman who tried to kill her today – you *will* become my enemy. And you do *not* want to be that! *That* I can guarantee!” Eric added warningly before leaving the apartment and going next door.

The Viking took a moment in the hall to calm himself. His protective instincts stronger than he'd ever felt them, he wanted to kill.

He wanted to maim.

He wanted to destroy.

The Were! Debbie Pelt! Bill Compton! Even the queen!

His hands ached to punish them for their part in Sookie's current pain.

But it was Sookie's "wants" he *needed* to consider in that moment.

He used his blood to find and assess her – to calm himself down; based upon her position, she was in the shower, and she was mostly calm, though a little sore. If she didn't stay that calm, Eric knew that he could be by her side in less than ten seconds.

If he came through the walls, it would be less than that.

He'd go through the walls – he resolved.

The Viking opened the unlocked apartment door and found Compton sitting on a plastic-covered couch, his head in his hands.

"How is Sookeh?" he asked, mispronouncing her name because of his antiquated accent and inability to adapt – even after months of hearing others pronounce it correctly.

"You lost the right to ask that question when you put her into my care – when you returned to Lorena," Eric sneered. "And – even if you hadn't then – you lost the right to even speak her name – correctly or incorrectly – because of what you did to her in that trunk!" the Viking growled, his fangs snapping into place.

“You know I *had* to return to my maker, and I knew you would – for all your faults – make sure Sookkeh stayed safe,” Bill insisted. “But now that Lorena is dead . . .”

“Don’t!” Eric interrupted. “I don’t care that I smelled Lorena’s blood and ash all over Sookie – just like I don’t care *how* your psycho maker died – nor will you ever speak of any involvement Sookie may have had in your miserable maker’s death. To anyone! However – unlike you – I *do* care about my role as Sookie’s caretaker, a role you asked me to fill, but one I would have been happy to do regardless. So listen closely Bill: I will *not* give up Sookie as easily as you did!”

“Not even if *your* maker calls?” Bill asked sarcastically.

For a moment – but just one – Eric was slightly taken aback. Imagining that Appius might swoop in and disrupt his life – potentially harming Sookie – had been a fear nagging at him for as long as he’d known the captivating telepath. Bill’s petty words were, unfortunately, not completely without basis. And Eric vowed in that moment to begin placing safeguards to ensure that even Appius couldn’t harm Sookie.

“Does she know that you believe you *own* her now?” Bill continued his challenge.

“I do not think of Sookie as a possession! But thanks to your hiding things from her, she didn’t even know what a fucking blood bond was!” Eric growled. “But – *yes* – I was upfront when I explained that *you* had asked me to take over as her supernatural guardian – that *you* had basically pensioned her off on me!” The Viking scowled. “And she is smart enough to understand your actions – all of them – well enough!”

“Now that I am free of my maker, Sookkeh is”

“If you want to keep your miserable existence, do *not* complete that sentence, Bill!” Eric growled. “Less than an hour ago, you were seconds away from raping her. And I have no doubt that you would have killed her – and likely turned her – so that you could continue inflicting her with your own twisted deficiencies. Sookie is *not* yours now, nor will she be again.”

“You say you don’t think of her as a possession, yet you are already dictating”

Once again Bill was cut off by the Viking, this time when Eric took him by the throat and slammed him against the closest wall, crushing the younger vampire’s body into the drywall.

“The only *dick* in the room is you,” Eric snarled. “You forget yourself; I am not the one who hurt her tonight!”

“I could not help myself,” Bill managed to screech out, despite Eric’s tightening grip.

“I. Don’t. Believe. You!” Eric returned. “As fucked up as your maker was, Lorena loved you – sick and twisted though that love was. Oh – I’m certain that Lorena enjoyed your pain, but I *seriously* doubt that she would have ever harmed you too badly. You were no doubt weak when you attacked Sookie, but were you completely incoherent?”

Eric paused just enough to see a flicker of guilt flash into Bill’s eyes.

The Viking sneered. “Moreover, Bill,” he spit out his name, “I can tell *exactly* how much blood you took from Sookie. Thankfully, it wasn’t enough to cause her to pass out, and even if you supplemented her blood with all of the synthetic I got, you are looking a little *too* rosy – a little *too* well! So you are either particularly weak or particularly vile. Ask me which one of those won’t get you killed right now.”

“Lorena kept me under silver and practically starved me for days,” Bill justified. “I woke up and smelled blood. I cannot imagine that even you, the *great Viking*,” he said sarcastically, “would have been able to control yourself any better than I.”

“That’s where you are mistaken. Even at only two years of age as a vampire, I did not harm someone that I cared for during my human life when my maker decided to punish me by ordering it,” Eric returned hauntingly. “I disobeyed my maker and suffered for decades for it, but I did *not* let him ruin me.”

Bill scowled. “A vampire cannot disobey his maker. You are lying.”

“A vampire cannot disobey without experiencing brutal pain,” Eric corrected. “Tell me, Bill. Did you even *try* to disobey Lorena? Have you ever? And more to the point – did you try to refrain from harming Sookie tonight – even for half a fucking second?!?! You are not as old as I am – not as controlled – but you are not an infant either. Be honest; did you attack Sookie *because* she smelled strongly of me?” he asked with a deadly edge to his tone.

Bill’s fangs popped down. “You got your blood into her again!” he snarled.

“Your anger is my answer,” Eric said murderously.

“What answer do you think you gleaned?” Bill spit out.

“That you harmed her out of jealousy – to punish her,” the Viking seethed.

“No! I would never harm Sookie on purpose!” Bill tried, though his voice quivered a bit.

“You *did* have a purpose in harming her – I think,” Eric responded as he squeezed Bill’s throat so hard that the younger vampire could not utter a noise.

“I think you were angry,” Eric growled. “I think you smelled that she’d had more of my blood. What you *don’t* know is that she took it because she’d been injured trying to find your sorry ass and needed strength to save you! What you don’t know is that I’ve learned of your importance to the queen,” he added as he released the pressure on Bill’s throat.

Bill’s eyes widened – even before Eric threw him into the opposite wall.

Bill rose carefully to his feet, not risking taking his eyes off of the Viking for a moment.

“Tell me of your project for the queen,” Eric said.

Upon seeing Bill flinch, the elder vampire smiled.

“Or is it *projects*?” Eric asked.

Again, the Viking took in Bill’s reaction.

“So I’m right. You have more than one,” Eric smirked. “Is Sookie a part of your work?”

“No!” Bill said insistently.

“So she *is*,” Eric nodded.

“No!” Bill repeated.

“Let’s play poker sometime; your bluff is absolutely comical. In the meantime, however, tell me of your *other* task for her highness.”

Bill pressed his lips together. Eric couldn’t help but to think that the pursing made Bill’s lips pucker like an asshole.

The Viking heard the water shut off in the shower that Sookie was in; it was time to move on – at least for the moment. “One night – in the near future – you *will* answer *all* the questions I have for you, but you have already told me enough for tonight,” Eric smirked.

“I’ve told you nothing!” Bill yelled out.

“You’ve told me more than your inferior noggin could imagine,” Eric returned confidently. “And now I will tell you something. If you approach Sookie uninvited or try to give her any of your blood, I *will* kill you in such a horrific fashion that even your maker could not have imagined it.” The Viking took a step toward Bill, even as the younger vampire seemed to try to disappear into the broken wall behind him.

“I will flay you again and again. I will enjoy taking one bone or organ from you each night. I will drain you and then give you rats’ blood so that you live on. I will burn you – with silver and flame. I will remove the cock you would have raped Sookie with and then make you give your severed dick a blowjob. And then I will begin making *you* give me ideas for your own torture. And – if I am not pleased by your suggestions – I will seek out counsel from Pamela, who – I think you are aware – is not a particular fan of yours,” he threatened.

“Sookie will hate you if you harm me,” Bill declared with bravado, though his eyes betrayed his fear.

“I believe she is *already* done with you,” Eric said honestly. “She just doesn’t want you dead – *yet*. But – if you harm her again, mentally or physically, I venture that she will give me leave to do my worst.”

Eric took another step toward Bill. “Do you want to see my worst, Billy boy? Do you want to experience it?”

“No,” Bill answered immediately, his fear bubbling to the surface.

“Then stay away from Sookie unless she asks for your presence.”

“You wouldn’t stop her from doing that?” Bill asked meekly, though his voice still held an edge of disrespect that Eric found irksome.

The Viking shook his head. “I would not. Contrary to what you have tried to lead Sookie to believe, I would *never* want her to be powerless.”

“How – how is she?” Bill asked, returning both to the question and to the contrite manner he’d begun their “visit” with.

“She is healed – physically,” Eric answered. “Anything else you need to know, you should be able to *feel*.”

“I cannot,” Bill admitted. “I can feel that she is alive, but our blood tie has been muted – because of *your* blood,” he added bitterly.

“That is better for Sookie,” Eric commented. “Don’t you think?”

“I think that you would do *anything* to take advantage of her, and now that you have so much of your blood in her, I cannot see a good end for Sookie,” Bill growled.

Eric frowned. "When did I wrong you, Bill Compton? Why do you believe me to be so repugnant in nature?"

"You think you are better than the queen!" Bill returned forcefully.

"I *am* better than she," Eric responded. "That is a simple fact. But that does not mean that I haven't served her well."

"You are a monster – glad to be a vampire! And you are a womanizer! You shouldn't be anywhere near Sookeh!" Bill stormed, his emotion causing him to mispronounce her name even worse than usual.

"I *am* a monster when I need to be" the Viking freely admitted. "And I *am* a womanizer in the sense that I have had sex with many women. I doubt you are much different in that regard. I have *always* been truthful in regards to my intentions toward Sookie, however. Can you say the same?" he added, studying Bill's reaction to those words.

"And what are your intentions?" Bill asked, avoiding the question he'd been asked.

"You tell me," Eric challenged.

"You want her."

"I do," the Viking acknowledged.

"You'll use her for her telepathy," Bill charged.

"Yes," Eric affirmed. "And her body. And everything else that she is – if she gives me the honor of choosing to be mine. She is extraordinary. To ignore that – or to try to stifle it – is wasteful."

“You are no better than the queen!” Bill seethed.

“Tell me more,” Eric smirked even as Bill realized his error in mentioning Sophie-Anne.

“Fuck you!” the younger vampire growled.

Again, Bill found himself in a choke hold against the wall – actually, somewhat *in* the wall.

“I will learn all about your assignments from Queen Sophie-Anne. Make no mistake about it, Billy Boy. Meanwhile, stay away from Sookie – *unless* she chooses to see you,” Eric reiterated, before dropping Bill and moving toward the door.

“*Until* she wants to see me,” the younger vampire crowed, though he looked less like a bird of prey than he did a fly that had become splatter on a windshield. “Because we both know she *will*.”

It was Eric’s turn to recoil a bit, though – thankfully – his back was still turned toward the younger vampire.

“Whatever Sookie chooses for her personal life, I will be ensuring her safety from now on,” the Viking said evenly. “And – just to be clear – the last thing Sookie needs to see right now is the man who attempted to rape her tonight. So you’d best stay here until we are well gone.”

“Tell me,” Bill said arrogantly as Eric turned the doorknob, “did Sookie ever tell you what I did to the *other* man who wanted to rape her?”

“No,” Eric growled. “But you just admitted that ‘want’ was – at the very least – one of your motives,” he said, turning to face the younger vampire. “Freud would call

that one hell of a slip. And I will add it to the list of things I will eventually kill you for," he informed coldly before leaving the room.

Chapter 09: Hound Dog

You ain't nothin' but a hound dog

Cryin' all the time

Well, you ain't never caught a rabbit and you ain't no friend of mine

– “Hound Dog” (songwriters Jerry Leiber & Mike Stoller)

After calming himself down from his discussion with Bill and sending a few quick texts arranging for his and Sookie’s travel that night, Eric entered Alcide’s apartment to find the Were putting two sandwiches, a soft drink, and a bottle of water into a brown paper bag.

“I own the unit next door,” the Were mumbled. “I’ll expect a check for the damages I heard you making to the walls.”

Eric strolled toward the kitchen. “Send your *bill* to Bill,” he smirked, enjoying his play on words. “After all, all of the dents are shaped like him.”

With that, Eric left the irritated Were and went to check on Sookie. Knowing that she had returned to the bedroom she’d been staying in, he knocked lightly on the door.

“Come in,” she said.

Her back was to him, but Eric could easily smell her tears.

He approached her slowly. “Sookie?”

“There’s a vampire next door. From his void, I—uh It’s Bill—right?” she asked, though she already seemed sure about the answer. The vampire with her noticed—and noted—that certainty.

“Yes. I did not know the Were would bring him so close, but I can assure you that Compton will not bother you tonight.”

“Thanks,” she whispered, though—of course—Eric could already feel her gratitude through the blood tie.

“You are welcome,” he returned.

“I did not realize you could tell the difference between vampires,” the vampire commented after a moment or two of silence.

“When I know them for a little while, their—uh—voids start to seem familiar. I can tell with Bill, Pam, Bubba, and you.”

“How are we different?” Eric asked curiously.

“Your voids are each a little unique—in shape. In size. Even in feel. Yours is the largest I had encountered—until Russell’s. But yours is warmer somehow—and rounder; its edges wash back and forth a little all the way around its circumference—like a round sea whose waves are all ebbing and then surging. It’s beautiful,” she whispered. “Bubba’s void is small and—uh—uncomplicated. It’s sort of triangular in a way. Pam’s and Bill’s voids are of about the same size; his is like a trapezoid—lots of sides. Pam’s is more circular, but hers is denser.”

“Well—Pam can be dense,” the vampire tried to joke.

Sookie let out the tiniest of snorts. “Purposefully?”

“Of course,” Eric chuckled. “She’s most dense when she pretends that she made a ‘clerical error’ in ordering a designer’s entire seasonal collection of garments and accessories.”

Sookie turned around, even as Eric felt mirth from her. Her slight smile was much better than her tears. “Pam’s clothing choices have baffled me from almost the start.”

“How so?” Eric asked curiously.

“Well – one minute, she looks like a dominatrix or something. The next, she looks like a P.T.A. mom.”

The vampire grinned. “The first category is my doing – a uniform of sorts. She hates it, but the throne was her idea.”

“A trade off?” Sookie asked with amusement.

“You are perceptive,” the vampire nodded. “Yes – I agreed to sit on that damnable throne for a few hours several nights a week, while she has to dress as if she were a fangbanger’s wet dream.”

Sookie blushed slightly.

Eric’s face lit up a bit. “I like that look on you.”

“Hmm?” Sookie asked, somewhat confused, but mostly embarrassed.

“A blush,” he smiled. “A vampire can forget them. I almost forgot what they looked like – till you,” he added, his voice becoming faraway.

“Forgot?”

“Mmmm,” he sounded in agreement. “A vampire does not blush, and – even if one could – most of us are open with our expressions with only a few of our own kind.”

“I’m surprised you haven’t made a lot of human women blush,” she ventured, blushing deeper with the effort of her statement.

Eric shrugged. “I suppose I have – made a few blush. However, quite a while back, I stopped pursuing my meals and physical needs with women who were innocent – or close enough to it to blush.” He shook his head. “The only blush a fangbanger might have is covered.”

“By the makeup they use to look pale – like a vampire,” Sookie finished.

“Yes. Their efforts really are wasted. It is as if they *want* to be unappealing.”

The telepath shrugged. “They probably just want to be more like vampires. Or maybe they think that vampires want humans to be more like them?”

Eric shook his head. “You have never entered Fangtasia in a costume, Sookie. I like that about you.”

She chuckled. “No. I don’t own Fangtasia-wear. But – even if I did – now that I know some vampires, I figure that most of y’all are tired of the repetition of the people that come into Fangtasia.”

“Repetition?” Eric asked, hoping she’d clarify her thoughts.

“Yeah. They try to look and act like extras from cheesy vampire movies. I doubt if it takes y’all long to get tired of the predictability. I figure most vampires like uniqueness, and people have no chance at being that if they’re tryin’ to be something they’re not.”

Eric reached slowly out to tuck a slightly damp tendril behind her ear.

“You are nothing but unique, Sookie Stackhouse. And that includes the way you look at the world – the way you are willing to look at beings different from yourself and find empathy while you quest for understanding.”

“I think you’re giving me too much credit,” she said bashfully.

“I think you’ve been around too many people who don’t give you enough.”

Eric’s words reminded Sookie of one of those people; she sighed, even as her expression clouded a bit. “Bill – did you hurt him?” the telepath asked.

“Not really. But I very much wanted to,” the vampire answered honestly.

“I know,” Sookie said.

“Is that why you were so upset when I came in?” Eric asked. “Did you worry that I had harmed Bill?”

“No,” she whispered. “I’m upset because I’ve lowered my shields as far as I can,” she added, barely mouthing the words as she looked significantly toward where the kitchen was located in the house.

Clearly, she’d heard something unpleasant from Alcide.

“Later?” he mouthed to her in question.

She nodded in agreement and then went to pick up the well-worn suitcase that she’d brought with her; it had belonged to Gran. Before that, Sookie didn’t know its history, but it looked to have a long one. Eric had the case in his hands before she could blink.

“The storm has lifted somewhat,” he grinned. “Do you mind a flight home? It’d be faster than driving.”

“On an airplane – right?”

He smirked and nodded. “Yes.”

“Flying used to scare me,” Sookie shared.

“Used to?” he asked.

She shrugged. “I think other things are more worth bein’ scared of now.”

He nodded somberly in agreement.

“What scares *you*?” she found herself asking the seemingly unflappable vampire.

Maintaining eye contact with her and moving very slowly, Eric bent down.

“Things I am unwilling to share when others are nearby,” he whispered at a volume Sookie was certain even Alcide could not hear.

She closed her eyes and shivered at the pleasurable sensation caused by Eric’s closeness and then looked up at him just in time to find him looking pleased by her response – but not leering at her in a way that would have made her uncomfortable. If anything, he seemed happy that her reaction to his nearness had not been fear.

Unable to help herself, Sookie found herself smiling at the vampire, an expression she’d figured – only hours before – that she’d never make again. However, her expression soured as they entered the front of the apartment – where Alcide was sitting on the couch, waiting impatiently for them to come out of the bedroom.

There was already a judgmental look on his face as he looked at Eric; it transformed into a pleading one as he turned toward Sookie.

“Sook, you’re welcome to stay here – under my protection. I have friends in the Jackson pack. It would be better for you than throwin’ your lot in with vamps – better than bein’ with *him*,” he added, gesturing toward Eric.

The telepath shook her head in confusion. “*Why* do you dislike Eric so much?” she asked, even as she used her telepathy to “listen in” to Alcide’s true response to her question. There had been a time – only the day before, in fact – when she would have avoided doing that with an acquaintance (let alone a friend), but being in the trunk had caused her to reevaluate *many* of her past behaviors.

Alcide seemed to flounder for a moment, clearly having not expected that question. “He’s a vampire,” he finally responded.

“But that fact doesn’t automatically damn him in my eyes,” Sookie responded. “Try again.”

“He – uh – well – he blackmailed me to get me to look out for you. Not that I wouldn’t have done it anyway,” Alcide tagged on quickly.

Sookie sighed. “You’re working off debts your father has with Eric – debts in the six figures,” she returned wearily. “Because Eric hasn’t called in the marker – which he could have done – your family has been able to keep your business. I know you hate the idea of working for Eric – or any vampire – and you blame vampires for your dad’s gambling addiction, but that’s not blackmail. Try again,” she repeated firmly.

“Sookie, you don’t know vampires like I do,” Alcide tried, obviously uncomfortable that she was bringing to light his own thoughts.

“Or maybe *you* don’t know them like *I* do,” she responded. “Try again.”

“A vampire just tried to rape you. He would have drained you,” Alcide reminded avidly.

Sookie cringed and took a step away from the Were, taking Eric’s hand automatically as she leaned a bit against his side.

“I don’t need you to remind me of what Bill did – or of what he wanted to do. And, for the record, the celebration currently occurring in your thoughts – the one where you are *right* about vampires being heartless and cruel – is happening at *my* expense. Not *your* expense! Meanwhile, you are ignoring the fact that another vampire – *not* you – rescued me,” she added softly, even as she squeezed Eric’s hand.

“Sookie . . .,” Alcide started.

“The *only* werefox I’ve ever met tried to kill me today,” she said quietly, but pointedly. “Should I now hate all werefoxes? Blame them for Debbie’s actions? Should I blame *all* of those with two-natures? Should I blame *you* for dating her? Should I blame myself for pretending that I was your girlfriend at Josephine’s? Or should I place my blame on the one who wanted me dead? On the one who tied me up, gagged me, and gave Bill the opportunity to rape and drain me – as you so accurately just pointed out!?!?”

“Sookie, please, Debbie’s a little crazy, but I’m sure she didn’t mean . . .,” he began.

Sookie interrupted. “She meant *everything* she did, Alcide. I know exactly what she wanted. And even *you* don’t believe in her innocence, though you love her nonetheless.” She sighed. “You should know this: Debbie came here looking to cause

trouble for you today. She was hoping to find us in bed and cause a scene. Oh—and she still has a key to this place.” She paused and frowned as she read his thoughts, shaking her head as she did so. “But you already knew that. Part of you likes the fact that she sneaks in here when you’re out of town and places her scent on your things. That’s why you didn’t find it suspicious that you picked up her scent in the parking garage earlier.”

“Sookie, Debbie and I have a long history,” Alcide attempted to justify.

Sookie huffed. “And I’m not gonna judge you for it, though I don’t think it’s healthy. You need to know that she is heavily addicted to V.”

“I figured,” Alcide admitted in a strangled tone.

Again, Sookie shook her head, feeling pity for her new friend. “Debbie lucked into Bill in the parking garage,” she continued her story. “And—when I had the misfortune of stumbling upon her feeding from him down there—she kicked my ass and threw me into that trunk, knowing full well was Bill would do. She thought that, perhaps, he’d even turn me. She *wanted* those things to happen—thought that I *deserved* for them to happen—even after I told her that you and I were never a real couple. *That* is the truth. She is sick and twisted, and she’d do anything to get you back. *Anything!* I heard her words and her thoughts. There is *no* room for rationalizations for her actions,” Sookie stated straightforwardly, hoping Alcide would truly absorb her words and the concern behind them.

“Sookie, Debbie and my relationship is,” Alcide paused, “*complicated*. Please don’t let him . . .” He looked at Eric, but left his sentence incomplete.

“Please don’t let Eric kill her?” Sookie finished for the Were – having read the plea in his thoughts. At least, he felt ashamed for making it, and that meant something to the telepath. She sighed. “Alcide, I honestly don’t know how to respond to that request. Debbie wants me dead. And – just so you know – *complicated* doesn’t lead sane people to homicide.”

“I know,” Alcide responded, his tone and agonized expression making his mixed feelings obvious.

“You do and you don’t know,” Sookie returned sadly. “Your thoughts are conflicted. On the one hand, you love Debbie and want to believe in the good in her. Of course, you also want to change her – to make her fit the mold you desire for a mate.”

Finding her telepathy much more potent – likely because of Eric’s blood – Sookie closed her eyes to delve further into Alcide’s mind before adding, “You want a woman who doesn’t want to procreate and add to the supernatural population. Part of you hates what you are, and you hate that she loves being a werewolf.”

“Sookie – I”

She interrupted the Were. “On the other hand, you *had* begun imagining a life with me. You wonder how I got my telepathy and whether or not it would be passed on like the gene for two natures,” she finished, opening her eyes.

“Sookie, I – uh – we *could* be a couple – a good one. I could feel it as soon as I met you – the attraction between us. Stay with me – please! We could be good together. I know it!”

“Herveaux, tonight is *not* the night to bring up such . . .,” Eric began angrily, though he kept only a tender hold upon Sookie’s hand.

“Eric, it’s okay,” Sookie interrupted, squeezing the vampire’s hand. “Alcide, I’m real sorry if I did anything to lead you on. I was upset and vulnerable because of Bill, and I let that kiss happen between us. But I shouldn’t have. In addition, I’m about as naïve as a person can be when it comes to relationships, but I’m *not* about to start something up with someone who still loves the woman who tried to kill me. Plus, you’re at a point in your life where you want to deny the fact that you’re a Supe. I was in the same place yesterday, but today I’m just not there anymore. And I hope never to be there again.”

“Sookie, please,” Alcide responded.

The telepath shook her head. “For your own sake, Alcide, I hope you come to terms with what you are.” She sighed. “I was hiding from *myself* too, so I know denial. I don’t judge you, Alcide, but I couldn’t be with someone like you either – not anymore.”

“Sookie . . .,” Alcide began again.

“Just keep Debbie away from me,” she interrupted, “and – in turn – I’ll do what I can to make sure Eric doesn’t kill her for what she did to me today. But – just so you know – she *would* deserve it,” Sookie added forcefully. “And if I *ever* see her again, I will act first and ask questions later.”

“So will I,” Eric echoed.

“Goodbye, Alcide,” Sookie said a little sadly. “Thanks for tryin’ to look out for me here.”

“Sookie, please. Reconsider staying — *with me*,” Alcide entreated.

Sookie shook her head. “As you said, I’ve already thrown in my lot with Eric. I hope you and I can still be friends — eventually — but, for now, I’m happy with my current company, and you haven’t severed your bad company.”

And with those words, Sookie and Eric left the Were’s apartment.

FIVE MINUTES LATER

Sookie was thankful that Alcide hadn’t come after her and Eric — in an attempt to continue with his arguments either against the vampire or for her staying with him in Jackson.

To be honest — given the fact that she and the Were had known each other for only a short time — the telepath had been a bit mystified by his fervent protests and offers.

That is, *until* she’d read his motives from his thoughts — motives she’d chosen not to throw in his face.

He’d felt incredibly guilty for Debbie’s actions and wanted to make up for them somehow.

Plus, he really, *really* hated vampires.

But, mostly, he was feeling territorial when it came to her, which Sookie speculated was because of either the full moon or Alcide's self-perceived competition with vampires for her affections.

In addition to Alcide "giving up" for the moment, the telepath was also grateful that Bill had stayed out of sight as she and Eric had left the Were's apartment. The last thing she would have been able to handle in that moment was Bill's face – his physical presence.

Just sensing his "void" had been difficult enough.

As she looked at the profile of the vampire driving the rental car he'd somehow managed to secure for them, she couldn't help but to speculate that he had likely threatened Bill to within an inch of his "un-death" if he made an appearance.

Perhaps, it was wrong to condone any threat, but she found herself happy for those that Eric had made on her behalf that night. They were – in many ways – keeping her from rattling apart.

The Viking had also sensed that going near either the creaky elevator or the parking garage would have been too much for her to take. Thus, they'd taken the stairs and exited the apartment complex at the street level – where an agent from Hertz had been waiting with a huge umbrella and a Honda. Sookie couldn't help but to notice that her purse, shoes, and shawl – which had been left in the Lincoln – were waiting for her in the front seat when Eric opened the door for her.

"I would have flown us to the airfield – if it were not still raining a bit," Eric commented, breaking Sookie from her reverie.

She nodded. She'd seen him hovering outside of her second-story hospital window, so she'd figured that he could fly – though she'd not allowed herself to think about it that much.

“What's it like? Flying?” she asked now.

He smiled. “Which kind?”

“The kind only vampires can do – uh – only certain vampires,” she corrected, for she knew that Bill couldn't fly.

“It's freeing,” Eric answered after a few moments of contemplation. “At my fastest, it can even be,” he paused, “*cleansing* for me. I like to be above the noise of the earth.”

“I think I'd like that too,” she sighed, settling back into her seat. “To be high above everyone else's thoughts.”

“Well – the plane will soon take us there,” he assured, pulling into what looked like an abandoned field.

“Uh – where's the airport? The airplane?” Sookie asked, her mind also trying to figure out just how there'd be no other “thoughts” once they were in the air. Were the pilot and flight attendants vampires too?

Eric chuckled. “Right in there,” he said motioning toward a building that looked like a large metal barn with a rounded roof.

At that moment, a door opened, and a gray-haired man exited the “barn” with yet another huge umbrella.

Sookie immediately dipped into his thoughts – a new “defense mechanism” that she was determined to utilize.

As if he could sense what she was doing, Eric was silent for a moment.

“Everything check out?” he asked.

Sookie nodded.

“He’s just a human,” she informed. “He had to scramble a bit when you asked for a huge umbrella for me; thanks for that, by the way. Uh – he’s already fueled your plane. Wait! *Your* plane!” she exclaimed. “*Yours!?!?*”

He chuckled. “Yes.”

“When I said that I wasn’t scared of flyin’ anymore, I meant in the *big* ones!” she exclaimed. “With *professional* pilots!”

He chuckled louder as he quickly got out of the car and took her luggage from the back seat; he’d not used the car’s trunk – a fact that Sookie had noticed.

And appreciated.

Within seconds, he had handed off Sookie’s suitcase to the airfield worker and had taken the umbrella from him. Since the telepath was still dumbfounded by the idea of Eric FLYING them home, the vampire had to open her car door, release her seatbelt for her, and tap her on the shoulder to signal her to get out of the car.

“It’s not rainin’ too hard to fly in an airplane – is it?” she asked Eric with trepidation.

“Not at all,” he chuckled. “The rain is quite mild now – unlike the storm earlier. And the radar is clear to the west. Plus, the FAA has *nothing* on me when it comes to safety regulations.”

“I’m sure,” Sookie mumbled, as she walked with Eric into what she now knew was an airplane hangar. As he led her to a small – as in *very* small – private plane, she wanted to turn around and run. “That contraption looks like it’s a toy. Can it even fly in pristine weather?” she muttered.

He laughed heartily. “It seats up to fifteen, Sookie. That’s hardly small. I assure you – this model is the safest of its size on the market. And I would know,” he leaned down to whisper as if telling her a secret.

She looked up at him skeptically.

“Fun fact!” he grinned widely. “Howard Hughes *himself* taught me how to fly. I even saved his life once – when he decided to test a particularly risky plane – not this kind,” he chuckled, gesturing toward the plane.

“What? Huh? Really?” Granted, most of what Sookie knew about Howard Hughes had been learned from the movie *The Aviator*. “Um – was he really crazy?”

Eric nodded. “So nuts that no one listened when he insisted that vampires were real! Go figure!”

“What?” Sookie asked.

Eric laughed louder. “Just joking. Howard believed in *any* conspiracy theory he heard, and he was as germophobic as any human I ever knew. And *that* was why the vampires who knew him – and there were quite a few of us, especially during his

earlier years – made sure that he *never* knew what we were. And – I’m only speaking for myself – but I never drank from the man either.”

“Worried about catching the crazy?” Sookie smirked.

“Absolutely!” Eric answered honestly. “Plus, given his odd diet, he smelled horrible! But he was a visionary when he could maintain his grasp upon his sanity. *And* an amazing pilot. But I’m better.”

“Bragging?” Sookie asked.

The worker, who’d been stowing Sookie’s belongings inside the plane, reemerged. “The travel plan’s been filed and okayed, and the tower is ready for you, Mr. Smith.”

Sookie’s eyebrows rose at the name “Smith.”

“There’s a bathroom at that end of the hangar,” the older man pointed, as he looked at them as if they were both human, “if you need the facilities before you board. I’ll go ahead and open up the main door so that I can tow you out when you’re ready. After I unhook, just radio the tower when you’re five minutes from wantin’ to take off, and they’ll get you worked out.”

“Thank you,” Eric said to the man.

“Do you need the facilities?” Eric asked Sookie after the worker had gone about his duties.

“Do you?” Sookie joked.

He chuckled, thoroughly enjoying the easy moment with her. Such a thing was welcome that night.

“How long’s the flight?” she asked.

“Just a bit more than an hour from hangar to hangar,” Eric responded.

“Then I’ll be good,” she said as Eric led her into the plane.

He handed her the small paper bag he’d taken from Alcide’s home as he motioned toward the copilot seat. “The Were packed some food and drink – if you require it.”

“Uh – I could just sit in the back,” Sookie said with apprehension as she looked at the control panel.

“Keep me company instead?” the vampire asked.

“I won’t have to do anything – right?” the telepath inquired, still looking around the cockpit as if it were a snake pit.

“You will need *to breathe*,” he chuckled, for she had been holding her breath in nervousness.

She let out a loud exhalation as she rolled her eyes at the vampire and then took the copilot seat, letting Eric secure her into the harness.

After he sat down and strapped in, he gave the worker a thumbs-up sign, and the plane lurched forward as it was pulled out of the hangar by a large truck.

“Breathe,” Eric reminded.

Sookie nodded and tried to compose herself as the plane came to a stop and the worker unhitched the truck and waved a quick goodbye before pulling the truck away.

To preoccupy herself from thinking about her odd situation, Sookie stowed her purse and the little “satchel” she’d made out of her shawl so that her shoes from the

night before could be easily carried. Then she looked inside of the bag. She grabbed the Dr. Pepper Alcide had put in there. It wasn't coffee, but both the sugar and caffeine would be welcome.

"You should have some food – if you can," Eric said when she began to close the bag.

"I'm not hungry," Sookie frowned as she watched him clicking buttons and flipping levers.

"Have you eaten *anything* today?" Eric asked gently.

She shook her head.

"Well – you know best about what a human body needs," he returned, still speaking in a soft – almost soothing – tone. "I have not eaten human food in many, *many* years, though I recall the need for sustenance several times per day – especially during times of battle," he added off-handedly.

"But I haven't fought a battle today," Sookie frowned.

"Have you not?" Eric asked with a shake of his head, before turning his focus back to the airplane. "The dents you managed to put into that trunk – despite how you were tied up – beg to differ. The wounds that I saw upon your wrists – obviously made from your trying to get out of your bonds – beg to differ. And they were quite deep," he frowned. "Must have been painful to make. Not to mention the bruises on your face and your tender throat. You must have tried to bite through your gag and scream for hours," he finished before turning the plane's propellers on.

The telepath cringed through Eric's words. The vampire's forensic-sounding description had been accurate – *too* accurate. That description was enough to cause her to reopen the bag and take out what looked to be a ham sandwich.

Sookie watched Eric to see if he would look at her in victory as she took a bite of the food she wasn't hungry for, but agreed she should eat. However, there were no "I told you so's" from Eric. He simply kept readying the plane and began a short dialogue over the radio.

After saying many technical things that Sookie didn't understand about runways and flight paths, Eric eased the plane into motion and drove it toward what looked to be a long, straight road.

He turned to her then, obviously feeling her nervousness spike.

"You will be fine, Sookie. I have you."

She swallowed hard, though she didn't have a bite in her mouth in that moment.

"I know," she replied. "I know you have me. Thank you, Eric. Thank you."

Chapter 10: Flip, Flop and Fly

I said flip flop and fly I don't care if I die

I said flip flop and fly I don't care if I die

I won't ever leave ... Don't ever say goodbye

—“Flip, Flop and Fly” (sung by Elvis Presley)

The flight from Jackson to Shreveport would be a short one, and though Sookie knew that there was plenty she and Eric needed to say to each other, she was happy that the first ten minutes or so that they spent in the air were silent ones—at least between the two of them—though Eric had needed to communicate with “the tower” several times.

Meanwhile, she’d managed to finish her sandwich and had been sipping at her Dr. Pepper.

“I like boats,” she stated randomly, breaking the silence. “I mean—compared to planes.”

Eric chuckled at her seemingly arbitrary choice of subjects. “Though planes have their benefits, I prefer boats too.”

“Of course,” Sookie smiled back. “You were a Viking. You would have traveled by—uh—long-boats? Right?”

“Our word for them is more closely translated to ‘dragon ships,’” Eric winked, “but—yes—you are correct.”

“Dragon?” she asked with interest.

He nodded. “There were generally figures – like dragons – carved at either end of our ships. These carvings were thought to frighten away the monsters we believed lived in the seas.” He shrugged. “They were,” he paused, “frighteningly beautiful.”

“The dragons or sea monsters?”

He chuckled. “Both.”

“Frighteningly beautiful? Like vampires,” she observed.

He laughed a little louder. Sookie was beginning to see just how much Eric Northman laughed – how it came naturally to him.

In certain company.

“Yes. I suppose that is an apt analogy – though some vampires have *little* beauty. But all vampires that I’ve ever known *do* have the capacity to be frightening – at least to humans,” Eric added.

Sookie thought for a moment. Most of the vampires she’d met were quite beautiful – or at least striking-looking. But that didn’t mean they all had interior beauty; in fact, some seemed downright ugly on the inside. (Malcolm and his brood came to mind.) However, she could imagine herself being frightened by any of them. Indeed, though she was perfectly comfortable with him right then, even Eric had scared her a time or two.

“What scares you?” she asked, returning to the question she’d asked him at Alcide’s apartment.

“Not much,” he sighed. “But the things that I fear are profound to me.”

“Will you tell me?” she asked.

Eric nodded almost imperceptibly, but took several moments before he responded. “Loss is a thing that vampires learn to accept early on. We lose our human lives – our human families. Indeed, we soon learn that *all* finite things will be lost – that even those who are supposedly immortal can be destroyed. My maker,” he paused, “tried to teach me to never care about *anything* – so that I would never register loss. But he failed – in many ways – with me. Or, perhaps, I failed him.”

“You fear loss?” she asked.

He nodded.

“What are you afraid to lose?” she asked with bated breath.

“Very little. Fortune is easy enough to gain. Knowledge too. I fear the loss of,” he paused, “people – certain people.”

“Who?” she asked, her voice sounding strained and small.

“Pam and my other child, Karin,” he started.

“You have another child?” she asked with some surprise.

He nodded. “I was relatively young and lonely when I made Karin – selfish too. I taught her – as best as I could – but she has preferred to be on her own since I felt she was ready to leave my side. I did better fostering a good relationship with Pam, for I was a better vampire – more healed – by the time I chose her to be my child.”

Sookie found herself surprised that Eric Northman would admit to any kind of deficiency or ailment. She couldn’t help but to feel honored that he would do that in her presence.

Or – maybe he already had been doing that. Maybe the few times they’d been alone had already told her all that she needed to know about Eric’s willingness to open himself to her. Indeed, from the moment they’d stared at each other through a hospital window to the moment they were now sharing, Eric had been “himself” with her, though he was clearly reluctant to be that *self* with others.

“I fear letting down the vampires who count on me,” Eric continued softly. “Many have sworn their fealty to me; I am beholden to them.”

“I very much doubt you let many down,” she returned just as softly.

He nodded slightly, but kept his eyes pointed through the front window of the plane. “And I fear losing you,” he admitted.

“And you don’t like having feelings?” she asked in a whisper.

He shook his head. “No. I do not. I worry that my maker might feel them too – that he might come and,” he paused, “*toy* with those feelings – with those about whom I *feel*.”

“He was bad?” she asked.

“*Is* bad,” the vampire corrected. “Appius taught me much about fighting and survival. But his lessons were learned at a steep price – to my body, my control, my choice,” he finished at a volume Sookie could barely hear.

Sookie sat silently for several moments as she analyzed Eric’s words and the subtext of them. He’d lost the three things she most feared losing if she were ever made a vampire, yet he still seemed so strong – even in his vulnerability. She found herself yearning to share her own darkneses with him, wondering if the creature of the night

sitting next to her was – ironically – the very individual who could best teach her how to shine a light upon her fears.

“Bill didn’t rape me tonight. But he *would* have,” she practically whimpered. “I know it.” She paused. “I had an uncle who would have done the same – when I was real young – if I hadn’t heard his plans from his head and told Gran. As it was, he did some things to me – things that still give me nightmares sometimes. Things that make it difficult for me to be around men – to trust them. Bill was the first, and he Well – I don’t think I made a good choice trusting him.”

Eric growled low, but Sookie knew that the fearsome noise was not aimed at her. “This other man – your uncle – is there any reason at all that you still need to fear him?”

“No,” Sookie responded. “In fact, Bill killed him. And – even before that – I wasn’t afraid of him. But I still,” she paused, “remember how powerless I felt.”

“You are not powerless anymore,” Eric averred.

“I was,” the telepath corrected. “In that trunk, I was.”

Eric looked at her pointedly. “How many hours were you in there, Sookie? Ten? Lesser things have rattled people to insanity – yet you are here and still whole.”

She shook her head. “How do you know my sanity wasn’t rattled? It feels like it was.”

“I felt you – what you were feeling – for a while before I could leave Russell’s mansion,” the vampire said quietly. “You were scared, but you were strong too.”

“I didn’t feel strong,” Sookie admitted.

“Are there not many kinds of strength?” Eric asked.

She shrugged.

“Survival is a kind of strength,” the vampire stated after they’d been silent for a few moments.

“You’re a survivor,” Sookie observed.

He nodded. “I am, and I recognize others like me,” he added, glancing pointedly at her.

She took a deep breath. “I’m still here.”

“You are,” the vampire smiled softly before his expression became severe again. “I am glad that your uncle is not. At least, Bill did one thing right,” Eric uttered, his voice steel.

Sookie shrugged. “I don’t know. Bill killed my uncle on my behalf, but I now carry guilt for that monster’s death.”

“You cannot believe that he didn’t deserve punishment!” Eric responded incredulously.

“Oh—I believe he did. Part of me wishes that Gran wouldn’t have chased him away with the shotgun. Part of me wishes that she’d asked Sheriff Bud to arrest him. We found out later that he’d hurt my cousin Hadley too.”

In the grips of her recollection, Sookie did not notice that Eric’s countenance changed slightly with the mention of the unusual name: Hadley.

“Who knows who else he might have gotten to?” the telepath continued as she crumpled the empty soda can in her hand and then put the trash back into the bag. “By the time I was grown, Uncle Bartlett was in a wheelchair. Despite that, I still worried

about other people – other little girls he might come into contact with.” She sighed. “It always seemed like a mistake not to tell, and I thought about having him arrested when I was eighteen. But Gran’s thoughts were *so* clear on the matter. In some ways, she was old school – maybe too old school sometimes. She thought it best not to air dirty laundry where people could see it.”

“You carried guilt for him remaining free – didn’t you?” Eric asked perceptively. Sookie nodded. “Yes. Gran didn’t mean for me to suffer in that way though. And her conscience was clear because she told Sheriff Dearborn about things and figured he’d make sure Bartlett didn’t do it again.”

“But you still worried,” the vampire observed.

“Yeah. Gran didn’t want me to have to relive things in a courtroom, but keeping everything a secret is what made me ashamed of it all.” She shook her head as if to shake herself from her gloomy thoughts. “After Gran sent her brother away, I didn’t mention it again because she didn’t even want to think about it. So I tried not to think about it either, but I did sometimes. And – whenever I did – I wondered why Bartlett’s sins coming to light would have been such a bad thing.”

Sookie paused for a moment. “I understood later on when I realized how certain people look at the victims of crimes negatively – either pitying them or sometimes even blaming them. I know Gran was trying to protect me. But that kind of thinking will never disappear until good people have the chance to think differently.”

“Do you believe people are capable of that?”

“I know it,” Sookie smiled softly – though a little sadly. “And *you’ll* prove it.”

“How?” he asked curiously.

“Tell me—how would’ve people in your human time dealt with someone like my uncle?”

Eric growled. “Anyone abusing a child in that way would have been publicly beaten and killed—and then buried without honor.”

“And the child?” she asked.

“He or she would have been viewed as innocent,” Eric returned.

“From what I’ve read about history, humans evolve and devolve in cycles,” the telepath mused. “Right now, a lot of people are taught to cover up situations like the one I faced as a child—to not think about the ugly side of life. But I think things will change again.”

“You have much faith in humanity,” Eric observed.

Sookie shrugged. “For every horrible, ugly thought I’ve endured, I’ve heard at least one kind or loving one. And—even if they are wary of me—most people I know are pretty decent overall.”

“More good than bad?” Eric asked.

“Most of them—except for people like Uncle Bartlett.”

Eric took one hand from the “steering wheel” of the plane and offered it to her in a sign of silent support.

She accepted it. “Would you kill him? My uncle? If he were still alive?”

“The truth?” the vampire asked.

She nodded.

"I would," Eric admitted, keeping his eyes forward. "I know what it is like to be," he paused, "victimized – powerless."

"You would have wanted to kill him for us *both*?" Sookie asked, though it was clear she already knew the answer.

"Even as I want to kill Bill right now," he sighed. "For the both of us."

"But you didn't; you haven't," she reminded.

"Not yet, but do not think that the desire has left my mind. I will be looking for an excuse," he conveyed honestly.

"But not one that makes me his inadvertent killer?" she asked.

"No – not one that does that," he assured. "But – make no mistake – I *will* protect you from him and kill him if he tries to directly harm you. Meanwhile, I will be hoping that he fucks up in *another* way."

Sookie chuckled darkly and shook her head. "That shouldn't make me laugh."

"It wouldn't have," he paused, "yesterday."

"I know," she whispered.

Again, there were several moments of silence between them.

Again, Sookie broke that silence.

"I'm afraid of being alone – not having someone to share my life with; I always have been."

"You need not be alone again," Eric returned quietly, squeezing her hand a little.

Sookie acknowledged his assurance with a squeeze of her own.

"I'm afraid of losing my brother, Jason. And my friends—Sam, Tara, and Arlene." She laughed ruefully. "Of course, I know that Jason doesn't think about me much—unless he's at Merlotte's and wants a free pitcher of beer or is craving home-cookin', but that's probably pretty normal for brothers. And Sam's thoughts about me aren't always—uh—comfortable."

"How so?" Eric asked with an edge to his tone.

Sookie shrugged. "He didn't like me bein' with Bill. Sometimes, he seemed to have an interest in me, but he never acted on it until Bill was already around. Needless to say, Sam doesn't have many nice things to say about vampires. And Arlene is more of a fair-weather friend than anything else, but I still don't wanna lose them."

"Fair-weather?" he asked.

"She's there for me only when it's easy or convenient for her," Sookie smirked. "She's the kind that asks for favors—expecting a 'yes'—but she begrudges me when I ask her in return."

Eric frowned.

"I take the friends I can get though," Sookie went on. "They've been few and far between because the people that remember me as a kid have just cause to think I'm crazy, scary, or both."

"How so?" Eric asked.

"Before I had shields, I got confused between spoken words and thoughts—like all the time! So I would answer people's thoughts or sometimes spill their secrets in public. Sometimes," she went on in a haunted-sounding voice, "there would be so

many sounds that I couldn't help but to cry or yell out or cover my ears, trying to keep them all out. Places like church and school were the hardest to be in, so I often broke down in them – until I was about thirteen and started learnin' to form shields. But Gran couldn't keep me at home because she had to get a part-time job at the grocery store to help take care of Jason and me. She didn't quit it until Jase got a job, moved out, and took over all the expenses for my parents' old house."

Sookie sighed deeply. "No matter how many years I've had decent control over my telepathy, though, it's the crazy-looking little girl weeping with her hands over her ears that most people 'see' when they think of me. Heck – Sam and Arlene are both transplants to Bon Temps. Arlene and I didn't meet until we were both waitresses at Merlotte's, which didn't open until Sam moved to town when I was eighteen. By the time I applied for a job with him, I had solid shields. He and Arlene know what I can do, but they've never had to see me when I don't have any control." She shook her head. "Jason's always *had* to tolerate me because I was his sister. So Tara is the only one who *chose* to be my friend before I got my shields."

"Tara was the girl at Club Dead?" Eric asked. "The one you danced with?"

Sookie nodded and smiled. "We've been friends since we were seven; sometimes – when Mrs. Thornton was holding down a job – she and Tara had cable, and we'd dance along with MTV."

Eric scoffed. "Music Television. Pamela subjected me to a countdown of the best videos by 80s hair bands when we were lying low in a safehouse a few years ago."

Sookie chuckled and then glanced sideways at him, a smirk evident on her lips. “Given that pink Lycra outfit you had available, I would have bet you enjoyed that kind of music.”

The vampire chuckled. “In moderation, almost anything is tolerable.”

Sookie’s cheeks flushed red.

“What?” Eric asked with confusion. “Why are you feeling both embarrassed and lustful?”

Sookie practically buried her face into her available hand.

“Tell me or I’ll crash the plane?” Eric grinned wickedly.

The telepath gasped and then rolled her eyes as she realized he was joking.

“Fine. I was just thinking that there was *nothing* about that Lycra that said ‘moderation.’”

Eric laughed out loud.

Just then, the radio crackled and the vampire took his hand from hers while he had a brief exchange with the tower attendant in the Shreveport area. The communication allowed Sookie the time to get her emotions – and her body color – back under control.

It also gave her the opportunity to think about just how comforting Eric’s touch had been. She didn’t have too long to miss the comfort, however, as he retook her hand gently as soon as he was done speaking on the radio.

“Is Franklin, the vampire Tara was with, a good guy?” she asked, recommencing their conversation.

“Franklin is,” Eric paused, “civilized, but he likely won’t keep your friend for long. I’ve never known him to be with a human woman for more than a few weeks, but – while he’s with her – he’ll dote upon her.”

“He won’t hurt her – uh – physically when he’s *done* with her – will he?”

Eric shook his head. “No, but he is known to pass his humans along to other vampires – even glamouring them to accept the change of ownership.”

“That’s horrible!” Sookie gasped squeezing his hand in her irritation. She didn’t let go of it, however.

“I disagree with that kind of practice as well – though I have certainly glamouried humans to complete daytime tasks or to forget that I had bitten them. But glamouring them to the point that they have no choices left . . .” His voice trailed off.

“Eric – uh – Tara likes Franklin. I heard her thoughts about that. She’s having fun with him and isn’t the kind to initiate a break up unless there are real problems. Um – she’s no saint, but I don’t want her to be traded like that.”

“Say no more. Franklin owes one of my casinos a bit of money. I will forgive the debt if he ensures that your friend is *not* bartered when he tires of her,” the vampire set her mind at rest. “She will be glamouried to believe that any break-up was amicable and will be sent on her way in peace.”

“Thank you,” Sookie said with relief. “Does that – uh – happen a lot? Vampires getting tired of humans?” she asked reluctantly.

Eric nodded. “Yes. Often. Vampires eventually get tired of most everything – and everyone – given time. There are exceptions, but they are rare.”

“I think Bill was tired of me by the end of our time together,” she admitted. “Even before his maker called him, he’d lost interest – at least in talking.” She sighed and shook her head. “I wasn’t happy, but I lied to myself. And,” she paused, “I didn’t want to be alone. Maybe I was just weak.”

“You are not weak,” Eric said matter-of-factly.

The two were silent for almost a full minute, though their hands continued to touch, his thumb brushing her palm soothingly.

“Will you kill Debbie?” she asked. “I promised Alcide I’d try to stop you.”

Eric sighed, his mixed feelings on the subject apparent. “Do you believe that she will come after you again?”

“Yes,” Sookie admitted. “I think Debbie had a lot of crazy in her already – before she got hooked on various drugs. According to Alcide’s thoughts, she went from alcohol, to weed, to meth – though she’s had periods when she’s been clean. Now that she’s found V, however, it’s as if she can’t prevent herself from havin’ emotional fixations: her obsession with Alcide bein’ an example. And now, she has her hatred of me to focus on too. She’s a lit fuse lookin’ for something to blow up.”

“In that case – *yes* – I believe I should kill her; I won’t risk your safety.”

“Eric, I don’t want her dyin’ because of me.”

“She’d be dying for her *own* actions,” he said forcefully. “But,” his voice softened, “knowing how you hate the thought of even someone like Debbie Pelt being slain on your behalf – I will offer you a compromise.”

“Compromise? What compromise?”

Chapter 11: If You Think I Don't Need You

If you think I don't need you

Then take a look in my eyes

Maybe these ain't raindrops

Falling out of the sky

– “If You Think I Don’t Need You” (songwriters Bobby Red West & Joe Cooper)

“Guards,” Eric said somewhat cautiously, already bracing for the telepath’s objections. “If you accept them, I will let Debbie live unless – *until* – she takes action against you.”

“That sounds like an ultimatum,” Sookie returned somewhat angrily, “not a compromise. Anyway, I don’t need guards!”

Eric was shocked – though grateful – that she hadn’t pulled away her hand from his own, but he still had to reign in his frustration at her outright denial.

Even though he’d expected it.

“You *do* need them,” he returned emphatically. “Even beyond the Debbie Pelt situation, you need guards. You will *always* need them now.”

“How do you figure?” she asked with a scowl.

Without thinking, he took his left hand off of the airplane’s controls and ran his fingers through his hair.

“What are you doing?!?! Fly the dang plane!” Sookie screeched, even as she pulled her hand from his.

He sighed at the loss, but then chuckled, thankful for the momentary tension breaker. “The plane’s been on automatic pilot since three minutes after our takeoff. I’ve just kept my hand on the controls to make you feel better. I will put it back on if you need,” he added.

She huffed. “I think you know me too well sometimes.”

“I think I don’t know you well enough,” he said with sincerity rather than the kind of suggestiveness that she was more used to from him. He also replaced his left hand onto the controls and retook her hand with his right.

Refusing to get sidetracked, she ignored his earnest tone and the way his hand in hers once more made her feel. “Well—I *know* you know me well enough to know that I don’t want guards.”

“Humor me for a minute as I try to convince you that—though you might not *want* them—you *need* them,” he requested.

Because his voice lacked even a hint of the patronizing tone that Bill’s generally held when he wanted to “explain” something to her *and* because she’d almost died earlier that night (so it was clear that Eric *did* have a point) *and* because she’d determined to be less stubborn, Sookie nodded her head, indicating that she would—at least—hear out the vampire.

“Thank you,” he said, pleased that she’d given in to his request without too much of a fight. “Let me begin by pointing out that you have worked for me before and

that I should be the one to ensure your safety. Your gift was made known in Dallas. And – given Bill’s relationship with the queen – I am certain that she knows of that gift as well.”

“Are you implyin’ that other vampires might try to – um – kidnap me or something?” she asked.

“I’m saying that – if you have renounced Bill’s claim that you are *his* – then you are currently free game.”

“I’m *not* Bill’s,” Sookie stated firmly.

Eric smiled a little. “Glad to hear it. But being unattached to a Supernatural being makes you much more vulnerable. Tell me – how difficult would it really be to control your telepathy – to control you?”

“I wouldn’t do anything against my morals,” she insisted.

“Even if someone were threatening Jason?” he asked gently.

She gasped.

“What *wouldn’t* you do for your brother is the real question – or those friends you’ve told me about – even the ‘fair-weather’ one?” he aptly observed.

Sookie went to reply, but Eric beat her to the punch. “If you agree to be guarded, I would hire guards for Jason too if necessary. And your friends also – should the occasion warrant their protection.”

“But the expense . . .,” Sookie began.

“It is nothing I would notice,” he paused, “monetarily. But I *will* notice when it comes to peace of mind. Feeling your terror earlier . . .” He was silent for a moment.

“Sookie, I can no longer deny that I care for you – not that I did a thorough job of hiding it before,” he admitted somewhat reluctantly. “Call it selfishness on my part if it makes you feel better – but I never again want to awaken the way I did tonight.”

She took a deep breath. “Did Bill wake up at sunset – or after?” she asked, trying to work through a question that had been swirling in her mind – and unable to process Eric’s declared feelings any more than she could her own internal mishmash of emotions in that moment.

“Based on how I found you, I’d speculate that he woke up right at sunset,” Eric relayed.

“Then how did you get to me so fast?” Sookie asked him in barely a whisper.

“Older vampires can wake up before sunset. Also, the storm obscured the sun, enabling me to awaken even earlier. And . . .,” he stopped midsentence.

“And?”

“The blood tie. Feeling your strong emotions You were frightened.”

“Yes, I was,” she concurred. “But you haven’t answered *how* you got to me so quickly.”

“I flew,” he said somewhat abruptly.

“You can fly that fast?” she asked.

“I left Russell’s mansion before the sun was officially down; the storm protected me,” he explained quickly – as if it were nothing.

“Eric!” she gasped. “One break in the storm, and you would” She couldn’t finish her thought.

“I know.”

“A thousand years!” she cried. “You’re a thousand years old!”

“More than,” Eric said with a confused look, not understanding what his age had to do with anything.

The next thing he knew, she’d let go of his hand again and was swatting and punching at his arm – with more strength than he would have thought her capable – even with his blood.

“You really are a warrior,” he grinned.

“And you’re a *fool*! Why did you risk yourself like that?”

“You care,” he observed somewhat incredulously. “About my safety?”

“You’re not the only one surprised, but – yes – I *do* care! Very much,” she added in almost a whisper after swatting his arm again. “I don’t like the idea of you risking your thousand-plus-year-old hide for me!”

“Well – then,” Eric returned, his frustration barely covering up the fear that had caused it, “you’ll understand that, if you’d had a full-time guard – one who was devoted solely to your protection – Debbie Pelt would have *never* gotten close to you. You would have never been in that trunk, Sookie! And I wouldn’t have had to leave Russell’s mansion while it was still daytime!”

“You didn’t *have* to do that!” she yelled out angrily. “I never asked you to care!”

He turned and exchanged a heated glare with her for a moment. “I never asked you to care either!”

“But I do!” Sookie huffed.

“Well, so do I!”

“Then we’re even!” she frowned.

“We are!” he agreed with a slight chuckle, breaking the tension.

She shook her head and regripped his hand before bringing it to her lips for a gentle kiss. He watched her with a mixture of surprise and awe in his eyes, her own showing a deep appreciation for his actions.

For him.

“With you, I find that I *have* to care,” he confessed before he could stop himself.

“I cannot help myself. Sookie, you need protection. And I *want* to be the one to protect you,” he emphasized.

She exhaled deeply. “Your point is taken; I’d want to protect you too.”

“You would?” he asked, again clearly surprised.

She rolled her eyes. “That’s what we were just yelling at each other about.”

“It was?”

She laughed. “You really are more clueless about the whole relationship thing than I am— aren’t you?”

He shrugged. “I honestly don’t know. All I know is that I need you to stay safe.”

“But Alcide was guarding me,” she pointed out, “and the Debbie thing still happened.”

“Alcide, for all his strength, is not a professional guard,” Eric frowned as he quickly raked his left hand through his hair again before putting it back on the controls.

“I should have done better for you, but I did not foresee your being staked at Club Dead,” he added apologetically. “Alcide is not a stranger to the Were club, so I used him to get you inside. I thought I would be enough if he proved incapable of protecting you in Jackson; clearly, I was wrong,” he added contritely, even as he looked away from her.

“You *were* enough!” Sookie insisted. “I’d be dead if it weren’t for you.”

“I never should have let you come to Mississippi,” he responded regretfully, his eyes still pointed toward the front windows of the plane. “But the queen,” he paused, “seemed desperate to get Bill back – desperate to the point that she threatened me and mine. I am sorry.”

“What’s your queen like?” Sookie asked.

Eric shrugged. “Usually quite reasonable and shrewd. She leaves me alone for the most part, but – lately – there has been a somewhat desperate tinge to her behavior.” He shook his head.

“Lately?”

“For the last decade or so,” Eric elaborated, “she’s been spending more and more money upon useless excess so that she looks stronger to other vampire monarchs. But conspicuous consumption has rarely worked in history.”

“Uh – what’s that?”

“When a monarch spends lavishly in order to try to seem more powerful. Sophie-Anne used to care much less about how she was viewed by others – as long as

she knew she was strong. In fact, she enjoyed punishing anyone who underestimated her.”

“You admired that about her,” Sookie observed sagely.

“Yes,” Eric agreed. “It’s one of the reasons why I decided to serve her. But somewhere along the way, she became more ambitious, and – to attract allies – she has spent beyond her means.”

“I can’t imagine what that means for a vampire,” Sookie frowned. Even Bill had money enough to be planning for major renovations on his ancestral home. And Eric had just shrugged off the expense of employing guards for her and those she cared about. She couldn’t even begin to comprehend the kind of money a vampire queen might have – or how much she might spend!

“Bill has been working on a project for Sophie-Anne,” Eric disclosed, “a project that I believe the queen is *quite* concerned about.”

Sookie took a deep breath. Bill had hidden his computer equipment in her house before he left Bon Temps. She could either keep that knowledge to herself and get the equipment back to Bill, or she could tell Eric about it.

Hadn’t it been Bill who’d told her to tell Eric about the computer project if he wasn’t back in Bon Temps in eight weeks? Wasn’t it Bill who told her to seek out Eric for protection – even though he disliked the elder vampire?

If not for her and Eric, Lorena would have kept Bill her prisoner for a lot longer than eight weeks. Or Bill would have told Lorena *exactly* where to find the computer

equipment; perhaps, he already had. After all, how else could the Were that had come to Bon Temps for her be explained?

“The project is Bill’s computer thing,” she told Eric, having made her decision to be forthcoming with the vampire who’d saved her life twice in as many nights.

Immediately, it felt like the right choice to the telepath.

“Computer thing?” Eric asked.

She nodded. “Yeah. Bill told me he was working on something secret for the queen. Before he left town, he hid it in my house. He put it in the cubby he built for himself over there. I’m pretty sure he figures that I’m mostly clueless about what he was working on, but I’ve seen databases before.”

“A database,” Eric frowned.

Sookie elaborated, “One with vampire information. I was over at his house when he was working on it one night and saw one of the entries.”

“You are sure it was information about a vampire?” Eric asked, his voice clipped.

“Yes. The entry I saw had a picture, a date of birth in the 1750s, and other information related to vampires.”

“Like?” Eric asked.

Sookie closed her eyes to better remember. “Blanks for things like maker and children. And—uh—places of residence. Names used. Special talents. Skills. Things like that.”

“A database of vampire information. Fuck!” Eric growled, seemingly slumping back into his pilot’s chair as if he were tired.

“Is that bad?” Sookie asked.

“Vampires are very private beings,” Eric answered. “Knowledge makes us strong. Conversely, others knowing too much about us could give them an advantage over us. For instance, there is information, such as the identity of my child, that I would not want to be known by anyone I don’t inherently trust.”

“But doesn’t everyone know that Pam’s your child?” Sookie asked with confusion.

“Pam and I do not hide our familial relationship, but we don’t flaunt it either. Many of the humans in our employ do not know. Indeed, most vampires who do know have already sworn fealty to me or are a part of Queen Sophie-Anne’s court. Karin, however, is another story. Very few know that the famous ‘Karin the Slaughterer’ is my child.”

“*Slaughterer?*” Sookie gulped.

Eric nodded and looked proud. “Karin was born to be a warrior – both as human and vampire. Her vampire gifts relate to stealth, and her senses are well beyond what they should be for her age. She works as an assassin for several carefully-chosen monarchs around the world.”

“A-assassin?” Sookie stuttered timidly.

“*Enforcer* might be a more apt title. In the supernatural world, we have had to be careful not to expose ourselves to humans. For the last several years, Werens and other two-natured creatures have been crafting plans to ‘come out’ as vampires did, but could you imagine what would happen if a Were were arrested and kept in jail when there

was a full moon? And – even now – rogue vampires must be eliminated – as the vampire-human relationship is still tenuous. Of course, it is the rogues who can be most dangerous. Karin has earned her nickname because she has never failed to eliminate a target, not because she kills gratuitously. Most vampires assume that she is thousands of years old because of her deadliness and stealth. Indeed, very few know what she looks like or even her scent since she has learned spells to partially conceal it. She is like a phantom, and she goes by aliases in her everyday life. My status as her maker is known by only myself and Pam, and Pam has been commanded to say nothing about her. Even my own maker doesn't know she still exists."

"How is that possible?" Sookie asked.

"I made Karin when Appius was in the Far East – about five years after he released me." Eric sighed as if the weight of the world had just been placed upon his shoulders at the verbalization of his maker's name. "In truth, a part of me missed him."

"You did? Even though it seems like he was cruel to you?" Sookie asked softly – her tone weighed with care and a willingness to understand.

"It is almost impossible to explain my ambivalence toward my maker."

"That means mixed feelings – right?" Sookie asked, recalling a recent Word-of-the-Day calendar entry.

Eric nodded. "Yes. I both love and hate Appius. He taught me a great many things about being a successful vampire, but his concept of a 'successful vampire' is not the same as mine."

"What is his?" she asked with trepidation.

“For a vampire to lose all traces of humanity.”

“You haven’t lost those,” Sookie remarked, even as she apprehended that truth herself. For all of Bill’s attempts to paint Eric as completely devoid of humanity – the creature next to her was the most “human” vampire she’d ever encountered.

“My human parents taught me many things that I saw no logic in abandoning,” Eric said matter-of-factly. “As vampire, I have tried to see value where it exists – no matter what species it exists within.” He smirked. “Do not get me wrong; I believe that vampires are superior – as a whole – to other creatures.”

Sookie rolled her eyes and playfully pinched his palm.

He chuckled before his expression darkened again. “Appius, too, can see value in others, but – when he does – his inclination is to exploit the asset until it is no longer beneficial to him.” He sighed deeply. “I was one of his playthings for many years. As long as I had value and amused him, he taught me. I absorbed the lessons that suited me. And I grew able to withstand – even enjoy – the physical requirements he made of my body.”

Sookie cringed. “How?” she couldn’t stop herself from asking.

Eric closed his eyes for a moment. “I do not know. Homosexual couplings weren’t uncommon among my people. Especially on long journeys, some men provided one another with physical release, and they did not face the kind of stigma that many homosexual or bisexual individuals face in the modern world. However, I was not attracted to other men, so my right hand was my best friend during long journeys.”

Sookie looked down at the hand she was holding – Eric’s *right* hand – and blushed beet red.

The vampire chuckled, but made no comment.

The telepath’s blush faded quickly as Eric continued. “Appius was not concerned with my sexual preferences – only his own. Although he did not force himself upon me in a conventional sense, he did command me to comply to his advances.” Eric once again raked his left hand through his hair. “In some ways, that might have been worse, for my will was taken away, and my body complied to his touch. However, my mind was ever-aware of my own powerlessness – ever-aware that my choice had been taken away. Eventually, the act of sex with him created no physical pain – only pleasure. Appius no longer had to command my compliance after a time, for I knew that resistance was a waste of time and energy. You have heard of Stockholm Syndrome?”

“Yes,” Sookie responded, her throat tight from both her disgust at Appius’s actions and her sorrow that Eric had been forced to endure them.

“Mine began well before 1973 – when the phenomenon was formally named,” he said ruefully. “Appius and I traveled through the area where Stockholm was eventually founded when I was about half a century old. It was there – ironically enough – that my forced compliance turned into a desire to please my maker.”

“Eric,” Sookie whispered, wishing she knew words that might comfort him.

The vampire squeezed her hand as if to comfort them both. “It took longer than that for me develop real affection for my maker, but I do have it now. Understandably,

I resented those positive feelings for centuries – though I have come to accept them now. However, I doubt I will ever *like* having them,” he emphasized.

“I cannot imagine,” Sookie said softly.

“I think you come closer than most to understanding the repercussions of a loss of control,” Eric responded, his voice laced with compassion for her own past experiences.

There was a minute or two of silence between the two survivors before the vampire began speaking again. “Eventually, I learned all that I was going to learn from Appius, and he began to thirst for a new project to fill his time, so he released me.”

“Has he ever re-called you to him?” Sookie asked.

Eric nodded. “Only once – when he was in a difficult situation, and my connections were needed to get him out of it. In addition, he has sought me out a few times over the centuries; one such time was about sixty years after I made Karin.”

“You never told me how it is possible that Appius doesn’t know about her being alive – uh still undead,” Sookie reminded. “You don’t have to tell me, but I am curious.”

“I do not mind telling you,” Eric said with a slight smile in her direction. “I engineered a situation that made Appius believe that my first child was finally dead, and I have never done anything to correct his misperception of the situation.”

“What did you do?” Sookie asked, engrossed in his story.

“Karin’s human name was Isolde,” Eric responded. “In fact, that is the name I still think of first when I recall the nights we traveled together. I anticipated that

Appius would want to meet her, and I had heard that my maker's latest child had failed to rise. A mutual acquaintance also told me that Appius had been on a rampage of sorts after that, and I worried for Isolde. Because of this, I released Isolde so that she could go out on her own – something she wanted to do anyway – and instructed her to change her name permanently, but only *after* she left my side; I also cautioned her against giving me any specifics about her plans. I did not even know her new name for a century or so.”

“You told your maker the name ‘Isolde’ – didn’t you? You told him that ‘Isolde’ was gone forever,” Sookie guessed.

“Yes,” Eric confirmed for the perceptive telepath. “I was even able to *truthfully* tell him that Isolde was ‘no more.’”

“Clever, but couldn’t he have just ordered you to *call* her?”

“He did,” Eric shared. “But by then it was too late.”

“Wait. Don’t children have to answer their makers’ calls?”

“Yes. But I had already freed Isolde from my command.”

“Freed?”

Eric nodded. “The complete abdication of a maker’s right to control a child is rarely made and requires magic to – quite literally – change the maker-child bond. Often, a maker will more informally release a child to go off on his or her own, but makers retain the ability to re-call a progeny to their side and issue commands. However, in truth, very few vampires of sufficient age to be on their own require commands to support their makers; similarly, most makers kill or cut ties completely

with any progenies they cannot trust. Such children are liabilities to a maker's safety and secrecy."

"What about you? Are you loyal to your maker?" Sookie asked, unable to stop herself.

Chapter 12: It Ain't No Big Thing (But It's Growing)

Well every day the hurt grows bigger than before

But I'll pretend I don't know this

Well, if I can hold you one day more

– “It Ain’t No Big Thing (But It’s Growing)” (songwriters Alice Joy Merritt, Neal Merritt, & Shorty Hall)

Eric nodded, but it was a few moments before he spoke, and when he did so, it was with an air of hesitancy. “Yes. I am loyal to Appius. But there are some lines that – if crossed by my maker – would make me reevaluate that loyalty. I believe Appius recognizes this fact – at least, on some level. Since he released me, he has done nothing that would cause me to question my allegiance to him.”

“But I thought you were worried enough about your maker’s motives to free Karin,” Sookie observed.

Eric nodded. “Yes. And – even after these many years – I still believe I was right to do so, for – at that time – Appius was unstable. I cannot say what would have happened if Karin had been forced to come when I called,” he said tensely. “But I *can* say this: when she did not come, Appius believed her to be finally dead. And his rage and jealousy were eased.”

Sookie gasped. “He was pleased you’d lost your child?!?!?”

Eric hesitated again, but then nodded in confirmation. “Yes. He’d failed with his own child, so he *was* glad that I had ultimately failed too. But I did *not* fail,” he said with a raised eyebrow and a slight smirk. “I succeeded in misleading my maker – an ancient. And that is no small task.”

“No – but it’s still sad you felt the need for the subterfuge,” she commented, breaking out another Word-of-the-Day.

He squeezed her hand lightly in silent agreement.

“Can’t your maker feel your children – through your bond with him?” Sookie asked after a few moments of contemplation.

Eric shook his head. “Makers can sense when a child makes a child, but that is the extent of it – unless they are very close in proximity to that progeny. Even then, a maker would have no ability to command his or her child’s child.”

“And Appius never suspected you were deceiving him about Karin?” Sookie asked.

“I told him half-truths, and he was quick to believe them, for he felt my own very *real* grief in being separated from Karin – from Isolde.”

“So – as long as Appius lives, you won’t be able to openly claim her as a child?” Sookie asked astutely and a little sadly.

“That is accurate. In addition, because of her profession, total anonymity is essential to her safety.”

“Yet you’re telling *me* about her,” the telepath marveled.

“I must give you my trust if I am to earn yours,” the vampire answered sincerely.

“Keep my trust,” Sookie corrected quietly. *“You’ve already earned it.”*

“Thank you,” Eric smiled softly.

“Does your maker know about Pam?” she asked after a moment.

Eric nodded in affirmation. *“Yes. When she gained control over her urges, I offered to release Pam in the same way as I once did Karin, but she declined. She is not one to prefer seclusion. Plus, she chooses to be by my side often – as I enjoy her company as well.”*

“What about Appius? Would he hurt her to get to you?” Sookie asked pensively.

Eric gave her a sideways smirk. *“He’d hate your saying his name. He thinks one must earn that right.”*

“Oh – sorry.”

“Don’t be. He’s a pompous prick,” Eric chuckled, though no smile made its way to his eyes. *“But to answer your question about Pam, she has met Appius – while we were still in Europe. My maker was in good spirits at the time, and she has a personality that amuses him – which I hypothesized even before they interacted. She has the talent to pretend indifference – even on the rare occasions when she does give a fuck about something. And since my maker’s favorite kind of harm is of the mental variety, Pam is not someone he’d see sport in breaking.”*

“Karin is?” Sookie asked.

“Yes. Appius would see her as a challenge – like he saw me,” Eric responded quietly. *“That is why I took extreme precautions to make sure she could not be*

connected to me. If Appius found out about her now, she and I would both be in grave danger from him.”

Sookie squeezed his hand in support. “Another reason why Bill’s database could be so damaging.”

Eric nodded. “While Karin’s true identity is well enough concealed that Bill would not have access to that knowledge, a lot of sensitive information can be had – for the right price or with a little torture.”

Sookie cringed.

“I don’t know how Bill is getting his information,” Eric continued, “but information such as vampires’ abilities, ages, and aliases could lead to consequences for many. Imagine if Bill named my business, my addresses, and my *associates*,” he said significantly. “Several of my properties are almost impossible to trace to me, but Bill is allowed access to much knowledge as Area 5 Investigator. Though I doubt Bill is savvy enough to discover what I endeavor to keep well-hidden, consider a younger vampire who has the finances to afford only one resting place. If the location of that place were to be known by an enemy, the consequences could be great. Worse – imagine if a rogue, like Godfrey, were to get a copy of the database and give it to the Fellowship.”

Sookie gasped. “Then why would Bill even create something like that? Why would the queen want it?”

Eric considered for a moment. “Money and power. Vampires would buy a database and keep buying any updates in order to know what was on it about them – so that they could take steps to safeguard against vulnerabilities. They would also want to

know about their enemies and associates – to keep the playing field even. Of course, I would speculate that Bill’s work has multiple layers – with only *some* of them intended for public consumption. The queen herself would have the most knowledge, and because the project has originated from her, she will also control the knowledge that is released about herself.”

“But wouldn’t other vampires resent her for developing and selling such a thing?” Sookie asked.

Eric thought for a moment. “Queen Sophie-Anne has almost certainly contemplated the risks versus the rewards of the venture. Indeed, I wouldn’t be surprised if the first version of the database contained only limited data of the more powerful vampires: just their names and *publicly*-known information. For example, my name and my ownership of Fangtasia would be in it, but likely very little else. That way, the queen could gauge the reaction and/or offer new information in increments – titillating little nuggets of intrigue unless one feared that she knew more information about him or her. Such vampires would reach out to Sophie-Anne.”

“And she’d maybe charge them for keeping any knowledge out of updates for the database,” Sookie posited.

“Astute observation,” Eric smiled. “And there’s no ‘maybe’ about it. Vampires would pay a lot to ensure their secrecy. Make no mistake about it.”

“So the queen could basically blackmail a whole lot of vampires with the information they don’t want in the database! Information she might not even have!” Sookie exclaimed.

“Indeed.”

“Wouldn’t Bill be a target then?” Sookie asked with concern—before she could stop herself from doing so.

Stop herself from caring.

Angrily, Sookie brushed an unwelcome tear from her eye. “I hate that I still care,” she sighed, frustrated. “Even after tonight. After Lorena. After everything! How pathetic is that?!?” She shook her head in self-critique.

“You have a good heart—one ready to forgive, one reluctant to judge,” Eric said softly. “That is not a pathetic quality, Sookie. It is an extraordinary one.”

“But I shouldn’t care,” she insisted.

He shrugged. “If you cared to the point that you were blind to all the pain Bill has caused you, I would caution you. I would be concerned for you. Are you hiding from those truths?”

“No,” Sookie said softly. “I can’t—not after all the promises I made to God—and to myself—in that trunk.”

He squeezed her hand softly. “Then there is no need for you to beat yourself up. You care about someone who was important in your life. That is not a pathetic thing, Sookie. It is an unavoidable one—a natural one, even. Even now, I care about Appius—though he has harmed my life in many ways and could potentially harm it again. I cannot stop myself. He has been important in my life, so I care about him,” the vampire stated matter-of-factly.

“Thanks,” Sookie said, after exhaling a deep breath – and some of her self-censure with it.

“No problem,” Eric responded after another supportive squeeze to her hand. In truth, he understood well her mixed feelings about the vampire who had attacked her earlier (even if he didn’t *like* the fact that she still had positive feelings about the plantation prick).

After a few moments, he answered her earlier question. “Likely, Compton would be a target – if his role in the project were to be made public. Though most believe him to be innocuous, my spy in New Orleans has told me that Bill was hired by the queen for,” he paused and glanced at Sookie, “his procurement skills, which would make him good at gathering information. Perhaps, Sophie-Anne would keep his part in the project a secret to protect her asset, or she might see Bill as expendable after he’s done his initial set-up. Chances are, her decision will be based on the quality of the work and whether or not she needs a scapegoat.”

“He’ll be blamed if the backlash for the database is more than she thinks it will be,” she observed.

“Likely. And – if that comes to pass – she will make a big production out of his punishment and the destruction of the rest of his project in order to protect herself,” he explained.

Sookie shook her head. “The vampire world is sure twisty.”

“That it is,” Eric agreed. “The other supernatural groups are also ‘twisty.’ And you are now known by many of them. Plus . . .,” he paused.

“What?” she asked after a moment.

“I believe you belong to one of those other groups.”

She scoffed. “Sorry to disappoint, but I’m just a plain, ol’ human.”

“Are you?” Eric asked with a chuckle. “Really? A plain, ol’ human with telepathy? A plain, ol’ human that captures the interest of supernatural men and women alike?”

Sookie shook her head. “No—I don’t!”

“Riiiiiiight,” Eric said in an exaggerated way. “Tell me that your shifter boss isn’t romantically interested in you. Tell me that Herveaux doesn’t want you. Sookie, I have seen vampires be drawn to you in *three* states now!”

“No, they haven’t been!” she insisted.

“You might not have noticed it, but I have,” Eric returned. “Hell—I’m evidence of the argument! Don’t get me wrong, I enjoy your company very much, but—from the first moment I saw you—I was drawn to you. Yes—you are lovely, but there is an extra allure to you. *Extra*,” he emphasized. “Even my talking to you so openly is an oddity. I enjoy it, to be sure. But there is more—a kind of trustworthiness that emanates from you.”

“Trustworthiness isn’t uncommon for humans though,” Sookie argued.

“Indeed,” Eric agreed. “My day-person, Bobby, is someone I consider trustworthy, though I still use glamour to ensure that. However, I’ve never been tempted to tell him my life story—even though he has worked for me for a decade. With you, I feel a *pull* to speak with you.”

“That could just be because of how you,” she paused, “feel about me. Heck! If Supes were so inclined to be open and honest with me, then why did Sam hide his true nature from me?” she challenged.

Eric chuckled. “You have me there. But I bet he was tempted; I’d even wager that hints were dropped – that he showed himself to you in his shifted state – even if he didn’t show himself to you while shifting.”

“Yeah – well – I had no idea that was him,” Sookie returned.

“Perhaps, not. But you should know that it’s almost unheard of for a two-natured creature to go anywhere near a human in his or her shifted form.”

Sookie frowned, thinking about the dog Sam transformed into. She recalled talking about “Dean” to Arlene about a year before; however, the redhead hadn’t known about the stray. Indeed, most of the times Sookie had seen the dog – every time she could currently think of, at least – she’d been alone.

“You have a point about Sam,” Sookie sighed. “Maybe his willingness to show me his other nature – even if he didn’t tell me about it – *is* something I should give him credit for.”

Eric nodded. “I’m not on his side, Sookie, and I definitely don’t want competition for your affections, but – from what I know about your gift – you can read shifter and Were thoughts to a certain extent. The fact that Sam kept you employed and close says something about his regard for you.”

“You think he *wanted* me to read his secret from his mind?” Sookie asked incredulously. “And – if he did – isn’t that sort of,” she paused, “the lazy way out?”

Eric chuckled. "I'm not saying it's not! Indeed, your finding out from his head would have been convenient for him in some ways."

"How so?" Sookie asked with a confused frown.

"You must understand that there are strict punishments for telling humans about the supernatural world," Eric said.

"*Telling* – not *thinking*," Sookie whispered. "But I actively try to keep out of my friends' heads. Sam *knows* I do that, too!"

"That practice is probably wise," Eric chuckled again. "But it does not negate the fact that you possess qualities that draw Supernaturals to you – both in positive and negative ways."

They were quiet for a few moments.

"How long?" she asked.

"Hmmm?" he sounded.

"How long would I need guards?"

He shrugged. "To be honest – for your whole life, but we could begin with a year. If nothing happens during that time, then we can talk again. Maybe you are right. Maybe you will not be threatened. However, if even a roving Maenad can identify you as being the key to getting my attention, I have my doubts," he added.

"How did she know I'd be a – uh – good messenger?" Sookie asked with a cringe as she remembered the exact nature of that message. And the pain it had entailed.

Eric sighed. "The god she serves, Dionysus, has given her the power to determine how to best *influence* people – even vampires."

Sookie frowned. "Am I a weakness to you?" she asked. "Was I! Even then?"

"Yes," he responded matter-of-factly. "In some ways. Indeed, if you were listed as being important to me in Bill's database, that would be *very* bad for us both, and I wouldn't be asking for permission to give you guards. But you're also a tremendous asset to me. Thus, even on the surface, the pros of my association with you outweigh the cons."

"On the surface?" Sookie asked for clarification.

"Dig a little deeper and you will find that I am intrigued by you. Hell! 'Enamored' is a good word too!"

"Eric, I—uh—don't think I'm—um—ready for . . .," she stammered.

"I know," he cut her off. "And I won't push. I just want you to accept the damned guards at this point! As long as you are safe, I'll have time to worm my way into your affections," he added with a smirk.

"Confident much?" she asked with a cut of her eyes.

"Yes, but the word I would use is *sure*," he returned sincerely—maybe too earnestly for her.

"Aren't those basically the same thing?" she laughed awkwardly.

"Not at all," he smiled. "If I were merely confident, that would be about me only. But to be 'sure' is to be *more*."

"How so?"

"I am *sure* that—once you give me a chance—you will not be able to get enough of me. Just as I'm sure I'd never be able to get enough of you."

She'd made the unfortunate mistake of taking a drink out of the water bottle Alcide had packed before Eric spoke, and her laughter propelled the liquid out of her mouth.

"See – you truly *do* need a guard," he grinned, "if only to save you from choking!"

Chapter 13: Pocketful of Rainbows

No more teardrops

Now that I've found a love so true

I got a pocketful of rainbows

Got an armful of you

– “Pocketful of Rainbows” (songwriters Fred Wise & Ben Weisman)

“Okay, smartass, so what would guard duty for me be like?” she asked as she did her best to clean up the console in front of her with her shirt sleeve, though she was careful not to actually push any buttons or move any switches.

“I’d want to assign an army,” he began.

“But we are *compromising*,” she reminded.

“We are. So – one to two Weres or other two-natured beings on duty for day. Plus, a human male – a talented sniper I know. And one vampire for night,” he said after some contemplation. “However, there will be seven to eight individuals on your security detail altogether – at least to start.”

“How do you get from four to eight?” she asked.

“Multiplication,” he grinned boyishly.

She couldn’t help but to chuckle. “Are you multiplying how insufferable you can be by how highhanded?”

He winked at her before answering her question about the number of guards more seriously. "They'd be full-time guards. They'd need time off," he returned. "And – in case of emergency – they could all be called upon to cover you and your friends and family."

"Oh – okay. So – uh – would they follow me everywhere?"

He nodded. "Yes. And I would ask to build a small guard post on your property. It could be converted into a guesthouse or storage unit if the guards become unneeded, and it would be unseen from the road or your house."

"Why would we need it?" she asked.

"Even housing five people in a hotel gets pricy very quickly. It would be more cost effective to simply build an apartment of sorts – and that would add to the guards' comfort-level too, which is a good thing. A guesthouse would also increase the value of your property – as you could use it as a rental unit at some point. And I would make sure it had its own entrance from the road and that it would be as far away from your home as possible, while still being on your property."

"You've already thought about all this?" she half-asked and half-accused.

"The flight from Russell's to that damned parking garage was long," he said in a low tone.

That sentence alone was enough to stop a lot of Sookie's complaints. "The guards would live on my property?"

Eric nodded. "Yes. During low-threat times, one or two would always be patrolling when you were at home. And – one would go with you or follow while you

were out, while one stayed behind to watch your home. More could be mustered temporarily during higher threat periods. Regardless, they'd be instructed to intrude upon your life as little as possible."

"Fine," she sighed. "But – hey – you said that Supes were attracted to me. Aren't you worried about competition?" she smirked.

He laughed out loud. "I already have the five full-time day-guards in mind – two very gay males and three very heterosexual females. And – of course – the vampire guards will lose their fangs if they seek your romantic attentions."

She couldn't help but to laugh with him – *at* him. "You can't be *that* worried about my appeal?"

"Why tempt fate?" he grinned.

She rolled her eyes.

"Actually, in truth, all of the guards are people I trust – have trusted – with my own safety. And their sexual preferences are just a happy coincidence," he winked. "The two men, Mustapha and Warren, are a couple. Normally, I would avoid guards that might place each other's safety over the protection of a ward; however, Mustapha and Warren are both ex-special forces. And they work very efficiently together."

"You said one of them was a human? A sniper?" Sookie asked.

"Warren," Eric responded.

"And the others?"

"The females are a varied bunch. Maria-Star is a member of Long Tooth, the largest pack in Shreveport; she is also the niece and goddaughter of the packmaster,

Colonel Flood, and would be his heir apparent if Weres weren't even more misogynistic than humans," he said with some irritation. "The other two I'd want to hire are not Weres, but each has her own particular skills. Willow is a werehawk and would be excellent for surveillance and reconnaissance. Onawa is a shifter, though her animal of choice is a black bear."

"A bear?" Sookie squeaked out.

Eric nodded. "Onawa is very strong, as shifters tend to be. But when she transforms into a bear, I would wager on her against almost any other two-natured creature, for she combines cunning with brute force. Other than Maria-Star, none of your guards are affiliated with a particular pack."

"Shifters—I know—are solitary. Sam told me," Sookie relayed. "What about the others. I thought packs were especially important for Weres. And—uh—flocks for hawks?"

Eric chuckled. "A group of hawks is called a 'cast,' I believe. But—to answer your question—Willow is odd to say the least. She is not a full-blooded werehawk, though she can shift because her mother was a natural witch. Werehawks, like some other groups of were-animals, tend to isolate themselves from other two-natured creatures. Indeed, they prefer that other species not be introduced into the bloodline. Willow is different. She enjoys the company of other two-natured creatures, and she has become a guard so that she can gain experience away from her cast." He frowned. "Werepanthers are isolationists too, which is why the group in Hotshot is suffering from horrible inbreeding."

“What? The folks in Hotshot are werepanthers?”

Eric nodded. “Yes, but not even all the first-borns there can shift because the blood-pool has become so fraught with recessive genes. Since they are in my area, I have tried to help them out – even offering to introduce new blood to their town. Recently, I found twenty werecougars willing to relocate, but – apparently – panthers and cougars aren’t close enough on the genetic spectrum to suit the werepanthers. Unless something is done, I give the panthers only one more generation before they wipe themselves out. It’s a pity, actually. Werepanthers can be quite formidable and are unmatched for stealth. Anyway – as for Mustapha – he was expelled from his pack when he came out as gay. His agreeing to donate his sperm for procreation did not placate his pack master – I’m afraid. Since then, he has worked security for a handful of vampires.”

Sookie sat in stunned silence.

“What is wrong?” Eric asked her.

“Just give me a sec to take all this in – okay?” she asked. “I’m just learning that a whole nearby town is populated by inbred panthers!” She sighed. “Not to mention the fact that you think I’m a Supe of some kind too.”

He nodded. “Yes. I’m still narrowing things down, but I’d bet a fairy, a demon, or a Siren. Tell me – can you sing well?”

She snorted – *off key*. “I couldn’t hold a tune in a bucket with a lid on it.”

Eric laughed. “Then – unless you have extremely recessive Siren DNA – that is not what you are.”

“Sirens are real? And demons and fairies?” she asked with incredulousness.

He nodded. “Indeed, but they are nothing like they are depicted in human folklore. Demons are not red beings with forked tails, nor are they malevolent. Indeed, they are well-known for their trustworthiness. And fairies are not small Tinkerbells. On the contrary, they tend to be quite tall and stately, though some of that might be their glamour.”

“Well—I’m not tall; that’s for sure. Wait! Fairies can glamour people to think they are beautiful?” she asked.

“Not in the same way a vampire glammers,” Eric explained. “It’s more like their innate magic makes them pleasing—especially in looks—in the realm they inhabit.”

“Realm?” Sookie gulped.

“Yes. Some Supernaturals are from other realms; planets, I suppose, is the right word for humans. Some of these planets have portals to this world—the earth. Other magical creatures seem to have originated from here.”

“Like what kind of creatures?” Sookie asked, clearly just as entranced as she was shocked by what she was hearing.

“Those like the Maenad,” he responded. “Oh—and seers. There is a vampire who was one. But each realm seems to have its own brand of witches or sorcerers.”

Sookie shook her head to clear it a little. “Telepaths?” she asked.

Eric frowned. “As you can imagine, telepaths would want to keep their powers to themselves. However, I know a few demons who have the trait, which is one reason why I think you might be part Dae. And—then there is your trustworthiness.

However, Dae blood is distinctive – *very* distinctive. It is a turn-off to vampires – to say the least. Even if starving, I would have a difficult time keeping it down, which explains why demons and vampires have long enjoyed close working relationships.”

“And I – uh – my blood isn’t like theirs?”

“The opposite. Your blood is exquisite – among the best that I’ve ever enjoyed,” he shared quietly.

“Why did you think I might be a Siren?” she asked after a moment’s silence.

“Their allure. A Siren could talk a vampire out of his fangs,” he chuckled. “And they are beautiful. But they lack kindness. I wondered if you had inherited part of their traits, but not others. Invariably, however, they *can* carry a tune – especially if they’ve placed it into a bucket.”

Sookie giggled. “Don’t forget the lid. So – the last on your list is fairies?”

Eric nodded. “I’ve never heard of one being telepathic, but fairies are notoriously secretive. And they have an allure to them – beyond the physical appearance they can generate with their glamour. A full-blooded fairy’s blood is intoxicating to a vampire. The sweetness of your blood *could* be accounted for by a trace of the Fae.”

“Or I could just be human,” Sookie reminded.

“Perhaps,” Eric relented, though he sounded completely unconvinced.

“Who would my vampire guards be?” she asked, returning them to their previous topic.

“Mainly Thalia,” Eric responded.

“Who’s that?”

“Do you recall the sour-looking vampiress that everyone seemed to fear, yet was surrounded by fans?”

“Yes,” Sookie answered after she’d thought about it for a moment. “My first night at Fangtasia – she was in the corner opposite the bar?”

“Yes,” Eric chuckled. “She *hates* people.”

“Um – I’m not questioning your judgment, but”

“That ‘but’ you just threw in means that you *are*,” he smirked. “*But* that’s okay. It’s your safety, after all. And you should have a say in it. As for what you are likely questioning, I would select Thalia *because* she hates people. She’s been looking for a way to get out of her time at Fangtasia. She’s loyal to me though. And she’s strong – maybe even stronger than I.”

“Is she older?” Sookie asked.

“We are near the same age,” Eric responded. “She could protect you without being seen – unless she needed to be. And she would *love* your woods,” the vampire smiled. “Indeed, she might decide to live in them, though I would employ a second vampire to take her place at least two nights per week so that she could,” he paused, “do Thalia things.”

Sookie chuckled. “You really have thought all this out.”

“And you haven’t disagreed with it yet,” he reminded.

“No. In fact, I’m going to say ‘yes’ to it,” she said after a deep breath. “But only for a year – for now.”

Immediately, Eric was digging his phone out of his pocket and texting – with *both* hands. Sookie immediately felt emptiness in the one he'd been holding.

“I thought you were gonna keep your hands – at least one of them – on the plane's – uh – steering wheel,” Sookie reminded.

He chuckled. “I know you well enough to know that you might talk yourself into changing your mind if I don't act quickly,” he said as he used his phone to type, his fingers moving almost too quickly for her to see them.

“Who are you texting?” she asked.

“Thalia. She will go straight to your home to ensure that all is well there, and then she will contact a Were to temporarily watch over you until the others can be called and assembled.”

“Already? I mean – you don't think I need guards *right now* – do you?”

He gave her a sideways look. “Think of it this way, the guards will be earning a regular paycheck beginning tonight. You wouldn't begrudge them of that – would you?”

She frowned. “How much? And how do you know that all the ones you mentioned will be available?”

“The salary will be adequate,” he replied enigmatically.

Unsurprisingly, his words were met with a frown.

But Eric soldiered on, nonetheless. “And – remember how you think I am highhanded?”

“Hard to forget,” she said dryly.

He smiled brilliantly in return. “I *may* have initiated a few *subtle* inquiries after the Maenad attack,” he relayed, emphasizing certain words as he went along.

She glared at him. “You were plannin’ to give me guards anyway – even *before* tonight?”

“Hoping,” he corrected, his triumphant smile not leaving his face.

As if he thought he could charm her.

Okay – maybe he could.

“I would never have forced them upon you unless I knew that a threat was looming. But our compromise is better.” He winked.

She shook her head. Indeed, his charm *was* getting to her.

“Okay. Guards starting tonight,” she agreed begrudgingly. “Where will the – uh – two-natured guards stay till the guest house is built?” she asked.

“There’s a lone wolf living near your home – Tray Dawson.”

“I know him,” Sookie said. “He’s a mechanic. Right?”

“Yes,” Eric confirmed. “In fact, he’d have been the first I would have chosen as one of your full-time guards, but too much structure doesn’t suit Mr. Dawson. However, he’s already agreed to watch over you during the daytime until your permanent guards arrive. And he will continue to work part-time after that.” He indicated, holding up his phone to show the confirmation text he’d just received from Tray. And then a second he’d received from Thalia.

Indeed, the vampire did work fast!

“Dawson has a two-bedroom apartment over his garage. Your guards can headquarter there until the guest home is ready on your property.”

“You trust Tray that much?” she asked. She’d never heard anything particularly bad about the Were, but he had a reputation for being a bit rough around the edges.

Eric smiled. “He’s the *only* mechanic I would trust with one of my vettes.”

“That’s not exactly an answer,” Sookie chuckled.

Eric shrugged. “Tray could have been a packmaster, but – like me – he prefers the simple life. I’ve trusted him with my own daytime security in times of need. He has never let me down, and I’ve known him for two decades – since he was but a teenager.”

“Okay then,” Sookie said after letting out a long breath. “That’s good enough for me.”

As if it were natural, Eric retook her hand, and they were silent for a few moments as Sookie leaned sideways to try to see the ground below.

“How long till we land?” she asked.

“About twenty minutes,” he responded. “But those will not be easy minutes,” he added, his voice heavier than she’d ever heard it.

“Uh-oh,” she whimpered. “What do you mean by that?”

“Yes. Uh-oh,” he replied. “I’m sorry, Sookie, but I need you to know about a theory of mine – because, based upon something you said earlier, I’m now almost certain that it’s fact.”

“What did I say?” Sookie questioned.

“A name,” the vampire returned forebodingly. “Hadley.”

Chapter 14: Rip It Up

I'm gonna rock it up

I'm gonna rip it up

I'm gonna shake it up

I'm gonna ball it up

I'm gonna ride it out

And ball tonight

—“Rip It Up” (songwriters John Marascalco & Robert Blackwell)

“Hadley!?!?” Sookie gasped.

Eric nodded. “I developed a theory regarding you a few weeks ago, but after you mentioned that unusual name, my theory has cemented in my mind,” Eric said after a few moments.

“What theory? And how do you know the name?” the telepath asked.

“The Hadley I have met is living in New Orleans with the Queen of Louisiana. She is Sophie-Anne’s most favored pet.”

Sookie gasped. “What does she look like? The Hadley you know?”

Eric considered for a moment. “Her hair was still growing out of a bad dye job, but it is light brown at the roots. Her eyes are neither blue nor brown. They carry both colors, but aren’t quite green either.”

Sookie gulped. “Hazel.”

Eric nodded. "She spoke with a stronger accent than yours, and she seemed uneducated. I would place her in her late-20s or early-30s, though I believe that hard living may be making her look a little older than she is. She is rail-thin and seems to like it that way. And she smelled unusually sweet."

"Not unlike me?" Sookie frowned.

"Not unlike you," he confirmed softly.

Sookie was silent for a moment.

"Tell me about her? Gran was so worried. I mean – after Hadley had been gone for about a year – Gran stopped bugging Sheriff Dearborn to check missing persons databases all the time to make sure she hadn't been killed."

"She hasn't been killed – *yet*," Eric sighed. "But my spy told me that the queen has been contemplating turning Hadley; your cousin seems quite willing though. Anxious even."

Sookie took a deep breath. "Is Hadley happy?"

Eric shrugged. "As I told you, the queen favors her – and seems to genuinely care for her. Sophie-Anne also does not share her – as far as I know. However, it is clear that Hadley would not be restricted if she sought out male bedfellows."

"How do you know that?" Sookie asked with some trepidation.

"She sought me out one night," Eric admitted.

"So you – uh. You two – uh . . .," Sookie stammered.

"No," Eric clarified. "With her scent, I was tempted, but I know better than to become even casually involved with the pet of a monarch."

Again, the two were silent for a few moments.

"I'm glad you didn't," Sookie sighed. "It would have been weird."

"Indeed," Eric agreed.

"You know – I wish Hadley had been in touch with Gran before she died, but – really – her status as the queen's – uh – pet doesn't matter. I mean – I'm glad she's alive. And I doubt your queen would stand for a druggie as a – um – blood source? So – uh – it's okay. But I bet tryin' to contact her would be complicated?" she half-stated and half-asked.

Eric nodded in confirmation. "Sookie," the vampire tilted the conversation with his more somber tone, "I do not believe that Bill Compton returning to Bon Temps – finding you – was a coincidence."

Sookie gasped as realization hit her.

"You think . . .," she began, but then could not continue her thought through the maze of questions forming in her brain.

When she did not resume after several seconds, Eric spoke. "I have no proof of anything, Sookie. I have only theories."

"Tell me what you think you have no proof of," she practically whimpered.

"Tell me that you think Hadley somehow let on that she had an abnormal cousin with a strange ability." Her pitch grew higher. "Tell me that you think the queen decided that a telepath would be a fun toy – an awesome pet to have! Tell me that Bill What did you call him – a procurer? Tell me he isn't just good at collecting information. Tell me that he's a people collector too! Tell me that the first man who I thought loved me . .

.,” her voice broke, and she yanked her hand from Eric’s as she began using all of her fingers to try to dam the flow of tears from her eyes.

They failed.

“Sookie,” Eric whispered, hating her tears as much as he hated being the immediate cause of them.

“Tell me Bill was in Bon Temps on assignment!” the telepath soldiered on through her sobs. “Tell me that Gran was killed because I was interested in a vampire who wasn’t actually interested in me! Tell me that I almost died tonight because I saved that same vampire from his sadistic maker! Tell me I’m an idiot! A naïve fool!” she panted in anger, even as more tears streamed down her cheeks. “And, Eric, tell me that Bill didn’t manufacture the situation that almost got me beaten to death just so that he could get his blood inside of me right after we met!”

Eric sighed deeply.

“Don’t sigh!” Sookie yelled at him accusingly. “I *know* you don’t have to! I know you’re not human!”

Eric did not match her anger – or her hurt – with his own.

“And don’t fucking pity me either!” she railed, turning her head away from him – toward the right-side window of the plane.

He waited more than a minute before he spoke, his voice calm, “When I was a human, I tried to hide the sound of a sigh whenever I made it. It was believed to be a sign of indecision and weakness. As a young vampire, I was beaten and silvered the only time I dared to make the sound when in Appius’s presence. You are right that it is

not a *natural* sound for me to make, but that is not because I am no longer human. It is because I have rarely let my guard down enough to let it out.”

Sookie was the one to sigh this time. She wiped away more hot tears from her dampened cheeks. “I’m sorry I snapped at you. You’re not the one I’m angry at.”

“I know,” Eric relayed softly. “And you *do* have a right to be angry at others.”

“Eric,” she wept – practically begged – as she looked back at him, “please tell me the truth about what you think.”

He nodded in part-agreement and part-resignation. “I believe your cousin, Hadley, informed the queen of your gift. I believe that Sophie-Anne was likely very intrigued by having a telepath in her court. Bill would have been the logical choice to send to procure you, given his profession in her court and his connection to your town. As for his feelings, I can say only that I believe that he cares for you – at least as much as he is capable. Otherwise, I would have killed him tonight.” Eric paused. “How long he has cared – or how deeply he cares – I know not. As for whether or not he arranged for you to be hurt so that he would have an excuse to give you his blood, I do not know that either. But I would love to find out – *preferably* with torture. However – since I believe you would feel guilt if I did as I wish – I will not push the issue. Unless I am wrong about your being queasy about the thought of Bill’s pain. If I am, I await only your permission, Sookie,” he said hopefully.

“You aren’t wrong. *Not yet*. I shouldn’t care if he lives or dies – or suffers – anymore, especially after this, but” She buried her face into her hands.

“But you need time to process everything,” the vampire offered.

“Yes. Once I do, I might wanna be the one to torture Bill myself,” she mumbled through her palms.

“Will you be selling tickets? Both Pam and I would love to attend!” Eric said lightly, desperate to do anything to help her escape the depression she’d been hurled into.

“I’ll let you know,” Sookie said with a small smile as she lifted her head. “But, even if I don’t torture him, I *will* need to see Bill.”

“Sookie, I don’t think . . .,” Eric started.

“Closure,” Sookie interrupted. “Bill’s a chapter that I need to *close*—once and for all. I’m not sure of a lot of things, but that’s one of them.” She paused to use her sleeves to finish wiping away her tears. The vampire was grateful when no new ones fell in their place.

“I have things—*better* things—I wanna move on to,” she said firmly. “But to do that, I need to know for *sure* that your theory and my ideas about Hadley’s involvement are true,” she emphasized. “And I need to ask Bill about the other things too.”

“Will you let me be there?” Eric asked with concern.

“Close?” Sookie suggested. “As a compromise? Yeah—I want you close,” she affirmed. “I’d feel safer if you were around. So—uh—could you be close, but stay outside—unless I needed you?”

He nodded in agreement. “Yes. Thank you. I would worry otherwise.”

“I know.”

“Sookie?” he asked with a little uncertainty. “What are those *better* things?”

She took a deep breath and then turned to look at him. "I thought a lot while I was in that trunk – waitin' for Bill to do," she sighed, "whatever he was gonna do to me. And – uh – I think – maybe – there might be more that I can do with my life than bein' a waitress. I mean – it's honest work; don't get me wrong. But I'm starting to believe that my telepathy might actually be the gift you say it is. And usin' it to know if people need refills or ketchup seems like a waste."

"It does to me too," Eric acknowledged.

Sookie took another long, deep inhalation. "*You're* a better thing too, Eric – at least, I really think you could be. *Hope* you might be." She looked at the vampire with almost pleading eyes. "Would you be? Good for me?"

"I think we could be good for each other. I *hope* we could, too. Will you give me the chance to prove it?"

Sookie nodded. "Yes. I think I'd like the chance to find out, too. No – I *know* I would like to know. But, Eric" Her voice trailed off.

"You need your closure first?"

She nodded again. "Yeah. And a little time to just," she paused, "make sure I'm far enough away from the trunk to really give us a shot. I don't think I'll need much time. In fact," she smiled shyly, "I was hopin' you'd be up for a date this weekend – somethin' casual? I – uh – might have until Monday off since Sam took me off this week's schedule. I was – uh – hopin' we could just – uh – hang out – uh – maybe on Sunday night? If you aren't workin'? Maybe we could watch a movie together or – uh – talk?" she stammered nervously.

"A date," the vampire stated, as if tasting the word for the first time — *ever*.

"*Casual*," Sookie reaffirmed. "Just as friends — to start?"

"I'd like to try that," Eric smiled.

Sookie smiled brightly in return for a moment, before her expression fell a little.

"What is it?" the vampire asked her.

"I'm thinkin' things I don't have the right to think yet," she said almost stubbornly — almost as if she were angry at herself.

"I cannot imagine that a telepath would think *that* was an anomaly," Eric smirked.

"Anomaly?" Sookie asked.

"A rarity. Something very unusual," Eric defined, though Sookie noted that his tone was not patronizing as Bill's had often been when Sookie did not know something.

"Thanks," Sookie said. "And — you're right. Lots of people jump the gun when it comes to things regarding their — uh — the people they — uh — date."

Eric smirked.

"Could you — uh?" Sookie asked, motioning toward the plane's "wheel" when she noticed his hand was off of it again.

"Of course," Eric chuckled, placing one hand onto the controls to comfort the nervous telepath. "And absolutely."

"Huh?" she asked inelegantly.

"Absolutely, you can think *anything* you want regarding me."

"Huh?" she sounded again. "Are you tryin' to be dirty?"

“Usually,” he laughed. “But not this time.”

“Then would you mind telling me what you mean? I can’t read your mind, after all,” she smiled.

“You require certain elements in a relationship, such as fidelity and probably many other items you will school me in during our time together. I have decided to pursue a relationship with you,” he said matter-of-factly. “As long as we do this, I will follow your rules. I think I will like them.” He chuckled. “Your God and my gods know that you’ll have to follow much more inane ones!”

“Huh?” she repeated.

“Vampire etiquette,” he said, a subtle apology in his tone. “Once we are a couple, there will be times when you have to defer to me in front of those higher than my station.”

“*Once?*” Sookie challenged.

“Would ‘if’ be better?” he asked.

She snorted out a small laugh. “For now. Yeah. ‘If’ would be better.”

“Okay – *if*,” he emphasized. “And as you contemplate that *if*, be sure to ask yourself if you would be willing to jump through the hoops that being mine will bring.”

Sookie sighed. “Bill taught me the drill. Don’t speak unless spoken to.”

Eric chuckled. “You don’t do such a good job with that one – you know. And – *no* – that is not what I would want from you. I’d just ask you to follow my lead if there were older or higher-authority vampires in our presence. Trust me – if a situation is precarious – I wouldn’t be speaking unless spoken to either!”

Sookie smirked as she thought about how Eric had dealt with the Sheriff of Dallas and the King of Mississippi. “Will I have to wear cheesy disguises, *Leif*?”

Eric laughed out loud. “No! But—just so you know—both Stan and Russell knew me for who I was. I use the name Leif when I don’t want Sophie-Anne to know I’ve ‘left the building.’”

“Oh no! Bubba!” Sookie yelled out. “I can’t believe I didn’t think of him before! Is he okay?”

Eric shrugged, but then took out his phone and dialed a number.

“You sure that doesn’t interfere with—uh—aviation stuff?” Sookie asked as she looked at the phone with trepidation.

Eric chuckled and shook his head.

Soon his call was picked up.

“Bubba,” Eric greeted before putting the call on speaker.

“Well! Hello, Mister Eric! Uh—I mean Mr. Leif. Why—I was just thinkin’ ‘bout lookin’ for ya—and for Miss Sookie, too—of course.”

“She is with me,” Eric informed.

“Well—then I don’t have to worry none ‘bout her. I surely woulda been trackin’ her down already if I hadn’t had the *strangest* night!”

“What kind of night?” Sookie asked.

“Well—howdy do, Miss Sookie!” Bubba exclaimed. “Are you with Mister Er—uh—Leif?”

Both the telepath and the Viking refrained from giving the obvious answer.

“Where are you, Bubba?” Eric asked, getting the conversation back on track.

“Well—I spent a few hours with Mister King Russell,” Bubba reported. “I gotta say—I was mighty nervous for a while ‘cause Mister King Russell thought I kilt a vampire lady and kidnapped Mister Bill!”

“Oh no!” Sookie gasped and then covered her mouth with her hand.

“Don’t worry none though. They was just gonna burn me on this wooden contraption—I think,” he informed them, his tone unconcerned. “Hard to know—‘cause of the party and all. They had a big bon fire and barbeque!”

“Oh, my God!” Sookie cried out in horror.

“Well—they didn’t—uh—burn *me* after all,” Bubba said, his voice sounding as if he were confused by Sookie’s reaction. “In fact, Mister King Russell said he was real sorry after this werefox lady told him all about me. Hey, Miss Sookie, why would that werefox lady smell like you? She your friend?”

“No!” Eric said firmly. “That woman is *not* Sookie’s friend. And if you see her around Sookie, you must remember to protect Sookie from her.”

“Oh—uh—well sure thing!” Bubba said. “Too bad. I am mighty grateful she told Mister King Russell that I ain’t no bad guy. You know—I was so happy ‘bout not bein’ burned and all—and ‘bout that nice plump cat Mister King Russell got for me—that I decided to sing a couple of songs when he asked. There’s this song I know ‘bout hound dogs. Closest I could think of that was fittin’ for the people listenin,’” he drawled.

“And after you sang?” Eric probed.

“Well—I just finished up—not ten minutes ago—and thought I’d look for Miss Sookie back at Mister Alcide’s place. Oh—and I need to tell him and Miss Sookie ‘bout the Were I kilt too!”

“You killed that Were?” Sookie exclaimed. “And put him in Alcide’s closet?”

“Well,” Bubba said apologetically, “I wasn’t intendin’ to do no killin’, but he was sniffin’ ‘round Mister Alcide’s place, and I overheard him talkin’ to someone on his phone. He said he was gonna hurt Mister Alcide and you, Miss Sookie. Couldn’t have that! No, siree, Bob!”

Sookie buried her face into her hands and let out a silent sob.

“You did well protecting Sookie,” Eric said quickly. “Make your way back to Shreveport, and Pam will see that you have all you need.”

“Why, thank you kindly, Mister Eric!” Bubba effused. “And it sure will be nice to see Miss Pam. She’s so nice that I think my momma would tell me to court her!”

Sookie looked up incredulously, her eyes widening.

Eric chuckled. “That’s probably not a good idea. But I am glad you are well,” he said before hanging up.

“He has no idea how close he came to dyin’—does he?” Sookie asked.

Eric shrugged. “He knows more than one would think. He just doesn’t seem capable of holding a grudge about the little ‘scrapes’ he manages to get into.”

“Do you think he told Russell that you and I are responsible for getting Bill out?” she asked.

Eric shrugged again. "It won't matter. I'll call Russell and tell him everything later. Likely, he was looking for a reason to get rid of the Lorena complication. Of course, he'll bite himself later when he learns that there was an injured telepath in his grasps. But he'll get over it; he'll likely congratulate me for having you as an asset and try to employ you. He's not one to hold a grudge, and condoning the Lorena and Bill matter wasn't his style."

"Why would he help Lorena then?" Sookie asked. "And does he know that several of his Weres – including Debbie Pelt – like V just a little *too* much?"

Eric frowned for a moment. "Russell is not above letting the Weres in his employ take the blood of vampires he is punishing or killing. Directly from the source, vampire blood is not as addictive, nor does it cause the same kinds of effects. In other words, it's more like a buzz or a feeling of euphoria – as opposed to a psychedelic trip."

Sookie smiled wryly. "I'm glad – since I've had vampire blood more than once."

Eric nodded and then continued, "Still, I'll tell him there might be a V issue among his Weres. As for why Russell would help Lorena, it's likely because of her maker. Mateo could be a little flighty at times, but he was a decent vampire. Many owed him favors; Russell was likely one of them. But I doubt Russell will blame you for removing Lorena from this world. And you need not worry about Lorena's maker either. He's long dead."

Sookie sighed with relief. "That's good to hear."

"Indeed, if he were still alive, I'd have to pay him a hefty fine," he stated nonchalantly.

“Really? But I killed her – not you,” Sookie frowned.

“You were implementing a plan I suggested,” Eric reminded. “Moreover, I doubt you would have killed her for no reason. Indeed, I’m betting it was self-defense?”

Sookie nodded in confirmation.

“Yet I still feel some guilt from you – even for Lorena’s death,” Eric said, shaking his head. “You *are* an odd creature, Sookie Stackhouse.”

“But you like that?” she asked with a raised eyebrow.

“I do,” he chuckled as his phone rang. He answered it after checking the caller ID. “Thalia,” he greeted.

He growled menacingly after listening for about ten seconds. “How many are there?”

Chapter 15: Steamroller Blues

I'm a napalm bomb

Guaranteed to blow your mind

If I can't have your love now baby

There won't be nothing left behind

—“Steamroller Blues (Songwriter James Taylor)”

“Do you need help?” Eric asked after hearing Thalia’s answer.

“Fine,” he said gruffly. “I will send Pam to collect them. But—if they are more formidable than you think they will be, then I want you to fly away from there.”

He rolled his eyes in response to whatever she said to him.

“I know very well how old you are. But I don’t think that even you could take out four Weres while you are dead for the day,” he smirked.

“Or wrapped in silver,” he said after a moment.

There was another pause as Sookie listened raptly.

“Okay—perhaps with one arm tied behind your back with silver.”

He chuckled after a few more moments. “Fine! Just *seeing* you dead for the day would scare the Weres to their own demise,” he said sarcastically. “Still—keep yourself safe, Thalia,” he cautioned before hanging up.

“Four Weres?” Sookie asked, having followed enough of the call to know that it wasn’t good – *for her*. On the other hand, Thalia seemed to be happy about the development.

Eric sighed, but Sookie didn’t chastise him for making the sound this time; indeed, she felt a very different reaction: appreciation.

“Yes. The Weres are currently lying in wait at your home. Thalia should be capable of subduing them, and Pam will transport them to Fangtasia for questioning.”

“Will – uh – Thalia be okay?” Sookie asked, avoiding the question she dreaded asking, which was *why* the Weres continued to target her.

Eric was having none of the telepath’s evasion. “Thalia knows her limitations. And I believe the Weres are at your home for the *same* reason one was at Alcide’s home – or, perhaps, because that Were has gone missing. And – don’t think I didn’t catch on that you weren’t surprised that Bubba put a dead Were into Alcide’s closet,” he stated, giving Sookie a sideways glance.

Sookie explained, “Alcide and I found him in the hall closet. Alcide recognized him as someone who’d hassled us at Josephine’s. He figured someone was trying to frame us for the Were’s murder, so we – uh – sort of – uh – hid the body,” she ended in a mumble, clearly somewhat ashamed of the situation.

“Hid?!?!” Eric asked, not hiding his amusement.

She glared at him, but blushed all the same. “It was horrible! We had to wrap up his body, and we took him to the woods to hide him.”

Eric snorted out a laugh.

“Not funny!” Sookie chastised.

“I’m just picturing you and the Were.” He closed his eyes. “Yes – it’s funny!” he laughed.

“Killin’ isn’t funny!” Sookie yelled.

“Stop complaining; you’re ruining this for me,” Eric said, opening one eye and smirking at her.

She smacked his arm. “I’ll never understand Supes and death – how casual you all are with it!”

Stifling the impulse to tease her some more, Eric shrugged as he opened his other eye. “That Were was where he ought not to have been – doing something that could have led to your harm or Herveaux’s. I won’t insult your intelligence by pretending that I’m upset in the slightest that he’s dead. The only concern I have is the potential repercussions that death will have on you or Bubba. But, by tomorrow night – or even dawn today – I will know why the Weres were waiting for you, and then I will take appropriate action.”

“And until you know?” she asked.

“Do not worry. Thalia is on the job. And Tray will keep an eye on you tomorrow. Maria-Star should be able to come right away too – since she is local. Knowing Thalia, she has already called her – to ensure that Tray has back-up just in case another Were group comes for you tomorrow while the sun is up.”

“Thalia would take the initiative to do that?” Sookie asked.

“It’s part of her job. Plus, in the text I sent to her, I told her my own suggestions for your team; she will know that Maria-Star lives in Shreveport. Oh – and Thalia is *extra* motivated to protect you.”

“What do you mean?”

Eric chuckled. “I offered to release her from serving in any other capacity as long as she remains your chief of security – *and* you stay safe. Thalia absolutely loathed doing time at Fangtasia; needless to say, she jumped at the offer.”

“Chief of security?” Sookie gasped, balking at the serious and official-sounding title.

“Trust me. Thalia will ensure that you are safe in the least intrusive way possible,” he assured her.

Realization hit Sookie. “Because she hates for her own life to be intruded upon.”

Eric nodded. “Exactly. You two have that in common. Plus, she’s extremely efficient. She likes living in my territory because I accept her quirks. And because we have a mutual respect for one another.”

“Then why make her serve time at Fangtasia to begin with?” Sookie asked aptly.

“I wouldn’t have,” Eric grinned, “if she hadn’t lost a coin flip. I was ready to tell her that she was exempt from the policy I’d mandated for Area 5 vampires after the Great Revelation, but she began speaking before I could – suggesting that her service be decided by a coin flip. She figured that she’d have a fifty-fifty chance of getting out of the service.”

“And she had no idea that she had a 100% guarantee of getting out of it if you’d never flipped the coin,” Sookie laughed.

“Yep. Pam was the flipper and took the coin from Ginger’s purse – just to ensure that it wasn’t ‘loaded.’” Eric rolled his eyes. “Apparently, the one Thalia brought seemed destined to land on heads every time.”

Sookie giggled.

“She took her loss stoically,” Eric recalled with a smirk.

“But how many humans suffered?” the telepath asked jokingly.

“None *too badly* – I’m sure,” Eric responded a bit too seriously for Sookie. “But I do believe she has made it her mission to destroy dimes since then; I find about a hundred of them a week in the corners of Fangtasia – crushed, of course.”

“Dimes?”

“An inferior coin – according to Thalia.”

“I take it that’s the one that Pam flipped.”

“Indeed,” Eric chuckled.

The telepath shook her head even as her smile disappeared. “So what will happen to the Weres after you question them? Do I want to know?”

Eric shrugged. “It depends. If I’m correct, they are from Mississippi. If they are looking for revenge for their fallen comrade, then I’ll contact Russell and negotiate an acceptable settlement for all sides, and the Weres will leave with their lives. If, on the other hand, they have been sent by a larger threat to you, I will stop at nothing to ensure your safety,” he added passionately.

Sookie took a deep, steadying breath. “The supernatural world is pretty damned intense. And frightening.”

“That it is,” Eric agreed. “My only question for you is how far you want to enter into it?”

“What do you mean?” Sookie asked.

“You mentioned the possibility of using your telepathy for more than you do now. But making yourself known to humans would be precarious.”

“*Just* humans?” she returned wryly.

“I am not one-hundred percent certain about idioms, but I believe Bubba would enjoy this one: ‘The cat is out of the bag’ about you – in the supernatural world. Why not control the situation?”

Simultaneously, Sookie both chuckled and cringed at the mention of cats and Bubba in the same sentence; it still grossed her out that cats were his favorite cuisine.

“Okay,” she sighed, “it’s extremely likely the queen knows about me and my ability.”

“Stan knows too,” Eric reminded.

Sookie frowned. “Why make me known to him? I mean – I’m glad I could help Farrell, but”

Eric contemplated for a moment. “Will you hate me if I admit to hoping you’d be *nudged* by the experience in Dallas?”

“Nudged?” Sookie asked, her eyebrows furrowing. “How?”

“I thought the matter would be an easy one for you,” Eric explained. “After all, Stan had already identified employees at the bar who’d seen Farrell on the night he disappeared.”

“You thought I’d read them and be out of there?” she asked.

He nodded. “And I thought that the knowledge of your gift would be well-contained. I underestimated both you and the Fellowship. As soon as you found the listening device in Stan’s nest, the game changed.”

“I’m not a game,” Sookie frowned.

“You are not; not to me. But to others, you will be a commodity to be won or stolen. And – trust me – you’d rather be won than stolen.”

“What do you mean?” she frowned.

Eric contemplated his words for a few moments. “I cannot be completely sure, but it is very likely that the queen hoped that Compton would bring a cooperative telepath to her court. She would have been pleased about your romantic connection with him – encouraged it even. As Bill’s human, you would have been asked to work for the queen – probably even paid for the work. Your happiness would have been welcomed by the queen. And Hadley would have been introduced into the equation as a lucky coincidence.”

“I could have read the truth from Hadley’s mind,” Sookie pointed out.

“Not if certain things had already been glamoured from it. Not if she had already been made a vampire,” Eric returned softly.

“So I would have remained oblivious – if Bill had managed to manipulate me into going to New Orleans,” Sookie sighed as moisture began to rebuild in her eyes.

“Please,” Eric entreated as he squirmed a little in his seat, “I do not like it when you cry.”

Sookie chuckled, despite the serious situation. “I don’t think I’m gonna be able to help it,” she said as she brushed a tear from her cheek. “I can see myself staying with Bill – if Lorena hadn’t called him to her. I can see him telling me that he needed to travel to New Orleans to meet with the queen. I can see him using the threat of *you* to make me too afraid to stay in Area 5 without him.”

“Yes, Bill likely painted me as quite the villain,” Eric said disdainfully.

“He said you’d try to manipulate me however you could because you wanted to steal me away from him,” she confirmed.

“Well, that part *is* somewhat true – if turning on my natural charm is considered manipulation,” he boasted, hoping to quell her tears by drawing either her laughter or her wrath.

She rolled her eyes, but a few more tears fell from them, nonetheless. “Especially after Dallas, Bill called into question your behavior – *everything* you did, in fact. And – though I wasn’t as sure of him as I’d been before – I *would* have gone with him to meet the queen. If only to please him.” She sighed. “I was worried about losing him – even before Lorena.”

“What?” Eric asked with surprise. “I cannot imagine him giving you up.”

She shrugged. "Bill had started to all-but ignore me in order to focus on his database. I was lucky to exchange ten words a night with him in the end."

"Fool," Eric growled out.

"Eric," Sookie started somewhat pensively, "there's something I just don't get. Why did Bill arrange for you to watch over me once Lorena called him? I don't get why he didn't just hand me over to the queen."

"I will admit that I, too, have been wondering why Bill sent *me* to you. After all, almost every action he'd made up to that point had been geared toward keeping me away from you. I have come up with only two theories to explain that decision on his part."

"He knew you wouldn't take me to the queen and hoped that his time with Lorena would be limited enough for him to get back to his assignment? So that he could still control me and gain favor with the queen?" Sookie speculated, angrily brushing away more tears.

"Yes. That is one of my theories. The other is that he was motivated by his care for you. Perhaps, even his ignoring you is indicative that he no longer wanted to manipulate you with romance."

"That explanation might work – *if* he'd stopped having sex with me. Stopped feeding from me," she responded bitterly. "I'm betting that he was hoping to get his database to a certain point before taking it *and me* to the queen. He'd have been doubly rewarded, and the presentation of the database would have been the perfect excuse for why we needed to stay in New Orleans for a while."

Eric nodded in silent agreement with her assessment.

“I just don’t get why he didn’t bond with me,” Sookie frowned.

“He could have been ordered not to do it,” Eric suggested. “Likely, it would have eventually been mentioned that a bond would be needed – for your safety. I imagine the queen had either herself or her eldest child, Andre, in mind for the task.”

“More manipulations of me,” she said sadly, wiping a fresh stream of tears away. “And I would have never known I was a bird in a cage.”

“All things considered, that fate would have been one of the better ones for you,” the Viking commented.

“How can you say that!?!? I would have been living a lie!”

“A *pretty* lie,” he returned calmly. “From what I have gathered, Sophie-Anne was abused as either a human or a young vampire. Because of this, she is compassionate to victims of assault.”

“Manipulation *is* assault!” Sookie huffed. “And Gran died because I was with Bill, so it’s not like my family wasn’t targeted either,” she added bitterly.

Eric nodded. “I agree. And that doesn’t even account for the way in which you were attacked tonight,” he added in almost a whisper.

Brushing more tears away, Sookie sighed. “I’ve been a fool.”

“You’ve been a person reacting to a new world. From what I’ve gathered, Bill didn’t offer you adequate information about that world because he wanted you to remain either innocent or ignorant.”

“Until earlier tonight,” she remarked. “His actions in the trunk would have neither kept me innocent nor continued my ignorance about his potential violence,” she whimpered. “Do you think he” Her voice trailed off.

“Do I think he what?”

“Do you think he had *any* control over his actions? In the trunk?” Sookie croaked out. “Today, I spent hours wondering if he would have any power over himself—if his ‘love’ for me would stop him from hurting me. It didn’t,” she ended flatly.

“Do you want the truth? It’ll hurt,” the Viking warned.

Chapter 16: It's a Matter of Time

It's a matter of time before I go back there

A matter of time before I go home

– “It’s a Matter of Time” (songwriter Clive Westlake)

“I want the truth,” Sookie affirmed.

Eric nodded somberly. “I cannot be one-hundred percent sure.”

“Then tell me what you believe,” the telepath asked.

The vampire nodded. “At first waking, Bill likely had very little control, but your blood is so distinctive that he would have felt a nagging sensation as soon as he took his first mouthful. But that mouthful would have included his tasting more of *me*,” he added significantly. “And – for that reason – I will always be sorry, Sookie. You were in a car I secured for you, and you’d just had blood I had given to you. I thought you’d be dealing with Bill only during the day – when he wouldn’t be able to muster the strength to harm you. I took for granted that the Were would be available to help you by nightfall. Herveaux would have been able to subdue an injured, hungry vampire.”

He sighed loudly and then took his hand off of the controls long enough to run it through his hair – two nervous tics that Sookie was pretty sure Eric didn’t afford himself when he was in company he didn’t completely trust. For a moment, she

wondered: was there *anyone* else he would show those signs of vulnerability to? Even as she asked that question, she felt her heart stretching – as if directly toward him.

“I did *not* take good enough care of you,” Eric continued his self-condemnation, interrupting her musing.

Sookie frowned. “You aren’t responsible for Bill’s actions. None of them.”

“Vampires are territorial, Sookie. Once he smelled – and tasted – my blood within you, he would have wanted to replace it with his own.”

“So what does that mean? Could he have controlled himself?”

“Based on several factors, I believe Bill *should* have been able to control himself within moments of tasting you. Stopping would have been extremely difficult if he were truly starving, but he wasn’t that far gone.”

“But Lorena *had* been torturing him,” Sookie reminded.

“What was his exact condition when you found him?” Eric probed.

“He’d clearly been beaten up and silvered. He was weak, but aware enough to help me get him into the trunk.”

“Pain can cause a vampire to stay awake after the sun rises, but – had Bill actually been starving – he would not have been able to move much and certainly not during the daytime,” Eric conveyed softly – gently. “And then there is the matter of how he looked when I saw him. Based upon what he drank from you and then the TrueBloods he had, he was”

“What was he?” Sookie pushed.

“Too strong to have been starving. Too old to have lost all semblance of his mind during his attack of you.”

“What about vampire instincts?” Sookie asked as if grasping for straws.

“Wouldn’t those make him feed without thinking?”

“I believe Bill could have fought against those instincts had he chosen to,” Eric informed. “But, as I said, I cannot be certain.”

“Debbie said Bill would smell your blood in me – that he would attack to punish me. Do you think he did that?” she finished with a whimper.

“Yes,” the vampire said in a steely tone that did little to hide his hatred of the younger vampire and his actions.

“Would Bill have turned me – in order to re-claim me as his own? Would he have gone that far?” she asked with a mixture apprehension and anger after a few silent moments had passed between them.

“I do not know, Sookie. And I’m glad we’ll never know, but the queen’s endgame might be for him to do that. Or – for her or Andre to become your maker.”

“Against my will,” Sookie seethed. “Your queen doesn’t sound like someone compassionate for victims to me.”

“Sophie-Anne would have justified her ‘stealing’ and turning you by comparing it to what others would do,” the vampire explained.

“And what’s that?”

“They would threaten, torture, and/or kill your family and friends to force your compliance. They would kidnap you and keep you in chains. They would treat you

like a blood whore, and – only when you were near-death – would they turn you,” he informed with brutal honesty.

Sookie shivered. “You’re saying that there are vampires who would do that?”

“Yes – and with no hesitation or compunction,” he responded gravely.

“That’s really why you want me to have protection – isn’t it? Not because of Debbie Pelt.”

“I want you to have protection for all kinds of reasons,” Eric said somewhat enigmatically, his sentence loaded with more meanings than Sookie felt capable of deciphering in that moment.

“A while ago – you said there was a difference between being stolen and won,” she said softly.

He turned to her. “Yes. I want to win you, but not like Bill. Not like the queen. I respect you, Sookie. I’m intrigued by you. The gods know I’m attracted to you. I want to,” he paused, “deserve you. I also want you to live up to your potential because I think we *both* deserve to see what that would be.”

“What do you think my potential is?” she asked somewhat tentatively, for she’d rarely let herself imagine it.

“*Not* to be a barmaid,” he returned quickly. “Sookie, your ability is as incredible as it is rare. I believe you should empower yourself by utilizing it to your best advantage. Jobs like the one you did in Dallas could earn you a lot of money, but they could also do much good for vampires and others. And consider this: You made

several powerful allies in Dallas who would line up to protect you from potential harm if it came.”

“What? Who?” Sookie asked incredulously.

“Stan Davis, Isabel, and Farrell – to name a few. From Stan, I have learned that six other vampires in the Dallas nest credit you – *directly* – for their continued existences. Betty Joe Pickard also owes you her life. As you gain even more allies, Sophie-Anne will have to kiss your ass because *every single job* you do will add distinction to her kingdom as well as to your reputation.”

“This is why you asked me how far I wanted to delve into the supernatural world – isn’t it?” she realized.

Eric nodded. “Yes. Sookie, I will insulate you as much as possible – from any others knowing about your gift – if that’s what you want. Sophie-Anne will likely not try to take an asset from me, especially if you are willing to do occasional work for her. But imagine for a moment if *you* took the reins of your destiny and chose to be a telepath for hire among Supernaturals! You would control your rate of pay and the kinds of jobs you did! And every satisfied customer would equal an ally for you.”

“And you? Would you be my – uh – manager?” Sookie asked, her eyebrow lifting.

“Yes,” he stated matter-of-factly. “The position is called a ‘handler’ in the supernatural world. I would help you find and complete assignments – while ensuring that you become a wealthy woman. And – just to be clear – I’d profit just as much as you. I won’t deny it. But my main motive would not be about money; as I’ve indicated,

I have plenty of that already. And it wouldn't be about gaining more power either; I already have the kind of position I want."

"What would your main motive be then?" she asked curiously.

"*Motives* actually," he smiled. "I like your company. As your handler, I'd insist upon accompanying you on your assignments. If you chose me to be your romantic partner, that would be a bonus, but—even as merely your business partner and friend—I believe we would enjoy our time together. I'm also bored with Fangtasia—so a change of scenery would be welcome to me. Seeing you stretch your legs and explore the world would be fun. Honestly, protecting you would be diverting too. If someone dared to try to obtain you, I'd be able to justify a battle or a hunt—rare things in the world today because of the Great Revelation."

Sookie gasped. "Battle? Hunt?"

"Don't knock 'em till you've tried 'em," Eric replied with a smirk.

Sookie couldn't help but to giggle a little, but soon became serious again. "I wouldn't want others hurt because of me."

"They'd be hurt only if they tried to hurt you first," he shrugged. "I wouldn't act without cause."

"So—you're basically sayin' you'd use me for entertainment?" she asked, her eyes sparkling with amusement, rather than annoyance.

"Oh yes!" he declared unabashedly. "But also for companionship. And hopefully for sex!" His grin became downright wolfish as she blushed. "I've lived long enough to know that tomorrows aren't guaranteed, even for the supposedly immortal.

I've also lived long enough to know that it's within my own power to make myself more content. I think *you* could help me with that, Sookie Stackhouse. I won't deny that I have selfish impulses every fucking time I think about you. I also won't deny that the thought of you being selfish in regards to me makes me even happier. You and I could be good for each other."

"What if you're wrong?" she asked.

"What's the worst-case scenario?" he countered. "If we didn't work out on a romantic level, then so be it. You need to understand that the honor I learned as a human has only amplified since I've been a vampire – despite my maker's own shortcomings. I would protect you with all that I am, even if you got tired of me and wanted someone else to become your lover."

Doing a poor job of stifling her blush, Sookie countered, "I would think the worst-case scenario would be someone killing you. And then taking me, chaining me up, making me a blood slave, etc."

Eric's growl was all that could be heard in the plane for a moment. "Yes. But that outcome would be less likely if you and I were in control of *when and how* your gift were used. I'm not saying there aren't risks, Sookie. I am saying that – if you try to keep your life the way it is now – there will be more risks."

Sookie shook her head and cut her eyes at him. "It's your growling that really ought to be my deciding factor."

"I have never tried to hide my potential for violence, especially when those I care for are threatened," he said somewhat defensively.

“The growl works in your favor,” Sookie quickly clarified. “It makes me know you care, though I’m still not sure why.”

He immediately relaxed. “Is anyone ever sure of the ‘why’ when it comes to attraction or affection? Beauty is one thing, and you certainly have that in your favor. But the rest of what you are is why I want to spend more time – *much* more time – with you.”

Sookie smiled and a blush once more exploded onto her cheeks. “I couldn’t have put that any better. About you.”

“So – what do you want to do about this?” the vampire smirked.

“This? Us?”

He chuckled. “We have already determined that we will begin by dating – yes?”

She nodded in confirmation.

“I was wondering what you wanted to do about your status in the Supernatural world,” he explained.

The telepath thought for a moment. “Honestly? I want to take a bit of time to be sure. Even before I was shoved in that trunk, I was thinking about making some major life changes. But right now, I feel a little numb: learning about Hadley and speculating about why Bill was really interested in me – not to mention trying not to dwell on almost being raped and killed by a person I thought I loved not even a week ago. But, most of all, I’m tryin’ to remind myself of the realizations I made in that trunk, even as I try to keep myself from dwelling on how terrified and hopeless I was in it.” She chuckled, though there was no mirth in the sound. “I’ll probably be claustrophobic for

a while, and I doubt if I'll turn off all the lights when I go to sleep for the foreseeable future. My electric bill is NOT going to be friendly," she added, clearly trying to make a joke to cover up the trauma she'd been through.

"Your feelings are understandable – all of them. And I'm not *quite* opportunistic enough to suggest that becoming nocturnal would solve one of your problems," he emphasized, again trying to tear her from her depressed mood.

She laughed lightly – but more sincerely this time.

Eric turned his head to smile at her. "I'm patient. And you are now protected. Take all the time you need to make your choices."

"That's sweet, but I just want a few days – maybe a week – to consider the job? Truthfully, I've almost decided about that already. And then I want to talk to Bill."

"You really think that's a good idea?" Eric asked. "To talk to him?"

"Like I said earlier, I have questions – even more after our talk – that only he can answer, and I think I need those answers in order to really move on."

"I don't like the idea of your being alone with him," Eric shared.

Sookie reached out her hand, and the vampire quickly took it – having missed it for the last ten or so minutes of their conversation.

"I don't like the idea of being alone with him either, but I don't think he'll talk as openly or honestly with you in the room. But you'll be close. And Thalia will be too," Sookie resolved. "Heck – the whole army you're bound and determined to build for me can be nearby!"

Eric contemplated for a moment, though the worry lingered on his impossibly handsome face.

“You’re concerned that he’ll try to hurt me,” Sookie speculated.

“I’m sure he already has,” Eric answered softly. “I don’t want him to do any more damage.”

“You won’t let him,” the telepath said, her faith in the Viking clear.

“Sookie, I will speed to you if I feel any pain whatsoever from you, but it will still take me a second or two to get to you. Bill *could* harm you,” Eric relayed honestly, his voice sounding haunted at his admission.

“And the worst he could do to me?”

“Kill you. Try to complete the bond with you. Try to turn you,” Eric responded.

“That would take more than two seconds – right?” Sookie asked.

“Likely. But if he hurts you – if he even tries – I won’t stop myself, Sookie. I’ll kill him,” he said evenly. “Tonight was my limit.”

“Okay,” Sookie agreed solemnly. “I’ll meet with him Friday, and you and I will have our date on Sunday – if you still want that,” she added.

“Absolutely,” he assured.

“And I should be able to tell you my final decision about my profession by then.”

“There really is no hurry,” Eric said with a sincere smile.

“There is for me,” Sookie said decisively. “It’s overdue.”

“Okay,” Eric supported, squeezing her hand a little.

“Good,” Sookie proclaimed. “Eric – uh – I want to try this thing with you. It’s one of those decisions that felt right to me in the trunk – when I thought I was gonna die and was makin’ myself promises about what I would do if I didn’t. I want to *know* you without Bill influencing my ideas about you. I can’t be sure of anything after that, but I believe that tryin’ with you will be a step in the right direction.”

Eric smiled. “I’m looking very much forward to taking that step with you.”

“And the rest we’ll play by ear?” Sookie asked.

Eric nodded in agreement, even as his phone rang.

“Northman,” he answered it.

He listened for a few moments.

“You are sure the situation is handled?” he asked.

Again, he listened for a few seconds.

“Very well. And the daytime guards?”

“Excellent,” he nodded after another pause. “We’ll be landing soon,” Eric informed before hanging up.

“Well?” Sookie asked.

“Thalia has successfully captured the Weres that were staked out at your home. And her preliminary questioning suggests that they were, indeed, looking to avenge the Were that Bubba killed. If that proves to be the case, then the matter will be dealt with by dawn, and any additional threats from that pack should be quelled immediately. However – just in case – Thalia has secured an expanded security detail for you during the daytime tomorrow.”

“Expanded?” Sookie asked.

“Mustapha, Warren, Onawa, and Willow will not be able to arrive before afternoon or early evening tomorrow. Meanwhile, Tray and Maria-Star are ready to begin at dawn. Along with them, Thalia has arranged for a few extra members from Long Tooth.”

“Isn’t that excessive?” Sookie asked.

“Not when four strong Weres were just found at your home,” Eric responded evenly.

Sookie sighed and shook her head. “Things happen fast in your world.”

Eric nodded, even as the plane bumped against the concrete of a landing strip.

Sookie immediately jumped and squealed. “What was that?”

“A successful landing,” Eric grinned.

“Oh—uh—I didn’t know we were about to land!”

“Better that way?” Eric asked with a raised eyebrow.

Sookie chuckled. “So much better!”

Chapter 17: Alright, Okay, You Win

Baby, what can I do

Anything you say I'll do

As long as it's me and you

– “Alright, Okay, You Win” (songwriters Mayme Watts & Sidney J. Wyche)

Sookie had fallen asleep on the drive to her home, and – sensing (quite literally) how weary the telepath was, Eric had been content to let her take her rest. After all, they’d already done a marathon of talking that night, and the telepath clearly needed time to decompress.

Of course, being a vampire, Eric didn’t require the same, nor did he need to focus more than a miniscule amount of his attention on driving.

Instead, he was focused on working through strategies to deal with all of the potential threats to Sookie, his retinue, and himself – at least, the most pressing ones.

The Weres: Eric was 99% certain that this problem would be resolved either before dawn or at first dark the next night. It seemed likely that Sookie’s first Were “visitor” had been sent by Lorena – to go through Bill’s house and/or to report on (or kidnap) Lorena’s “competition.” The current group of Weres were probably from the same pack – if not the same cohort within that pack. The Viking had no doubt that one word from Russell Edgington would make them fall in line. The only question would

be the “price” needed for Russell’s help. Knowing the somewhat eccentric Mississippi King, Eric figured that a demonstration of Sookie’s telepathy would be fee enough.

Debbie Pelt: Simply put, that bitch’s days were numbered. The Viking had no doubt she’d make her way to Bon Temps to harm Sookie – likely sooner rather than later. However, the vampire also had no doubt that she’d be killed quickly – even if she were unnaturally strong because of any V she’d taken.

Bill Compton: Eric was certain that the ludicrously side-burned leech-on-the-fucking-planet would attempt to re-insinuate himself into Sookie’s life. The Viking wasn’t worried that Sookie would accept him; however, he did know that Bill’s continued presence in Bon Temps would create an uneasy environment for the telepath. Plus, Bill’s true motives were – as yet – unknown to Eric. Was his priority still his work for Sophie-Anne? Or was his current concern centered upon Sookie’s welfare and continued independence? Or was he simply obsessed with her? His behavior in the trunk pointed to the last of these. And – if that was the case – Eric had no doubt that Bill would need to be put down permanently.

The sooner the better.

Queen Sophie-Anne: Of course, Bill’s original puppet master was of larger concern to Eric. Sophie-Anne and her children were formidable. The “Berts” – the common nickname for the almost identical Saxons that guarded Sophie-Anne all the time – were, at least, honorable warriors. Indeed, Eric quite liked Wybert, though he could do without his humorless brother Sigebert. Andre was the larger concern. The weaselly vampire was well-known for being his maker’s henchman. Andre preferred to

ask Sophie-Anne for her forgiveness for his more brutal or underhanded tactics, rather than to seek her permission. Sophie-Anne, despite her public protestations, was grateful that Andre took such “initiative.” She didn’t want to dirty her own hands – but didn’t mind profiting from the fruits of her eldest child’s machinations in the least.

Appius: Lorena’s call for and manipulation of Bill had been just what Eric needed to be reminded that his own maker could easily fuck up his life.

The Viking lightly touched Sookie’s arm – but not so much as to stir her. With that touch, he experienced the weightiness of his feelings for her; he simply couldn’t suppress them any longer. Given this truth, it was only a matter of time before Appius began to wonder how such “heavy” feelings were not a *burden* upon his child – how that mass actually made Eric feel *lighter* in so many ways.

Yes – Appius would be curious.

The question was whether or not he would *also* be bored with his current life.

Or worse – *jealous*. Covetous that Eric’s feelings were not for him.

Given these concerns, Eric knew he needed a safeguard in place – someone whom he could trust unreservedly to deal with the situation if Appius decided to divert himself with a “visit” to Louisiana.

There was only one vampire Eric knew of with the stealth and skill to kill Appius *cleanly*, if needed – only one whom he trusted enough to have the resolve to do the same *to himself* if it came to that.

Of course, it would be a lot to ask of her – perhaps, too much. But he knew that he needed to ask it, nonetheless. For allowing Appius to get to Sookie or – even

worse – harming his own beloved because of commands from his maker were both fates that the Viking could not abide.

He *would* die first.

Thus resolved, Eric took out his cellphone – even as he continued to monitor Sookie’s sleep.

In general, his phone was quite secure, for it was equipped with anti-tracking and anti-hacking software which had been designed by Molly, a young, incredibly brilliant vampire in Area 5. In addition to those security measures, however, there was an “app” that offered an extra layer of privacy, for it – quite literally – randomly encrypted the electronic signal of his calls (what Molly called the calls’ fingerprints) so that there was no way to trace them or even know that he was the one making them. Of course, too much security would have been seen as suspicious to anyone monitoring him, so he used the encryption “app” only occasionally.

Now – it was needed.

“Karin,” he said softly as the individual he was calling picked up.

“Eric,” his older child greeted, curiosity clear in her tone. “It has been a long time since you have contacted me.”

“I need your aid,” Eric admitted.

“I am ready for any task you have for me,” Karin replied somewhat formally.

“Thank you. But you should listen before you agree.”

“I am listening.”

“You are the only one I fully trust to do this thing,” Eric said softly as he looked over at Sookie. “I need you to kill me if I become a danger to someone I love.”

The phone line was silent for a moment.

“Explain!” Karin demanded icily.

“I was recently reminded of how powerless a vampire child is when being commanded by his maker.”

“Appius!” Karin hissed. “Is he near you?”

“No,” Eric assured. “But I find myself to be truly,” he paused, “*happy* right now; I have never felt this way. I am,” he glanced at Sookie, “in a relationship with a human—Sookie. She excites me, challenges me. Soon, I might even be . . .” His voice trailed off.

“In love with her?” Karin finished when her maker did not.

“Yes. I likely already am,” Eric disclosed. “I do not know because I’ve never been in a,” he hesitated, “situation like this. But—if I do love her or if I grow to love her—then Appius may very well come. I need someone that I know will take care of it. Nid ydym wedi gallu i fod yn agos am beth amser, ond hyderaf nad oes neb yn fwy na chi, merch [*We have not been able to be close for some time, but I trust no one more than you, daughter*],” he added in Karin’s native language.

She paused for a moment. “I *will* come. But—just to be clear—you *are* giving me leave to slay your maker—yes?”

“Or me—if there is no other way to protect Sookie.”

The vampiress was silent for a moment. “I do not accept that outcome.”

“Yet I need you to agree to it,” maker said to child. “Otherwise, I will have to contact someone else – someone who will not be able to do the job as efficiently or cleanly.”

Again, the line was completely silent for several moments. Eric gave his child the time she needed.

“I will kill Appius *now* – before he is a threat to you.”

Eric ran his left hand through his hair. He was tempted – sorely tempted – to take his child up on that offer. But a part of him could not.

“I want to avoid his death – if possible,” he said softly.

“Your loyalty to him is illogical,” Karin responded gruffly.

“Some might argue the same about yours – for me.”

She huffed. “That would be a ridiculous comparison!”

“I was not the best of makers to you, Karin.”

“You taught me how to be a vampire – how to stay alive and thrive. And you did so without cruelty.”

“Appius taught me much as well,” Eric reminded. “Some of those lessons were passed down to you.”

“Some of those lessons are why you felt the need to free me – to separate from me,” she spit out somewhat bitterly.

“Do you regret my freeing you?” Eric asked curiously.

The phone was silent for a moment.

“You have never asked me that before,” Karin said at such a low volume that her sire had to strain to hear her words.

“I did not offer you true independence from me solely because Appius was a potential threat to you,” Eric conveyed.

“I know that,” Karin said as if exhaling the words. “But—for a while—I felt that you did it for yourself. I thought you did not want to face the harm he would do to you.”

Eric frowned. “Isolde, oedd nad yw byth fy mwriad [*Isolde, that was never my intention*],” he said in her native tongue.

“Rwy'n sylweddoli hyn - nawr [*I realize this - now*],” she responded.

“But not always,” he sighed, returning to English.

“No. mae'n ddrwg gennyf [*No. I am sorry*].”

“There is no need. I should have done more to reassure you at the time—to let you know that I thought only of your safety and preferences when I freed you forever from my command.”

“I know,” she said after a moment. “And it is what I felt I wanted—to be completely free. To not have to answer to anyone—not even you. But I have sometimes regretted the high price—the connection to your life. I have envied my sister,” she admitted.

“You may be as connected to my life as you wish,” Eric said sincerely. “Pam did not yearn for her independence. She never resented the fact that I could control her actions.”

“As I did,” Karin admitted flatly.

“Yes,” he agreed as he looked at the telepath. “Sookie reminds me of you in some ways; she, too, is independent. I have had thoughts of turning her.”

“Of course, you have,” Karin said as if the idea was self-evident. “You have affection for her, so you would naturally wish to keep her.”

Eric shook his head, though his child couldn’t see the gesture. “It is not something she wants. She does not wish to be controlled – ever; she would resent it if I curbed her behavior with my command – even when she was a youngling.”

“Just as I resented you at times.”

“Yes.”

Karin scoffed. “I was young. I got over it.”

Eric chuckled. “It always took you a while to forgive me, however. Luckily, I did not have to command you often.”

“And you never did it to hurt me,” the vampiress commented with rare affection in her tone. “True independence is a good thing, but there has always been something unsettling about it too. It is difficult to describe. I am just grateful that I can still feel your existence and – when I am near enough to you – your stronger emotions.”

“I am grateful for those things too, Karin,” Eric said sincerely.

The two were silent for a moment.

“Who will know I am there?” she asked.

“Only one vampire here might be able to pick up your trail. Do you know of Thalia?”

“I have heard the name. What will you tell her?”

“Only that you are a safeguard for me. Given the magic you employ to alter your scent, she will not be able to pick up that you are my child, so there is no need for her to know of that.”

“And Pam?” Karin asked.

“It is better that she not know you are near, Karin – unless you wish to become a more public part of my existence.”

“If I choose that, I will *have to* kill Appius,” she emphasized.

“I know,” he responded. “However, unless required, I do not want that step taken *for me*,” Eric reiterated. “But – if you want to be closer – do it for *yourself*, Karin.”

“You would not mind?”

“If the choice is his continued existence or your happiness, *dottir*, there is no choice,” Eric stated honestly.

“I would have to change my existence,” she mused. “To do what I do now and live a more open life would be too dangerous.”

“Yes,” Eric agreed.

“I could retake my own name.”

“Yes. You could.”

“I will think about what I want while I watch over you,” Karin decided after a moment. “Perhaps Appius will make things easy by making any ill-intent he has for you or your Sookie known before he actually acts against you.”

Eric chuckled darkly. "Perhaps he will. He is not above boasting about his plans. I wonder sometimes if he was the inspiration for the stereotypical James Bond villain."

Karin chuckled before getting back to business. "If he does not seek you out soon, I will plan to stay in Louisiana indefinitely – through your Sookie's lifetime if necessary."

"You'd stay that long?" Eric asked somewhat incredulously.

"Yes. I will stay as long as you need me there," she returned evenly.

"Thank you," the Viking conveyed earnestly. "Your being here will be a comfort to me, Isolde. I do not think Appius will leave the situation for too long, however. If he is intrigued, he will be impatient to make a visit."

"What do you speculate he will do from there?" Karin asked.

"Hopefully, he will simply observe Sookie and me for a while, preferably from afar. However, if he finds himself jealous – either because I have given to Sookie what I chose not to give him or because he begrudges my being more content than he is – then he will likely try to destroy that which makes me happy," he relayed. "That is when I'll count on you."

"You think that twisted fuck will command you to harm your Sookie," Karin observed.

"Mentally, physically, and/or emotionally," Eric stated evenly, confirming that he did – indeed – believe that his maker was capable of doing just that. "He would view it as a new game – a new way of testing me with the purpose of 'curing' me for

once and for all of what he has always viewed as my 'weaker emotions,'" he finished in a low tone. "Through his orders, he would make it impossible for me to kill him. He would also not be reticent about commanding me to make Pam do his bidding. Thalia is formidable, and she would likely be willing to try to eliminate Appius for me, but I need to know that she is focused on Sookie."

Sounding and feeling weary, he continued, "I have fought Appius's commands before – when he ordered me to harm someone I cared for. I would fight him again; however, he is stronger than I, and I *could* succumb. Or," Eric frowned, "he could simply give up on ordering me and do the harming himself. He is a master at mind games and could manipulate my life in all kinds of ways, perhaps even seeking an ally in my queen. Jag kommer inte att tillåta Sookie att vara hans offer, Isolde [*I will not allow Sookie to be his victim, Isolde*]," he ended passionately, slipping to both his own first language and his child's first name.

"You really do love your woman," Karin stated after a moment.

"She would not like you calling her that," Eric said with a slight smile as he glanced at the still soundly-sleeping telepath.

"Independent indeed," Karin commented with admiration in her tone.

"She has fire inside of her," he stated. "There is something about her that calls to me. To my very soul," he added softly even as he acknowledged the fact that he still had a soul; it had been a very long time since he had.

"Good. You will be kept on your toes by her," Karin commented with a hint of mirth in her voice.

“I have a blood tie with her,” Eric shared. “I want to make it a bond. Maybe even pledge eventually.”

“The last two are rare steps to take with a human.”

“She is likely not fully human.”

“Interesting,” Karin commented, clearly intrigued. “What is she?”

“I cannot be sure. She is lovely and has allure to other Supernaturals. It is uncommonly easy to trust her.”

“A siren?” Karin asked. “Eric, I caution you to stay away from those creatures,” she firmly warned.

“I do not think she is that, though I will admit to considering it. Unlike a Siren, Sookie is extremely *worthy* of any trust given to her. Plus, she has no,” he paused, glancing Sookie’s way again and smirking, “discernable singing ability.”

Karin chuckled, but almost immediately became serious again. “How do you know she can truly be trusted?”

“Overwhelming evidence in the form of examples. Sookie is a telepath. However, not only does she go out of her way to keep others’ secrets to herself, but also she has not used her talent for any kind of personal profit. She is a rare and honorable creature, Karin.”

“You love a Dae?” Karin asked incredulously, clearly having come to the conclusion that Sookie had to be of that group, considering Eric’s continued description.

“Of course, they make good and trustworthy allies, Eric, but you could never stomach her blood!”

The maker chuckled. "I thought Dae too, but – as you say – their taste is almost unpalatable, and Sookie is sweet. In fact, her blood is the best I've ever had."

Karin considered for a moment. "You are thinking Fae then?"

"You were always wise beyond your years – beyond me," Eric complimented.

"Yes, I am leaning towards her being part fairy – unless the gods have made a new kind of Supernatural being just for me," he added with a smirk.

"Of course, you'd be full enough of yourself to think that," Karin deadpanned.

Eric chuckled. "The problem with my theory is that I have never heard of a fairy to be telepathic. Have you?"

"No. But they are secretive about their gifts," Karin returned.

"Yes – especially with vampires. I could contact Niall – ask him about telepathy," Eric mused.

"That asshole?" Karin asked.

Eric laughed loud enough to cause Sookie to stir for a moment. Once she was asleep again, he spoke. "You are just bitter at Niall because he didn't let you fuck him *or* allow you to eat his child."

"His half-human whelp was careless," Karin sulked. "And – if I remember correctly – *you* were the one who stopped me from killing Fintan with one of those commands I disliked so much."

Eric smiled as he recalled that long-ago night. Karin had been just a "whelp" herself – barely a year old. Fintan *had* been careless that night, but – in the boy's defense – he had not yet been in complete control of his magic.

“I still don’t know why you stopped me from draining him,” Karin continued her complaint.

Eric chuckled quietly at his child’s tone. “Yes, you do. I owed Niall and wanted to clear the debt. Plus, a vampire drunk on fairy blood almost never survives the night.”

“You would have pulled me into the ground if I had been too inebriated to do so myself,” Karin reminded.

“Only *if* I could have controlled my own bloodlust once I smelled the halfling’s blood,” Eric stated. “Also, do not forget that, at his death, all of Fintan’s blood-kin would have known of his passage into the Summerlands. They would have come to collect his remains immediately – and, even if we’d made it to ground, they would have hunted us and staked us in our day-death. Or worse!”

Karin scoffed, but then relented, “I know.”

Indeed, Eric had seen firsthand the destruction that fairies would wreak upon the vampires who killed their kin. They especially enjoyed catching a “guilty” vampire while he or she was still “drunk.” They would then torture that vampire for weeks before throwing him or her into the sun to burn. However, even if there was a delay to their retribution, a “guilty” vampire did not often escape it. That was why wiser and older vampires knew to stay far away from the temptation that the Fae offered.

“In truth, it matters little what Sookie is,” Eric conveyed, bringing them back to the subject at hand, “beyond what her lineage might mean for her safety.”

“And if your Sookie is the curious one?” Karin asked.

“Then I will see what Niall is willing to do to help her find her kin,” Eric answered simply.

“Just be cautious with the Fae, Eric,” Karin cautioned.

“And just who taught *you* that lesson?” he smirked.

“Whatever,” she huffed.

They were silent for a moment.

“Unless you need me immediately, I will be there in four nights’ time. I have an incomplete assignment that I would like to see to.”

“Do not put yourself into jeopardy by rushing. I have felt no movement from Appius as of yet. That means he is still in Eastern Europe.”

“I won’t rush, but I *will* hurry,” she returned somewhat stubbornly. “I will contact you as needed, and – of course – you will feel when I am nearer.”

“Yes. Remember – if it comes to a choice between my life and Sookie’s”

“I *will* kill Appius,” Karin said firmly.

“If you can,” he agreed. “But – if that is not possible – you *must* end me.”

“You ask so much,” she whispered.

“I know I do, but I am,” he paused, “afraid. To lose Sookie would be to lose more than I could live with giving up.”

“Will you tell your Sookie about me?” Karin asked after giving her maker an unasked-for moment to steady himself.

“She knows about you already. But I will refrain from telling her you are in the area unless necessary. She should not have to worry about something that may not come to pass. Of course, if you decide to change your circumstances, I will tell her all.”

“Regardless, I hope to have the chance to meet the woman who won your heart.”

“*Found* it. She found my heart,” Eric corrected in a whisper so low that Sookie could not have heard him even if she were not lightly snoring.

“Then I will like her — even if there is no reason for me to meet her,” Karin stated.

“You honor me by agreeing to come like this,” Eric said after a moment, his voice full of affection for his eldest vampire daughter. “We have not always had an easy relationship.”

Karin chuckled. “You think you were broken when you made me. Maybe you were. But you were also exactly what I needed. *Exactly*. I have never wished for a different maker, Eric. I will be nearby soon, and I will do what you have asked of me — *all of it*,” she finished, her voice laced with emotion. Eric heard a quiet sob right before she disconnected the call.

As he put away his own phone, Eric sighed loudly, causing Sookie to stir and awaken.

“Anything wrong?” Sookie asked, wiping away the little bit of drool that had pooled on the side of her mouth.

“Just adding an extra layer of protection,” Eric said honestly. “For the both of us.”

Immediately, the telepath looked pensively at him. “What protection?”

“I hope it’s not needed; I’ll tell you if it is – okay?” he requested cryptically and somewhat pleadingly, not ready to share the nature of the phone call at that time.

The telepath took a deep breath and then took in Eric’s serious expression. Pre-trunk Sookie would have demanded he tell her – called him high-handed and/or underhanded if he didn’t. But she just wasn’t that girl anymore.

“Okay,” she responded. “Tell me what you can when you can. I trust you.”

The vampire smiled softly and took Sookie’s hand, bringing it up to his lips for a soft kiss.

Of course, he kept one hand firmly on the steering wheel and one eye on the road – *for her benefit*.

Sookie had a feeling that his call was also ultimately *for her* benefit. And, looking at his strong hand needlessly gripping the wheel, she was certain that his decision not to tell her was not about keeping her in the dark as much as it was about keeping her from freaking out.

She’d take it.

She’d take him.

Chapter 18: (Now and Then There's) A Fool Such as I

Pardon me, if I'm sentimental

When we say goodbye

Don't be angry with me should I cry

When you're gone, yet I'll dream

A little dream as years go by

—“(Now and Then There’s) A Fool Such as I” (songwriter William Marvin Trader)

It was just after 4:00 a.m. when Eric pulled into Sookie’s driveway; to the telepath, it felt as if she’d been up for days — despite the nap she’d enjoyed in Eric’s car.

Even if Eric’s pensiveness when he’d hung up on their ‘extra layer of protection’ hadn’t stirred her minutes before, the bumping of the low-ride vehicle in her driveway would have.

“I’m sorry about the bumps,” the telepath apologized. “Gran and I tried to save up to get the driveway re-graveled — or at least, patched — but somethin’ always came up. Uh — I’m hoping to have some funds to spare when I — uh . . .” Her voice trailed off.

“When what?” the vampire asked curiously.

She blushed. “When I get the — uh — Dallas check,” she muttered as if apologizing for her words. Despite their intimate conversation earlier — despite

everything that had passed between them – she still felt awkward mentioning the payment.

Indeed, she could almost hear Gran rolling around in the nearby cemetery; in fact, she caught herself glancing in the direction of the cemetery – just to make sure Gran wasn't running out of it in ghost-form. The matriarch had often preached that money wasn't to be spoken about "in polite society." In many ways, it had been a more taboo subject to the older woman than sex!

"Get the Dallas check?" Eric asked, his voice taking on an unexpected edge of irritation that made Sookie squirm a little.

"Yes. Uh – I'm sorry to have mentioned it though. Gran would have my hide. And – uh – I'm sure you've been busy, and I don't want to seem impatient or ungrateful about it. As long as I get it by February – um – if that's not a bother to you, that is. That's the deadline for the property taxes. 'Course maybe – if I start that new profession – I'll be able to do more around here – more of what Gran always talked about doin'." She chuckled with a mix of caution and embarrassment. "Anyway, this old driveway has suited me well enough for years. It'll keep for a while longer."

Despite her conciliatory tone, however, Eric's growl filled the car.

Sookie looked at the vampire pensively. He was facing forward, his knuckles testing the strength of the steering wheel. His fangs were down, and his eyes seemed to be glowing.

"Eric, please," Sookie pled, her voice quivering. She couldn't help but to clutch the door handle, her body yelling at her to get out of her current confines. Somehow,

however, she stopped herself from running and spoke to the vampire calmly. “Eric, I *know* you won’t hurt me, but I *really* don’t wanna be trapped in a car with a mad vampire right now – especially when I don’t know why you look like you want to tear something apart.”

“Sookie,” Eric sighed contritely, coming back to himself immediately. His fangs snapped back into his gums and his hands relaxed. He leaned away from her in every way that the car allowed him – towards his door and also the back of his seat – in order to make sure he didn’t continue to spook her. “I am sorry to have frightened you. It was insensitive – inexcusable – especially given what happened earlier,” he apologized softly, his eyes pleading for forgiveness from her. “It’s just that I sent Bill a check for your services the night after we returned from Dallas.”

“You sent it to – uh – *Bill*?” Sookie asked with a frown.

“It’s protocol,” Eric answered, thrusting his fingers through his hair as he parked the car.

“Because I was *his*,” Sookie observed bitterly.

“Yes. You had not renounced him at that time. And, because he is Area 5 Investigator, I had to go by the book. But, if I had even suspected that he might hold back the money from you, I would have burned that goddamned book!”

“But why wouldn’t – uh – he – um . . . ?” Sookie stammered.

“To keep you dependent upon him,” Eric growled, though certainly not as menacingly as before.

“And to keep you the villain,” Sookie said with a growl of her own. “He said a couple of times that he’d help me pay my taxes because he figured *you* wouldn’t come through. He would’ve *had* to have had the check by then!” She took a ragged breath. “Or – uh – is it possible he didn’t get the check? Could it have been – uh – lost in the mail or somethin’?”

“It was cashed,” Eric said flatly.

“Fuckin’ asshole,” Sookie muttered, holding back her tears for the vampire who didn’t deserve them.

“Yes,” Eric agreed. “He is.”

Just then a figure walked out from the tree-line.

“Just Thalia,” Eric identified immediately so that Sookie wouldn’t fear that it was another enemy. “I should speak with her,” he added regretfully.

“Okay. I’m just gonna sit here for a minute or two and stew. I don’t want my anger to follow me inside,” the telepath informed.

“Follow you inside?”

“Gran used to say that,” Sookie recalled fondly. “Jason and I used to squabble – especially during car rides. She’d make us work out any disagreements while we were in the car – *before* we came inside. ‘Course, she wouldn’t stay to see just how that happened.”

Eric took her hand briefly and squeezed it in silent support before exiting the vehicle.

Once he shut his car door, Sookie took a moment to fully descend into her thoughts and her emotions. At the forefront was anger at Bill. Ultimately, she knew that it didn't matter why he'd kept the money from her. What mattered was that it would have given her peace of mind if she'd had it. However, Bill had withheld that peace — despite knowing good and damned well just how much she was struggling from check to check!

From tip to tip!

Heck — she'd had to borrow a couple of "helpings" of Bill's shampoo just three weeks before because she'd used all of hers (and what Gran had left behind) and needed to get groceries before hygiene items that week! She closed her eyes, thinking about how she'd saved money on tampons just the week before by counting on thick wads of toilet paper from Merlotte's to deal with all but the heaviest days of her menstrual cycle. She'd felt guilty — felt like she was stealing from Sam. She'd never — in a million years — speculated that Bill had stolen from her.

But that week had been horrible for tips, and she'd been a little desperate.

And certainly too proud to ask anyone for a loan.

And, of course, Bill hadn't *seemed* to notice her plight.

In truth, he'd probably celebrated all the more knowing how apprehensive she'd become about pinching every drop out of every penny!

So — *yes* — she was mad.

Steaming!

But she was also very sad. She felt betrayed. She felt as if Bill had taken another of her deepest fears, her worry that she might not be able to take care of herself – to make it on her own – and manipulated it.

She let her anger and sadness simmer for a few more minutes as she watched the vampires converse.

And then she made a choice. “Bill *doesn't* matter anymore,” she resolved to herself. “He didn't matter even before I learned about the fact that Eric already paid me for Dallas. And he's not gonna matter again. Anything new I learn about him is just another nail in a coffin that's already full of nails – and full of shit,” she finished with a raised voice.

Both vampires turned to look at her then, and she couldn't help but to notice Eric's smirk. He'd clearly heard every word she'd said – even when she was just muttering. And – like always – he *got* her sense of humor.

Determined more than ever to discover her own path in life – without “Bill baggage” weighing her down – she got out of Eric's car and approached the two vampires.

“You okay?” Eric asked her.

Sookie nodded. “Yes. Bill being a lying bastard isn't news. The lengths to which he went to keep me powerless *will* be addressed on Friday night,” she added with venom and determination in her voice.

Eric moved toward her and offered his hand.

Thalia's eyebrow went up noticeably when Sookie took the vampire's hand as if it were the most natural gesture for them in the world.

"Telepath," the ancient vampiress greeted sharply, stepping forward, "you are – apparently – my responsibility now. And there *are* rules."

"Rules?" Sookie asked with a frown.

"Yes rules. First and foremost, when there is danger, you *will* do what your guards say – without question or hesitation," she instructed bluntly.

Sookie felt her hackles rising, but she took a deep breath and – once again – recalled her promise to change her mindset. She nodded. "When I'm in danger, I will," she agreed in a clipped tone that echoed Thalia's.

"That was easier than I thought it would be. Will you also promise not to *ask* for danger?" Thalia smirked.

That particular expression on her lips was much less playful than it was when on Eric's.

"I've never *wanted* danger!" Sookie insisted.

"Yet you foolishly court it," the ancient vampiress stated.

"Thalia!" Eric said warningly.

"What?"

"I am courting Sookie now," he informed.

"See then? I am right. Always. Right," she cackled before disappearing quickly into the woods.

“Well – at least she’s good at what she does,” Eric stated once the vampiress was well away from them. “And her personality *can* actually grow on you.”

“How long does that take?” Sookie asked with a little chuckle.

“In my case? Only a century or two,” Eric deadpanned.

Sookie rolled her eyes as Eric led them back to the car to get her things. Their hands stayed locked until Sookie needed to fish her keys from her purse.

“Eric Northman, you are welcome into my home. Thalia – uh – whatever your last name is – if you even have one, that is – you are welcome into my home. Bill Compton, I rescind your f-in invitation,” Sookie added firmly.

“Had you rescinded mine from before?” Eric asked curiously.

“No, but I wasn’t wholly behind *that* invitation; plus, you’d better not enter my bed again without my *verbal* invitation!” Sookie challenged.

Eric chuckled. “Do you know the best part of that sentence, Sookie?” he asked, his voice lowering an octave.

Sookie pondered that he probably had nicknamed that tone the “panty perishing pitch.” Whatever he called it, it was effective.

“Sookie?” he interrupted her thoughts.

She blushed. “What?”

“The best part of the sentence?” he smirked.

“What?” she asked.

“You said ‘again.’ That I better not enter your bed *again* without your say-so. That implies there will be an *again*.”

“Oh, hush, you perv!” she giggled.

“Pam?” he asked.

“Huh?”

“Invite her,” Eric suggested.

“To my bed?!?!” Sookie exclaimed.

“No!” Eric responded quickly and then laughed. “Into the house—in case of emergency.”

“Pam, you are welcome into my home,” Sookie stated.

“Did you not *mean* hers before either?” he smirked.

“Actually, I *did* rescind hers and Chow’s when they left last time,” Sookie admitted, causing an even louder laugh from Eric. “Should I reinstate Chow’s?”

“There’s probably no need,” Eric said after a moment. “Thalia will let me know if there becomes one.”

“Um—you want to try your invitation out?” Sookie asked motioning toward the entryway of the house, which they’d yet to enter.

“Just far enough to deliver this inside,” he said, lifting her small bag. “You are tired, and I have Weres to deal with and a king to pacify.”

“Oh—of course. I *am* tired, and I have to call Sam tomorrow so I can get back on the work schedule while I think things through.”

Eric looked ready to say something, but stopped himself.

“You were about to offer me money so I didn’t need to work while I’m makin’ my decision,” she speculated wryly.

He smirked. "A thousand years of perfecting my poker face, and you decipher it in months, Miss Stackhouse. I don't know whether to be thrilled or frightened."

She chuckled. "So – uh – I know I'll see you Friday, but – um – could I call you in the meantime? Um – if I have any more questions about anything?" she asked tentatively, looking down at her feet.

He gently raised her chin. "Of course. Do you have your phone? I'll program my number in."

Sookie frowned as she thought about the damnable contraption. "It doesn't have any charge right now."

"I guess I'll *have* to come in for a while then," he sighed dramatically, finally stepping over the threshold, "if only to write down my phone number for you."

The telepath giggled as she looked for a pad and pencil in the drawer of the small table near the door. Eric had already put her shabby suitcase next to the door to her bedroom and returned to her side by the time she'd found what she needed.

"I'm writing down Pam's and Thalia's numbers too, as well as one for Colonel Flood," he informed after he'd taken the writing implements.

"Colonel?" Sookie asked.

"The leader of the Long Tooth pack. But keep it to yourself that you have his direct line – especially from your shifter friend. I will tell the Colonel about you, and he will send help during the daytime if you need it. However, very few people know that he and I have as close of a working relationship as we do. One such person is Maria-Star, which is another reason why she is ideal for being one of your guards."

“The secrecy stuff? Is that because of Supe politics?” she queried.

“Exactly,” he smiled at her. “Vampires are *supposed* to believe that all Weres are worthless, rabid mongrels.”

“And Weres are supposed to think that vampires are all bite-happy bloodsuckers?” she smirked.

He chuckled. “Bite-happy – *that* part for sure.”

He handed her the pad of paper back. “Flood can do much during the day – if there is an immediate threat to you or your loved ones. Your two-natured guards will have his contact information too. And – if you cannot get me on my direct line for some reason – call Fangtasia and ask for Leif.”

Sookie snorted out a laugh. “Why do you use that name for your spy stuff? Leif?”

“I had a son named that – when I was a human,” he responded, his eyes taking on a faraway look.

“Do you mind talking about your human life?” she asked. “I’d like to know about it – about that part of you.”

“No, I don’t think I would mind – at least I wouldn’t with you,” he answered with a sincere, but slightly melancholy, smile. “Some vampires avoid the subject because they do not like to remember that part of themselves or because they still mourn what they had to leave behind.”

“That’s understandable,” Sookie replied.

A moment of silence grew between them as neither quite knew how to say goodbye for the night.

“Sookie,” the vampire finally said, stepping closer to her, “you don’t need to have a specific question in mind in order to contact me. I’ll give you your space unless you want to see or speak with me, but—for the record—I would enjoy *any* interaction you initiate.”

She gulped somewhat nervously as she looked toward the floor. “Okay. Uh—you’re sure Friday night’s okay for you to come while I—uh—deal with Bill? I just realized that Fangtasia must be busy that night.”

“And I have *priorities*,” Eric said meaningfully, lifting her chin once more.

This time, he gently held onto it as their eyes locked.

“Would it be presumptuous of me to ask you for a goodnight kiss, Miss Stackhouse?” Eric asked softly after they’d spent many moments lost in each other’s eyes.

“Yes, it would be. But I’d like one anyway,” Sookie said with a shy smile.

Eric leaned down slowly as she leaned up.

They’d kissed before—once in Dallas when bloodlust had caused Eric to lose his restraint regarding her and once on the night he’d accompanied her to the orgy. Of course, just the night before, they’d done much *more* than kiss, but the soft, chaste kiss that Eric placed onto Sookie’s welcoming lips was certainly the most intimate moment the two had ever shared.

He pulled away just as slowly as he'd leaned down and then took a step back from her. "Thalia and the others will be close and *will* keep you safe," he emphasized, assuring himself as much as her.

"I know," she whispered.

"I know you need your space, Sookie, but call on me if you need. *Or want.*"

"I will."

He seemed as reluctant to leave as she was to see him go, and they hesitated at the doorway.

"If you would like, I will make sure that Compton knows not to approach you until Friday one hour after sundown," Eric offered.

"And if he tries anyway?" Sookie asked.

"Thalia will put him under silver," the vampire warned.

Sookie nodded. "Okay. I think I'd rest easier knowin' I won't have to see him until I'm expecting to."

Having stepped onto the porch as she remained in the doorway, Eric turned to face her. He lightly ran one cool palm against her cheek. "You will have your time to think and to find your closure—your peace, Sookie Stackhouse," he said as if he were swearing an oath.

"And—after that—my life will change," she whispered—as if both fearful of and welcoming to such an idea.

"For the better—whatever decisions you make this week," Eric said confidently.

"Goodnight, Eric," Sookie whispered.

“Goodnight, Sookie,” the vampire replied before going to his car. Sookie noticed that he waited until she’d locked her door before driving away.

And that thought made her smile.

Until she fell asleep.

The End

The 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

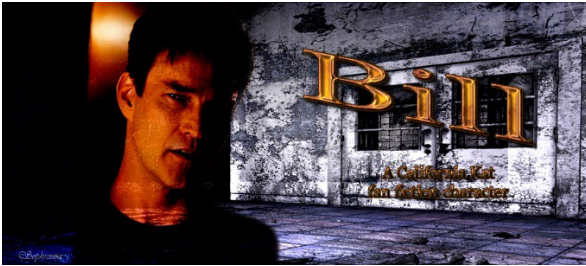


Figure 4: Stephen Moyer as Bill Compton



Figure 5: Margot Robbie as Karin (Isolde)



Figure 6: Summer Glau as Thalia



Figure 7: Kristin Bauer as Pam

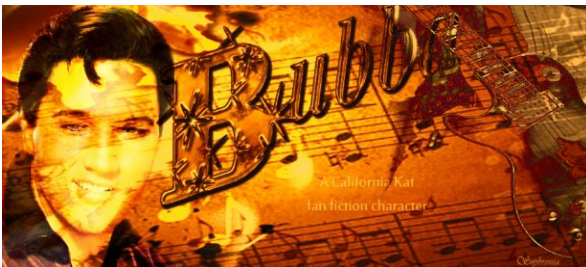


Figure 8: Elvis as Bubba (in my dreams)



Figure 9: Daniel Dae Kim as Chow



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: Mariana Klaveno as Lorena



Figure 19: Matt Dallas as Bernard

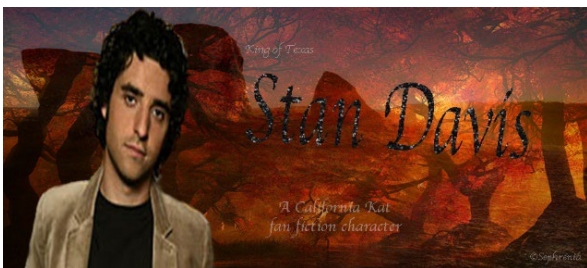


Figure 20: David Krumholtz as Stan Davis



Figure 21: James Frain as Franklin Mott



Figure 22: Andrew Rothenberg as Malcolm



Figure 23: Raoul Max Trujillo as Longshadow



Figure 24: Valerie Cruz as Isabel



Figure 25: Tina Majorino as Molly

The Two-Natured



Figure 26: Joe Manganiello as Alcide Herveaux



Figure 27: Brit Morgan as Debbie Pelt



Figure 28: Sarah Shahi as Maria-Star



Figure 29: Laz Alonso as Mustapha



Figure 30: Karina Lombard as Onawa



Figure 31: Alexandra Daddario as Willow



Figure 32: Karl Urban as Tray Dawson



Figure 33: Sam Trammell as Sam Merlotte



Figure 34: Viggo Mortensen as Colonel James Flood



Figure 35: Michael Cudlitz as Charles Clausen



Figure 36: Jessica Simpson as Helene



Figure 37: Haley Lu Richardson as Janice Herveaux



Figure 38: Linda Purl as Barbara Pelt



Figure 39: Steve Rankin as Gordon Pelt



Figure 40: Jennifer Lawrence as Sandra Pelt

Fairies & Part-Fae



Figure 41: Ryan Kwanten as Jason Stackhouse

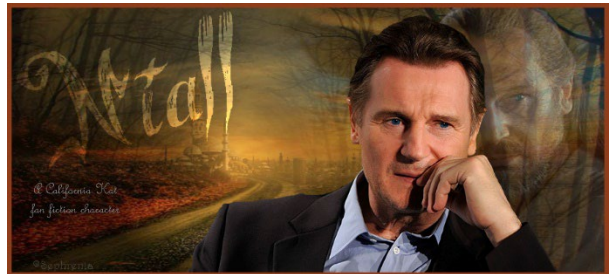


Figure 42: Liam Neeson as Niall Brigant



Figure 43: Gerard Butler as Fintan Brigant

Others



Figure 44: Michelle Forbes as Maryann Forrester

Humans



Figure 45: Morena Baccarin as Tara



Figure 46: Edgar Ramirez as Warren



Figure 47: Lois Smith as Adele Stackhouse



Figure 48: Nelsan Ellis as Lafayette



Figure 49: Michael McMillian as Steve Newlin

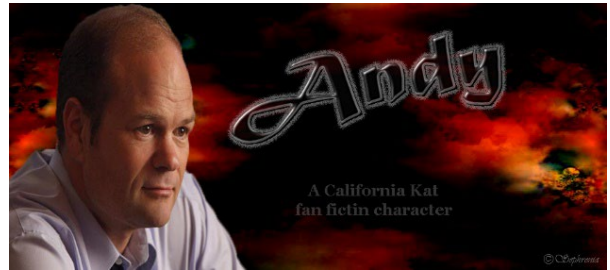


Figure 50: Chris Bauer as Andy Bellefleur



Figure 51: Carrie Preston as Arlene Fowler

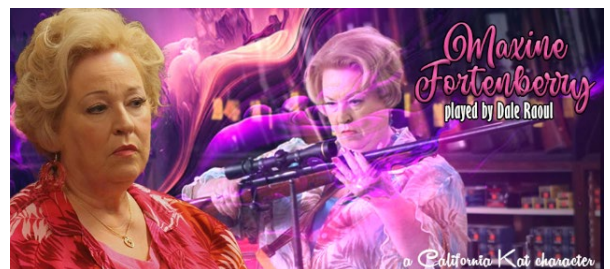


Figure 52: Dale Raoul as Maxine Fortenberry



Figure 53: Lynn Collins as Dawn Green



Figure 54: Danielle Sapia as Maudette Pickens



Figure 55: Michael Raymond-James as Rene Renier



Figure 56: Cheyenne Wilbur as Bartlett Hale



Figure 57: William Sanderson as Bud Dearborne



Figure 58: Adina Porter as Lettie Mae Thornton

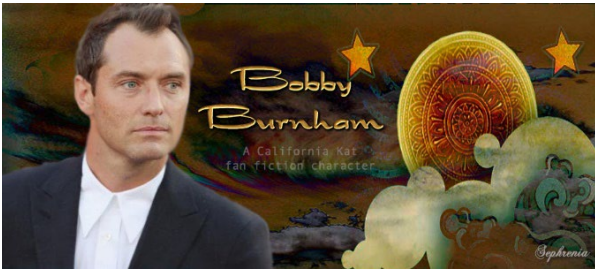


Figure 59: Jude Law as Bobby Burnham



Figure 60: Tara Buck as Ginger



Figure 61: Jennie Jacques as Aude