Encounters with the Dead

by Severina

Summary

What if Bill hadn't made his way to Bon Temps before the murders started, and Sookie decided to go to Fangtasia to investigate on her own? This is my take on Season One of True Blood with a nice heaping dose of Eric/Sookie. I've changed some events, eliminated others, and added many more. Maudette and Dawn have been murdered and Jason is the prime suspect. The story begins on the afternoon of the day that Sookie goes to Fangtasia for the first time.

Notes

This is the first of an estimated 18 chapters of what I hope to be a 50K story, written for NaNoWriMo 2016. I've already written the first 7.5 chapters, and hope to be able to post a chapter a day (though there may be a couple of days between chapters if my writing slows down.) I did not rewatch S1 of True Blood before starting this fic, so the events that mirror the TV show are from my memory. Some little hints from the books may show up as well, but nothing that would spoil anything for non-book readers. Each chapter alternates between Sookie's and Eric's point of view.

* * *
Chapter One

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Chapter One

I was doing my best to lose myself in a book when I heard the crunch of gravel on the driveway. Not that it was that easy to concentrate, even when the book was just one of those lightweight bodice rippers from the library. Knowing that there's a serial killer running around plays havoc on a girl's concentration. Usually I appreciated the isolation of Gran's old house – my house, now – but for the past week or so I'd definitely been getting the jitters.

And I'd known both Dawn and Maudette, which made the whole thing even worse. Of course, everybody practically knew everybody in a small town like Bon Temps, and I wasn't really friends with either of the women. Maudette I saw occasionally over at the Wal-Mart or sometimes on a Sunday at church, and even though Dawn and I had worked together we didn't have much in common. So they were more acquaintances than friends, but the thought of what had happened to them was enough to have me double-checking my locks at night and jumping at every groaning floorboard and creaking windowpane in the place.

I put my novel face-down on the table when the sound of the tires drew around to the rear of the house. Only one person came in through the back door, so it had to be Jason.

When he tugged open the screen door and nodded to me before heading to the fridge, I steeled myself for bad news. First, it was the middle of the afternoon, so my brother should have been at work, supervising the road crew and working on his tan. Second, he bypassed the pitcher of lemonade and pulled out a beer. Jason never drank during work hours, so he obviously wasn't going to be heading back to the Renard Parish crew today. Guess Hoyt or Rene'd be filling in as foreman for the rest of the afternoon.

I waited until he'd downed half the bottle of Bud just standing in the middle of the kitchen, then got up and started pulling the makings of a sandwich out of the fridge. Not that food made everything better, but Gran had always said that it was easier to talk about things over a family meal. I piled yesterday's leftover meatloaf and some lettuce on a couple of thick slices of Texas toast smothered in mayonnaise for Jason and pulled out a small bowl of strawberries for myself.

Jason had slumped into one of the kitchen chairs, eaten half the sandwich and started on a second bottle of beer before he finally leaned back and met my eyes.

"Feel any better?" I asked.

"Honestly?" Jason said. "Not really, Sook. Not that I don't appreciate the effort."

I folded my hands on the table and successfully resisted using my curse to poke around in his head. Jason hated that, and I took extra special care not to rummage around in the heads of my family and friends. "You gonna tell me what's wrong?"

If he'd gotten fired, it wouldn't be good. I love my brother but he's not exactly the sharpest knife in the cutlery drawer, and there's not an abundance of jobs out there for someone with his skill set. And neither of us made enough money to set some aside for a rainy day. I was half worrying myself into a state of panic over how on earth he'd afford his mortgage and property taxes when Jason sighed.
"I just spent the last four hours down at the police station," he said.

Okay, completely not what I was expecting. "Again?"

"They keep haulin' me down there every couple of days, askin' the same damn questions. How close was I to them girls, when did I see 'em last, what do I know about their... well, their sexual... particulars."

He gave me a sheepish look, well aware that the last thing I wanted to hear about was what Dawn and Maudette used to do in the privacy of their bedrooms, especially when some of those things involved my own brother. I got enough information about that sort of stuff sneaking past my shields when I wasn't expecting it, thank you very much.

Jason hung his head. "By the time they get through with me these days I'm half believin' I actually did kill poor Dawn and Maudette."

I crossed my arms at my chest. The idea of Jason killing anybody was ludicrous. My brother loved women – maybe a bit too much and a bit too often, but still. He'd never lift a hand to a woman in anger, and I didn't have to peek into his head to know it. He might love 'em and leave 'em, like the song said, but he'd never, ever get physical. Gran was the strongest woman I ever knew and she raised him better than that.

"Well, that's just crazy, Jason," I said.

"Andy's got a way of messin' with my head, Sook," Jason said. He looked sadder than a coon dog at the end of hunting season. "He's sure I did it and he ain't gonna give up 'til I'm behind bars at Angola."

The thought of my brother in the Louisiana State Penitentiary made me shiver, even in the midst of a summer heatwave. Not just because I was sure he was innocent, but because... well, Jason's a good looking fella. He's a fighter, sure, but he'd last about ten minutes before somebody bigger and brawnier with one of them teardrop tattoos had him face-down on a cot. I've never gotten those kinds of images out of anybody's heads, thank goodness – the violent kind of images, I mean, not the male sex kind, 'cause I sure don't have any problem with people loving each other, no matter what gender they are – but I did have cable for a while. Had to stop watching Oz when it gave me nightmares.

I shook my head and pushed the bowl of strawberries away. I wasn't hungry anymore. I'd been the one who found poor Dawn, sprawled out on her bed all lifeless and broken... and thanks to my little gift, I knew exactly what Maudette looked like when the police got to her house as well. Andy Bellefleur was a strong broadcaster even when I had my shields up. Of course, Andy and Bud hadn't exactly been discreet about talking out loud about the case either, so half of Bon Temps knew that both girls had "spent time" with vampires. Seems to me that the investigation should be focused on that and not my hapless brother.

"Anybody with more than five brain cells would know you've got nothin' to do with those murders, Jason," I told him. I watched him pluck a couple of strawberries from the bowl and pop them into his mouth – not even being suspected of double homicide could hamper Jason's appetite – and thought about what I'd seen at Dawn's house; what I'd seen in Andy's head about Maudette. "What are Bud and Andy doin' about the... the bite marks? And the vampire with the tattoos?"

Jason threw up his hands. "Nothin'! Least as far as I can tell."

"But it's their job to investigate—"
"Andy's so sure it was me," Jason interrupted glumly, "he probably plain forgot Maudette and Dawn ever even had sex with vamps. 'Sides, that video tape I told you about? It's missin', so it's ain't like they got more than my say-so that that big deader with the tattoos ever existed."

"It's the best lead they've got, and they're blowing it," I said. I might favour historical fiction of the rough and tumble antihero and the innocent maiden sort – hey, a girl's gotta get some action, and when you're like me and can't date without hearing all the rude and unwelcome thoughts in a guy's head then novels are the next best thing – but I read all sort of other books, too. And mysteries are about my second favourite kind of story. And the one thing detectives do in all those books is find the common denominator between the victims.

Now fine, both Dawn and Maudette had dated my brother – if 'dated' was the right word, and I was absolutely sure it wasn't. But they'd also both had fang marks in very intimate places, and Jason sure as heck didn't have fangs. And another thing...

"Didn't somebody say Maudette and Dawn both hung out at that vampire bar in Shreveport?"

"Fangtasia," Jason filled in. "Yup."

I rolled my eyes. Fangtasia. Just about the stupidest name I ever heard. "Well, why aren't Bud and Andy gettin' their butts down there and askin' around? Or at least callin' the Shreveport PD and—"

"Don't ask me, sis. I'm just the dumb fuck who got caught in the middle of this mess 'cause I couldn't keep my dick in my pants." He reached across the table to pat my hand briefly in apology for his language, then snatched up the remainder of his sandwich. He waved a hand in the air, sending a glob of mayo-coated lettuce splatting on my clean floor. Jason didn't notice. "Thanks for this, and for listenin'. I'm gonna head home and maybe do some fishin'. Get some peace and quiet for a change."

"That'll do you good, Jase," I said as I rose to see him out the back door. He still looked unsettled, his eyes darting around and a sheen of sweat on his skin that made him look feverish. Sitting on his old deck with a pole would relax him, I hoped. I watched until his taillights vanished around the side of the house, then slid the flimsy bolt home on the door. Not that a lock would do much good when the screen was open to let in the fresh air, but it still made me feel a little better.

After I cleaned the floor and washed and dried Jason's plate, I tried to get back into my book. But my mind wouldn't focus on swordplay and derring-do. It kept circling back to the shocked, scared look on Dawn's face when I found her, and the way her naked body was just splayed out on her bed for anybody to see, and the tiny set of fang marks on her inner thigh. Fangtasia.

I set my novel aside and absently ate a couple of strawberries as I thought. Tina did her best to distract me – first by meowing around her already full bowl of food in hopes of getting some of the meat loaf, and then by jumping into my lap and curling up contentedly while I stroked her glossy fur. By the time she'd fallen asleep I'd come to a decision.

If Andy Bellefleur and Bud Dearborne weren't going to do their jobs, maybe it was time that I did a little investigating of my own.
"Good crowd tonight," Pam said.

I raised my head from my cell phone, though in truth I hadn't been paying attention to the screen for the past fifteen minutes. I had been, in the vernacular of the decade, 'zoning out'. Something that was happening far more often lately as I sprawled in my chair on the stage.

I let my gaze drift slowly across the dance floor. It was thronged with sweating bodies, as Pam had said. The music was loud and discordant; the writhing of the bloodbags forced and awkward. One of the women near the stage tried to catch my eye, slithering gracelessly on stiletto heels. I barely stopped myself from sneering. If I had to look at one more anorexic breather squeeze her fake tits into a too-tight leather corset I might be tempted to... no, that was the problem. I was not tempted to do anything. Feeding from them was still enjoyable, though it was harder than ever to find one whose blood wasn't polluted by the drugs and alcohol that they insisted on pumping into their systems. And fucking them was more instinctual than pleasurable these days. I simply let the bloodlust take over and then tried to make a game of it. How long could I pound into them before I came? How many orgasms could I force from them – their bodies growing limp, their gasps turning into whimpers – before I finally let them rest?

My reputation grew the more bored I became.

Pam mistook my attention on the squirming breather for interest. "She's hot," she offered.

I leaned back, stretching my long legs. The woman was not 'hot'. She stumbled a little closer to the stage as I watched her; close enough that I dropped fang and hissed a warning. She gasped and tottered away on her too-high heels, self-preservation winning out over her lust. Another in nearly identical latex and leather flailed to the music in her place and sought vainly to catch my eye. Fools, all of them.

I swiveled to look at Pam, lifted a brow. She was still regarding the breather with a predatory fascination. I thought she had better taste than that, but my Pamela is still young. It will probably take her another few centuries for the ennui to set in. "Help yourself," I said.

"Hmm. Maybe later," she drawled. She licked her lips, then straightened to look down at me. Despite her own leather ensemble, she was now all business. "Eddie has not shown up for his shift."

I grunted, doing a quick scan of the room to confirm. The young vampire usually took a seat at one of the side tables, as far away from the restless crowd as he could manage and still be in the same room. He huddled into himself, nursing a Tru Blood and avoiding eye contact. I was certain that most of the breathers in the bar thought he was just another human wannabe; some sadsack from Monroe or Minden who came to the bar to 'pretend' but couldn't even be bothered to dress up in costume and try to fit in. Eddie put in his four hours two nights a week and went home alone. I'd be of a mind to tell him to skip his required appearances altogether were it not for the precedent it would set.

"Shall I send someone to fetch him?"

Pam's eyes glittered at the thought of doling out a little discipline, but I waved a hand dismissively. Eddie Gauthier was more likely to drive customers away than keep them drinking. And I frankly didn't want the annoyance of listening to his pathetic screams for mercy, or the added bother of
glamouring Ginger after she cleaned up the mess.

"But—"

"Pam," I said firmly. Several pairs of eyes had snapped up in our direction. While I valued her counsel in the privacy of my office, I would not tolerate her questioning my decisions or my authority in public. Pam realized this quickly, because her eyes dropped submissively. I waited a beat or two until the other vampire's attention dropped away, then lowered my voice for her ears only. "Tell me of your visit to New Orleans."

"Loud, hectic, and annoying," she said. Her hand fisted on her hip before she brightened. "I did have a lovely breather in a little jazz club in the French Quarter. Her blood was divine. And the things she could do with her tongue. She played the clarinet. Amazing breath control for a bloodbag."

As fascinating as her little sexual diversions could be, I wanted to know the real reason for her visit. "And the Queen?"

Pam's brow furrowed. "You were right. Sophie-Anne is up to something, and it definitely involves our Area. She dropped a few hints, but nothing concrete even though I sat through seventeen games of Yahtzee while I was attempting to worm it out of her. And I was unable to get that insipid Hadley alone despite some very creative maneuvering on my part."

"Pam," I scolded teasingly, "you're losing your touch."

She pouted elaborately, coaxing a laugh from me before she straightened again. "Seriously, Eric, Sophie-Anne has become increasingly erratic. She's had a day room constructed complete with swimming pool and simulated sunlight. Her fixation borders on fanaticism. She's obsessed with what she can never have."

Daywalking. Every vampire's dream, but most of us were wise enough to realize that seeking it out was a fool's errand. More than one vampire had nearly been driven mad by the attempt, or had seen his sure-fire solution burn up in the morning's rays along with the flesh off his bones.

I leaned back, swept a hand through my hair and ignored the shuffles and sighs of appreciation the movement brought forth from the humans on the dance floor. It was better to accept our place. We were darkness.

And we attracted our like, pitiful humans who painted themselves in our image and scurried for our favour like dogs begging for a scrap of meat.

Not for the first time, I considered my options. I could resign as Sheriff; sell the majority shares in the club to Pam. The thought continued to its logical conclusion. I would then have to settle somewhere new, find a place in a hierarchy where I would have little power; I would have to bow and scrape to whatever pathetic vampire held the position that I now fill. Unacceptable.

A different human had maneuvered her way to my dais while I mused. This one was a redhead, her hair piled up haphazardly in looping curls that were designed to look careless but truly took hours to create. The hair colour was the only thing that set her apart from the others who gyrated around her: she had the same fake tits spilling from the same black bustier; the same flat ass and stork-like legs. The same dead eyes.
She saw me watching her and thrust out her chest, one manicured finger snaking down between the globes of her breasts before drifting over to tease at a nipple. Her heart rate sped just a little faster with every second of my attention, the blood pulsing in her veins until I could almost see it thrumming beneath her skin. Yet the thought of having her was more repulsive than arousing.

"We'll keep an eye on Sophie-Anne," I told Pam, lifting my gaze from the now-disappointed breather to track over to the bar. I felt Pam's acceptance, as well as her resignation that I'd soon be sending her on another fact-finding mission to New Orleans. Maybe I'd pick her up a custom set of die as a gift for the Queen for her next visit.

As amusing as the thought was, it could not hold my attention for long.

The music changed; the dancers did not. I let my eyes drift half-closed, resigned to another tedious night, when a flash of movement at the front entrance caught my eye. The woman was replacing her identification in her purse, blinking as she adjusted her eyesight to the dim lighting of the club. Her blonde hair shone; her church-picnic dress seemed to bathe her in an ethereal glow.

I straightened slightly in the chair and lifted a brow toward Pam. Perhaps this night was looking up after all.
I smoothed a hand nervously over my dress. I'd chosen it because... well, because it was just about the prettiest dress I owned: white with a smattering of red flowers, a sweetheart neckline with a ruffled bodice that showed off my assets without looking slutty and a full skirt that swirled when I walked. I'd had some kind of half-baked idea that the red would let me blend in – the whole blood thing – and I'd paired it with a cute little red straw purse and low heels. My blonde hair was tucked back from my face with a headband and when I'd left the house I'd felt all kinds of empowered and yes, kind of sexy.

I was the only person wearing white. Heck, I was the only person not wearing black. I'd honestly never seen so much leather and fishnet in my life. And I think a couple of people were wearing... I squinched up my nose... was that plastic?

And the thoughts! Sex, sex, sex. It seemed like every single person in the place just wanted to have sex with a vampire. And get bitten by a vampire. And... I gulped nervously when I picked up a couple of interesting combinations of the two, because ewww. People are sick.

It was only when someone nudged me from behind that I realized I was still blocking the entrance. With a mental inhale, I allowed my shields to raise partway and took a determined step into the club.

The décor matched the people, all black and red and sort of sad and desperate. There was a long bar along one side of the room, and I made my way carefully past the wooden tables and milling people to reach it. Not only could I use a drink – well, okay, I could use several, but I was driving tonight so I could only allow myself one – but I also knew from my own job that the people that knew the most and saw the most are the ones who work the front lines. Heck, I could probably tell you more about Jane Bodehouse than her own son.

I squished in between a man wearing a dog collar and leather shorts – honestly, who even knew they made leather shorts – and a woman whose top appeared to be constructed of a few artfully placed plastic straps. The woman was trying to figure out how to get the attention of some blond male vampire on the other side of the room, and the man was thinking about – ugh. I shut off that connection as quickly as I could. But it didn't help much. Everyone in the room was thinking equally nasty thoughts. A lot of them were about the blond. I guess he was some kind of big deal around here.

I set my purse down on the bar and took a breath, reminded myself why I was here. I had to ask questions, and I had to probe people's minds to see if they had any insight about Dawn and Maudette when I did it. If that meant I got bombarded with some gross mental images... well, I could take a nice long shower when I got home to wash them away. And maybe read my bible. And go to church about seven times.

It was only when the bartender lifted his eyebrow that I realized he'd been talking to me. The first vampire I'd ever met. He was tall and thin, Native American, with long dark hair and a few tattoos. He looked about forty, but goodness knows how long he'd actually been alive. Or undead. Or....

I blinked, shook my head. "Sorry. Woolgathering," I said. He didn't move. Okaaaay then. Not exactly off to the best start. I plastered on my best smile, knowing it was awkward as all get out, and said pleasantly, "Gin and tonic, please."

He mixed the drink at normal speed, which kind of surprised me. I knew vampires could move super fast – there were commercials on late night TV for a house cleaning service out of New Orleans that
hired vampires, and they boasted they could have an entire two story house spick and span in twenty minutes – and somehow I figured that vampires would just use that ability in all their jobs. But it took him a good minute to fix my gin and tonic, and I was thankfully able to use that time to get my head straight.

"Three fifty," he said, setting the drink in front of me on a little cardboard coaster. Bright white fangs dripping blood on a black background. Classy.

I dipped into my purse for my wallet, and pulled out the two photos while I was at it. I handed him a five. "Keep the change," I said, and steered myself before he could walk away. I let my shields down fully and prepared to dip into his head, and held up the pictures of Maudette and Dawn. "And I was wondering if you could do me a favour?"

He glanced down at the photos for a millisecond before looking back at me.


I didn't know what he was thinking, but he suddenly grinned at me and I saw a glimpse of fang. He puffed out his narrow chest. "You like what you see?"

_I didn't know what he was thinking._

The place where his thoughts should be was just a blank void. An empty spot. I couldn't hear a thing.

It was incredible.

He was still staring at me, and I laughed nervously. "Oh, no," I said, and only realized how that sounded when his eyes narrowed. I backpedaled quickly. "I mean, you're a very handsome man… or vampire, I should say… but I—"

I was about to make up a fictional boyfriend back in Bon Temps when his lip curled and his arms folded over his chest. "What do you want?" he grunted out.

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I held up the photos again. "I was wondering if you'd seen either of these women here at the bar?"

He glanced again at the photos. "I've seen them both."

"And," I said quickly when he looked like he was going to walk away, "do you happen to remember if either of them left with anyone?"

I'd been hoping that by asking the question, somebody would think of the bald vampire that Jason had seen in Maudette's video. Of course, now that I couldn't read vampires – or at least, I couldn't read _this_ vampire – that plan was out the window.

"I don't notice those things. Neither will you," he said, fixing me with a stare. The warning was clear. I guess they took privacy seriously here. Considering what they got up to based on what I'd seen in some people's heads, I guess that made sense.

"Okie dokie," I answered. I tucked the photos back into my purse. "Thank you for your time," I added, but he'd already slipped away to draw someone a beer from the tap.

And I still didn't know what he was thinking.

I whirled on the bar stool, trying to look unobtrusive as I sipped my drink. I did a quick experiment. I dipped into the head of the girl wearing the weird strappy top, and yup – she was still thinking about
the blond vampire with the long hair. She was trying to decide if she should dance over to his chair and peel off her strips of plastic one by one. Yuck. The man in the dog collar had moved to the dance floor, but the girl in a teeny bustier who'd taken his place was thinking about how good it had felt when the bartender — turns out his name was Longshadow — had bitten her last week, and wondering what she had to do to get him to do it again. Slightly less yuck.

So my little curse was in full effect on humans. I fixed my attention on a vampire twirling around a pole in the middle of the dance floor, and... nothing. I could sense the spot where her brain should be, but the only thing I got was a hole in the atmosphere. I tried with another vampire, a woman lounging against the wall near the door, and got the same result.

I was exhilarated. The thrill of not-knowing sparked through me. I was still getting bombarded with a whole lot of unwelcome mental images from all the humans, but those teeny bits of quiet space felt just joyous. I found myself smiling into my glass.

Then I remembered why I was here. None of my peeks into the human brains had revealed a muscled tattooed bald vampire, and if my hint from Longshadow was correct then none of the vampires were going to answer if I straight out asked about him. And I couldn't look into their heads, which was super exciting for me but not so great for doing any investigating.

My gaze fell on the tall, blond vampire sprawled on the stage as I dredged up the last of my gin and tonic. He was the one starring in at least seventy five percent of everyone's mental fantasies, and once I really looked at him I could see why. He was one long cool drink of water. Pale, of course, with hair that fell past his shoulders and legs encased in black denim that went on for a mile. He was completely still, but it was in the way that a lion is still before it pounces. Anybody could see the power coiled in the stillness. There was nothing static or stagnant about him. I felt a thrill all the way down to my toenails.

I reached behind me to set my empty glass on the bar. It was pretty obvious from the way everyone was deferring to the blond that he was the Big Kahuna around these parts, and if I wasn't going to get answers from the bar staff then I might as well jump on up the ladder. The worst that could happen was that he'd say no. Actually, I guess with vampires there was a lot worse that could happen than that. And Merlotte's doesn't offer medical insurance. Maybe coming to Fangtasia wasn't the best idea I ever had. But as Gran used to say: in for a penny, in for a pound.

I hopped down from the stool and smoothed my dress before I could change my mind, then started making my way across the crowded dance floor. The music — if you could call it that — was earsplitting and jarring and I had to step carefully to make sure I wasn't jostled by the people flinging themselves around and I was trying to keep my shields up as best I could and... he was staring at me. He never moved, never blinked, and never looked away. It was unnerving but also a little exciting.

I stopped a little bit back from the stage, suddenly aware that I had no idea how to begin. Shoving photos into his face seemed rude, and I didn't have an opening like ordering a drink. I clutched at my handbag and smiled.

"Hi there," I said.

He lifted a brow but otherwise didn't move a muscle.

Up close he was even better looking than he had seemed from across the bar. He was all lean muscle and bright blue eyes, and he had a delicious cleft in his chin that just begged to be licked. I'm sorry, but it's the truth. The men I knew in Bon Temps just had nothing on him.
"I was wondering," I continued when he didn’t speak, "if I could ask you a few questions?"

"No, we're not allergic to garlic; yes, sunlight is dangerous to us; whether we sleep in coffins or not is a personal preference," the female vampire standing next to him droned.

I blinked. Honestly, I'd barely noticed the woman – which could have been dangerous, considering where I was – but my good manners kicked in, if a little belatedly. "Well, that's very interesting," I answered, smiling over at her. When her expression didn't change from bland boredom, I looked back over at the gorgeous male vampire in the chair. "But my questions are more about some former patrons of yours?"

"Very interesting," he said, gently mocking my accent. "Aren't you sweet."

"Not particularly," I said, lifting my chin. I guessed that he was just teasing me, but stuff like that tended to get my back up. I tried to remember why I was here, and tempered my voice accordingly. "I'll only take a few minutes of your time."

"Time is something I certainly have in abundance," he said. His eyes tracked over my body in a way that made me shiver before he gestured to the smaller chair at his side. "Sit."

I didn't much like being commanded like a hound dog. But if he was willing to talk I was willing to sit while I listened, so I stepped onto the stage and perched on the edge of the chair, my purse clutched on my lap. The mental voices from the humans on the dance floor got louder, and I probably winced a little. I was getting called everything from a two-bit whore to a trashy hick, and getting criticized for everything from the size of my boobs to the gap between my teeth. I snapped my shields into place a little firmer and smiled until I could feel my jaw cracking.

Then I glanced at the vampire and tried to narrow my focus and get a read on him. Nothing there but a nice, silent void. I could feel my smile relax into something a little more natural.

When he didn't say any more, I undid the clasp on my purse and pulled out the photos of Maudette and Dawn. He took them from my outstretched hand without looking away from my eyes, so I couldn't be sure if he brushed my fingers accidentally or on purpose. His fingers were long and cool and I shivered again, even though the club was hot as a blast furnace.

"I was wondering if you'd seen either of these two women here," I said.

He glanced down at the photos, then back to me. "And you ask about them, why?"

"Well, sir, they were murdered," I answered.

"Aah," he said. He smirked over his shoulder at the female vampire before turning back to me. "And you must be the detective assigned to the case."

"No, sir," I answered as pleasantly as I could. He could tease me all he liked, I wasn't going to rise to the bait. Gran raised me better than that. "I'm just a waitress. My name is Sookie, Sookie Stackhouse. I work at Merlotte's Bar and Grill over in Bon Temps. You've probably never heard of it."

For some reason, giving him my name and occupation seemed to help. He inclined his head. "I am Eric," he said before gesturing to the vampire in the leather mini-dress at his side, "and this is Pam."

"Pleased to meet you both," I said, ducking my head in return.

"Charmed, I'm sure," Pam drawled.
Eric smiled back at me. I didn't see any fang, which was encouraging. Then he leaned forward and stared at me, which was more disconcerting than anything else. "And you are not just a waitress, Miss Stackhouse," he said. His pretty blue eyes bored into mine. "What are you?"

I'd never heard of anybody picking up on my telepathy before, at least not unless I did something stupid like blurt out the answer to a question they were thinking or smack my tray over somebody's head for thinking dirty thoughts about me. But Eric sure seemed to suspect that something was up.

"I'm not anything," I said firmly, "except a waitress." I stared back at him as innocently as I could, and then something occurred to me and my eyes got wide and I couldn't help laughing. "Are you tryin' to glamour me?"

Eric blinked and lounged back on his chair. I'd surprised him, and the fact made me giggle some more. I'd bet dollars to donuts that not too many people figured him out.

"Of course not, Miss Stackhouse," he said politely. He cocked his head, and again his gaze trailed from my eyes to the tips of my toes, and then back again. I couldn't help blushing, and he seemed to find that amusing. "I simply find you… curious."

He seemed sincere, but I still didn't doubt he had been trying to glamour me. There was a whole report about glamouring on 20/20 back when vampires first came out of the coffin. They claimed it was an unintentional side effect of close attention, but the way I could feel Eric pushing at my head I knew now that wasn't the case at all. A little information to file away and think about later.

"I'm only curious about Dawn and Maudette," I said, jutting my chin toward the photos.

"Why do you care?"

"As if two poor girls being murdered in their beds wasn't enough reason to care about them!" I answered.

But I guess for vampires it probably wasn't. Gosh only knew how old Eric was, and before synthetic blood came on the market he'd probably done more than his share of killing. Not that vampires could help it back then, I reminded myself. You can't blame the lion for killing the zebra.

My suspicion was confirmed when Pam and Eric shared a dubious look.

"My brother is a suspect," I said, deciding all at once to come clean. "I know Jason didn't do it, and the detectives in town are… well, I'm a lady so I can't say what I truly want to about them, but 'incompetent' is the nicest word I can come up with. I'm just trying to find out any information I can to help my brother."

"Hmm," he said. For the first time he looked carefully at the photos. He stabbed one long finger at Dawn's photo. "This one I tasted," he said. "The other was too pathetic."

Okay then. I took a deep breath. "Did you happen to notice if they left with anyone?"

"As I said, I had this one in my office. I escorted her to her car when she left. She liked pain." I screwed up my nose at that, but Eric was looking at the other picture and didn't notice. He tapped Maudette's photo. "This one left alone."

"Well, that's just great," I muttered. I flopped back in the chair, the noise and the frustration from all those active brains sending horrible thoughts my way suddenly getting to me. I'd wasted my time and my gas on a wild goose chase, and the only reward I got was hearing a bunch of drunk people call me names in their heads. I could get that at Merlotte's on any random Saturday night, and at least
then I made some good tips.

Well, okay. I also met my first vampires, one of whom was drop dead gorgeous – pardon the pun – and discovered that I couldn't hear vampire minds. But those two things weren't enough right now to ease my irritation.

The corners of Eric's mouth were upturned in amusement and I realized how I must look, slouched back on the chair like a pouting child. I sat up and smoothed my skirt, tried to plaster a smile on my face and reached for the photos. "Thank you for looking," I said as I tuck ed them away again.

"I'm sorry that the answers were not what you anticipated," Eric said. Out of the corner of my eye I saw Pam raise a brow, but any curiosity I had about that dropped away when Eric asked, "Where are the bodies?"

I swallowed. "Why?"

"I may be able to help," he said. He lifted one brow and smiled. "If you trust me."

Well, that was just the million dollar question, wasn't it? But I had come all this way, and if he could do anything at all to clear Jason's name…

I nodded quickly before my brain could overrule my heart. "Sure," I said.

He stood, and I had to practically crane my head backwards to meet his eyes. Boy oh boy, he was tall. I got an abrupt mental flash of climbing him like a tree and felt my cheeks getting hot; I forced myself to slot that away until I was safely home in my bed. If nothing else, this trip to Fangtasia was going to provide me with enough fantasy fodder for months.

"Come," he said.

"Again with the dog commands," I muttered. But I put my hand in his, and let his cool fingers wrap around mine as he helped me to my feet. For a moment I hesitated, there on the edge of the stage, holding a vampire's hand while the music pounded around us and a dozen brains hurled out nasty thoughts my way. It felt like I was at the edge of a precipice; one wrong move would send me crashing onto the rocks below.

Then Eric's hand tightened on mine, and I took the first, safe step.
Chapter 4

The woman's vehicle was an embarrassment.

And apparently leaving a bar in the accompaniment of a vampire was one thing, while allowing herself to be chauffeured in luxury by the vampire in question was quite another. If I was able to glamour her we'd be tooling toward her little hick town in my corvette, and I wouldn't have spent a frustrating two minutes trying to convince her of the benefits of riding in a sports car and another minute adjusting the passenger seat to fit someone who was not hobbit-sized. Of course, if I could glamour her I wouldn't be going on this expedition in the first place. Right about now she'd be bent over my desk with my fangs buried in her neck and her lovely white dress raked up around her waist.

At least that's what I told myself as I watched the trees whip by. The windows were open – of course her pathetic excuse for a car didn't have air conditioning – and the viscous, humid air of a Louisiana summer pushed against my face, whipped my hair back in a thick tangle. I turned away from the monotonous view to watch her instead.

She sat with her back straight, her small hands firmly at ten and two on the wheel. At first glance she was nothing more than a prim and proper young lady with the garden party manners to match the Sunday-best dress. But this same woman had the mettle to laugh at me in the middle of my bar, in front of all those who owe me fealty, when she'd realized I'd been trying to influence her thoughts. Hell, she had the steel in her spine to waltz into Fangtasia asking her ridiculous questions in the first place.

Yes, the truth about my interest in Sookie Stackhouse was a little more disconcerting. I found her fascinating even without her curious resistance to my call. She was sweet, despite her assurances to the contrary. But I suspected that her kindness was not an act, and I'd sensed some anxiety but very little fear from her at the bar even when I set her aside from the other vermin and gave her all of my attention.

She had simply treated me like a… person.

Even now, she hummed along to the country song on the radio under her breath. As if she didn't have a thousand year old vampire inches from her jugular. As if she didn't have a care in the world.

"You are not afraid," I said.

She side-glanced me, cocking a brow. "Is there a reason I should be?"

Only a hundred reasons. But I lifted a shoulder, and gave her one that applied whether the male in question was human or vampire. "One might question the wisdom of leaving a bar with a gentleman you don't know, Miss Stackhouse."

"Well, I'm glad you consider yourself a gentleman, 'cause I'm sure you'll act accordingly," she answered tartly. "Besides, if you wanted to hurt me you had ample time to do that at Fangtasia. And it's not like no-one knew where I went tonight, plus a ton of people saw me leave with you. I think I'm safe."

Does she not know how easy it would be to feed from her and fuck her, leave her drained and ripped apart as a feast for the gators? How easy it would be to wipe the minds of any miserable breathers who would risk telling the human police what they'd seen?
"Your friends may have made the same arrangements," I pointed out.

Her fingers tightened on the wheel. "Dawn and Maudette weren't my friends, exactly."

What kind of woman would potentially put herself in danger to avenge the murders of those who weren't even her friends? I would do much to ensure the protection of those vampires under my charge, but to actively help them – from the 'goodness' of my dead heart – was beyond his comprehension. I remembered, though, that her brother was involved. Humans did much for their blood kin. "Your brother's friends, then."

"Not Jason's, either," she answered. Her gaze left the road briefly, and the look on her face was uncomfortable. "Jason's sort of a… horndog. Not that there's anything wrong with two consenting adults getting together," she said quickly, "but I think you should care about someone before you do… that."

She got more and more interesting as the miles flew by. I inhaled subtly, sifting through the scents in the car, but there was no way to know if my new suspicions were correct. I decided to try a more direct approach.

"And do you care about someone, Miss Stackhouse?" I asked.

"I don't know that that's any of your business, Mr.---" She stopped her sharp tongue and cocked her head, giving me another glance. "You never did tell me your last name."

She was quick to divert from an embarrassing subject, this one. Still, as I'd told her, I had nothing but time. I allowed her the temporary comfort of a digression. "The name I use for my human dealings," I told her, "is Northman."

"Northman," she mused. "I read somewhere that older vampires don't have last names." She didn't wait for my response but simply continued her thought. "So I guess you chose Northman because you're from the north?"

I lifted a brow, but set aside her correct assumption about my age to consider at a later date. It seemed that the mental box of curiosities about the lovely Miss Stackhouse was getting more and more full as the miles passed. "You mean Canada?" I answered.

She laughed aloud and it made me smile in return. When she turned her attention from the road this time it was to study me more closely. I turned his head to look directly into her eyes, and had the distinct pleasure of knowing that her heart rate sped at my level gaze. But her voice when she turned back to the road was steady. One who was not vampire would never know that the sight of me made her pulse pound.

"I'd guess somewhere in Northern Europe," she said. "Norway?"

A good guess. "I am from the land now known as Sweden."

"Now known as?" she repeated slowly. I could see her eyes grow wide in the low light from the dashboard. I was coming to learn that little got past her. "Oh my god," she said excitedly, "were you a Viking?"

She couldn't know how unusual it was for vampires to talk about their pasts. Their human pasts. Every day since Godric found me can play out in sharp relief in my memory, every nuance easy to examine once I find the place where the memory resides. But many of my days as a human are hazy and indistinct. I remember my father, my mother, my small sister. I remember the wolves and the wolfsangel mark and the hunt. I remember my own funeral pyre, and the heat of the fire. I remember
Godric. All else is unimportant.

"I was," I said, and then blinked. I had had no intention of answering.

"No shit!" Sookie gasped, her hand flying to her mouth at the vulgarity. The action caused me to laugh out loud, all tension at the thoughts of my human past gone in the space of a human heartbeat.

"No shit," I repeated. I waited as Sookie made the turn onto a side street in her little town, then gave her my full attention once more. "Now, I have answered your questions, Miss Stackhouse—"

"Sookie," she corrected me. "If we're going to be pairing up on this thing, the least you can do is call me by my first name."

Oh, I certainly wanted to 'pair up' with the beautiful Miss Stackhouse. But somehow I didn't believe that fucking her to within an inch of her life was exactly what she had in mind. At least not yet. "Pairing up?" I said.

"Sure," she said with a giggle. "Stackhouse and Northman. Murder Investigations R Us. We could get little business cards made. Maybe a little cartoon of me holding a tray of beers and you lookin' all fangy."

I turned to her quickly then, dropping my fangs and hissing. "Like this?" I asked.

She jerked, but looked more startled than afraid. Her eyes widened, and her hand actually lifted from the wheel to drift toward my mouth before she caught herself and turned her attention back to a parking lot outside a small municipal building. "Yeah," she said softly, "sorta like that."

Curiouser and curiouser. I tucked my fangs away, watched her as she drove smoothly into the lot and parked in an empty spot near the side of the building. She turned the car off, moved to place the keys in her purse. "Who do you care for, Miss Stackhouse?"

"Huh?"

This time I was not going to let her change the subject. This time I would get my answer. I leaned across the seat, pinning her with my gaze until she squirmed in a way that my sharp fangs hadn't inspired in her. Most interesting.

"Well, Jason of course," she said finally. "My friends Tara and Sam, and Lafayette…"

I raised a brow and saw comprehension dawn on her face.

"Oh," she said quietly. She put her hands in her lap, stared at the pale pink polish on her nails. "That's… not really possible for me, Eric."

I sat back. Even without the dashboard lights I could of course see her clearly. Her skin was soft and unblemished, her hair golden and windblown. Her eyes, though downcast now, were warm and bright.

"You are young, shapely, attractive," I told her. Amusing, brave, beautiful, charming, intelligent. "There must be men eager to sample you."

"It's not that," she said.

If she took offense to my wording, she gave no sign. But her hands twisted in her lap anxiously, and her shoulders hunched around her pretty face. I told myself that I cared nothing for humans, but this
human? I found myself wishing to ease her discomfort. It was an unsettling thought.

"I would gladly have wild, passionate sex with you," I offered.

The words worked as I intended, and she laughed and lifted her head to mine. "Well, thanks for the offer," she said, "but I'm goin' to pass."

For now.

Before I could enquire further about her lack of bed partners, she shook her head and gestured toward the building. "We're here," she said. "What do you say we get this show on the road?"
Chapter 5

I got out of the car before Eric could answer; listened to the ticking engine and kept my back turned to him deliberately. He'd hopefully think that I was studying the building and not trying to calm the blushes that I could feel heating up my cheeks.

It was impossible for me to have romantic entanglements. Believe me, I'd tried. From the guy who'd mentally wondered if I was blonde all over to the one whose mind told me he'd rather be dating my brother, it was just one disaster after another. The only local guy who'd lasted more than one date with me was JB duRone, and that was because he was so simple that even his dirty thoughts were kind of weirdly innocent. I'd long ago come to the realization that I was always going to be alone. Just me and Tina. Heck, later I'd probably get more cats. Become a regular ol' cat lady.

Of course, all that was before I discovered that I couldn't read vampire minds. I probed toward Eric now and only felt that blissful silence. It made me sigh happily… and it made me consider other possibilities. Interesting possibilities. Eric had certainly made it clear that he found me desirable, after all.

Then I frowned. Eric had been a Viking, which meant he was… what, a thousand years old? A thousand years of adventures and experience. My mind boggled at the thought. And quickly came to the conclusion that a one thousand year old Viking vampire would have zero interest in a small-town telepathic barmaid. Eric liked to tease, that was all. And his blatant offer had certainly done a lot to lighten the mood in the car, I'll give him that.

I was only alone for about thirty seconds before he finally followed me out of the vehicle.

He leaned up against the car beside me, all long lines and leather. I sneaked a quick look at his profile. Strong jaw, pale lashes, all that hair. Long lean torso, and legs that went on for days. He folded his arms against his chest, and I could see the muscles bunching beneath the leather jacket. I imagined those strong arms wrapping around me; imagined tangling my hand in his hair as he bent to kiss me.

Okay, that was not helping!

I forced my mind to more practical things, like… the heat. I wiped away a trickle of sweat making its way down my collarbone, though I wasn't one hundred percent sure whether it was the typical Louisiana humidity or the gorgeous vampire standing next to me that was making me so hot and bothered. I sure didn't know how he could handle having a leather jacket on in this weather. Then again, I guess vampires don't feel the heat. In the brief time that I'd touched him, when he held my hand and led me from Fangtasia, I'd felt how cool his skin was. I had a sudden image of turning to him now and rubbing myself all over him like a cat just so I could cool down, and found myself giggling.

He turned to me and raised a brow, but I just waved him away, still grinning. For a second he looked like he was going to ask anyway, but he seemed to come to a conclusion – probably that I was some kind of crazy mental case and not worth his trouble – and pushed away from the car instead.

"We'll enter through the back," he said, already starting toward the rear of the building. "Come."

" Seriously, I'm not a dog," I muttered even as I hurried to catch up with him. The fact that we were actually going to do this – we were really going to break into the morgue and look at dead bodies – did more to sober me up from my brief giggling fit than a cold glass of water. Or a cold shower. I
reached him just as he was rounding the corner, and on impulse sent my mental probe into the building. What I found made me stop short and make a wild grab for Eric's arm. "Wait!" I said. "Mike Spencer's still inside."

I felt him stiffen beneath my grip, supple flesh turning into steel. Then faster than I could blink he had me pressed up against the bricks, and his eyes were boring into mine. His voice, however, was still soft. "And you know this how, Miss Stackhouse?"

"Sookie," I breathed out. "Partners, remember?"

His gaze held mine for a long moment, and then the hands holding my upper arms slackened their grip. "Then perhaps my partner had better come clean," he said.

I nodded and he stepped back, looking at me expectantly. There was just no way to ease into something like this. No matter how I tried to phrase it, I was a freak. So it was better to just blurt it out. "I'm a telepath," I told him. "I can read minds."

Eric's face remained completely impassive. He could have been made of marble; perfect, ageless, and impressive as all get out. I waited for some kind of reaction but when he continued to just stare at me I finally figured it out. "You don't believe me!"

"Let's just say," he said smoothly, "that if that were the case, there have been several instances this evening where you may have been inclined to slap my face."

"Oh." Ohhhhh. I fought against the blush that tried to flush my cheeks, and quickly moved to set him straight. "Human minds," I clarified. And then the excitement that I'd been feeling all evening bubbled over, and I was babbling before I could stop myself. "See, I'd never met a vampire before tonight. And when I tried to read Longshadow and couldn't I thought it was maybe some kind of fluke, but then I tried with the pole dancer and with Pam and with you and I can see the... the sort of mental placeholder that tells me there's someone there, but there's only an empty spot where your thoughts should be! And it's soooo quiet and peaceful bein' with you, I just can't believe it!"

I was grinning up at him like a loon, the delight in my discovery carrying me away. He couldn't know how incredible it had felt to drive along the interstate with him and not have a bloomin' clue what he was thinking! I didn't realize how on edge I was all the freakin' time until suddenly there was no need to be constantly firming up my shields and worrying about what rude, thoughtless comment was going to sneak past them the moment I let my guard down. I couldn't ever remember feeling so free.

I guess my enthusiasm must have affected him a little, because the corner of his mouth turned up for a second before he sobered. "You came to my bar hoping to read our minds and find your killer."

"Well... yes," I said. He raised that expressive brow again. Ohhhhh. The folly of that hadn't seemed quite so obvious until I saw the way he was looking at me. "But only to see if anyone had seen Dawn or Maudette leave with this big tattooed vampire that Maudette had been seeing!" I hastened to assure him. "I don't care about any other... I mean, what you-all do in your own time is—"

"You must never attempt to read a vampire's mind, Sookie."

"Uh huh," I agreed with a quick nod. Well, I couldn't do that anyway. And the way Eric was looking at me reminded me that I really, really didn't want to. Vampire secrets can just stay buried, thank you very much.

He must have decided that he'd made his point, because he leaned away from me. Part of me
appreciated the release of tension, but another part really missed having his body pressed up against mine. I should have been giving this situation the seriousness it deserved – it didn't take a brain trust to know that Eric's words were a warning, after all – but my traitorous body just wanted him to touch me again.

His gaze flicked over my face once, and then he looked away to scan the parking lot. But even that one final look surprised me. Most people, when they realized I could read minds? They looked disgusted, or fascinated, or horrified. They gave me a wide berth for a while, or they acted all fake and awkward. Eric just looked like he was filing the information away, no different than if I'd told him that I liked to play softball or read cheesy romantic fiction.

Was it possible that he just accepted it as a part of me, something no different than having brown eyes or blonde hair? I guess knowing that I couldn't probe his brain helped, but he didn't seem all that concerned about my little curse one way or the other. Maybe in all his long years he'd come across lots of things that were more interesting than a small-town waitress who read minds. I was probably boring compared to the things he'd seen and done.

"You suspect this bald vampire of killing those women," he said without turning to face me.

I blinked. Right, there were other things going on here that were more important than my curse or my lack of sex life or how the sexy vampire at my side could make my blood boil just by looking at me. Things like finding a killer before my brother ended up doing ten years to life in maximum security.

"I don't know," I answered honestly. "I know that he had… that he and Maudette had sex. He's just my only lead. So… maybe?"

Admitting as much could be dangerous. I knew that. When I'd made my plan to go to Fangtasia I'd thought to gather as much information from people's thoughts as I could, then take what I'd found to Bud Dearborne and make him listen. I'd thought that the law would take over and bring the killer to justice, and Jason would go free, and everything would suddenly be hunky-dory. Sometimes I was pretty naïve, I guess.

Now things were different. And I had no reason to believe that a vampire would turn over one of his own, even if he was killing innocent women. But my Gran had always told me to go with my gut, and I trusted Eric. Maybe that would come back later to punch me in the face, but I'd gone this far with him and I was willing to keep going until he gave me a reason to doubt him.

He turned back to me. "Then let's find out."

I nodded, but reached out to touch his arm. "What about Mike Spencer?"

Eric just grinned.
Chapter 6

The back door was locked. I dealt with that easily enough, and dropped the crushed doorknob behind a flowering bush before pushing the door open with the tips of my fingers. The hallway beyond was unlit. No problem for me, but I heard Sookie stumble in the unfamiliar landscape. I paused and looked over my shoulder, thought to offer my hand until I felt her fingers wrap firmly around my belt and her left hand press against my shoulder blade. I smiled in the dark and slowed my steps to accommodate her.

A turn and then another led us to our quarry. Even without the light shining from the inner office I could have found him from his stench: stale sweat, cheap cologne, and the salty astringent scent that let me know that Mike Spencer hadn't stayed late to work on his spreadsheets.

Sookie breathed a little easier when she saw the light. Her grip on my belt dropped away, more's the pity, and she stepped forward to take the lead. Her head held high, she walked directly into the office. I would have stopped her if Spencer's pants had still been around his ankles. That is not something I would have wanted her to see.

I didn't analyze that thought too closely.

"Sookie, what the tarnation! We're closed! You got some gall, girl! You can't just walk in here in the middle of the goddamn—" His tirade faltered as I stepped up behind her. Like most men, only too eager to abuse a woman until a stronger male appears to protect her.

"Don't you lay into me, Mike Spencer!"

I smirked. Not that Sookie Stackhouse needed that kind of protection.

"Well... geez, Sookie, you scared the bejeebus outta me!" A half-hearted apology if it could be called an apology at all. I disliked this man more with every second that I had to spend in his cramped office, drowning in his offensive odor. "How'd you get in here, anyways?" he asked.

"Your back door was open," I said.

"That so?" His brow furrowed as he looked between Sookie and I before finally settling on the woman. "Who's your friend?"

"Mike, this is—"

Sookie Stackhouse, always the polite southern woman. I stepped forward before she could continue. "My name is not important," I said, leaning over his messy desk. His head swiveled back to me when I moved, as I'd known it would. And just like that, he was captured.

"Sure," he said slowly. "I don't need to know your name."

"Holy smokes," Sookie said softly at my side.

I side-glanced her before turning all of my attention back to the undertaker. "You will take us to the room where you are holding Maudette and Dawn's remains," I instructed him. "You will open the drawers where they are being held. Then you will go home, take a much-needed shower, and go to bed. You will wake up in the morning refreshed and with no memory of this encounter."

"Okay," Spencer said. "I can do that."
"And on Sunday you'll put one hundred dollars in the collection plate for Reverend Michaels," Sookie added quickly. When I turned to her, brow raised, she lifted a shoulder. "Mike Spencer always pretends he 'forgot his wallet' when he goes to church, and we've been tryin' to raise enough money to repair the bell tower for over a year," she explained. Her grin could only be described as wicked. "That oughta make up for about six months worth of missed donations."

I found myself returning her grin and including her instructions. Her church would get a little bit wealthier this Sunday.

* * *

"So… can you do that with everybody?"

She was stalling.

I decided to let her.

"Clearly not everybody," I answered. I leaned against the tile wall, crossed my arms. The pathetic undertaker had already left, smiling vacantly as he wandered off. There had been a thin line of drool running down his chin. I'd heard his car start up a few minutes later. Sookie and I were alone with the bodies.

"It must be my telepathy," she said. "Whatever prevents me from getting a lock on your thoughts is probably the same thing that stops you from…" She waved a hand in the air. "Whatever it is you do."

"I picture a string," I told her. It was different for every vampire, but the string analogy worked best for me. "Pull it tight to implant the instructions. Pluck it out—" I mimed picking a flower. "And the memory is gone."

"Just like that," Sookie said softly. She bit her lip and stared down at the toes peeking out of her pretty white sandals. The polish on them matched those on her fingernails.

I narrowed my eyes. This frightened her. Not the sight of my fangs, not my vast strength, not the blood that I drank to sustain myself. This made her cross her arms over her breasts and cup her elbows and shiver.

She lifted a hand again. "Maybe we ought to just—"

"Yes," I said.

Her gaze darted everywhere but at the two bodies shrouded in white sheets on the stainless steel gurneys. I had no such compunction. The bodies were just corpses. I was death. Sookie had forgotten that, or perhaps she hadn't realized it until confronted with the actual bodies of her acquaintances. What separated me from them but a little magic, a little supernatural mumbo-jumbo? She had been treating me like a person. Only now did she truly understand that I was Other.

There was a strange sensation in my chest. It took a moment to identify it as hurt. I quickly channeled it into anger. Vampires did not feel 'hurt' by the opinions of humans, of mortals with their frail shells and even more fragile egos. I did not.

I stared down at the ashen face of the first woman before moving on to the second. The one I had tasted. Her blood had been strong and pungent, and the sex adequate until she had started begging me to beat her. I had lightly slapped her face and her eyes had rolled back in her head and she had laughed as she licked the blood from her lip, and it was enough to make me finish with her quickly.
and send her away.

I looked from her slack face to Sookie, still hunched against the wall and now staring blankly at the wheel of the gurney. Any anger that I had been coaxing to life waned and died. I could play with humans like puppets: make them dance, sing, fuck, scream, hurt themselves, hurt others. Induce them to make large donations to their church funds. And then I could make them forget. I could not influence her, but I could harm people she cared about. She was smart to feel anxious.

She was nothing like this useless dead fangbanger.

I turned my attention back to the bodies.

"They were not exsanguinated," I noted.

"Nope. They were strangled," she answered. When I looked over at her curiously, she made a face and pushed off from the wall. She had clearly come to some conclusion, because she straightened her back and approached the gurneys. "Just because I'm uneducated doesn't mean I'm dumb. I know what exsanguinated means."

"I never assumed otherwise," I said. I met her eyes, and strangely she attempted a wan smile. Did no one ever tell her of her worth? In only a few short hours I had already determined that she was bright, charming, courageous. I wanted to fuck her and bite her. I wanted to lay with her and listen to her speak in that slow, lazy drawl. I wanted to tuck her hair behind her ear and kiss the hollow of her throat. I wanted to make her smile. I... wanted.

"Can you tell anything?" she asked, jutting her chin toward the bodies.

"Yes," I said. "A vampire did not do this."

"How do you—"

"A vampire would have drained the bodies," I told her. I did not mention that only the very young would be so sloppy as to leave such a kill behind even if one did lose control. There were many ways to dispose of victims that ensured that no trace was left behind. I pointed to the fang marks on the fangbanger's thigh, though I noticed that Sookie's eyes did not follow my gesture. "And you can see that the marks are old. They were already healing when she was killed."

"So that big bald vamp is in the clear. A human did this," Sookie said. She sounded defeated. Tired. She was likely worried about her brother, perhaps afraid that whatever I discovered would only implicate him further in some way.

I wanted to reassure her.

I leaned over to scent along the body. Sookie stiffened at my side and I waited for another wave of disapproval, but after a moment she merely stepped closer and watched me with wide, inquisitive eyes. I had to close my own so that I could concentrate when her scent filled my senses, the sweet smell of her blood and the fresh clean scent of her skin overriding all else. I fought to filter her vibrant perfume from the odors of the body, picking my way through them delicately. I was not the best tracker and it was not a skill that I often practiced, but for this my abilities were sufficient.

"Three have touched her recently," I said when I rose.

Sookie's mouth had been hanging open; now she closed it and blinked. Her mouth twitched as she fought not to laugh. "You can tell that? Just by sniffin' her?"
"One was the undertaker," I told her. "His scent is the most prominent. Buried beneath are two fainter scents. Both human. One of those is likely your killer."

I had thought that my pronouncement would lay some of her fears to rest. There were two suspects, not one. Her brother had a fifty percent chance of being proven innocent. Instead, Sookie threw up her hands. "Well, great," she bit out. "That's real helpful, Eric."

"Sookie—"

"It's not like I can go around sniffin' everybody at the bar or down at the Grabbit-Quik!" she continued. "Not that I'd even know what to sniff for, since you're the one with the crazy hound dog nose!"

She was upset. I gritted my teeth and forced myself to move past the insult. "And you are the one," I pointed out smoothly, "who can read minds."

"It ain't that easy, Eric!" she railed. "When was the last time you sat up there on your fancy throne in Fangtasia thinkin', 'gee, I'm sure glad that I buried that girl under the tree just past mile market ninety seven off the interstate' or 'gee, good thing I deposited my extra cash in Swiss Bank Account number 12345'? People just don't think that way!"

"I can assure you that I have never thought of anything that began with 'gee'," I told her.

She paused in her ranting, and then smiled ruefully and shook her head. "I'm sorry. I'm just—"

Beautiful when you are frustrated. Beautiful when you smile at me like that. Beautiful when your eyes flash and your hands slice through the air.

"I know," I said.

"You did your best to help me, and you sure didn't have to. Thank you for that," she said. "I truly do appreciate it."

I nodded, and took care of replacing the shrouds and interring the bodies back into their cold metal drawers before escorting her from the room. She walked in front of me as far as the first turn, and I entertained myself by watching the sway of her hips and imagining palming the globes of her ass while I rode her. It was a pleasant image.

When the light drifting from the room behind us faded and left us in darkness, she stopped and held out her hand. I reached out and took it without hesitation, and led her out with her fingers entwined around my own.
Chapter 7

Eric walked me to the door.

The ride to my house had been in silence. I'd spent the time thinking over everything that had happened in the last twelve hours. It seemed strange to me that I'd started the afternoon eating strawberries in my kitchen and was ending it with a vampire passenger in my little Honda Civic. In between I'd gone to a vampire bar, discovered my curse didn't work on vampire minds, snuck into a morgue, watched somebody get hypnotized, and discovered that vampires have super-sniffer-noses that can identify specific scents on dead bodies. Oh, and an extra-hot Viking vampire flirted with me. A lot.

It was a great deal to take in.

"This is your home," Eric said.

It wasn't exactly a question, but I nodded anyway. "This is it," I said. The farmhouse had been in my family for five generations. I knew it wasn't exactly in tip-top shape – I just didn't make enough money to keep it up properly, and it could sure use a coat of paint – but I was proud of it.

"You live here alone?"

Now was that a hint of disapproval in Eric's tone? I fistied a hand on my hip, but kept my own voice pleasant. "Sure do," I said. "My Gran? She raised Jason and me after our parents passed. She passed away herself a few years ago. Stroke." I looked down at the worn floorboards on the porch, missing her like I always did whenever I talked about her. If this was a couple of years back she'd have been waiting up for me, pretending to read while listening for the sound of my car on the gravel.

"Anyway," I continued when I was sure my voice wasn't gonna waver, "Jason's got his own place. Gran left the house to me."

"It is—"

"Old, I know," I said, "but it suits me just fine. And I like the quiet."

Eric cocked his head. "Yes, I imagine you would," he said.

So he understood. 'Cause I'd thought of selling the place – especially when the property tax bill came in at the same time as the water bill and the invoice for the furnace oil and it seemed like I'd never get caught up and might have to drive in to the food bank just to get something to eat – but then I pictured being surrounded by people in town and never, ever getting the chance to relax my brain and I somehow managed to pull in a few extra shifts at Merlotte's and get everything paid and still have food to eat. The peace was worth the struggle.

I shook my head, and moved to unlock the door. I stopped with one hand on the doorknob. "Do you need to call a taxi?"

"No," Eric said. "I'll make my own way home."

Ohkaaaay. I pushed the door open, hesitated. The logical part of me was telling me that I ought to thank him again and send him on home. But he'd gone out of his way to help me tonight, even if we didn't end up with much to show for it. And the manners that Gran had instilled in me from the time I was a little girl just wouldn't let me brush him off like that. "Would you like to come inside and sit for a while?" I asked.
"Thank you," he answered.

"Then please, come in," I said formally. The question itself might have been enough to allow him in the door, but I wanted to make sure he was aware of his welcome.

I slipped off my shoes as soon as the door shut behind us. Bliss! I wiggled my toes as I padded my way barefoot into the kitchen, Eric following behind me slowly. He stood and looked around him as I went to the cupboard to get a glass, then to the fridge for the pitcher of iced tea. I was thankful that I kept up on my cleaning. Would be embarrassing to have a mound of dirty dishes in the sink when I found myself with unexpected company.

"Who has been in your home today, Sookie?"

His voice was mild, but the hairs on the back of my neck rose up anyway. "Just Jason," I told him. He nodded like he approved of my answer, and the lightbulb went on. "You can smell him?"

"If it was the other..."

I nodded quickly. He didn't have to finish that sentence. The other was the person who probably strangled Maudette and Dawn to death, and if Eric smelled him here that would mean he had been in my house. I didn't even want to think about it. I focused on pouring iced tea into my glass instead, and tried to think happy thoughts. Happy 'at least the serial killer hasn't been popping over for Sunday brunch' type thoughts. It was only after I took a healthy swallow of the drink that I remembered my manners.

"I don't have any Tru Blood," I apologized. "I'm sorry that I don't have anything to offer you."

One moment he was standing in the middle of the kitchen, his hands behind his back. The next her was pressed up against me, my back to the counter and his cool body against mine. His finger traced a line down my throat, making me shiver.

"I wouldn't say that," he said.

I blinked up at him, feeling a tingle start down below and spread throughout my body. My heart was suddenly galloping in my chest. His eyes were so blue, and even though I knew he couldn't glamour me I still couldn't look away. He wanted me, and for a moment I thought about giving in. I thought about taking the teensy little step that would close the distance between us; about feeling his lips brush my neck; about wrapping myself around him and letting him carry me to the bedroom.

My hand came up to push against his chest instead, and my voice didn't betray any of the indecision I felt. Apparently my brain had decided to overrule my heart. Stupid brain.

"Now while I do appreciate you helpin' me out tonight," I said, "that doesn't mean I'm givin' you access to an all you can eat buffet."

"Hmm," he said. His tongue came out to dart at his lips, and I caught a glimpse of fang. "A taste, then."

"Eric," I said warningly.

He smiled then, and stepped back. The sudden lack of him made me feel bereft. I slotted that away to think about later.

"You can't blame a vampire for trying," he said, still grinning.
I shook my head even as I returned his smile. He was an ancient vampire and he could do anything he wanted with me – I'd invited him into my house, for Pete's sake! – but I still felt completely safe. I picked up my glass from the counter and gestured toward the living room. "You wanna come sit?"

He led the way. I could see his gaze moving from the old braided rug to the worn sofa to Gran's quilt draped on the back of the chair, but his face betrayed nothing. For all I know he lived in one of those McMansions out on the edge of Shreveport, the ones with guards at the gate and brick walls surrounding the homes so none of the riff-raff could see into the yard. But I was proud of my home, with its comfy furnishings. Practically everything in the room had a memory attached that made it special to me.

And when Eric sat on the sofa, he owned it just like he owned that crazy throne on the stage at Fangtasia. He spread out his legs and threw one arm over the back of it and looked like he belonged there. I found myself smiling again as I took a seat on the chair and turned on the table lamp.

Tina seemed just as happy as I was. She strolled into the room and hopped up onto the arm of the sofa proprietorially; her ears twitched as she watched Eric carefully. He held out one index finger, his brow furrowed together when Tina leaned out her long neck to sniff at him cautiously. "You have a cat," he said.

"Nothin' gets by you," I teased. Tina apparently decided that she liked what she saw, because she rose and rubbed her face against his arm. She even purred, and she wasn't a very garrulous cat. "And Tina likes you. You should be honoured," I said. "She doesn't take to just anyone, you know."

"It is not common," Eric said. He shifted his hand to rub Tina behind her ears before looking over at me. He must have seen the concern on my face – everyone knows that animals are the best judges of character – because he continued, "Animals usually sense that I am the stronger predator. They avoid vampires."

"Well, I guess Tina knows that you're not going to hurt anyone," I pointed out.

He leaned forward then, his relaxed posture gone in a heartbeat. Tina gave him an insulted look and jumped down, probably in search of her food bowl. He ignored her, his entire attention focused on me. It was both exciting and a little scary. "I will not hurt you, Sookie," he said.

"Okay," I said warily. I set my glass of iced tea on the side table, folded my hands in my lap. "Why do I sense a big ol' 'but' comin'?"

"But," he said with just the trace of a grin, "there are others who will seek to exploit you because of your gift." The hint of amusement was gone when he cocked his head, studying me. "I can protect you."

"My gift," I said slowly. I might refer to it that way sometimes, but it was more of a curse. "My telepathy, you mean."

Eric inclined his head. "When I return to Fangtasia this evening, I will draft a document that officially lists you as an asset of Area Five and file it with the proper authorities. If anyone wants to use your services, they will have to—"

"Whoa whoa whoa," I said, holding up my hand. "An asset? Area Five? Did I just slip into an episode of The Twilight Zone? And who on earth even knows about my stupid curse except you?"

"Sookie," he said patiently, "you came into my bar last night for the express purpose of using your gift. You tried to read vampire minds. You have used it here in your town; you don't have to tell me
this for me to know it is true. Growing up in a small town has given you some isolation, but that will soon change. It will only be a matter of time before your ability comes to the attention of other vampires. And some of them may not be as accommodating as I."

I sat back on the chair, my mouth suddenly very dry. "So you're saying," I began cautiously, "that by going out tonight and trying to help Jason, I put my life in danger?"

"It is… a possibility."

"You're saying," I continued, and okay, maybe I was starting to sound a bit more strident at this point, "that by telling you what I can do—"

"No," Eric said firmly. He propped his elbows on his knees, met my eyes. He radiated sincerity, and I found myself relaxing slightly even as my heart rate sped. "I will never harm you," he said. "And by listing you as my asset—"

"An asset," I interrupted. "Like a car or a computer."

Something flitted across his face then, too fast for me to catch. His lips thinned before he spoke again, and he relaxed his own posture and leaned back again against the sofa. "I am a very powerful vampire, Sookie. I am the Sheriff of my area, and as such I am responsible for all the vampires who reside within it. By placing you under my protection, I can ensure that none of them… touch you."

"So you're like… the head honcho?" I'd suspected as much, from the attention he got from the humans at the bar and from the way the female vampire, Pam, had deferred to him. I thought back and remembered that one of the other vampires had dipped his head to Eric as we were leaving Fangtasia, too.

"Only the Queen has more authority than I."

"The Queen," I repeated slowly. This was just getting to be too much. "Of Area Five."

Eric shook his head. "The Queen of Louisiana."

"Of course," I said. "The Queen of Louisiana! What else would she be the Queen of?" I could feel the hysterical laughter bubbling up in my chest and my skin stretching in the fake, awkward smile that made some people in town call me Crazy Sookie, and fought to clamp down on both. If I started laughing, I might not stop until I was in one of those rooms with the padded walls.

Eric must have sensed that I was on the edge of a full-blown meltdown, because he started to lean toward me again. "Sookie—"

"Just… give me a minute," I interrupted.

Thankfully, he sat back again and let me think.

It was true that most everybody in Bon Temps believed there was something weird about me. Some knew I could read minds and some thought I was psychic, but they all agreed that sometimes I knew things that I just shouldn't. I'd made it pretty obvious tonight that I was searching for information about a vampire, and it would only take one of those Fangtasia vamps – Pam, for example, who heard everything I said to Eric in the bar – about ten minutes to find out all about me. Heck, she probably wouldn't even need to glamour anybody to do it. People are only too happy to gossip about the town freak.

And if she thought that I was trying to use my curse (which I was) to catch a vampire (which I was,
at least until Eric pointed out that a vampire couldn't be the killer) – well then, what would stop her from taking me out and protecting one of her own? Or taking me and… what? Kidnapping me? Eric implied that other vampires might want to use my telepathy – though how they could do that when I can't read vampires, I don't even know – and I'm guessing that I wouldn't have much choice in the matter.

Unless I accepted his protection.

I was starting to get a headache. And I needed to make a decision. I took a fortifying sip of iced tea then set the glass calmly back onto the table, and met Eric's eyes. He leaned forward to meet my gaze. "What would this protection entail, exactly?"

He raised that expressive brow. "You will be mine."

Well, that was blunt. And I could give eyebrow with the best of 'em. "Uh huh," I said. "Little more detail, Eric."

"As I mentioned, I will register you as my asset."

"Sure. One sports car, one house, one telepath." I shook my head. "Your property, you mean."

"Similar to being my accountant or my stockbroker," he countered. "The difference being that other vampires are free to hire the services of my accountant without getting my approval. As my registered telepath, all other vampires who wish to use your services must go through me. I will determine which requests are worthy and handle the arrangements. And of course you will be amply compensated for your time."

I crossed my arms at my chest. "So you'd be my pimp."

He laughed. "Think of it as more like an agent."

"Why can't you just go back to Fangtasia and forget you ever found out about my stupid telepathy?" I knew doing this was ultimately in my best interest and I was close to whining, but it had been a really long night. "What makes you think I even want to use my curse for other vampires?"

"What makes you think they will give you a choice?" he answered. "Your gift will not stay a secret for long. If I claim you as mine, it will... how do you say it... put the ball in our court. We take the offensive. And you will be protected, while I will gain a valuable asset." He leaned back again, his posture relaxed, his arm once again slung over the back of the sofa. "Win-win."

I frowned, going back over everything in my head. It honestly didn't sound so bad. In fact, it sounded kind of... good. If the whole vampire community was bound to find out about me anyway, then it was better that I come out swinging. If I ended up making some money out of the bargain, that was even better. And – the deciding factor, really – I trusted Eric. I hadn't known him very long at all, but I felt sure in my gut that he wouldn't let anyone hurt me.

There was just one other thing...

"You said, before—" I started. I bit my lip, thinking hard on how to phrase this without sounding like a complete imbecile if I was wrong. "You said no other vampire could 'touch' me. I can't help thinkin' that sounds like something more than forcin' me to read somebody's mind."

"Yes," Eric said. He straightened, and his voice became very matter-of-fact. "No other vampire may feed from you or fuck you without my consent. You will be mine. Only I may touch you."
"But you won't," I said quickly. "Feed from me or… the other thing."

"I would very much like to," he said. The corners of his mouth twitched up in amusement. Gotta give him points for honesty. "But I will not. Not without your permission."

"And you'd never give consent to anyone else."

His brow furrowed, and he looked shocked that I'd even asked. "No."

"Okie doke," I said. "So… what? I just say I'm yours and then you file some paperwork and it's a done deal?"

"Essentially, yes," he said. He stood then, and when he held out his hand for me I let him help me out of the chair. His long fingers wrapped around mine, and he dipped his head to meet my eyes. "Sookie Stackhouse," he said formally, "will you be mine?"

Part of me wanted to giggle, but looking into his eyes made the notion fade quickly away. The air felt heavy, suddenly, and my pulse stuttered. The enormity of the moment wanted to swallow me whole. "Yes, Eric," I said softly. "I will."

"Excellent." He smiled then, wide enough that I could see the tips of his fangs, and released my hand. "And now, I must leave you. Dawn will be here soon, and I must make my way back to Shreveport."

Ohkaaay then. I blinked and followed him out onto the porch. "You're sure there's nothing else I need to know?"

"There are other ways… things that would further cement my protection," he said. I could tell that he was hedging, but I was okay with that. I shouldn't even have asked, because I wasn't sure I could handle any more earth shattering revelations tonight. We hadn't even gotten into the whole 'Queen of Louisiana' thing. "But we don't need to go into those at this point. For now, know that you are safe."

I'd pretty much felt safe from the moment I took his hand in Fangtasia.

I watched as he walked down the steps. "You sure you don't want me to call you a taxi?" I called out.

"I'm sure," he said. One moment he was standing on the gravel at the bottom of the stairs, and the next? He was hovering five feet off the ground. "I think I'll fly."

Holy smokes.
Chapter 8

I did not think of Sookie Stackhouse immediately when I awoke. No, my first thought of her came while I was in the shower.

I paused, soapy hands stilled on my chest.

I closed my eyes, easily able to picture her small, pert breasts, the upper swell of them barely visible at the bodice of her dress. Just enough of a hint showing to entice the eye, to encourage the observer to imagine their soft rounded curves. I pictured her tiny waist flowing into perfect, shapely hips. No stick-thin model type, no. Sookie's hips swayed provocatively when she walked, tempting one to all types of perversion.

She was a beautiful woman, of this there was no doubt. But I had had many beautiful women, too many to enumerate. I could call up a parade of them on my closed eyelids, from countesses to street urchins. I told myself that there was nothing special about this woman, with her long golden hair and open, expressive eyes and sweet southern drawl. The way her eyes lit up when smiled. That intriguing gap between her teeth. Her unreserved giggle when something amused her. Her candor. Her trust.

My fangs ran out as my hand dropped to my cock.

I rested my left hand on the tiles as I took care of business, imagining that it was Sookie's moist lips wrapped around me. I threw my head back, increasing the speed of my hand until the motion was little more than a blur. I traded the image of her mouth for the cradle of her hips, imagined rocking into her as she gasped, her hair tangled on the pillow and her perfect lips parted on my name. Her neck stretched out long and pale and lovely, her blood calling to me until I bent to kiss and lick and nibble and…

I groaned long and hard as I came, the sound echoing off the tile walls. My orgasm was stronger and more protracted than any I had experienced in many months. I could try to deny it, but my own perfect memory and the evidence did not lie. I tried not to analyze that as I finished cleaning myself off and stepped out of the spray, dried myself quickly and slid into jeans and a T-shirt. I tied my hair back into a ponytail and made my way to my car.

The night air was sultry, sticky and hot. Sookie's decrepit old house would be sweltering. Then I recalled that the calendar posted on her refrigerator had her scheduled in at the shifter's bar this night, and at least Merlotte had air conditioning. My Sookie would not…

My Sookie.

My hands clenched on the steering wheel. Her image again fixed in my memory – the way she had sat with her small hands clasped in her lap, her agile brain working through the implications of accepting my protection. The lamp on the table had haloed her hair in splashes of luminous gold; her tanned skin glowed; her tongue peeked out to lick lazily at her lower lip…

I slammed my palm on the wheel, only remembering at the last minute to hold back on my strength. Enough of this!

Sookie was pretty, yes, but she was also a telepath -- and I had claimed her for my own. Strong emotions were natural in such a case. It was nothing more than that. Once I went to the club and filed the paperwork that the coming of dawn had prevented me from sending the night before, I could put the woman out of my mind until the time came to call upon her for the use of her gift. Perhaps
tonight I would take one of the fangbangers down to the basement. It had been some time since I'd made use of my toys.

The smile I saw reflected in the rearview mirror looked more like a grimace.

* * *

My missive to Sophie-Anne's headquarters was brief and concise. I outlined the acquisition of a telepath for my Area in a few short sentences, making it clear that the woman was now under my protection. I studied the letter momentarily to ensure there were no sticky loopholes that could come back to bite me in the ass later, then nodded and hit 'send'.

Sookie Stackhouse was mine. There was no way anyone – not even the Queen – could take her from me.

I pushed the laptop away and pulled forward the stacks of paperwork that had accumulated in the twenty-four hours that I'd been away playing detective with the lovely Miss Stackhouse. Invoices, stock reports, an analysis of revenue over the last six months correlated to the 'specialty nights' that Pam had organized, the payroll ledger… all of it important, all of it mind-numbingly boring. I sighed and pulled out the company chequebook, but had only managed to get through writing two cheques for the employee payroll when I saw movement in the hallway.

"Pam," I said.

She backtracked at my call, pausing to model in the doorway. Her outfit tonight was… awe-inspiring. We didn't need to breathe, but I did wonder how she managed to sit down. I raised a brow, and she twirled.

"You like?" she asked, posing with one hand on her hip. "It's a one-off from Christophe."

I recognized the name of an up-and-coming New York designer. Trust Pam to get in on the ground floor. "Christophe is making bondage gear now?"

"Don't be silly," she said. "I save the bondage gear for special occasions. Was there something you wanted? Because the vermin are restless, and I was just about to go out there and kick someone in the face. They love that."

"Sookie Stackhouse," I said.

"The creampuff in the garden party dress," Pam drawled. She stepped into the room and perched on the edge of my desk. "I would have thought you'd had her already. Tell me everything. Was she good?"

"She's a telepath."

Pam froze for a moment before she cocked her head, her eyes bright and inquisitive. "And is she your telepath?"

I leaned back on the chair and folded my hands over my stomach, grinning. "She is."

"My my, weren't you busy last night," Pam said approvingly. It was always nice to have my hard work appreciated. She somehow managed to cross her legs despite the skin-tight wrapping of her dress; now she set her leg swinging as she thought. "Sophie-Anne," she said finally. "This little plot we've heard hints about for the past few weeks. Poaching a telepath out of our area would be just like the little bitch."
I mock-gasped. "Such words are treasonous, Pamela."

Pam's lip curled. "I hope she chokes on her dice."

My progeny was certainly no lover of Yahtzee.

I leaned forward again, tucking my leather chair under the desk and reaching for a pen. "Whatever our illustrious Queen had planned, she waited too long. I filed the paperwork tonight and officially claimed her as my asset. I only wish I was there to see Sophie-Anne's face when she read it." I tapped the pen against the chequebook meditatively. "Sookie Stackhouse is mine."

"Speaking of that, how was she?" Pam asked. She tapped one manicured nail against her chin. "No, let me guess. She tastes like apple pie and hot dogs and sweet tea."

"She is…"


Mine.

Enough of this, indeed.

I scrawled a figure on the blank cheque at the top of the pile before I could second-guess myself, signed it and held it up between two fingers. "I want you to find out what church Miss Stackhouse belongs to, and have this in the mail to them by the end of the night."

"Miss Stackhouse, is it?" Pam raised a brow but took the offered cheque. Her lips pursed when she saw the amount, although twenty thousand was a drop in the bucket compared to what our holdings took in each month, and her eyes narrowed when she lifted her head to look at me. "What's going on, Eric?"

I pushed away the rest of the paperwork and pulled the laptop closer again. "That will be all," I said without looking up.

Pam hesitated for a long moment before hopping lithely down from the desk and landing gently on her four inch heels. "Eric—"

"Thank you, Pam," I said firmly.

I waited until the click of her heels had faded down the hall before pulling up the appropriate website and completing my next task. It was too late for the order to go through tonight, but the generous tip I included on the payment line would ensure that the arrangement would reach her home by the following afternoon. I chose white lilies peppered with several smaller red flowers, an homage to her gown of the previous evening. If she knew the further meaning behind the types of blooms I chose, all the better.

I hit 'send' on the order before I could overthink it, then closed down the laptop and completed filling out the payroll cheques. Ginger, Belinda, Monique, Eleanor, Svetlana… an endless litany of bulimic bimbos only too eager to sacrifice their integrity for the high of a quick fuck and the fang. Nothing like her.

Her image came to mind again, and I cursed and flung the pen across the room. I saw her in the small cramped room of the morgue, her innate curiosity and wonder overriding her natural squeamishness as she watched me bend over the bodies. The smile curving her generous mouth as she embraced all the changes wrought in her life in the course of one evening. Her wide, awestruck eyes when she...
saw me fly.

I pushed away from the desk, sending papers fluttering to the floor.

I could go to her.

I… should go to her. She will be distracted by the murderer in her little town. She would do little good to me if she were gallivanting around the parish searching for ways to clear her brother's name when I needed to call upon her to use her telepathy. I should ensure that she is well; perhaps do what I can to find her murderer so that her attention can be focused where it should be.

It didn't do well to dwell too closely on where I thought Sookie's attention should lie.

* * *

Merlotte's Bar and Grill. The place had not changed in the several years since I had last visited. Still the same rickety tables and chairs, the same stench of grease and stale beer, the same honky-tonk tunes on the jukebox.

The utter silence descending on the place when the breathers realized there was a vampire in their midst was new.

I stopped inside the doorway, scanning the faces. Sookie wasn't present, but Merlotte stepped out from behind the bar and approached me warily. Smart man.

"Northman," he said with a slight incline of his head. The bare minimum that he could get away with without risking an insult. I allowed it, partially because as lower lifeforms went he was one of the least distasteful, even though he did reek like dog. And partially because I recalled this one's name on Sookie's short list of people she cared about. It wouldn't be wise to rip his throat out for a minor offense. "Is something up?"

"Shifter," I said in a voice low enough that only he could hear.

He bristled, but aside from a quick side-glance at the nearest table of overweight bloodbags guzzling his watered-down brew he did nothing. The last time I'd been inside his roadhouse had been to warn him about the upcoming Great Revelation – the coordinated worldwide announcement of the existence of vampires. He was reasonable in thinking that perhaps another equally momentous occasion would draw me here again.

Sookie had not been here that night, almost three years ago. I was sure I would have noticed her.

I stared down one of the patrons until the man hastily looked away, gulping down half of his pint in one long nervous swallow. Then I turned my attention back to the shifter. "Can't I just stop by to bask in the ambiance of your… enchanting establishment?"

"No," the shifter said bluntly. "So you might as well just come out with whatever it is that—"

"Eric!"

I smiled over the shifter's shoulder at the reason I was planning to spend a night marinating in the odours of fried hamburger and sour sweat. Tonight she was clad in the Merlotte's uniform of black shorts that stopped just south of indecent and a tight white T-shirt bearing the bar's logo. Her long blonde hair was done up in a tight ponytail at the top of her head. She looked young, fresh, and good enough to eat.
"Miss Stackhouse," I greeted her. "You look delectable this evening."

"You're lookin' mighty fine yourself, Mr. Northman," she answered with a smile. Her eyes grazed quickly over my body, hesitating just briefly over my exposed arms before she shook her head and planted her eyes back on my face. The slight uptick in her pulse rate signaled her interest and approval even more than her words. The blood just doesn't lie. "What are you doin' all the way over in Bon Temps tonight?"

"Wait a minute," the shifter interrupted. "You know this guy, Sook?"

This guy. I kept my attention focused on Sookie so that I wouldn't break my mental promise not to disembowel the pooch.

"Sure," Sookie replied, "Eric and I met at his bar the other night, and then—"

"And then we went for a drive," I finished. I reached out to touch her elbow. Even that part of her was lusciously soft, deliciously warm. I exerted just the tiniest amount of pressure. "Didn't we, Sookie?"

She was nothing if not perceptive. "We sure did," she said, though her smile was now overly bright and nervous. Her eyes darted around the room quickly. Most of the patrons had decided that I wasn't going to put on a show for them and had gone back to their greasy meals, but the shifter was still eyeing me suspiciously. "You want to sit, Eric? Can I get you a Tru Blood? I think we've only got O. You're our first vampire."

"O is fine," I answered. O is actually swill, but beggars cannot be choosers, and if I would not be tasting the lovely Sookie then I would have to settle for the synthetic alternative. I made my way alone to the booth closest to the door, sprawled out on the red vinyl seat and watched her as she waited next to the microwave. Her hips swayed as she crossed the room with her tray to set the warmed bottle, a glass, and a folded napkin in front of me on the table. How she was not swamped with admirers I did not understand.

"I guess we need to talk?" she asked.

I gestured to the seat across from me. "A word, if I may."

Sookie shook her head, glancing from me to the tables overflowing with customers. "I'm working here, Eric."

Delivering burgers and beers to illiterate rednecks for minimum wage. She should be doing something worthy of her talents, worthy of her eager curiosity and quick-thinking brain. "Surely the shi… Merlotte can do without you for a few minutes," I said with my most ingratiating smile.

"Nope," she said.

My lips thinned. Not many people had the nerve to say 'no' to me. Perhaps Pam, and even then she had to have a very good reason. "Then I will be brief," I said quietly. "It may be best if not everyone were made aware of our arrangement."

Her brow furrowed as she crossed her arms at her chest. Her eyes met mine steadily. It was a pose that looked well-worn, and gave me a glimpse of Sookie's stubborn streak. No doubt as our association continued I would have reason to see more of it. That thought was interesting. I do enjoy a challenge.

"I'm not real fond of keepin' secrets from people I care about, Eric," she said. "I've got nothin' to
"I do not refer to our arrangement in regard to your telepathy," I explained. "The more who know of that, the better. That knowledge will only serve to protect you."

"Then what—"

"I am here in an attempt to find your murderer," I told her. And to gaze upon you and see you smile; to smell the sunlight that still lingers on your skin and listen to the blood surge in your veins. "I can be more effective if people are unaware of the reason for my presence, or our previous attempts in that regard."

Her eyes grew wide, and one hand crept up to brush against her nose. "You mean—"

"I believe you compared it to a hound dog," I said.

"Oh, gosh, I didn't mean anything by that!" She blushed so prettily for me. "So you came to sniff out the culprit? Literally?"

"The capture of this killer is important to you." I tried not to consider why it was also important to me. "If I also get to spend time with you, well… that is an added bonus."

Her eyes, surprisingly, brimmed with sudden tears. "That's about the nicest thing anybody's ever done for me," she said softly.

I blinked. She should be showered with praise daily, draped in fine fabrics, gifted with the finest jewels; not shocked and surprised at a simple kindness. I waved away her imminent tears, cast about for something to say that would return this conversation to steadier ground. I found it in thoughts of our investigations at the morgue. "Besides," I said, letting my lips curl up into an impish smile, "if anyone knew that we'd glamoured the undertaker to gain access to the bodies, Mr. Spencer's upcoming hundred dollar donation to the church just may come under scrutiny."

Not that her church fund would require it when my cheque arrived. But she didn't need to know that.

Sookie bit her bottom lip, and I felt a surge of what could only be termed jealousy. I wanted to be the one to nip at that full lip. I wanted to slide my lips against hers and coax her tongue into my mouth. I wanted to swallow her moans whole, roll them around inside me until they filled me up.

I pressed my own lips together until I could retract the fangs that had started to descend at the thought.

"I probably shouldn’t have done that," Sookie said finally. "It wasn't right to take advantage."

I shook my head. It was done; there was no need to dwell further on it. "If my—"

"Sookie!" The shifter's voice rang out, and Sookie jerked in surprise. "Table's ain't gonna wait themselves!"

I would strangle him with his own collar if I knew it wouldn't upset this woman.

"Sorry, Eric," she said apologetically. "Thanks for this, and enjoy the blood. I'll check in on you in a bit," she called over her shoulder as she scurried off. To make small talk with inbred trailer trash. To lug heavy trays laden with odorous beverages that turned the most erudite of men into incoherent imbeciles. She deserved more.
I watched her as I sipped my Tru Blood, and I listened to the talk around me – baseballs scores and statistics, mostly, with only a smattering of discussion of the women's murders. I spoke with Sookie when she returned to clear away my empty glass and bring me another bottle of blood, though she kept one watchful eye on the shifter and made sure to stay at my table no longer than she did at all the others. And I surreptitiously scented every person who passed my table or entered through the front door. The murderer was not among them.

By the time the crowds were thinning and Sookie was prepping my third blood in the microwave, I was forced to admit that my mission had been a failure. Yet I was loath to leave, despite the pile of paperwork waiting on my desk at Fangtasia. I told myself that a latecomer might still arrive and reveal himself through his scent to be the killer; my hindbrain was well aware that it was not catching a murderer that kept me in my seat.

The monotony of the night was broken when someone had the bravery to approach my table, the first besides Sookie to do so. The human was dark skinned, with glittering gemstones dripping from his earlobes and chipped ruby polish on his blunt nails. He cocked his head at me and smiled as Sookie came up behind him.

"If Sook here ain't gonna do the introductions, then I guess I's gonna have to walk my fine ass over and introduce my own self," he said. He leaned over the table and batted his fake lashes. "Lafayette Reynolds. And may I say you is one gorgeous side of beef."

"Yes," I said, "you may."

Sookie snorted as she set down the bottle of Tru Blood. "Ego much?"

I turned my attention to her and lifted a brow. I had been an attractive man. I was a very attractive vampire. If it was egotistical to be aware of my own good looks, then I would own that label happily.

"Now where has you been hidin' this luscious scoop of vanilla ice cream, Sook?"

He was certainly outlandish, but Sookie just giggled. Apparently this was Lafayette's standard modus operandi. Despite their outward appearances, I could see why the two were clearly friends. Both were outsiders; neither were able to hide their differences.

"Eric and I just met last night," she told him. "Lafayette," she said primly, using her best southern manners, "this is my friend, Eric Northman from Shreveport."

Her friend. Yes, I suppose I was that. Soon to be more, if I had my way. And I usually did. But I would accept 'friend' for now. 'Lover' would come soon enough.

"Eric Northman," Lafayette repeated. He looked me up and down, lingering just a little overlong on my pecs, before turning and winking at Sookie. "You's been doin' all right, hooker."

I was out of the booth in less than the single beat of a human heart, my hand wrapped around the human's throat and my fangs extended to their full length almost before the magnitude of the insult registered. I vaguely heard Sookie squeal beside me, and the crash of an overturned chair as someone at a nearby table made a dash for the exit. None of it mattered.

"You will show her respect," I gritted out.

"Eric!"

Sookie was pulling at my arm, which was fully extended so that the man's feet dangled several inches above the floor. His eyes bulged; his fingers grappled uselessly at my wrist. One squeeze was
all it would take to end him for his offensive slur on Sookie's character.

"Eric!" she called out again, and this time I was able to think past the blind rage to look at her. "He doesn't mean anything by it!" she said. She let up on pulling ineffectually at my arm and punched me in the chest instead. It was that, more than anything, that penetrated past the fog of my anger. She **punched** me. I liked her more and more with every passing minute. "Let him go!"

I slowly lowered my arm until her friend's feet touched the ground. Only then did I release my grip on his neck and take in the rest of the room. The few patrons left who had been going about their business were watching with wide, frightened eyes, and the shifter was halfway across the room… with a baseball bat in his hand. Perhaps not as efficient as a stake, but he might have made it do in a pinch. I met his eyes and raised a brow at the weapon; his eyes flashed, but he backed off. Then I could turn my attention back to my… to Sookie.

For her part, Sookie stepped up quickly to touch her friend's face and waited until he nodded that he was okay before she turned to round on me.

"What in the heck was that?" she said.

She should be thanking me for defending her honour, not upbraiding me in such a loud and strident tone. I raised myself to my full height, looking down at her. "He insulted you," I said, though why I should have to explain this to her was unknown to me.

"By callin' me 'hooker'?" Sookie asked, her brow furrowed. "Jesus Christ, Eric, it's just a nickname! Lafayette calls everyone hooker!"

I glared from her to the man still rubbing absently at his neck. "Not anymore," I said coldly. He blinked up at me. "Sure, whatever you says," he said. He lifted a hand. "I gets why you did it. You didn't know, and anybody who defends Sookie is a friend of mine, you gets what I'm sayin'?" I inclined my head, and he nodded once. We understood each other. "And hey," he said as he turned to shuffle off. He winked. "Still think you're hotter than Brad Pitt. And let's me tell you, that's high praise comin' from me, 'cause that motherfucker hotter than Mordor in the middle of an August heat wave."

I huffed out a laugh as he sauntered away, wiggling his fingers behind him in a wave. Unfortunately, Sookie was still glaring at me as though I'd drained her grandmother. "Well?" she snapped out.

I spread my arms, my brow furrowed. What did she want of me? The incident was done. "I have been unsuccessful in finding the murderer," I told her quietly.

"I don't care about that! What about Lafayette?" At my blank look, she threw up her hands. "An apology might be nice!"

An apology. She had crossed her arms at her chest, and one shapely leg was outstretched as she tapped her sneakered foot impatiently on the floor. She expected an apology, for ensuring that a man did not continue to insult her by implying that she lifts her skirts for anyone with a fistful of bills.

"I… apologize if I acted in a way that offended you," I finally said.

"Offended me?" Sookie repeated. "Eric, you dang near took Lala's head off!"

"But I did not," I pointed out. "And now he understands that he can no longer denigrate you with such language."
She stared at me for a long moment, and then she sighed. "This is in no way implying any approval for what you just did," she began warmly, "but I do appreciate you standin' up for me. It was very sweet, even if you did do it in the most outrageous way possible."

"Sweet," I repeated. My lips twitched. "I have been called many things, Sookie Stackhouse, but sweet has never been among them."

"First time for everything," she said. She wiped a hand across her brow. "Listen, Sam's probably gonna have a conniption over all this drama, but my shift is over so I'm gonna skate. I've just got to clean up my tables and—"

"I will stay and walk you to your car," I said.

There was no reason for me to stay.

She smiled at me shyly. "Okay."

There was every reason for me to stay.

* * *

"Thanks for comin' out tonight," Sookie said. She leaned back against the door of her truly horrible little car, her exhaustion evident. She had probably spent the entire night poking into minds, searching for any hint that would clear her brother and getting battered by a dozen unkind thoughts in the process. "I appreciate you tryin' to help Jason. I'm sorry it was a big ol' waste of time."

I cared nothing about her brother, and I was coming to discover that being in her presence was never a waste of time. "We'll try again another night," I said.

"That would be great," she answered. She jiggled her car keys nervously in her hand, glanced over her shoulder at the yellow monstrosity. "Well, I guess I should—"

I stepped closer, close enough that I could feel the heat of her skin through my thin T-shirt. The material chafed; my skin itched to be against hers with no barrier between us. She tilted her head back to meet my eyes. I saw my own lust mirrored there, my own desire reflected back at me. But I saw uncertainty there, too, and the barest hint of fear.

I did not believe it was I who frightened her, not even after the little display with her friend in the bar. Perhaps it was her own innocence and naiveté that scared her. Perhaps a former lover had proven unworthy and hurt her. I didn't know, but I was a patient vampire. I could wait until the only thing I saw in her eyes when she looked at me was the hunger for my body to take hers.

I skinned the back of my fingers down her cheek and over her neck, lingered on the pulse jumping beneath her skin. I bent over her slowly, giving her all the time in the world to stop me if that was what she wished.

Her full mouth called to me, but instead I pressed my lips to the smooth skin of her cheek. "Sleep well, Miss Stackhouse," I murmured against the shell of her ear.

Her small hand was still pressed to her cheek when I took to the air.
Chapter 9

I was practically bouncing in my sneakers when I got to Merlotte's just before the start of my dinner shift.

The late lunch crowd had already cleared out and the place was practically empty, just Jane Bodehouse propping up a stool at the bar and nursing what was probably her fifth rum and coke, and one of the mechanics from Dave's Autobody over in Minden working his way through an extra-large serving of Lafayette's famous nachos. It was the calm before the storm, for sure – there was a big revival meeting later, so we'd be getting the usual dinner rush plus all the extras who'd stop in to get fortified before heading off to listen to the visiting preacher give his talk and maybe save a few souls. And then of course most of them would return afterward, and hopefully remember enough of the good man's words to avoid getting into drunken brawls or thinking too many rude thoughts at their waitresses.

I was going to earn my money tonight and go home with sore feet and aching shoulders, yet I still couldn't stop smiling.

Eric had sent me flowers.

It was a big ol' bouquet of white lilies sprinkled with tiny red flowers, and I didn't have to be a brain surgeon to know that he'd chosen the colours to match my dress. I'd pulled out the beautiful crystal decanter that usually lived on the very top shelf in the kitchen cabinet, the one that had belonged to Gran's mother, and spent too much time arranging them to their best advantage before setting them on the mantle in the living room. I was almost late for work, in fact, because I kept stopping to look at them or to go over and sniff at one of the blossoms.

I only regretted that I hadn't thought to pick off one of the blooms and pin it to my shirt before I left. Then I could have carried the scent of them with me all night.

I waved to Holly and D'Eriq and headed over to my work station with a grin on my face, and was about halfway through refilling the ketchup bottles for my tables when Arlene stepped out of the storeroom. As soon as she saw me she dumped the carton of vodka she was carrying onto the bar counter and spun toward me.

"All right girl, spill. What's all this I hear about you?" she said without preamble. "Ain't it always the way, all the interestin' stuff happens when Rene's away on his stupid fishing trip with Hoyt and I'm stuck at home with the kids. Not that I don't love Coby and Lisa with all my heart. Just think twice before you have children is all I'm sayin'. Now come on, spill the beans!"

"I don't know what you mean," I said, glancing up at her. I don't think it was possible for me to grin any harder, though.

Arlene made a face and leaned closer, though everybody in a two mile radius could probably still hear her. "I heard you're datin' one of them vampirs?"

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"All right girl, spill. What's all this I hear about you?" she said without preamble. "Ain't it always the way, all the interestin' stuff happens when Rene's away on his stupid fishing trip with Hoyt and I'm stuck at home with the kids. Not that I don't love Coby and Lisa with all my heart. Just think twice before you have children is all I'm sayin'. Now come on, spill the beans!"

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"I blushed and fiddled with one of the paper napkins poking out of the holder. "I wouldn't say we're dating," I answered. "We've just been...hangin' out."

"Hanging out?" Arlene repeated shrilly. "You don't hang out with vampires, Sookie! You know what you do with vampires? You get your throat torn out with vampires, that's what you do!"

"Arlene!" I scolded. "They're mainstreamin' now. They're regular citizens who have jobs and pay"
taxes. I heard there's even a vampire church over in Shreveport? They have night services and everybody's invited, whether you're vampire or human. They're just like you and me."

"Sure, just like you and me if we drank blood to live," Arlene replied, shaking her head.

"Exactly," I said. "To live. It's a nutritional requirement. Can't really hold it against them, can we? That would be like gettin' mad at a monkey for eatin' bananas."

"Well, I don't like it."

"Well that's fine, Arlene, 'cause it ain't you he's… hangin' out with." Then I couldn't hold back my enthusiasm any longer, because it felt like it was filling me to bursting. "He sent me flowers today," I said before adding softly, "and last night he kissed my cheek."

"Sure sounds like he's courtin' you to me," Holly said as she passed by on her way to refill the salt shakers.

"No!" I insisted, though the thought of it sent shivers down to my toes. Did a person send flowers to a woman if he wasn't courting her? I just had no idea. "He's a thousand years old! He could have anyone he wanted!" My spirits dropped as I considered what I'd just said. A thousand years of experience. Sexual experience. I hadn't gone any farther than letting JB stick his hand under my top while we made out in the back row of the movie theatre. "Heck, he probably already has."

"Don't you be sellin' yourself short, Sookie," Holly said.

"That's right, girl," Lafayette put in as he wandered in from the kitchen, lifting his apron over his head as he walked. He sure didn't seem to bear any ill will toward Eric for nearly choking the life out of him. He batted his eyelashes at me and gave me a long, definitely leering once-over. "You is one fine piece of ass."

"Stop it," I said, giggling.

"Ts serious. Any man would be lucky to have you, hooker." He looked around elaborately, even going so far as to duck down to look under the closest table, but no irate vampire jumped out of the woodwork eager to throttle him. "Ts can say that now that the sun's still out, right?" he joked.

"I'll talk to Eric," I assured him, "and make sure he knows you mean it only as a term of endearment."

"Damn straight," Lafayette said. He flipped his apron onto the counter and wiggled his fingers at us. "Terry's on his way, so I is outta here. See's ya on the flip side, bitches."

"Well, I'm with Arlene," Sam said after Lafayette had flounced out the door in the way only he could pull off. I wasn't sure when he'd come out of his office, but he sure was eager to throw his two cents onto the pile. "You can't trust vampires. Their brains just aren't wired like ours. They've always got some kind of agenda. If Eric's paying you some attention, Sook, then there's gotta be a reason."

"Oh sure," I rounded on Sam. "It can't just be 'cause he finds me interesting, or thinks I'm a decent person, or even that I'm nice to look at. No, it's gotta be because he wants somethin'!"

I might have come down a little harder on Sam than he deserved because a part of me was worrying about the same thing. Eric had made it clear that my telepathy was a big deal in vampire circles, and that some pretty nasty vamps might try to make me do things I didn't want to do if I wasn't under his protection. And he expected me to put my little curse-slash-gift to use for him when he asked, and I got the idea that 'asked' really meant 'demanded'.
But he certainly hadn't tried to force that on me. I'd agreed to that of my own free will. There was no need for him to butter me up when the deed was already done. And him coming all the way out to Merlotte's last night had nothing to do with my mind reading. He didn't have to drive all the way here to try – again – to help me find Dawn and Maudette's murderer and clear Jason's name. And he didn't have to send me flowers. And he sure as heck didn't have to hold my hand and kiss my cheek and… and look at me the way he did, like I was the sun and moon and every star in the sky.

"You're all those things, cher," Sam said. His voice took on that half-soothing, half-whining tone that I found so danged irritating sometimes. "That's why you deserve a decent man who'll treat you right."

"What makes you the big expert on vampires anyway?" I retorted. "Eric is a decent man. And he's treatin' me just fine, thank you very much."

"How much do you even know about him?" Arlene asked. "For all you know he's the one goin' around killing those poor girls!"

"Look, this is gettin' a little loud, don't y'all think?" Holly put in. She always tried to be the peacemaker, bless her. "Why don't we all just take it down a notch and be happy for Sookie that she's found someone who cares about her?"

Unfortunately, I wasn't much in the mood for peace anymore. "I know about as much about Eric as I knew about JB duRone and Matt McClauskey before I went out with them, and nobody had a darned problem with that," I told Arlene, ignoring Holly entirely. "I know that he's funny and smart. I know that he owns his own business. And I know that he's never lied to me or treated me like anything less than a lady."

"Sure," Sam said, "'cause he's tryin' to get in your pants."

"Sam Merlotte!"

He seemed to realize that he'd gone too far, because he backed up and held up his hands. "Now listen, Sook—"

"No, you listen, Sam Merlotte!" I was ashamed to feel tears prickling at my eyes, and I fought valiantly to hold them back. "You've been sniffin' at my heels for years, ever since I started working here, and don't you think I don't know it! I can hear it sometimes, the way you think about me. But you never said one single word! And now that someone else is interested in me, you have the gall to assume that it's only because he wants to fuck me!"

"Sook—"

I shook my head, not sure if I was more shocked at the idea that one of my best friends thought so little of me or at the vulgarity that had just popped unbidden out of my mouth. Sam was looking at me like I'd just kicked his puppy; Arlene's mouth was so far agape that she could catch a barrel of flies, not just one; Holly just looked sad and sympathetic. The poor mechanic from Dave's had dropped some bills near his half-eaten plate of nachos and scurried out the door. And I was losing the battle to keep the tears at bay.

I shrugged past Sam, avoiding his grasp when he reached out to snag at my arm, and darted toward the kitchen. I had a vague idea that I could grab a bar towel and sneak out the back door to have a good cry, 'cause it was either that or quit my job on the spot and I frankly couldn't afford to be without the paycheque. I lifted my hand to my face in an attempt to stifle the first of the sobs as I pushed through the kitchen door, practically running to get away.
Which was exactly when I collided into D'Eriq, who was shifting the boiling pot of cooking oil onto the burner.

I'd made it all the way to twenty five years of age without ever once meeting a vampire or riding in an ambulance. This was just my week for firsts, I guess.
Chapter 10

I sped down the interstate, mentally reviewing everything that Pam had told me when I'd arrived at the club.

Sookie had been injured. In what fashion? How badly? Pam did not know. She hadn't asked. Sookie had called, Pam said, because she wanted to inform me that because of this injury – this injury that my progeny had not seen fit to enquire further about – she would be unavailable for a few weeks. A few weeks.

My fist had clenched as I'd absorbed the information. Pam had finally realized that her flippant recital of Sookie's phone call was pissing me the fuck off, because she had whimpered and dropped her eyes.

"She sounded fine, master," Pam had said, her eyes still downcast.

"Master. As though reminding me of my place in her world would placate me and somehow lessen my wrath. I had turned my back on her and left without a word; had revved the 'vette's engine and peeled out of the back lot and been on the road without seeing anything beyond the black void of my rage. It was only when I was halfway to Bon Temps that I was able to slow down to something less than killing speed and get a handle on my fury.

Sookie had placed the call herself and Pam had noted that the call came from Sookie's home number – at least my progeny was good for something – so she was not in the hospital. The injury she faced was not life-threatening, then. It calmed me a little, until I remembered that Sookie expected to be out of commission for weeks. A fractured leg? A fall? Had she been lying alone and broken in that old house in the woods for hours before someone found her? I had barely left the woman alone for forty-eight hours!

Fuck it. I gunned the engine and the corvette ate up the asphalt. I was pulling into Sookie's rutted gravel driveway and out of the car faster than I could have imagined when I left Shreveport thirty minutes before; almost as quickly as flying, which had been out of the question given my rage. I wanted to dash into her house and demand an explanation but I forced myself to stop on her porch, to smooth my fingers through my flyaway hair and ensure that I looked more like Eric Northman, respectable bar-owner and business-vampire, and less like Eric the Norse Man, Viking Raider.

And Sookie, I realized, would not appreciate me barging into her home. I raised my fist instead and knocked loudly enough on the front door that it rattled the glass.

"Who is it?" she called out.

Good. A worry for her mental state that I didn’t know I'd been harboring fell away at the sound of her voice. At least she was well enough to know not to give an open invitation to whomever showed up her door. I identified myself and waited for her to invite me in – a nod to manners, not necessity – before speeding into the living room.

I could smell the rot before I saw her. My nostrils flared as I scanned her, slumped in the middle of the sofa with her arms propped up on two pillows placed beneath her bent elbows. Segments of the bandages that covered her forearms were already seeping with the secretions leaking from her skin.

"Hey, Eric," she greeted me. She didn't move to get up; her southern manners didn't stretch that far when she was in obvious pain. Her smile was weak but genuine. "Thank you so much for the
flowers. They're beautiful."

I stared at her, drawing myself up to my full height. She was hurting, her face pale and her eyes clouded with weariness, and she was talking about flowers? And she was alone, without anyone to care for her. I looked around the living room, as though her visitors may pop out of the sideboard or from the fireplace. "You are alone?"

"Yup," Sookie said. "Holly and Tara had to work tonight, and Lala's car broke down over in Monroe where he's visitin' his new beau. Jason..." She grimaced, though she tried to hide it. "He's got some new girl named Amy and he's sorta been busy, I guess, all caught up in... whatever it is they're up to over there. And Sam of course is avoiding me. So it's just me and Tina, except she's off hidin' somewh..."

"Sookie." She bit her lip, and I crossed to sit on the edge of the coffee table in front of her. Her hand was limp in mine. "Tell me what happened."

She took a quivering breath. "Sam and I had a big argument."

I fought to keep my strength in check, to maintain only a gentle pressure on her fragile hand. I kept my voice even, my face calm and placid. "Did he hurt you?"

"No!" she squealed out. "Gosh no, Sam would never..." She shook her head. "No. I got splashed with cooking oil."

There was more to this story, and if the shifter was to blame in any fashion he would soon be nothing more than a smear under my boot. I waited, my face impassive, my thumb tracing whorls on the soft skin of her palm.

"It was my own dang fault," Sookie finally continued. "Sam and I got into it about... well, that doesn't matter... thing is, after I yelled at him I went rushin' into the kitchen and I was crying so I didn't look where I was going and D'Eriq was changing the big pot of cookin' oil and I collided right into him, and the next thing I knew there was—"

"Hush," I said. The shifter had made her cry, and yet she blamed herself. The shifter would pay. For now, I had to focus on the woman.

I went to my knees in front of her.

"I'm going to remove the bandages," I told her softly.

I could read the hesitation in her eyes, in the stiff way she held her body, but she nodded once and made herself still and quiescent while I carefully unwound the thick gauze from her arms. The stench of burned flesh and virulent pus assailed my nostrils, but I kept my face expressionless as I studied the wound. The burns were deep, her skin flailed red and raw, and already blisters had formed and burst. A viscous creamy secretion shone in the runnels where the oil had burned deepest; the white bandage was coated with it.

I didn't lift my gaze to her face. I simply moved to the loose shift she was wearing and slid it carefully up to expose her bandaged stomach. I had hoped that the first time I saw the flat expanse of her stomach would be when I was slowly undressing her to bed her. Now, the muscles there twitched as I peeled away the tape that held the gauze in place.

Her stomach was in worse shape than her arm.

"I guess I won't be pulling out the bikini any time soon," she said, her voice trembling. I looked up
then to see the tears that she'd been bravely holding back wetting her cheeks. "Or ever."

"That would be a grave disservice to mankind," I told her. "A body this bounteous should be admired by all."

I was rewarded with a huffing half-laugh and a wavering smile. She moved to lift her hand to her face to sweep away her tears, but stopped with a grimace of pain at the slightest motion of her arm. I raised my hand instead, brushed my thumb lightly across her cheeks. She gasped – perhaps at the coolness of my flesh on her heated skin, at the proximity, at the unexpected tenderness – and new tears threatened to spill. She blinked them away determinedly.

"You'd better replace the bandages," she said when she'd gotten her voice under control. "The doctor said that there was a chance of infection if—"

"I can heal you," I said.

I blinked. The words had tumbled from my lips without conscious thought. I could hear Godric's admonition hissing through my brain -- our blood is sacred -- yet I could not take them back.

A smile played about Sookie's lips. Small, cautionary, doubtful. Little more than a twitching at the corners of her lips. But there. "How?" she asked.

"Our blood has healing properties," I told her. In my head, Godric howled a protest. I ignored it; ignored all the lessons that he had imparted through the years that warned of keeping this information secret, of sharing the blood only when creating a progeny, of the dangers that could result if humans learned of this power. He had planted disturbing images in my mind of the wholesale hunting of vampires; of rows of beds in underground bunkers in which silvered vampires were harvested for their blood.

But this was Sookie.

"If you drink from me, your wounds will heal. The destroyed flesh will reform. There will be no scar tissue left behind," I continued. There would be no more pain, no more suffering. No more tears. Her beautiful skin would replenish itself, perfect once more. I sat back on my heels. "Will you let me do this?"

If she refused, I knew it was going to take all of my vast will power to prevent myself from forcing it upon her anyway.

Her eyes were wide with wonder, pain temporarily forgotten by my surprising revelation. "That's... that's incredible," she breathed out. Then her gaze sharpened. "And what else would happen to me? I mean, drinkin' vampire blood ain't gonna be all sunshine and lollipops, Eric."

That was Sookie. Ever practical. "You will have increased abilities for a time. Your hearing and eyesight will be sharper, more acute. You will be physically stronger. Your libido will increase as well."

"Sounds like all pluses and no minuses to me," she said, though her cheeks flushed at the mention of her sex drive. She cocked her head. "What's the catch?"

Aah, the rub. I should have known that she would not simply accept the healing without learning of all the consequences. Yet it never occurred to me to keep the rest of it from her. My mental image of Godric slumped desolately back into the recesses of my mind, defeated.

"The sharing of blood from vampire to human is rare, for many reasons," I began cautiously. "Once
you have my blood inside you, we will be... connected. My blood inside your body will call to me. I will be able to track you by listening to it. I will be able to feel your emotions. I'll know if you are hurt, or in danger." I knew she might hear this as 'you'll never be alone' – her emotions laid bare to me, always. So I tried to put a positive spin on it, one that she could appreciate. "This could give us an advantage, Sookie. If anyone tries to harm you, I'll know it. I'll feel it. If a vampire decides to ignore my claim on you, I'll be able to find you. It is another big 'plus', as you say."

"This is one of the things you hinted at the other day, isn't it?" Sookie asked. "One of the things we could do for added protection."

I smiled at her. "Why are you slinging burgers at a third-rate diner in the middle of nowhere?"

Sookie blinked. "Huh?"

"You are smart; you make connections that others would not make. You could do anything if you put your mind to it."

She shifted uncomfortably, wincing when the slightest movement pulled and stretched at the hideous burns that mottled her fair skin. "Yeah, well, I also barely made it through school with everybody's deepest, most private thoughts pushing at my brain all day long. And I've got this house and the land which ain't exactly easy to maintain on my paycheque, and I sure as heck don't have the money to get a higher education, not that I could handle my little curse any better in a classroom now than I could then. And don't think I didn't notice that you didn't answer my question, Eric Northman. What's the deal?"


She tried to frown at me, but the smile tugging at the corner of her lips ruined the effect. "Spill," she demanded.

I sighed. "Yes, giving you my blood strengthens my claim on you."

"See? That wasn't so hard."

I kept my gaze on her, swept a hand through my long hair while I thought. "It... doesn't bother you."

"Oh don't get me wrong, it's all kinds of weird," Sookie said. "Knowing that you'll be able to tell what I'm feeling? That'll take some gettin' used to. But I've been picking up people's thoughts ever since I was too young to even understand them, and I think this will be a little bit like that... but in the reverse. If people can put up with me hearin' them, then I think I can put up with you sensing if I'm pissed off 'cause Sam gave me three day shifts in a row or... or if I'm real happy 'cause somebody sent me flowers."

"You surprise me every day, Sookie Stackhouse."

"I'm gonna take that as a good thing, Mr. Northman." She glanced down at the festering wound on her arm, and shivered. "Anyway, I think the benefits far outweigh the weirdness. So, how are we going to do this, exactly?"

I stood and took the seat beside her on the sofa, resting my back against the armrest, then carefully maneuvered her until her back was leaning against my chest. "You must be brave, this is the easiest way." I murmured when she whimpered once as her arm bent and the raw flesh screamed. When she was finally settled against me, cradled between my legs, one of my hands resting on her hip and the other stretched out along the back of the sofa, she craned her head over her shoulder to look at me. Again there were tears shining in her eyes; again she found a wan smile for me. "You're starting to
get very comfortable on my chesterfield whenever you visit," she teased. "Just sprawled all out like you own the place."

I bit back on a dozen lewd responses. Now was not the time to remind her where I wished to be sprawled, or on whom. I lifted my hand to smooth my fingers through her hair instead, and tucked an errant lock behind her ear. Then I gently eased her around; my fangs dropped, and I bit into my wrist.

I reached around her to hold my dripping wrist to her mouth. "Drink until the wound closes," I instructed.

She took a breath, then another. And then her small hands closed around my forearm and she pressed her lips to my skin.

I let out a gasping shudder as she took the first, tentative sip. Her throat convulsed; she swallowed; my blood exploded in her body like firecrackers on the Fourth of July. I could feel it traveling through her system, sparking nerve endings and igniting synapses wherever it touched. She drew in another, stronger pull of my blood and my hand convulsed on her hip, fingers digging into her fragile flesh until I remembered myself and forced my grip to relax. I realized that I was hard against her, my cock pushing insistently at the thin material of denim jeans and khaki shorts that separated her body from mine, and I made my hips still. I would not rut against her like an animal. But I could not still my hand, which wandered from her hip to the smooth expanse of her stomach, soft skin knitting under my touch even as I quested further, the tips of my fingers barely skimming the edge of her simple lace bra. I could not stop myself from dipping my head to breathe in the scent of her hair, or my throat from letting loose with a glorious groan as she took a final, powerful swallow.

I let my head fall back on the armrest. If I had a beating heart, it would have been racing. My fangs were still out; my hand still splayed on her warm stomach. I had no intention of changing either thing for at least another moment or two.

I thought that the moment was coming too soon when Sookie stirred against me. She made no move to dislodge my hand, however; she merely lifted her own arm and turned it this way and that, her eyes wide and full of light when she looked at me over her shoulder. "It's amazing," she breathed.

I closed my eyes. I could feel her elation, her astonishment, her awe. It was intoxicating. I opened my eyes to smile at her. "Yes," I said.

She shifted again, and this time she turned until she was kneeling on the cushion between my knees. I reluctantly let my hand drop away from her stomach and gave it a home on her hip instead. "Can you feel me?" she asked. "My emotions, I mean?"

"Yes."

"What does it feel like?" Her inquisitiveness sparked through her blood – through my blood – alongside the wonder in her voice.

"It is…” I hesitated. How to describe the feeling of being in two places at once, of sensing the long golden cord that stretched between us? Her giddiness and curiosity plucked at it, high notes that rang clear and bright in my veins. I decided that her word suited it best. "It is amazing," I said.

"If it feels as good as this…” she said, wiggling her arm. She giggled. "I feel like a million bucks!"

"You are worth much more," I said, and leaned forward to take her lips. She was still, quiet, her uncertainty heavy in our tie, and then the hesitation was replaced with desire and her mouth moved
against me. I kept the kiss slow and unhurried, learning the taste of her, and when I finally touched my tongue to her lips she opened eagerly for me, her own tongue slipping inside my mouth to graze along the edge of a fang. She pulled back then, her eyes meeting mine in a silent question before she slowly raised a hand to my mouth. I obliged and let my jaw go slack; shuddered when her finger tentatively brushed against my canine. I closed my mouth around her finger and sucked slowly, and watched her eyes darken as she gasped.

"Eric," she said.

The next kiss was stronger, deeper, a wildfire where the last was a match in the darkness. My hand fisted in her hair as I angled her head just so, and she moaned into my mouth before I was forced to release her. Her breaths came in desperate gasps as I nuzzled my nose against her, following a path from cheek to jaw to the long line of her throat. Her pulse stuttered and I placed an open-mouthed kiss there, my lips a promise; the soft skin behind her ear beckoned me, and I kissed there, too; the shell of her ear was a masterpiece that I had to worship with my tongue.

She arched against me, her nails digging into my shoulders. Her body throbbed with need-more-want-yes and I moved to comply, my hand pushing beneath the hem of her shift, brushing across her quivering stomach to rest on the scratchy lace of her bra. Her nipple strained against the fabric and I flicked my thumb over it once, twice; felt her hands squeeze tight, tighter on my shoulders and her warm breath shudder against my cheek.

Then she was pushing back, away. Her head dipped and shame suffused our tie, regret and worry tangling with affection and lust until the cord between us jangled discordantly.

"Eric," she said. "I don't... I'm sorry, I don't think I can..."

My body surged in protest, but I merely pulled my hand away from her breast, palmed her cheeks and brushed her hair back from her face. "Shhh," I soothed. My nose nuzzled again at her cheek, her chin, the hollow of her throat. I drew in a breath to scent her in before I planted a kiss there. "It's all right."

I felt Sookie's relief through our tie just as I felt it in the sudden pliancy of her limbs. So I allowed myself the luxury of following that kiss with another, licking and sucking a trail along her collarbone until I came again to the smooth column of her neck. I nipped her there – another promise – and would have followed up with a kiss to her perfect earlobe had she not tangled her hand in my hair and urged me back.

"You can," she said. Her index finger trailed a path where I had just nipped and sucked. "If you want."

My gaze flicked from her eyes to her pale neck, the vein throbbing enticingly beneath her skin, and then back to her face. Her pupils were blown wide, her smile soft and warm. She wanted this, and when I searched our tie I found nothing there to convince me otherwise.

But she had my blood. I would not do this without ensuring she knew the consequences.

"We will be one," I told her. "We will be bonded. It will be stronger than the tie we now share. You will be mine in all things."

Her eyes never left mine. My blood in her surged, triumphant. "Do it," she said.

I leaned forward to kiss her again, slow and deliberate, a vow made of soft lips and murmured sighs. I pulled away only to brush my mouth against her cheek, to press a chaste kiss to her closed eyes, to
nuzzle my nose into her soft hair and make my way slowly, slowly to the juncture of neck and shoulder. I draped my arm around her waist and tugged her forward until her body was flush with mine, until her heart pounding against my chest felt like it was my own. I licked and nibbled at her neck until her arms wrapped around me and she let out a low, breathy moan.

My fangs slid beneath her skin.

She arched against me. She was exquisite.

I closed my eyes with the first pull, drowning in the taste of her, relishing the thick, savory sweetness. Vaguely aware of her hands clutching at my shoulder blades and her body pushing against mine, struggling to get ever closer; of her gasps of pleasure; of my hand fistng in her hair. With the second pull I tasted the hint of something more, and with the third I identified it – fae, buried far back in her bloodline, just enough to give her blood a special nuance, a singular uniqueness. With the fourth pull of her blood into my mouth I knew that I was hers as much as she was mine.

I withdrew carefully and pulled back only far enough to lick lazily at the small, neat puncture marks my fangs had left behind, healing them before I rested my head back on the arm of the sofa. Sookie was snuggled against me, her head pillowed on my chest and her breathing slowly getting back to normal. I lifted a hand to tease it through her hair, slowly easing out the tangles I’d created.

"Well," she said into the silence, "I guess that increased libido thing was true."

I huffed out a laugh and pressed my lips against her hair. "That is how I feel about you all the time, my Sookie," I answered, and felt her smile against my chest.

I finished smoothing out her long hair and moved my hand to her back, my fingers trailing slowly along the length of her spine. I thought of everything and nothing. Her breathing became so even that I believed she had fallen asleep, until she shifted a little and curled her fingers into the fabric of my shirt.

"Nobody would, right?" she asked. I lifted my head to look down at her, brows raised quizzically. "Nobody would really ignore your claim and try to—"

"No," I said firmly. "You are mine. We are bonded. No one will take you from me."

"And you are mine," she said.

Yes. Yes. I could hear Godric howl somewhere in the back of my mind, and I determinedly shut the door on him again, locked him up tight until his protests faded to distant rumbles and then stopped altogether.

This was good. This was right. I was sure of it – the knowledge resonated in my bones, rocketed through my marrow, sang in my blood.

Sookie smiled up at me and there was nothing for it but to kiss her again.
Chapter 11

Four days later, I walked back into Merlotte's. After taking Eric's healing blood I could have gone back to work for my very next shift after the accident, but that would have looked too suspicious. A girl gets a pot of hot oil tossed over her, there's gotta be some recovery time. So I braced myself for curious looks and skeptical thoughts and a lot of questions when I waltzed in to do my dinner shift.

And I got… nothin'. Oh, Holly's eyes widened a little when she saw my arms were completely healed, and Arlene took one look and then went on and on about how I must have a fast metabolism or some-such and how it was just like her Coby, who could fall down and scrape his knee and the next day you'd never know he'd ever been hurt and Dr. Daniels down at the clinic said he was a little miracle and blah blah blah.

I moved over to my station and started filling the pepper shakers before she was even finished talking, but that didn't seem to faze her. She just continued the story to Terry instead, and that poor man was stuck in the kitchen and couldn't get away from her.

I was probably being uncharitable in my thoughts, but truth be told I was a little hurt. Nobody was surprised at how fast I'd healed because none of them had seen how truly bad it had been. I'd sat on that sofa in my living room all day long, knowing that Arlene and Holly had the evening shift at Merlotte's that night. Knowing that as supervisor of the road crew Jason could duck out pretty much whenever he wanted. Knowing that Sam made his own hours and didn't have to justify leaving the bar. Crying with the pain every time I had to get up to try to fix myself something to eat – and I don't even want to talk about going to the bathroom – and knowing that not a single solitary person had stopped by to check up on me.

Not until Eric showed up.

I smiled to myself when I remembered how he'd come over all three nights that I'd been on my leave of absence, too. He watched me cook dinner and then we lounged on the sofa in the living room or made our way outside to the porch swing and watched the stars. He told me all about Fangtasia and being a vampire Sheriff and Queen Sophie-Anne, who sounded smart and funny and pretty obsessed with Yahtzee. I told him about working at Merlotte's – which he hated – and growing up with telepathy and being raised by my Gran and the things I wanted to do with the house if I ever saved up enough money, although so far the only change I could afford was planting some new azaleas.

And sure, we'd made out like a couple of kids beneath the bleachers at a football game, but he seemed content to take things at the pace I set. Every time I curled up on his lap and kissed him I felt happier and more content than the time before, and every time the memories of old Uncle Bartlett bothered me a little less.

"Sookie."

I blinked up at Sam. He knew something was up, but he was smart enough not to show it beyond narrowing his eyes and shaking his head at me when I walked in. Eric had gotten the full story of my argument with Sam out of me two nights ago and it was all I could do to stop him from flying right over and taking a strip out of Sam's hide.

"Hey, Sam," I said.

He swiped a hand over the stubble on his chin. "Look, cher… I just wanted to say I'm glad to have you back. And I'm sorry about everything."
"Uh huh," I said. I wasn't sure I was quite ready to forgive him for the nasty things he'd said about me. I wondered what he'd think if I told him that Eric and I hadn't even had sex yet, since he thought Eric was seeing me just 'cause he was so all fired anxious to get into my pants. But what Eric and I did – or didn't do – was none of Sam Merlotte's business. I looked beyond him to see that the restaurant had been filling up while I'd been prepping. "I've got tables to see to," I told him before brushing past him.

The next couple of hours went by quickly. It was just busy enough to keep me hopping without being so crazy that I fell behind. And though I kept sneaking little peeks into people's brains to see if anybody happened to be randomly thinking of something that could help clear Jason's name, I didn't pick up on a single rude or unkind thought. It was a banner night for Sookie Stackhouse.

I was standing at the bar waiting for Sam to fill my drink order for Table Six – a bunch of men from the bank, out celebrating someone's promotion – when I decided to do another quick check.

I felt more than a dozen active brains – and one void.

I grinned, spinning around so fast that I nearly knocked over Jane's rum and coke. Eric hadn't mentioned that he'd be swinging by tonight but I could probably convince him to stay until my shift was over and—

And the vampire standing hesitantly just inside the door was not Eric.

He was average height, with dark hair and brown eyes, wearing beige dockers and a pale yellow polo shirt. He looked about as different from Eric and the rest of the vampires I'd seen at Fangtasia as it was possible to be. And he'd noticed me watching him.

He smiled at me – an open, pleasant smile with no hint of fang – and lifted a hand toward the open booth closest to him. "May I sit anywhere?" he asked politely.

His accent pegged him as a hometown boy. And yet something made me want to direct him to a different table. One that wasn't in my section. I blinked and shook my head. Now that would just be rude. Instead, I plastered on a smile and nodded. "Help yourself," I told him. "I'll be right there to take your order."

A couple of customers glanced up with wide eyes then, but after a couple of seconds everybody went back to eating their burgers and sipping their beers. There wasn't a big hush like the night that Eric had come by. I guess to the people of Bon Temps, once you've seen one vampire you've seen them all.

I delivered the bankers their drinks before plucking a menu from the stack near the door and approaching the vampire. Sure, I knew he wouldn't be ordering food but it just seemed presumptuous to assume anything. He smiled up at me again when I placed the menu down and got out my little order pad.

"Hi there," I greeted. "I'm Sookie, and I'll be your waitress this evening." We didn't normally have to introduce ourselves since usually everybody in the place was local, but Sam insisted on it when we got out-of-towners into the bar. He said it made us sound more professional. "What can I get ya this evenin'?"

"Good evening, Sookie," he said. His smile didn't waver and he nodded civilly enough, but his hand inched toward the menu, fingering the worn edges of the plastic. It struck me as a nervous gesture, although he looked relaxed enough leaning back on the red vinyl. "I'm new in town, and thought I'd stop in to check out the local watering hole." He glanced around the room, taking in the rough
wooden tables and the paper napkins. His smile looked a little strained when he turned back to me. "It looks homey."

"Well, we sure like it," I said. "Can I get you a Tru Blood, Mr…"

"Please, call me Bill," he said. And okay, that smile was getting super creepy. He leaned forward as though he was going to tell me a secret and lowered his voice just slightly. "You know, Sookie, I was hoping that someone would show me around town. Perhaps when your shift is over we could take a stroll and… get acquainted?"

I’d have thought he was just trying to flirt with me if I hadn’t felt him pushing at my brain. He was trying to glamour me! All the times that Eric had mentioned other vampires being interested in me and never once had we discussed what to do about it if one showed up! My order pad was curling in my clenched fist and I made myself relax, though my smile had ratcheted up to Crazy Sookie territory.

"Well, I’m honoured that you’re interested, Bill, but I’m not sure that would be a good idea," I told him, my face practically cracking around my grin. "Now, we have O or AB negative…?"

He leaned back again, and I could tell that I’d confused him. Apparently I was supposed to swoon and fall into his arms. He managed to force another smile onto his face, though. "O would be fine, Sookie."

The way he drawled my name made my skin crawl.

I nodded and rushed through filling his order. I had my other tables to check on – the bankers were ready for another round, and a couple of the church ladies from St. Joe's Presbyterian were looking irritatingly from me to their menus – but I hurriedly pulled Holly aside and asked her to fill in for me for a few minutes before I dashed back to Sam's office to use his phone.

Eric answered his cell phone on the first ring.

"I can feel your anxiety," he said. "What is wrong, my Sookie?"

I felt better just hearing his voice, even if he was all the way over in Shreveport. And the way he called me his Sookie gave me a little happy shiver, but I didn't have time to dwell on that. "Okay," I jumped right in, "so you know how you said that other vampires might be interested in me 'cause I'm a telepath and that sooner or later what I can do will get out and they might come lookin' for me? Well I might just be panicking for no reason over here, but I figured it was better to call you than—"

"Sookie," he interrupted. "Tell me."

I took a breath. "There's a vampire at Merlotte's and he tried to glamour me." There was a long pause, so long that I thought maybe we got disconnected. "Eric?"

"Describe him."

"Okay, um, he's got dark hair and eyes and porn star sideburns and a really creepy smile," I said. Then I thought of something else. "He says his name is Bill."

Eric grunted out something in a foreign language – probably an ancient foreign language – and I didn't have to get a translator to know that it was a curse word. "Go nowhere with him," he said.

"Well duh," I said. That kind of advice I could have gotten free from Arlene. "I wasn't exactly plannin' on it!"
"Stay in the bar and around other people where you are safe. He may try to glamour you again. Do not let him know that you're aware of what he's attempting. I am on my way."

I bit nervously at my bottom lip. "You don't think it's possible this is all just a misunderstanding?" I tried. "Maybe he just thinks I'm a cute waitress with nice boobs and he's hoping to get some action."

"You are quite beautiful, and your breasts are spectacular," he said seriously. I wasn't sure how he knew that when he hadn't even seen them yet, but whatever. "But no, Sookie. This is more than a hungry vampire looking for some 'action'."

Damn it.

"Tell the shifter," he instructed. "Have him watch over you until I arrive."

"The shifter?"

"Merlotte," he said impatiently. I could hear the wind, so I figured he was already in the air. "I'll be there soon."

His cell phone clicked off before I could say any more -- like, maybe, oh, ask him how I was supposed to stop a vampire from taking me if he got it into his head that's what he was gonna do. I shook my head. One thing at a time. First, a deep breath. Then I tucked the little business card with Eric's cell number scrawled on it back in the pocket of my shorts, and set the receiver of Sam's office phone carefully back in its cradle. I tightened my ponytail.

I could do this.

I breezed out of the office like I didn't have a care in the world, calling out a thank you to Holly for stepping up for me while I was busy. She was mighty ticked off, trying to work the bar and my tables plus her own because Sam had nipped out to look into some emergency supply issue while I was using his phone. There went my backup. He picked the worst time in the world to decide we just absolutely had to have more beer nuts!

I promised Holly I'd make it up to her and went straight back to work. I apologized my face off to the two church ladies when I delivered their chicken wing baskets; they gave me sour looks and I knew I could kiss any tip from their table good-bye but I still felt better for acknowledging that I'd been slacking on the job. I chatted with the bankers as I scooped up their empty glasses and took their orders for another round. My smile felt relaxed and natural. But I could feel Bill's eyes on me as I made my way around my section, and I had to take another deep breath before I approached his table.

There was nothing left of his Tru Blood but a tinge of red around the glass, and I started to feel a little hopeful. "Get you your bill?" I asked.

"Actually, I'd like another," he said.

"Sure thing!" I could feel my smile straining again, and my voice was waaaay too high and perky. Where in the hell was Eric?

"And a moment of your time, if that's not too much to ask?"

"Let me just fetch you that blood. Another O?" I didn't let him answer before I whirled away. "Comin' right up!" I called over my shoulder.

"Sookie, you all right?" Arlene asked as I waited for the Tru Blood to heat up in the microwave.
"You're actin' all crazy. Well, crazier than normal." She frowned and side-eyed Bill from her spot at the corner of the bar. "That fanger givin' you trouble?"

Okay, so maybe I wasn't coming off as relaxed and natural as I thought. I considered telling Arlene the truth, but "I'm a telepathic barmaid under the protection of a vampire sheriff because the queen of Louisiana and some bad vampires might want to kidnap me. Oh and by the way the sheriff can feel my emotions and I might be falling in love with him, just fyi" just sounded way too weird, even in my head. "I'm just fine," I lied. When she gave me a dubious look, my smile got even wider. Pretty soon my cheeks were going to snap right off from the pressure. "Really!"

"Uh huh," she said. "I know you're happy with that big blond one, but I just don't trust 'em. It's like I was sayin' to Rene, there's just no way to know what they're thinkin'! What with them bein' dead and all."

"Rene's back?" I asked distractedly.

"Uh huh, him and Hoyt showed up today with a dozen trout and expected me to clean 'em! And I was tellin' them all about your Eric from Shreveport right after I put them to work on their own damn fish. 'Course, they both thought I was overreacting, 'specially when I told 'em he'd sent you flowers and all. Men think flowers fix everything!"

"Nobody ever sent me flowers before," I told her. I'd shaken the bottle of Tru Blood to get rid of any cold spots, and couldn't really delay returning to Bill's table any longer. I smiled brightly again at Arlene, but I could feel her eyes on me as I put Bill's drink on a tray with a fresh glass and carried it over. At least if he snatched me up I'd have a witness.

"Here ya go!" I chirped as I set everything down on Bill's table.

"Sookie." He was fast. Of course he was. He was a vampire. His hand whipped out to circle my wrist before I could even begin to turn away. His fingers were cold, and when I looked from his hand to his face I saw that while he kept the spooky smile in place his eyes were as frigid as his skin. "It occurs to me that you might be scared of me," he said, as though the idea were preposterous. "You're not frightened of me, are you Sookie?"

"No," I answered. In my head it sounded all strong and confident, but aloud it came out as a breathy little whisper. I cleared my throat, looked back again at his hand. "Please let me go," I said. That was better. "I have to see to my other tables."

"Good," he said, responding to my answer and ignoring everything else. I felt the pressure in my skull again, and glanced back up to his eyes to find that he was staring at me intently, unblinkingly. "I don't know anyone in Bon Temps. I just want us to be friends, Sookie. You want to be my friend, don't you?"

"What are you, the undead Mister Rogers?" I snapped. He blinked in surprise and I took advantage of the moment to twist my arm out of his grasp. Hooray for Eric's blood! "And I said, let me go," I gritted out.

"You got a problem there, Sookie?" Catfish Hennessy called over from a neighbouring table.

I was grateful for the support, but I could only imagine what might happen to innocent bystanders if Bill decided to push the issue. I didn't want a bloodbath on my hands. "No," I called out over my shoulder without taking my eyes from the vampire. "Everything's fine."

"That's right," Eric's voice said from behind me. I felt all the tension ease out of my body in a rush,
and I couldn't decide whether I wanted to sink down to the floor in relief or run over and cling to him like some damsel in a dime store novel. I did neither, just held my tray up to my chest like a shield and eyed Bill warily. "Everything's just fine, isn't it Bill?"

"Eric," Bill said, giving a perfunctory nod. His spine was ramrod straight. At least the creepy smile was finally gone.

Eric strode up beside me, and I finally felt comfortable enough to look away from Bill. Eric was smiling at Bill's obvious discomfort, but I could see the tips of his fangs. There was nothing jovial about him right now. He drew himself up to his full height, and he was six foot four inches of badass vampire. I wondered if I ought to get out of the way.

I spared a quick glance for the surrounding tables. Catfish and his friend Calvin were still keeping an eye on things, but nobody else seemed to think anything was amiss. At the same time, nobody was bugging me for refills on their Coors Light or calling out for their bills, either. I guessed that was a good thing but I didn't lower my guard.

"Bill Compton," Eric drawled out. "What's it been, sixty, seventy years?"

Bill looked like he'd rather be anywhere than sitting in a booth at Merlotte's. "Something like that."

"And here you are, in my territory after all this time. Strange," Eric mused. "I don't recall you stopping into Fangtasia to register with me."

"I just arrived in town late last night," Bill said stiffly. "I'm staying at the old homestead. My nearest relative passed away recently and—"

"I don't care what story you've been instructed to tell," Eric interrupted as my eyes went wide. The only Compton around here was old Jesse Compton and he passed away over a year ago… and his house was just across the old graveyard from mine. This vampire was living a ten minute walk from my house? The fingers of my left hand twitched up to twist in the fabric of Eric's T-shirt, but he didn't seem to notice since he was getting ready to give me another shock. "Tell me the truth. Just what is the Queen's procurer doing in Area Five?"

Procurer. My blood chilled. Somehow I didn't think Bill had been sent by the Queen to procure a six pack of Tru Blood. And Eric did notice that my worry was ratcheting up to Defcon One levels, because he casually slung an arm around my waist and tucked me against his side. Just being that extra close to him sent a wave of comfort around me and eased the rapid-fire pounding of my heart.

"It is the truth, Eric!" Bill insisted. "I'm mainstreaming now. You can ask Sophie-Anne if you don't believe me!"

"Oh, I will," Eric answered smoothly. "In the meantime, ensure that you check in with Pam before the end of the evening. And of course, I hope you'll take the time to meet some locals. They're an… interesting group."

"Yours?" Bill repeated. His eyes narrowed, and his gaze flickered to me before returning to Eric. "You have claimed her?"

"In every way," Eric answered with a wicked grin.

Now that was just a bald-faced lie! But since it was going to help keep Bill Compton from snatching me up and stealing me away for his dice-addicted Queen I made sure to keep my face impassive, no matter what Eric's loud declaration did to my reputation.
"I wish you well," Bill said. He took his time getting out of the booth before removing his wallet and setting a couple of bills on the table. A quick glance showed me that he'd massively over-tipped me and I decided then and there that I'd donate that extra money to a good cause. Maybe the local SPCA. I sure didn't want it. His eyes met mine again and this time there was no real push behind them, but he still tried to lay on that creepy smile. "It was a pleasure to meet you, Sookie."

Gran might roll over in her grave, but I couldn't bring myself to return the compliment. "Bill," I answered shortly.

Eric and I both watched Bill stroll out the door and only when I was sure he was gone could I really, truly relax. "Okay," I said shakily, and then I just couldn't get out anymore. I turned and buried my face in Eric's chest and clutched at him and I didn't care what it looked like to the patrons of Merlotte's. Eric was a cool and solid wall of support and his arms were wrapped around me. If somebody had yelled at me right then for a beer refill I'd have told them to stuff it.

He bent to nuzzle at my hair. "You are safe," he told me.

"Can you stay?" I asked. My voice was muffled against his chest and I was a little embarrassed by how off-kilter I felt – Gran had raised me to be stronger than this! – but I couldn't seem to make myself pull away. "Until my shift is over?"

"Of course," Eric said.

"Okay," I said again. But I still snuggled against him for another thirty seconds before releasing my death grip on his T-shirt and raising my head to look at him. He was – weirdly – smiling down at me proudly. I wasn't sure what I did to make him look so satisfied, but seeing that look seemed to stop the world from tilting on its axis quite so much. I straightened my back and gestured to the table. "You want a Tru Blood?"

He grimaced but nodded, sliding easily into the booth that Bill had just vacated. Seeing him sit there, his long lean body filling the space where Bill had been, his arm sprawled out on the back of the vinyl like he always did… It was like his presence overrode all the bad vibes that Bill Compton had left behind.

"Sookie?"

I blinked and shook my head. "One Tru Blood comin' up."

* * *

When my shift ended, I didn't head straight to my car. I figured that once we got home Eric would have to leave, and I wasn't ready to lose him just yet. Plus we had a lot to talk about, and we hadn't exactly been able to chat inside Merlotte's. So I ambled over toward the little bench that Sam had installed over by one of the shade trees. Eric seemed happy to follow along with me, so I guess there was nothing super urgent calling him back to the bar.

"You're worried," he said.

"Don't need a bond to figure that out," I told him. I turned before I reached the bench. "A procurer, Eric? Really?"

"Before the Great Revelation, before vampires made themselves known to humans, a procurer was common among royalty. He was used to—"

"I can figure out what he was used for, thanks," I snipped out. I wrapped my arms around my waist.
I knew intellectually that vampires had to hunt for blood before the Japanese came out with the synthetic version. I knew that had likely involved glamouring unwilling humans. But knowing it had happened and realizing that it still happened — and that I was one of the humans potentially on the menu — were two different things entirely. "I thought the Queen knew that you had… that I was…"

"That you are mine," Eric finished. He looked thoughtful. "Yes. I will contact her and correct the oversight."

"Kidnapping me seems like a heck of an oversight, Eric!"

"I didn't believe he was here to take you," Eric said soothingly. "To gain your trust, yes. To make you his so that you would go with him willingly." I must have looked confused, because he waved a hand in the air. "With most humans, the blood bond combined with the use of glamour is… irresistible. Compton would have believed that he could compel you to love him, to believe that you wished to be with him. Humans under this spell are always… compliant."

I frowned. "I thought you said it was rare. For a vampire to give blood to a human."

"It is," Eric answered. "But a procurer does what he must for his Queen." His lips curled in a satisfied smile then. "And he has no idea that you cannot be glamourd. His ploy would have failed, regardless."

I slumped down on the bench. At least my little curse came in handy for something. And it was good to know that Eric could never 'compel' me to do anything. Not that I'd have been with him if I thought he would, but that extra knowledge that all the things I felt for him — smooshy, romantic, giddy-making things — were all my own was nice to know.

"So," I said, summing up, "you'll talk to the Queen. And if any other vampires show up I should announce that I'm yours loud and clear so there's no misunderstandings."

"Yes," he said. He sat down next to me and stretched out his long legs, then reached over to take my hand. "Though I do not believe there will be any other problems. You are safe."

I nodded. With Eric's fingers entwined through mine, I sure felt safe. I leaned my head back on the tree and closed my eyes, listening to the sounds of the insects and the wind whistling through the leaves above me. Then I thought of something, and twisted my head to look at him. "What's a shifter?" I asked.

"Have you never thought," he said after a moment, "that there were other things in the world besides vampires?"

I sat up straight, eyes wide. "Are you tellin' me that Sam's some kind of supernatural—"

"I misspoke earlier in my… concern for your safety," he said. "It is Merlotte's story to tell."

But my brain was already in overdrive. I read a lot, and the fantasy genre is full of all kinds of wild and fantastic creatures, some of which apparently weren't 'fantasy' any more. "Wait a minute," I said. "Shapeshifter? Are you tellin' me that Sam can turn into other people?"

He shifted his head to smile at me. "I keep telling you that you are smart, my Sookie," he said. "Animals," he clarified. "Merlotte can turn into animals. He favours dogs.

"Get out of town!" I squealed, releasing his hand to push on his chest. He staggered back elaborately — as if my tiny push could move him if he didn't want it to — and returned my grin. I bounced on the wooden bench excitedly, my mind a whirl. "What else is out there? Are there werewolves? Ghosts?"
"Ghosts can be called to manifest by witches, though they do not wander about in cemeteries or haunt buildings like in your fiction," Eric answered.

"Witches!" I was practically vibrating on the bench now, so much so that I couldn't bear to stay seated any longer. I bounced to my feet, reaching for Eric's hand and pulling him up with me. I didn't have any space in my brain to worry about the Queen or Bill Compton anymore.

"And weres of all sorts exist," Eric continued. "Of course, these are all lower life-forms and hardly to be considered in the grand scheme of things."

"Is this all a secret?" I asked, noting Eric's disdain but slotting it away for later. This was just too exciting. "Oh my gosh, what about elves and fairies? Zombies?"

"The only walking dead is the one in your arms," Eric said, pulling me closer to him. His arms snaked out my waist, and he bent his head. "The one who has been in your presence yet denied your lips for far too long."

Well when he said things like that…

I threw myself into the kiss. Eric might have me beat in experience, but I sure tried to make up the deficit with enthusiasm. From the way he looked at me when we parted, I was pretty sure I was succeeding. I reluctantly stepped away – I sure as heck wasn't going to go any further than a kiss in Merlotte's parking lot – but held his hand as I backed toward my car.

"Will you drive me home?" I asked.

Which is how Eric ended up squished behind the steering wheel of my little yellow car while I relaxed in the passenger seat with my eyes closed, holding his hand and enjoying the blissful silence and feeling all kinds of content.

"We must discuss how you are aware of 'porn star sideburns'," Eric said as he made the turn into the long driveway leading up to my house.

I opened my eyes to look at him. "Hello? Telepath!" I said. "I've been hearing things in people's heads that I shouldn't since I was two!"

"Hearing is not seeing," Eric pointed out.

Busted. I bit my lip as he pulled up in front of the house and cut the engine. He was out of the car and opening my door for me before I could blink, and I smiled as I took his hand again. His enquiring look reminded me that I wasn't going to be able to get out of this one.

"Okay," I confessed. "I may have snooped through the specialty channels at Jason's house a time or two."

"Miss Stackhouse," Eric grinned at me, "how naughty of you."

"Only for like five minutes, I swear!" I said. "It was just too… gross."

If anything, Eric's smile only got wider. It occurred to me that in his long life he had probably done every single sexual thing it was possible to do, and some I couldn't even imagine. Probably nothing was 'gross' to him. And yet here he was with me. It was kind of amazing to think about, really.

I tugged on his hand and walked backwards, leading him toward the house. Maybe I still wasn't quite ready to go full porn star, but I was getting really good at this kissing business. We could sit on the steps and… well, I could give him something to make him happy on his flight back to Fangtasia.
I was smiling at the thought when I turned toward the steps and saw Tina sprawled awkwardly out
on the porch, her neck stretched at an odd angle. "Tina," I called out, "what in the heck are you—"

"Sookie," Eric said. He had sped in front of me, blocking my view so that all I saw was the wide
expanse of his black T-shirt.

I shook my head, and he let me step around him. He paced me as I took the stairs slowly, each step
taking me closer to poor Tina's broken body. She looked so small. There was no blood.

For the second time that night I found myself burying my head in Eric's chest, my hands clutching at
him. This time my shoulders shook and my tears soaked into the fabric of his shirt. He let me hold
him for as long as I needed to, which turned out to be a very long time. When my tears finally dried
up and I was down to sniffles, he carefully let me go and bent down to Tina's little body.

"She has been strangled," he said.

I had suspected as much, but hearing it said aloud just made it seem more real. "Was it…" I began. I
realized that I hadn't filled Eric in on everything. "The Compton house is just on the other side of the
cemetery," I told him. "Bill said that he was going to be living there. Could it have been—"

"No," Eric said. "Not Compton." He stood again, his gaze drifting toward the trees at the edge of my
property. "I don't recognize the scent."

"The killer, then."

"Being with me has made you a target," Eric said with a nod. His eyes came back to mine. He didn't
suggest changing that. Neither did I. We were together, and I couldn't imagine my life without him in
it.

"Then I guess we'd better hurry up and figure out who's doing this," I said. I wished I felt as
confident as I sounded. I looked back down to Tina's body and tried to steel myself for what was
next. "I want to bury her under the azalea bushes," I said.

He nodded and when he lifted her reverently, I was grateful. I ducked into the house and by the time
I'd returned he'd already dug the hole, just in the spot I'd envisioned, not too close to the flowering
plants and just where the sunlight would fall perfectly. Tina had loved sprawling out in the sun as
much as I did. I spread Tina's blanket out on the ground and waited while Eric set her on it, then
placed her favourite mouse toy next to her and stepped back. The tears were coming again by then so
it was Eric who folded the edges of the blanket around her; who placed her in the ground; who filled
the hole quickly and efficiently using all of his vampire speed while I sobbed like my heart was
broken.

"You must think I'm crazy," I was finally able to say, "carryin' on like this over a cat."

"I have seen much death, Sookie." He stood stiffly beside me, and when he spoke again it was
halting, hesitant. "I believe I've forgotten how to mourn."

"Oh Eric, that's so sad," I said. "Mourning, it's…" I struggled to put it into words. "It's how we
understand how much the person we've lost affected us. How they changed our lives and made us
better people. We miss them because it's only through losing someone that we truly appreciate how
much they made us grow."

He was clearly straining to understand. "And you feel this for a… cat."

I smiled through my tears. "Gran got Tina for me when I was eight years old," I explained. "Me and
Jason had just lost our parents, and there was... some other stuff going on, with an uncle of mine." I hurried past those memories. They were over. It was done. "I was goin' through a real hard time, what with dealing with the mind-reading as well, and Tina was the one thing I could count on. She was always there for me, a constant. She always seemed to know when I was upset 'cause she'd find me and snuggle up beside me. She was there to listen when I talked about boys or worried about Gran's health or felt like a freak. Just petting her and hearing her purr and knowin' that no matter what she'd always love me and she'd never let me down... it made all the difference growin' up. She was probably my best friend."

I was crying again, and I knew Eric still didn't really understand. But he took me in his arms as if he did, which was probably even better. And when the crying stopped he carried me inside and sat on the sofa and curled me in his lap; he pulled my ponytail from its tie and stroked my hair.

I didn't remember falling asleep, but when I woke up I was stretched out on the sofa with Gran's old quilt laid over me. I blinked in the sunlight streaking through the big picture window, and figured it had to be early afternoon. I thought of Tina and how much I'd loved her. I thought of Eric, his fingers running through my hair, trying to soothe an ache he didn't comprehend but willing to do anything to try. I loved him, too.

I blinked and stared down at the dark earth tones in the quilt at that thought. I'd always believed that when I realized I was in love it would be a big revelation. Like there would be a Moment with a capital M that spelled it out in big neon letters. But this slow and simple understanding was better. It was soft and warm, like Gran's quilt. It filled me up. It made me feel alive.

I was content to snuggle under the quilt all day, but a knock on the door had me moving before more than fifteen minutes had gone by. My hair was a mess and I was still in yesterday's smelly Merlotte's uniform but I dragged myself up and made myself move whether I wanted to or not. The view through the thin curtains revealed a delivery man in a smart-looking uniform.

"Can I help you?" I called through the door.

"Delivery for Stackhouse," he said.

I considered my options. There was a killer on the loose who wasn't happy with women who dated vampires, and I was now one of those women. Tina had already paid the price for that. But I could also see a large, plastic wrapped package leaning up against the railing on the porch, and I figured if a serial killer was going to fake a delivery it would probably be flowers or something equally small that he could carry in his hand. Why lug something big and heavy if you don't have to? Besides, I couldn't live my life hiding in my house scared of every danged shadow.

I cracked open the door and looked at him quizzically. "I didn't order anything," I told him.

The delivery man glanced down at the form in his hand. "Says it's from a 'Northman'," he said. He held out the clipboard and a pen, pointed with one finger. "Just sign here, miss."

Well okay then. I scrawled my name where he'd indicated and waited until he'd gotten back into his truck and started down the drive before stepping out onto the porch. It took some figuring but I was finally able to see where the big industrial staples held all the plastic in place, and was able to work my finger into the ridge and tug away the wrapping.

My hand came up to my mouth and my eyes filled with tears when the plastic finally fell away.

It was a beautiful wooden cross. Tina's name was emblazoned in fancy script in large letters along the top, along with the years of her birth and death. There was a wide base at the bottom, and the
script there read “Beloved Friend”. I went down to my knees in the sunlight and ran my fingers over the words, blinking rapidly to stop the tears from falling.

Eric had done this. He didn't fully understand my feelings of grief and loss, but sometime between leaving my house and going to his rest at dawn he had taken the time to order this grave marker to honour it. If I didn't know I already loved him this would have been my Moment with a capital M.

I swiped my fingers under my eyes, then got to my feet and lugged the heavy cross to the backyard. It would take two people to erect it, but I could Jason to help me with that in a few days. I set it near the fresh mound of earth where Tina lay, and told her how much I loved her and missed her, and let myself have another little cry that was partly mourning my little fluffball and partly being grateful to have Eric in my life.

Then I got to my feet, brushed the dirt from my knees, and headed back to the house to start my day.
I came to one conclusion while I sat on hold waiting for Sophie-Ann's minion to transfer my call: 'muzak' should be banned. I had already suffered through a pan-flute version of *Smells Like Teen Spirit* and was midway through the string quartet variation on *Stairway to Heaven* -- and seriously considering the True Death as an end to my misery -- when my Queen's voice finally came through on the line.

"Eric," she said without preamble.

"Your Majesty," I greeted her. "Thank you for taking my call."

She sighed heavily into the phone. "I'm a very busy vampire, Sheriff."

"Then I will get straight to the point," I said. I didn't want to keep her from the all-important tasks of buffing her nails or perusing the latest *Cosmo*. "Bill Compton."

"Ahh, yes," she answered. I could hear the minute shift of fabric, imagined she was adjusting her gown. "He left a message; something about a minor altercation at a roadhouse. Nasty places, those human eateries. Filled with peanut shells and… plaid. Horrid. Nothing for you to be concerned about, Sheriff."

"Respectfully, I must disagree, Your Majesty," I said. The niceties of playing Sophie-Anne's game were already wearing on me, but I had centuries of experience in dealing with the nuances of the court. This conversation would end to my advantage. "He tried to glamour my woman."

"You have a pet, Eric?"

I let that slide. If she'd talked to Compton, which of course she had, she knew well that Sookie was more than a mere pet. "I claimed the human as my asset a week ago. She is a telepath, a coup for my Area. The paperwork was sent to your office."

"Was it?" She shifted again. So many small, nervous movements that belied the cool tone of her voice, something that she would learn to control if she ever reached my vast age. Sophie-Anne was a child compared to me. But royalty. I had to remember not to treat her like the pampered brat she was. "It must have fallen through the cracks," she continued. "So much tedious correspondence involved in governing a realm. I'm sure you understand."

I gritted my teeth but let nothing of it show in my voice. "Of course, Your Majesty. I'll have a replacement copy delivered to your office by courier before the end of the night. In the meantime, I trust that my claim will be honoured."

"A telepath," she mused after a moment. "Perhaps she would be more comfortable in my court. I have many dealings with humans where a mind-reader would be a substantial advantage." A rustle of fabric again, indicating that she had straightened in her chair. I readied myself for the true negotiations. "As for your claim... humans are a dime a dozen these days, Sheriff, even ones with special... talents. You know that. What can I offer to take her off your hands?"

"I'm afraid that will not be possible, Your Majesty. We are bonded."

I sat back and tapped my pen on my desk blotter while silence filled the line. Tossed the pen up in the air once or twice and caught it one-handed. Grinned into the phone.
"You have given your blood to this human?" Sophie-Anne finally said.

"The bond is fully formed," I answered. Yes, I have shared my ancient blood. Yes, I have taken hers. Yes, we are joined in a way that no vampire can tear asunder, not even a Queen. Not even the highest-ranking representative of the Authority. I tossed the pen again and let her stew on that for a moment.

"I see," she said. Her voice became as brittle as the ice covering a stream after a thaw. "Congratulations, Eric."

I blinked, caught the pen on its latest downward spiral. "Your Majesty?"

"I have heard," she said frostily, "that blood from a… telepath… is quite exquisite."

Aaaah. "She has a unique taste, Majesty, but a trifle overrated. Her blood is not as special as one might have hoped."

I propped my booted feet up on the desk as Sophie-Anne mulled over my choice of words. I had of course suspected that the Queen knew of the hint of fae in my Sookie's blood; her comment had only confirmed it. I knew, too, of the extensive library at the Queen's palace and its sizable collection of books on the supposed properties of fae blood on the vampire physiology. My reply let her know in no uncertain terms that daywalking via Sookie's blood was not a possibility.

I pictured her staring blindly about in her pseudo-sunroom, perhaps digging her nails into the palms of her hands in an attempt to maintain her calm. Another dead end. Another hope rendered false and dashed to the ground. I would not like to be the minion on whom she took out her wrath this night.

"I see," she said again. "Thank you for informing me, Eric."

"Of course, Your Majesty," I said smoothly. "And Bill?"

"Oh, Bill," she said, her tone flippant once more. "His assignment will be terminated, but he may be staying in your area. He truly did express an interest in refurbishing that revolting old house of his, and one procurer is the same as another."

Not that answer I had hoped for, but with the threat of Sophie-Anne removed there was little Compton could do. "Then I will make sure I assign him to a task worthy of his skills," I told her. Perhaps garbage collection.

"Of course you will," Sophie-Anne said. "Oh, and Eric? I look forward to meeting this human."

I will keep Sookie as far away from you as possible for as long as possible. "As you wish, Your Majesty. At your convenience."

We hung up our phones at the same time, though I was certain that my satisfaction was nothing compared to her ire. I adjusted my feet on the desk and leaned back against the leather headrest of my chair, pleased with my accomplishments thus far in the evening. The threat from Sophie-Anne was eradicated, her dreams of daywalking crushed. Sookie was safe. Our bond was acknowledged and irrefutable. Compton remaining in the area was a minor complication but one easily dealt with. Yes, all in all a successful night.

I was still gloating over my accomplishment when Pam poked her head into the office. Her glum expression was a direct counterpoint to my immense satisfaction. "Eric," she said pointedly, "we need to talk."
I motioned her inside. "I just got off the phone with the Queen," I told her. My glee was palpable, thrumming through my blood, and not even Pamela's dour look would stifle it. "She realizes she has no choice but to accept my claim on Sookie and—"

"Sookie!" Pam huffed out. She stalked forward, her hips swinging and her high heels clicking angrily on the tile. "Do you have any idea how tired I am of hearing about fucking Sookie! Sookie's decrepit house and Sookie's pathetic job and Sookie's fabulous tits!"

Perhaps I had been… what was the human term? Oversharing, yes. Oversharing the details of my encounters with Sookie Stackhouse. But there were limits to what I would accept from my progeny.

"Pam," I said warningly.

"This fascination has to stop, Eric. It's affecting your job! It's affecting me. How long has it been since you've sat on the throne out there? Those pitiful bloodbags come here to see you, Eric! Profits are already down but you wouldn't know that because you're too busy snuggling on a porch swing with Sookie like some lovesick puppy!"

I stood quickly, my good mood turned sour and rancid. "You know nothing of my relationship with Sookie Stackhouse," I gritted out. I floundered for something that didn't involve clearing her brother's name or comforting the woman over a dead feline. "The groundwork I'm laying—"

"This has nothing to do with claiming her as an asset or her goddamn telepathy," Pam railed. "This is about you, Eric, neglecting your duties, neglecting me… over a human!" Her lip curled. "Just get your head out of your ass and fuck her already so you can get her out of your system! I should have followed her home and drained her that first ni—"

I crossed the room in a blur, slammed her into the wall hard enough to crack the gypsum. My fangs extended and my fingers dug furrows into the flesh of her throat. "You will never harm her!" I hissed.

"You can rip my throat out but that won't change the fact that Eddie is missing," Pam rasped out, "and you've been so busy with Sookie that you haven't even noticed."

At first her words didn't register. I was too blinded by the vision of my progeny waiting in the dark for Sookie to return home from work, slipping up behind her as she distractedly dug her keys out of her purse, tangling fingers in her hair and bending her lovely neck back to expose the jugular. My fingers tightened their hold on Pam's throat in response to the mental image, and I hissed again, this time wordlessly, the urge to destroy her and eliminate the threat pulsing through my blood.

"Master," Pam choked.

I turned my back as I flung her away, my fingers still clenched for the killing blow. I heard Pam stumble on her heels before she righted herself, saw her hand rise to rub at her throat in my peripheral vision, but it was long moments before I could straighten and face her without the risk of delivering that fatal blow. It was as I suspected when I took Sookie's blood: I was lost.

The thought should have raised the hackles on my spine, made me rage against the indignity of a vampire of my age, my stature, being connected in such a way to a human. But I could feel the golden cord that stretched between us humming pleasantly. I could stretch out my senses and feel Sookie's contentment, her distress of the previous evening replaced with a slow, steady beat that hinted of simple ease and relaxation. The feeling reverberated through our bond, plucking out soothing notes that thrummed beneath my skin.
This was why Godric had always cautioned against the sharing of our blood. The risk of this connection, forged of blood and body and spirit, that could make a vampire endanger everything for a human. Shift alliances, reconsider options, modify priorities. All for one human woman.

Love, Godric had always warned me, was weakness. I would have to prove him wrong.

"Pam," I said. I straightened and she came to me, moving past my outstretched hand to fold herself into my arms. She pressed her cheek to my chest and I bent her my strength, enveloping her in my embrace. The tension coiled in her slipped away slowly as her arms circled my waist. I nuzzled my cheek against her hair. "I would never neglect you, Pamela."

She nodded; her fingers clutched at my back. "I know that you care for her."


Pam moved away then, turning her head to surreptitiously swipe away a tear. She was an expert at it; there was not even a hint of blood on her pale cheek when she looked back to me. "I'll try to understand," she said.

I grinned at her impishly, hoping it would help to bridge the gap between us. "It is rather unprecedented," I said.

She snorted. "The great Eric Northman getting his panties in a twist over a human? Yes, you could say that." She lifted her palm when my eyes flashed. "I meant no disrespect, Master. I said that I would try to understand, and later you must tell me everything that you discussed with the Queen. But now—"

"Eddie," I said.

She nodded, all business. I would be a fool to believe that this was the last time we would be dealing with this issue, and I was no fool. But we would defer the rest of this discussion for another time. If Pam was correct and Eddie was missing, then I had been neglecting my duties as Sheriff. Finding the balance between my responsibilities to the vampires in my Area and my love for Sookie may prove to be a formidable task. Fortunately I knew that I was up for it.

"He hasn't shown up for his last three shifts at the bar. People are beginning to notice," Pam told me. At my raised brow, she waved a hand. "Not the vermin. They think he's a human," she sniffed. "But some of the staff are making noises. Indira seems to believe that if Eddie is getting a free pass, then perhaps that perk ought to be applied to other vampires as well."

"You'll speak to her," I said, my look reinforcing exactly what kind of talk I expected my progeny to have with the other vampire. Her eyes glittered at the thought. I turned the discussion back to the pertinent details of Eddie's disappearing act. "What about his job?" I asked.

"The accounting firm has not seen him for the last week," Pam told me. "Apparently he does most of his work from home, so they didn't think to inform us until he failed to turn in his scheduled reports."

I cursed under my breath. "His address?"

She pulled out a slip of paper that had been tucked beneath the long sleeve of her gown, held it out to me between two fingers. "It's not in a very good part of town," she drawled. "Make sure you don't get mugged."

I glanced from the paper to her face. "I appreciate your concern, Pamela," I said.
"Always, my Master," she said. Her lips curled, but the smile did not reach her eyes. We both knew I wasn't only talking about Eddie. "If you need my help—"

"I will call you," I told her. If I needed her help to retrieve one errant baby vampire then I should just turn in my proverbial badge and retire to Oland. She nodded and spun on her heels and I was forced to call her back. I knew that one aspect of our discussion, at least, could not be tabled until another time.

"Pam," I said. She turned back, a single brow raised. "You will never harm her. And if you ever speak to me that way again, I will end you."

She dipped her head once in acknowledgement, and then I was alone.

* * *

Eddie's home was a small non-descript little house surrounded by a slightly overgrown patch of grass. I stood next to my car and studied it for a moment, but I sensed no movement inside. The house was as quiet as the neighbourhood.

It was only when I reached the stoop that I noticed that the door was very slightly ajar. Again, I sent out my senses. Again, I was met with nothing but silence.

I pushed open the door with the tips of my fingers, taking in the room in one quick glance. A sofa and chair circa Sears-Roebuck 1989, standard television, bland and uninspired painting on one wall. Lamp toppled to the floor just inside the door. That and the unlocked door itself were the only signs that anything was amiss.

Dropping to one knee, I studied the area around the lamp. There was no blood, but my keen senses picked up the lingering scent of burned flesh. It is an odor not easily forgotten – not once a vampire has been silvered and smelled it pouring from his own flesh, clogging his nostrils with char and sickly-sweet rot. My fangs rode out at the stench, both from the memories of my own past tortures and the sure knowledge that Eddie had suffered a similar fate. He had been silvered. Taken.

A vampire in my Area, under my protection. Silvered and spirited off like a mongrel to the pound.

I hissed, the sound filling the still air. My body hunched to attack, though the assailant was long gone into the night. I forced myself to control; to stand and scent along the doorway and the foyer. There were hints of at least three other, human scents, but the acrid tang of Eddie's burnt skin overrode them. I could not get a fix on any of them.

I turned and smashed my fist into the wall, crumbling the plaster. A vampire, taken from my Area, and I could do nothing! It was unacceptable. I stalked into the living room, the small dining area, the kitchen with its outdated, unused appliances. Nothing out of place; no odor but the dry, cool scent of vampire.

It was when I reached the bedroom that I finally found what I was seeking. The air was redolent with aroma. Eddie, of course. The sulfuric stink of a candle. The hot, musky, pungent smell of spent passion rising from the bed with its rumpled sheets. And buried beneath all of it, a scent I recognized.

Eddie's bedmate had been Lafayette Reynolds.
The radio station was playing one of my favourite songs and a warm breeze was blowing my hair back as I tooled up the interstate toward my last stop of the day.

My first stop had been at Purrs ’n’ Paws, the non-profit animal shelter. I'd donated the twenty-four dollars that Bill had left me as my tip – I certainly didn't want any of his money after what he'd been sent to do to me – plus an additional thirty dollars of my own. Okay, twenty dollars of that thirty had been Eric's tip to me on his own Tru Blood last night, but I was all caught up on my bills and the property taxes weren't due for another few months so I was okay to give a little. Besides, Purrs 'n' Paws was always struggling to make ends meet and I had a real soft spot for the owner, Maxine Fortenberry, who'd been on her own since her husband passed on when Hoyt and Jason and I were just kids. It had given us kids all something in common, though the circumstances of Mr. Fortenberry's death was a lot different than what happened to my folks. She'd raised Hoyt on her own just like Gran had raised me and Jason. I dropped off Tina's bowls and the remainder of her kibble, too, and accepted Mrs. Fortenberry's condolences on my loss. She was a true animal lover and she got genuine tears in her eyes when I told her that Tina had passed on.

Of course, Mrs. Fortenberry was also an inveterate gossip so she'd also heard all about the visit of not one but two vampires at Merlotte's. She took me aside and lowered her voice – though we were the only two people in the place – and advised me to stay well away from "those fangers". Her thoughts let me know exactly what she thought of vampires, though I imagine her view of herself as a good Christian woman would mean she'd never actually say such nasty things out loud. The look on her face when I told her I was dating one of them would have made me laugh if she hadn't immediately sketched the sign of the cross right after I finished speaking. That threw me for a loop. If Maxine Fortenberry had suddenly converted to Catholicism there was going to be a right hubbub at the next community rib roast.

My next stop had been the library. Ever since I met Eric, I just couldn't maintain any interest in the frothy little historical bodice rippers I usually read. How could I, when my very own blast from the past was making out with me on my sofa? The real thing was so much better than the fiction. And with a serial killer still on the loose, targeting me and the people I care about, I wasn't in any mood for a mystery or a detective novel. Even the thrillers that I sometimes picked up when I wanted to get well and truly spooked seemed to hit a little too close to home now that I knew there were all sorts of things that really did go bump in the night. I'd kept that news to myself – not that I had anyone to tell – until I could double-check with Eric and make sure I wasn't supposed to be blabbing about the existence of witches and werewolves to all and sundry.

I mused on that as I took the turn into the Wal-Mart parking lot. Eric had said that there were all kinds of 'weres', not just wolves. I wondered if that meant there was such a thing as wereleopards and werelions. That thought just led to other, much sillier ones. Wereducks? Wereducks? I thought of Catfish Hennessy turning into a hamster at the full moon and had to pull into the first parking spot I saw when I suddenly got a fit of the giggles.

When I could finally stop laughing – and believe you me, I got some strange looks from a couple of teenagers walking through the lot and seeing me sitting alone in my car giggling like I was an escapee from Serenity Springs – I made sure the car was in park and moved my library book onto the back seat. I'd decided to pick up a book on Vikings instead of my usual fare. It was a thick and
scholarly type book with tons of footnotes, and Mrs. Beck had looked at me funny when I set it on
the desk for her to check out for me. She was one of those people that tended to judge a book by its
cover, which was ironic considering she was the town librarian. She figured that because I was
young and blonde and usually checked out romantic fiction that I wouldn't understand anything else
and that book about Vikings would go right over my head. I didn't have to guess at that – I got that
thought right out of her head. She didn't realize that I was pretty danged smart all on my own… or
that I had a real-life Viking in my life who I could question if I wanted clarification on anything.

Which was actually pretty cool. Heck, I thought as I grabbed a cart and started through the sliding
doors, Eric could probably write his own book. I was reflecting on that as I walked slowly down the
aisles – wondering if he'd really be interested in putting his memories down on paper, and if he'd let
me be the one to compile them all into a format suitable for a book, and whether it should be strictly
a piece of thought-provoking non-fiction or if there would be a way to make it into a really interesting,
age-turning historical novel, and thinking how that was something I'd actually be really good at –
and then I didn't have time to think about anything at all, since I started bumping into just about every
single person I knew in Bon Temps.

First it was Holly, out without her boys for once and shuffling through overpriced steaks at the meat
counter.

"Hey, Sookie," she said with a smile as soon as she saw me. "Listen, I'm so glad I ran into you. I
wanted to apologize to you for last night." At my blank look – last night to me just then was filled
with the magic of learning about 'supes' and the sorrow of losing poor Tina – she shook her head.
"Losing my temper when you asked me to fill in for you," she clarified. "You never do stuff like
that; you're the hardest darn worker at Merlotte's! And I had no right to get all snippy like that."

"No, Holly, it's okay," I assured her, waving off her concern. Holly was just about the nicest person I
knew, and it was just like her to worry about something like this until she made it right. "I just
thought there might be a problem with that new vamp. I wanted to make sure Eric could drop by
and…well…"

"Kick his ass into next week?" Holly suggested.

"Somethin' like that," I said with a grin. "Anyway, everything turned out fine in the end."

"If you say so," Holly said skeptically. When I cocked my head at her, she shrugged. "Something
just felt off about that new one, Sookie. I stayed back out of it when you and Eric were talking to
him, but I've got bad vibes. And I always trust my instincts."

"Me too," I told her. It was my gut that told me that right from the start I could trust Eric, and it was
my gut that told me that Bill's politeness and southern courtesy were all a sham. So far, my gut hadn't
been wrong. Impulsively, I pulled her into a hug. "Thanks, Holly."

"Sure, Sookie," she said. "You take care now. And if you need anything, you call me, you hear?"

She gave me a little wave as we parted ways, and I'd barely made the turn into the canned goods
aisle before I almost ran into Catfish Hennessy. I had to press a quick hand to my mouth to stop a fit
of giggles when I was suddenly assailed with the image of a tiny Hamster Hennessy running around
in one of those exercise wheels, but once we'd said our how-de-do's it was clear the conversation
was going to be a serious one. Turned out he'd been paying more attention last night at Merlotte's
than I first thought, and he also had something to say on the wisdom of staying far away from Bill
Compton. Catfish had been Jason's boss in the City Works department ever since Jason joined his
first road crew ten years ago, and he was well respected in town. I listened solemnly to every word.
"That deader was creepier than a one-eyed fish in a cracker barrel," he finished, "but that blond vamp seems like he's lookin' out for ya."

"Eric and I are dating," I told him. It seemed weird to call a one thousand year old Viking my boyfriend, but there just wasn't any other word for it. We were certainly past the 'hanging out' stage. And I couldn't deny the little thrill of excitement it gave me to finally be able to say that I had a boyfriend. "He'll take care of me, Catfish."

"See that he does," Catfish said with a parting pat on my arm. I could see in his head that he thought me a smart, resourceful woman… but also that he figured having strong back-up couldn't hurt. He also considered himself part of my back-up, and between him and Holly I was left feeling happier about the state of my friendships in days.

I ducked into the beverages aisle to pick up some Dr. Pepper in case Jason stopped by, and threw in a six-pack of Tru Blood as well. I wasn't expecting to see Eric tonight, and even if I did… well, I certainly wasn't averse to sharing my own blood if he got hungry. In fact, I got shivery just thinking about it. But it would still be good to keep some of the synthetic version on hand.

I stopped and passed a few words about nothing in particular with Troy Dawson as I was rounding into the next aisle. And I was pulling my grocery list out of my pocket and checking that I'd gotten everything when I heard someone call my name. I looked up to see Summer standing near the display of hot dog buns and waving enthusiastically. Hoyt was with her, looming over her tiny figure and smiling indulgently, while Rene and Arlene appeared to be arguing over brands of barbeque sauce. I don't know why Rene bothered. Arlene always won.

I beefed up my shields as I wheeled my cart over, even while I mentally berated myself for thinking unkind thoughts. Summer was a good-natured, simple girl – emphasis on the simple. And she'd never done or said anything to hurt me and mine. She was probably the epitome of the sweet Southern belle – the real life version of what Eric had accused me of being the first time we met. We should be good friends, but mostly she just made me grit my teeth and want to run far, far away.

"Heyyy, Sookie!" she said, as if I might not have noticed her arm flailing. I plastered on a smile that I knew was edging into Crazy Sookie territory. "What are you doing here?"

I wanted to say 'washing my hair' and bit back on the instinct. What on earth was making me so snarky all of a sudden? Hadn't I just been thinking how lucky I was to have the friends I did, even if they let me down on the rare occasion? I should be pleased that Summer was obviously happy to see me.

"Oh, just a little shopping," I answered. I threw in a little white lie. "When I was laid up I managed to run out of quite a few things."

"I heard about that, you poor thing," Summer said. She patted my arm absently before her face lit up in a smile. "We're laying in supplies for a barbeque," she told me. "Going to have a little late night weenie roast under the stars!"

"That sounds—"

"And I see you're buyin' some of that Tru Blood," she said, pointing one finger at the contents of my cart. She giggled, leaning forward to lower her voice conspiratorially. "Is that for your beau?"

"Well, who else would it be for?" Arlene said irritably. I don't think Arlene was any more of a Summer fan than I was. Then her eyes widened and she turned to me, gesturing with the barbeque sauce bottle still in her hand. "Unless you're plannin' on movin' on to that dark haired one with the
sexy voice? The one that was at Merlotte's last night?"

Rene turned to Arlene. "You didn't tell me there was another one," he said.

I waved a hand, and tried not to dwell on Arlene's version of 'sexy'. "His name is Bill, and no, Arlene, I'm not movin' on," I said.

"Well, you never know," Arlene said. "You got yourself a little vampire fan club there."

"I do not!" I protested. "I barely know Bill!"

"Probably best to keep it that way, cher," Rene said.

Somehow, I was a little surprised that Rene was part of the anti-vampire brigade. I shouldn't have been, because he was with Arlene and all. They'd been dating for the best part of two years and I knew – from a little poking around I'd done in Rene's head a few months ago – that he was thinking of making it official. I guess a couple wouldn't last very long if they didn't agree on the major things… or if they didn't share the same prejudices. Still, it made me sad for Rene.

And I couldn't even counter what he said, because it was best for me to stay away from Bill. And I wasn't going to defend him when I knew what a lying sneak he was. It left me floundering for something to say that didn't make it seem like I distrusted all vampires even though I seriously distrusted Bill Compton.

It was Summer, of all people, who came to the rescue. "Vampires are so dark and mysterious, and now we've got one living right here in town and one visitin' all the time! And they both sound nice as strawberry pie to me, Rene Lenier," she scolded before turning back to me. "Though Sookie, if I were you I'd maybe say somethin' to your beau about bein' so vocal about… well, about your S-E-X life, if you know what I mean. Arlene said he announced it to the whole danged bar!"

I could feel my cheeks burning. "I'll… uh… I'll mention it," I finally managed to strangle out.

"Still, the whole thing is very exciting," she said. "Don't you think so, Bear?"

"Nothing wrong with vampires," Hoyt said, snuggling her into his arms, "as long as they stay away from you, pumpkin."

It was so cute I wanted to vomit. I'm pretty sure Arlene did gag a little. She rolled her eyes and tossed the barbeque sauce into the little wire basket that Summer was holding hard enough to make it bounce. "All right, come on then," she said, moving toward the check-out. "We've still gotta get the fire started and roast these suckers, and if we ain't home by eleven we're gonna have to pay the sitter overtime. Nice to see ya, Sookie."

"You too, Arlene," I called out.

"You know, you're welcome to join us, you," Rene said. "Have a night away from the vampires for once?"

I smiled at him. The offer was a sincere one, I could tell. But I probably couldn't handle a whole evening of Summer's perkiness and a bunch of anti-vampire rhetoric, probably liberally sprinkled with speculation about my sex life. "Thanks," I said, "but tonight I've got a date with a good book."

"All right, Sookie," Rene said. He gripped my arm and gave it a little squeeze. "You take care of yourself."
I waved them all off and wandered around in the cleaning supplies aisle until I could be sure they'd be through the check-out. I was suddenly exhausted, and curling up in the chair with my new book sounded like about the best thing in the world.

* * *

By ten o'clock I was halfway through the chapter on Viking home life, and I'd already learned so much. Viking boys, for example, were considered men at the age of thirteen and were expected to start going out on raids. I remembered Jason at thirteen, when he'd spent half his days whining about how he really needed an ATV and the other half sneaking off with Hoyt to play on some old treehouse on the Bellefleur property. It was impossible to imagine him with a sword in his hand, leaving home for months at a time, fighting and killing to survive. But those Viking boys would have looked the same as Jason did at that age – they probably had similar stature, the same fair hair. It was such a strange thought.

And most Viking men were married between the ages of sixteen and eighteen, which made sense because their life was so difficult and death came so young. I held my finger in the book to hold my place and thought about that. I'd never asked Eric his age when he died and I could admit to myself that I'd never brought it up because the thought of it made me shiver, and not in the good way. Eric had died. His heart had stopped and he'd grown cold and he would be nothing more than bits of bone today if his maker hadn't turned him. I still didn't know exactly how that happened either. Eric had told me Godric's name and that he was a good maker, but other than that I was in the dark.

But even though I didn't know the particulars, I knew that Eric was a good sight older than eighteen. I'd peg him at about thirty in human years. I wondered if he'd had a wife. The thought was oddly disconcerting. For some reason knowing that he'd been with about a billion women since he became a vampire wasn't as unsettling as the image of that one human wife. Had she been beautiful?

Had he loved her?

I tried to imagine him walking back from the fields to find her, wrapping his arms around her, maybe tickling her to make her laugh and squirm away. Pressing warm lips to her cheek. Sitting with her at the table, eating the food she'd prepared for him. Making love to her. In my mind's eye she was tall and golden, pale and perfect. The mental pictures set like a heavy stone in my belly, an uneasy mixture of hurt and jealousy. All over someone who had been dead and gone for more centuries than I could fathom.

I wanted to ask him about her, this possible wife from his distant past, and yet I also didn't want to know. It was possible my imaginings were wildly off-base; that Eric's marriage had been of convenience and not love, which the book said was a common occurrence among important families. But it was also possible that he'd loved her madly, deeply; and I wasn't quite sure how I felt about that beyond the ridiculous churning in my gut.

I shook my head and turned back to the book, putting aside any decision about what to ask Eric for another day. I was midway through the next paragraph when my hair suddenly fluttered back from my face. I blinked up – and nearly jumped out of my skin.

"Sookie," Eric said. "You will come with me now."

"Jesus Christ, Shepherd of Judea!" I squealed. Eric stood, tall and arrogant, in the middle of my living room. "You just scared the crap out of me!"

"Come," Eric said. He held out his hand. "Now."
The look on Eric's face was intense, his arm stiff and unyielding. And again with the dog commands, which I'd mostly broken him of during the three nights he spent at my home after the accident. I lifted a brow. "Come?" I repeated imperiously. "I thought I'd made it perfectly clear that I'm not your pet to order around, Eric. And since when do you just storm into my house like you own the place? There's such a thing as knocking, you know!"

"I care nothing for your southern manners or your semantics at the moment," Eric grit out. "I require your services. You will come."

I rose from the sofa, letting the book tumble onto the seat beside me, and tipped my head back to meet his eyes. He might have a good foot on me, but now my back was up. "I'm not yours to command, no matter what you might have to tell your stupid Queen," I said, the grit in my voice matching his. "And if you keep talkin' to me like that you'll find yourself on your backside on my front porch faster than you can say 'rescind' and 'invitation!'"

Eric's eyes flashed. I didn't have to be a mind-reader to know that he was considering just throwing me over his shoulder and zipping out into the night. It was there in the stance of his body, the quick flick of his eyes to the open front door. I could feel tears prickling behind my eyelids but that didn't stop me from glaring at him. I'd just realized I loved him this morning and now here we were having our first fight and I didn't even know why!

After a heartbeat or two – though his position didn't change – I knew he wasn't going to do it. He wasn't going to make me do it. Thank God, because I didn't have any experience even with normal relationship stuff and I sure as heck had no idea how someone came back from forcibly evicting her boyfriend from her house using magical words. I relaxed slightly knowing it hadn't come to that, at least, crossing my arms at my chest and adding a frown to my glare. We stared at each other with less than a foot of space between us until I finally snapped. "Well? Are you goin' to apologize for barging in here and treating me like a slave or are you—"

"A vampire has been taken," he interrupted. "And your friend -- the word was a mockery on his tongue -- "is involved."

I blinked, the wind going partially out of my sails. "Taken? You mean..."

"Kidnapped." Eric's voice was vibrating with barely repressed anger. "Silvered and taken from his home, possibly as long as a week ago."

I blinked again, trying to understand. I knew that there were people out there who hunted vampires. There were some that did it because of the rumour that vampire blood was an aphrodisiac, and some who had been vampire hunters for years and years, since long before vampires revealed themselves to the world, and who just couldn't understand that times had changed and they no longer had to 'rid the world of evil'. They thought they were doing the world a service, and they bragged about staking vampires on their sites on the internet, hiding their identities with voice filters and code names. 20/20 had done a whole report on them.

But one of my friends? It was impossible. "Who?" I finally asked.

"Eddie's home reeks of Lafayette Reynolds," Eric told me. His lip was curled into a sneer that I'd never seen on his face before, but I couldn't focus on that because my knees gave out and I found myself sitting again on the sofa. "I would have gone straight to him," he continued, "and glamoured him to get the truth... but there are limits to what glamour can achieve. So I thought to come to my telepath. My woman."

I shook my head, not able to concentrate on all the nuances Eric had thrown into that final word
because my mind was whirling. "Lafayette would never…" I began. I raised my head to look up at Eric, still towering over me, still angry enough to spit but holding in his rage. I realized suddenly that he wanted to tear into something – probably Lafayette – and was holding back for my sake. Which made it all the more important for me to convince him he was wrong before he changed his mind. "Lafayette knows what it's like to be different, to be judged! And he likes vampires!"

"Yes," Eric spat out, "he likes one of them enough to fuck him to put him off his guard before torturing him with silver."

I sat back. If Eric said that Lafayette and Eddie had been having sex, then I had to believe him. I'd seen what Eric's nose could do. And clearly the only way he was going to believe me when I said that Lafayette was innocent was if I could show him the proof. "What do you want me to do?" I asked.

The tension in Eric's body suddenly went out in a whoosh, and he sat on the coffee table in front of me. "Read him," he said. His voice, while still intense, lost some of its underlying menace. His sharp blue eyes pierced mine. "There may be information that you can get from his mind that I would not think to ask him under glamour. I must find the truth of this."

I nodded slowly. "And you trust me?" I had to ask, even though I wasn't sure I wanted to know the answer.

"I know you, Sookie Stackhouse. You would not lie to save your friend. Not if it meant another may die due to your folly. So yes, I trust you." He cocked his head, and a hint of a smile played at the corner of his lips. "Besides," he added, "we've shared blood. I'd know if you were lying."

Bastard. But the fact that there was even the trace of amusement in him now when he'd arrived in full badass vampire mode allowed me to relax back a little on the sofa. He rose from where he'd perched on the table, and held out his hand to me again.

"We must go now, Sookie," he said. "Come."

I frowned at him, both for his word choice and his need for haste, though I totally understood the latter. But I had to make sure we were clear about everything, including the consequences. "And when we find out the truth?" I asked. "If Layafette is guilty, which he's not," I hastened to add, "or if he knows something about who did this? What then, Eric?"

He drew himself up to his full height. "Then we turn them over to the proper authorities," he said, looking down his nose at me as though my thinking that there was any other probable scenario was absurd, "after we retrieve Eddie."

I contrasted his answer with the restrained anger in which he'd greeted me tonight. I was his 'asset' and as such I was supposed to do what he said. I had no idea what was going through his head, and most times that was the best thing in the world but at times like this it frustrated the hell out of me. I knew what he could do to Lafayette or any human who hurt a vampire under his charge. And I knew that the bloodlust was still roiling under his skin.

He hadn't dropped his outstretched hand. I took a breath, then grasped it and let him pull me from the sofa. "I trust you too, Eric," I told him.

He nodded his head once, briefly, before curling his fingers around mine and leading me quickly to the car. I directed him to Lafayette's little house, knowing he wasn't scheduled for work at Merlotte's. Lafayette was a social butterfly so there was no guarantee he'd be sitting at home painting his nails on his night off, but it was the best starting point we could come up with. And if Lala wasn't home
then maybe Eric's nose could track him from there. Now that I knew what was up, I wanted to find him as soon as possible and clear his name. Then Eric could concentrate his efforts on who really kidnapped Eddie, and I'd be more than willing to help him there, too. I bit my lip, hoping like hell that Eddie was just a booty call for Lafayette and nothing more. Lala was my friend – probably my *best* friend, and—

"And because he's my friend," I said suddenly.

Eric glanced at me before turning his attention back to the road. He was driving faster than he should, one hand clenched around the wheel, and I tried to concentrate on what we were going to do and not on the fragilities on my mortal body should his little sports car end up in a ditch. "What?"

"You came to me because I can hear things you can't. I can get the full truth. And that's my job. That's what I'm supposed to do for you. But glamour usually works just fine, doesn't it? You also came because Lafayette is my friend," I told him. "You know me, Eric? Well, I know you too."

I could feel the conflict in him. I don't know how – maybe the whole 'feeling emotions' thing works a little bit both ways when there's a telepath in the mix – but I knew that he was unsure how to respond. Then the hand that wasn't on the wheel reached over to my lap and took mine, squeezed gently.

"You are my telepath," he said, so quietly that I could barely hear him over the roar of the engine and the wind in my ears. "But you are my woman first."

He didn't want to hurt Lafayette. He didn't want to hurt me, either.

I squeezed his hand back and willed his car to go even faster. The sooner we could fix this thing, the better.

Chapter End Notes

My writing is now officially caught up to my posting! That means that there will be a couple of days between chapters (though I'm hoping that I'll be able to write fast enough on the weekend to manage one a day. We'll see!)

All Viking information in this chapter is directly from the books. I just didn't have time to research to look everything up myself. Hopefully Charlaine Harris did her research!
Chapter 14

Following Sookie's directions, I pulled up in front of a small, dilapidated home on the outskirts of town. Unlike others in the neighbourhood, it had never seen better days. There were holiday lights strung through the wooden beams and twinkling in the middle of the summer, a garden gnome poking its head from the overgrown grass. As an attempt to lend cheer to the place, both failed miserably.

Sookie met me at the bottom of the steps, stood at my side and stared at Lafayette's closed door. She was wearing a crisp cotton sundress the colour of the sun – or at least the colour that I remembered the sun to be in my hazy memories of my human life. She looked sun-kissed herself, her skin golden and her hair flaxen in the moonlight. At any other time I would take the opportunity to press her against the cool metal of the car, to trace my lips along the column of her neck and run my hands over her curves.

Now, I merely met her eyes.

She returned my gaze squarely. I had already learned of her – many times – that she was never one to run from a challenge, even one that may result in her own heartache. She would never have walked into Fangtasia if that were the case. She took my hand, and even took the lead on the walk to the door.

"Now, you let me do the talkin'," she instructed. If it were not for the gravity of the situation I would have smirked at her lecturing tone. "If you go up in there all badass vampire it's not gonna do us a lick of good."

"Yes, Sookie," I said compliently.

She shot me an exasperated glare before releasing my hand to swipe her palms along her skirt. Her nervousness was palpable, a sharp pinging along the cord of our bond, but she lifted her chin and knocked resolutely. We didn't have to wait long before the door was opened, Lafayette's gaze drifting between the two of us in confusion. He was clad in a fuchsia wrap that matched the slash of colour on his eyelids.

"Hey, what's you two doin' over here in my neck of the woods? You takin' the big man slummin', Sook?"

If he felt any guilt over what he'd done, he showed no sign of it. I felt a grudging respect for the man. He'd make a good vampire.

"You think we could come on in, Lafayette?" Sookie asked. Now I could feel her anxiety and worry coursing through her blood, but her voice was steady and only a minute twitch of the fingers gave her away. A human would never notice; a vampire always did. "We need to talk to you."

Lafayette's eyes flicked over to me again. He knew what he was risking by inviting a predator into his home. "I'm just gettin' ready to head out, Sook," he hedged. He shifted in place, preparing to step around her. "Maybe we can talk out here on the porch."

"It won't take long," she answered. She wasn't budging. Her voice let him know she would brook no argument, and I knew it would take a stronger man than Lafayette Reynolds to resist her. I was not
surprised when he stepped back.

"Sure," he finally said, reluctant but attempting to hide it. "You's two come right on in."

I strolled easily in behind Sookie, keeping my anger in check for the moment. Lafayette's home was strewn with discount furniture and tchotchkes, the stench of incense barely covering the sickly-sweet scent of marijuana. I studied the cluttered shelf of ikons while Sookie made small talk, drawing her friend down to sit next to her on the sofa but being very careful, I noticed, not to touch him. She was apparently tamping down on her gift until she was required to open her mind to his, and contact appeared to accelerate her condition. Interesting.

"Eric, come sit down," she called over to me once she'd smoothed her short skirt over her thighs. I looked over the room and finally plucked a lap blanket from the chair before seating myself opposite the two of them. A broken spring immediately made its presence known in my left ass cheek. I lifted an arm over the back of the chair, looking for all the world like a man indulging his woman on a social call.

"Lafayette," she began once she'd ensured that I was in place and not about to take over the proceedings, "you know about my… my little curse."

"Sure, Sook," he said. "You's been pickin' up thoughts from people's heads since the moment I met you down at the community pool that summer. We was what, eight? Nine? You told your Gran the lifeguard was thinkin' nasty thoughts 'bout some of the boys in the wading pool." He smiled in remembrance, and I briefly found myself wishing that I'd been able to meet this Gran. I think we would have gotten along famously. "Thought your Gran was gonna rip his arm off. Or somethin' else he'd be needin' a lot more than his fuckin' arm."

"I've been pickin' up thoughts for a lot longer than that," Sookie answered. She took a breath and reached out to his hand. "I need to read your thoughts now, Lala."

He immediately snatched his hand back, and I leaned forward in the chair in anticipation. The annoying spring was forgotten. Sookie's feisty grandmother was forgotten. My eyes narrowed, focusing on the sharp, scared look on Lafayette's face. I would hold him still if necessary, force him to submit.

"Hells no," he said. He inched back on the sofa, his eyes flicking suspiciously between the two of us. "You don't wanna know what's rollin' around up in here, Sook."

"It's important, Lafayette," Sookie told him. "One of the vampires in Eric's Area has gone missing. His name is—"

"Oh shit," Lafayette breathed out.

"—Eddie."

"Ohhh shit."

My forward motion on the chair had been unceasing since the first word from Lafayette's treacherous mouth. Now I was practically hovering at the edge, only the knowledge that my telepath would best be able to get the information I required keeping me stationary in my seat. Still, my eyes sought to catch his, the urge to pluck the strings in his mind with my glamour so great that I had to curl my fingers into the arm of the chair so as not to forget myself.

"We know you two are… friends," Sookie said. His eyes were wild, but she gentled him like a wild horse, her voice soothing and empathetic. She held out her hand and he looked at it with something
like loathing, but she held it steady; unmovable, implacable. Her pale pink nails shimmered in the light from the lamp. Such a tiny little thing, Sookie's hand, and Lafayette Reynolds regarded it as though it held his doom. It just may. "We just want to know what happened last time you saw him. You tell us, and I'll listen in while you talk. That's it. Then we'll be on our way."

He finally looked up to meet her eyes. "That's it?"

"Promise," Sookie said. She shouldn't make promises she might not be able to keep. I would remind her of that later. Now it was better to let him believe. "We just want to find out what happened to him, Lala."

Her friend still looked hesitant. I was ready to suggest an alternative method of persuasion, one involving chains and sharp metal implements, when Lafayette took a deep breath and nodded. "Okay, Sook," he said. He reached out to wrap his hand around hers. "What's you want me to do?"

"Just relax and—" Sookie began, and then her eyes went wide. "Lafayette," she said haltingly. "You... you took his blood?"

I hissed and surged to my feet, my fangs running out and my body instinctively crouching into attack mode. Lafayette's eyes went wide and he shrunk back onto the sofa, trying his best to burrow himself into the cheap material. I snarled again, every inch the beast that hid behind the unruffled everyday exterior... and then Sookie was standing and her small hand was pushing at my chest, her eyes flashing.

"Eric Northman," she scolded, "you put those things away! That ain't helping, you're scaring poor Lafayette to death!"

I blinked down at her. I could push past her and have the human's throat beneath my fangs before she even knew I had moved yet I remained where I was, the slight pressure of her hand on my ribs keeping me in place. How had I let one human woman gain so much power over me in such a short time? Why did I let it continue?

"Drainer," I growled.

"It wasn't like that!" Lafayette protested quickly. "I'm no drainer! Tell him, Sook!"

"Relax, both of you!" Sookie yelled. I pushed against her slightly, testing her resolve, and she scowled up into my face. The sight of my fangs didn't faze her in the slightest. Sometimes I couldn't decide whether my Sookie was exceedingly brave or exceedingly foolhardy. "You want to find out what happened to Eddie," she said firmly, "then you've got to let Lafayette tell it and you've got to let me listen. So take it down a notch, all right?"

I hissed again, but made no move to take the step that would put me into her friend's orbit and his throat beneath my teeth. Sookie held my eyes for the space of several human heartbeats, until I straightened and retracted my fangs. I still felt coiled like a spring wound over-tightly, but she was right. Instinct could not win out over logic. She nodded once to herself and retook her seat on the sofa next to her friend, turning her back on me without a single concern. Worry and fear for her friend still seeped through our bond but there was not a single ounce of trepidation in the act of leaving herself open to me. Her courage...

I shook my head, stalked back to the front of the chair where I could keep an eye on the proceedings.

"Just tell me what happened, Lala," Sookie said gently.

"It was all 'cause of Ruby Jean," he said after a nervous glance in my direction. He let Sookie take
his hand again, which was its own kind of bravery. "Not that I blames her, ya know. She can't help the way she is."

He slowly pulled himself forward until he was sitting upright, earning himself another reluctant mental nod of respect from me. He eyed me warily but still sought to face me with his back straight and his head held high. He took a shaking breath, and his eyes darted back to Sookie when he saw that I wasn't going to rip his throat out. Yet.

"You know she's up in Serenity Springs," Lafayette continued.

"Ruby Jean is Lafayette's mother. She's… not well," Sookie explained to me. As if the name of one of the higher-tier psychiatric hospitals in the state wouldn't have informed me of the fact. She flicked her gaze back to her friend sympathetically, as though stating such a truth would damage him in some way. "Mentally," she added.

None of this was helping me to find Eddie, or doing much more than delay the inevitable end of Lafayette's miserable life. "Continue," I said shortly.

Sookie frowned at me, but turned back to Lafayette and nodded. Her grip never left his hand.

"That place, it's real expensive," he said. "More than I cans afford flippin' burgers and pullin' in a couple days here and there on the road crew. It was a bit easier when Tara was around, you dig? She threw in a deuce or so every month, whatever she could afford. Then she lit out on us—"

"Oh Lafayette," Sookie crooned. "I had no idea. Why on earth didn't you tell me?"

"What could you do?" Lafayette answered. "Hooker, you's can barely make ends meet on your ownself. You couldn't help me with Ruby Jean."

I bristled at the insult, at the digression, at Sookie's misplaced compassion, at the thought of my woman struggling to get by on minimum wage and tips from rowdy rednecks. I growled again. This was getting us nowhere.

"I do a little dealing to make up the difference," Lafayette continued quickly. "I got no problem slingin' a little E, some weed to take the edge off. Uppers and downers, I gots them for ya. But I ain't never gotten into that V shit, no matter how much it brings on the market. I ain't got no death wish!"

He had taken the blood of a vampire under my charge. He was not doing a very good job of convincing me.

"Eddie," I said to get him back on track.

"He was lonely," Lafayette said. His eyes darted to me, but he must not have liked what he saw because he quickly returned his gaze to Sookie. "He was like… a vampire that nobody taught how to be a vampire. All he did was sit around all night and watch TV. He offered me his blood, Sookie! You gots to believe me! Once a week I dropped by his place, I made a little withdrawal… and then I made a little deposit. You's know. It was all consensual!"

Sookie nodded. She turned her pale face up to me, obviously shocked by some of the revelations she was receiving from her friend's mind. I could feel her surprise, her astonishment… and a tiny hint of curious interest. That Lafayette Reynolds would enjoy all manner of sexual deviance was the least shocking thing I'd heard all night. "He's telling the truth, Eric," she said.

I sat down abruptly on the chair opposite them, leaning forward to rest my elbows on my knees. Lafayette flinched back at my sudden movement before remembering himself and straightening his
back again. I noticed, however, that his fingers clenched convulsively around Sookie's hand.

"Then where," I asked, my voice deceptively soft, "is Eddie?"

He stared resolutely at the Fangtasia logo on my T-shirt, avoiding my eyes. The urge to glamour him was still great, but I had gone to Sookie for a reason. I trusted her to get to the truth of this. I would not rape her friend's mind unless I had no other choice.

Lafayette swallowed. "When I gots to his house last week, the door was unlocked," he said slowly. "I stepped inside, saw that ugly old lamp he had was lyin' on the floor. Could see there'd been signs of a struggle, you know? So I skipped. That's all I know."

"And you didn't think to inform anyone?" I growled out.

"Who was I supposed to tell?" Lafayette asked. His eyes flashed to me, regaining just a little of their fire. "Until you startin' takin' up with my girl here I didn't know there was any kind of vampire police! Hell, I still wouldn't know unless she'd told me you was some kind of Sheriff. And you think Bud Dearborne and Andy Bellefleur gonna give two shits about a missing vampire? Them two'd say good riddance and go have a beer to fuckin' celebrate."

I listened to his words and heard the truth of them, but my eyes were for Sookie. Her mouth had gone wide, her face pale, her eyes distant and frightened. There was more. "Tell me," I snapped at her.

She blinked up at me, tears brimming in her expressive brown eyes. I could not let it affect me. I would not. "TELL ME!" I roared.

Sookie flinched, but it was Lafayette who took up the tale again. "Jason's been using V," he said quietly.

I did not take my eyes from the woman.

"I stopped selling to him 'cause the boy couldn't handle it." Lafayette's voice now was resigned, weary. "He got all crazy, wired on the shit. Tried to strong-arm me into supplyin' him; him and Amy, that new girl of his. When Eddie went missing, I thought maybe he'd followed me to Eddie's place. Thought maybe he'd taken matters into his own hands."

I already knew her brother was a fool. I had no idea he had such little disregard for his own life.

"It's just a suspicion," Sookie said weakly. Her eyes met mine imploringly. "We don't know anything yet, Eric! Jason might not have anything to do with this!"

Yes. A suspicion that I would never have heard about had it not been for her telepathy. The gift that she called a curse. And now for the first time I could see why.

If her idiot of a brother had drained Eddie Gauthier…

A vampire is never at the mercy of his emotions, I heard Godric say in my head, as clearly as if he was crouched next to me on Lafayette's worn rug, his lips pressed to my ear. He dominates them.

If Jason Stackhouse was responsible for the death of a vampire in my charge…

I had told Sookie that I would turn the offender over to the human police. Human deaths were frowned upon by the Authority in these days of mainstreaming and synthetic sustenance. But my blood boiled with the desire for vengeance. I wanted nothing more to drain the killer as he'd drained
Eddie, to rip him apart, to prove him unworthy and consign him to Hel so that he may never reach Valhalla.

And if I did so, my woman would never forgive me.

A vampire is never at the mercy of his emotions...

I stood, took in Sookie's wide eyes, the hands twisting in her lap. Consigned Godric to the closet in the back of my mind where he resided, and locked the door tight. There was time to make a decision when I had all the facts. For now, there was only one task remaining.

I rose to my full height, towering off Lafayette where he still sat on the sofa. "You will no longer sell V," I told him, "or I will kill you."

"Eric!" Sookie squealed.

"Is that understood?" I asked, staring down Lafayette and ignoring her completely.

"Eric, you can't—"

"Sure, yeah, absolutely," Lafayette interrupted her. He still hadn't met my eyes but I knew I didn't have to use my magic to make this stick. He was practically vibrating with the need for this whole ordeal to be over with it. For us to be on our way, as Sookie had promised. That he regretted his actions was irrefutable. "Believe me, I'm done with that shit."

"Eric—"

"Leave him be, Sook," Lafayette said. His tone now was vehement, his look one of disgust. "Nobody oughta be sellin' a person's blood for some sick high. It ain't right. I knew that and I did it anyway, and now—"

"Eddie might still be fine," Sookie insisted. Her need to believe that her brother was as innocent of this as he was of double homicide sang through her blood, high and desperate. It tore at me, clawing at my insides, scratching at my dead heart. "Jason's not stupid! Well, he is," she automatically corrected herself, "but he's not this stupid!" She shook her head, her long blonde hair swinging with the vigor of her action. "No," she said. "I don't believe it. Jason wouldn't be this dumb!"

The assertion rang false, a desperate hope from a desperate woman. But I reached out for her and took her hand, and tried to lend her my strength. I pulled her to her feet, squeezed her hand gently.

"Let's find out," I said.

Chapter End Notes

Welllll, I've just found out that workers are going to be coming in to do bathroom repairs (ripping out walls and all) at the end of the month. This means that I've got to relocate for a few days -- thank god for my awesome sister and brother-in-law -- which means no computer access. My last available time to write will be Monday morning.

My goal is to cross the Nanowrimo 50K finish line by then. The story itself, however, still has four more chapters to go at the point and will definitely run over. So, good news bad news. To the good: more story! To the bad: completion date will probably be mid-
December.

Thanks to everyone who has been reading along. I appreciate it!
I'm finally back home after 4 days away from my computer! Things are still a bit topsy-turvy and concentration can be difficult, but I'm hoping to be able to finish this story in the next 7 to 10 days. Three more chapters!

* * *

"It doesn't fit," I said once we'd travelled a few miles down the road.

I'd been silent as Eric pulled away from Lafayette's house and turned the car around. There were too many emotions boiling up in me to settle on just one. I felt nauseas with worry, afraid for Jason, concerned about Eric's missing vampire, determined to find out the truth. And the more I thought about it, the more I believed that Jason had more respect for life to be a party to kidnapping and possible murder.

Eric glanced briefly away from the road. He'd been quiet too, the anger that had erupted back at the house banked for now. I knew he was doing it for my sake, and I couldn't quite decide whether to be annoyed or grateful for that. Later, we'd have to have words about the way he'd yelled at me. But right now I was too fretful about my brother and he was too amped up about Eddie.

"You think Lafayette is wrong?" he asked.

I bit my lip. Oh, I wanted to think he was wrong, but wanting it and actually believing it are two different things altogether.

"I just know that it doesn't make sense," I said. I turned to him, watched the way his fingers clenched on the wheel. Yeah, he was still angry. "You don't know Jason. He'll pull over to the side of the road if he sees an injured raccoon. And he'd rather drive his truck into a ditch than hit an animal himself, and believe me he loves his truck more than he's ever loved any woman in his life. I can't see the Jason I know kidnapping someone to slowly drain his blood and kill him." I shook my head. "I just can't."

"But he is not that person anymore," Eric said. "He's an addict."

The defense of my brother was automatic. "We don't know that!"

"We know what Lafayette has witnessed. We know that he threatened his friend when his supply was terminated. We know that he is irrational."

"But—"

"And vampires are not cute and cuddly animals," he added bitterly.

"Jason respects life! He's got nothing against vampires," I insisted. "Why, one time one of those crazy Fellowship of the Sun people came into Merlotte's, and Jason was one of the ones who escorted him out the door and told him we didn't hold to his idiotic theories about the bible sayin' vampires are evil!"
"And yet he injects a vampire's blood into his veins," Eric said. "That is not respect, Sookie. That is abuse. Instant gratification. A Big Mac, a shot of whiskey, a hit of V. No thought to the fact that the vampire is a being with feelings, plans—"

"Isn't that what you did for years?" I bit out. "Hunted humans and killed them for their blood? With no regard for their hopes and dreams, the families you were leaving fatherless, the parents who would never know what happened to their children?"

I couldn't regret it, even when Eric's spine stiffened. The car lurched when Eric convulsively pressed down on the gas pedal – just an instant, but the reflexive action told me that my barb had hit home. He smoothed out the ride and we traveled another half mile down the interstate before he spoke.

"Yes," he said.

His simple acquiescence knocked all the wind out of my sails. I realized I'd been itching for a fight, anything to block out the miasma of worry-fear-anguish eating up my insides as Eric's little sports car sped through the miles and brought us closer to our destination.

I turned back to face the windshield, clutched at the seatbelt over my shoulder. The simple fact of the matter was that Eric was a predator. He simply chose not to kill. But he would – to protect himself, someone he loved, the vampires under his care. Like Eddie.

I trusted him with my life, but I remembered the way he'd leapt from the chair when he'd thought Lafayette had drained Eddie and I feared for what might have happened if I hadn't been there.

"Thank you." I spoke quietly, but I knew he could still hear me. His hearing was better than his sense of smell, and that was saying something. When I felt him look toward me, I turned again in my seat. "For understanding that Lafayette never meant Eddie any harm," I explained.

He studied me for a minute before turning his attention back to the road. "If the blood was given freely—"

"You know it was." I'd seen way too much in Lafayette's head to think any different.

"—then he deserved to live, and there was no need to involve the police," Eric finished. "But don't pretend, Sookie, that your friend is an innocent in this."

"He didn't do anything wrong!"

"Because he only had to whore himself out to get the blood? Or because if he didn't do it, someone else would?" he asked. He glanced away from the yellow line markers speeding by under the wheels of the car. "If Eddie was supplying Lafayette with crack, would your response be the same?"

I knew darned well that if Lala was peddling hard drugs I'd be reading him the riot act. And Eric knew me well enough to figure that out. Heck, I wasn't even that happy about the stuff Lafayette had admitted he did sell. And really, what was the difference between crack and V? Both of them turned people in junkies, destroyed lives, broke apart families, forced people to commit heinous acts to support their addiction. Here I was, mentally berating Jason and hoping he had more regard for another person's life. Was I the same? Did it not matter as much to me because it was 'just' a vampire?

I slumped back in the seat. "I think I have to thank you even more," I said. "And I know Lafayette will never do it again!"

"As do I."
I didn't want to imagine it, didn't even want to consider it. But... "If Jason is involved in all this, if he's hurt Eddie..."

"Then we will turn him over to the human authorities," Eric said.

I'd started this whole thing trying to prove that Jason wasn't guilty of killing Maudette and Dawn, and now I was on my way to find out if he was guilty of killing a vampire. And Eddie's life was just as valuable as the two human women. Much as part of me – the biggest part – wanted to beg Eric to turn a blind eye to my brother's offences, I could never live with myself. And every time I looked at Eric I'd remember, and it would taint everything from here on out.

I just had to hope and pray that we were wrong.

Eric had slowed down when we approached Jason's house, and now the tires crunched on the gravel as he eased the car onto the driveway. He stopped well back from the door, shadows from the trees enveloping the car in darkness. He looked to me. Never in my life had I wanted to run away from my stupid gift more than I had in that moment.

Then Eric reached for me. I felt the strength flow from his hand to mine, the sure knowledge that I was strong enough and brave enough to face whatever happened in the next few minutes. I didn't know if I was feeling it on a metaphoric sense or if this was some new aspect of the bond we'd forged... and honestly, I really didn't want to think about that until I finally got through this night. I just appreciated the gesture in the spirit it was given, and took a deep breath before I sent my extra sense out toward Jason's house.

"Two human brains," I said softly. Then my shoulders slumped. "And one void."

Eric cursed in a foreign language under his breath. It was only then that I realized he'd been just as eager to have Jason proved innocent as I was, even though that would mean that he was no closer to finding his missing vampire. I felt a surge of love for him in that moment that threatened to overwhelm me, and squeezed his hand to keep it from tumbling from my lips.

At least Eddie was still alive.

I straightened my spine. Now that we knew, some of the anxiety had eased. Now that the uncertainty was gone I could face this head on. I released Eric's hand and got out of the car before folding his fingers into mine and directing him toward the back of the house and the old deck. Jason hardly ever remembered to lock up the back door. If we were going to get in sight unseen, it was the best way. It only occurred to me later to think how odd it was – and how heartening – that Eric, who probably had hundreds of battles under his belt, had let me take the lead.

"I'll go inside and then invite you in," I whispered as we approached the screen door. I felt more than saw his head dip in agreement. I needed to take those few steps up to the porch, needed to ease my way inside the house. Every moment that I hesitated could potentially put Eddie's life in danger. But Jason was my brother. I swallowed, my throat suddenly dry. "And Eric—"

He lifted my hand and pressed my knuckles to his lips. "I won't hurt him, my Sookie," he breathed against my skin.

"Okay," I answered. The first breath I took in was shaky; the second was better. I nodded. "Okay."

Our entrance went undetected. The basement door was ajar, and as we crept closer the sound of voices became clearer. I felt Eric stiffen beside me and knew that to him the voices might as well be in the same room – that he could hear them as clearly as I could hear Keith Urban crooning about
making memories when I lay out in the sun with my earbuds in and the sun beating down on my skin – but I clenched at his hand and he stayed by my side as we made our way down the first few stairs.

"—glamouring you!" I heard a female voice say.

"He don't even know how to do that shit!" Jason's angry voice carried up to us as we crouched on the landing. "I ain't lettin' him go 'cause he did some mumbo-jumbo on my head! I'm lettin' him go 'cause this is wrong, Amy!"

"Jason, baby, listen to me." Amy's voice was sweet, persuasive. My less than bright brother would be putty in the hands of someone like that. "You're not thinking straight, okay, baby? We talked about this before. You just listen to me. When was the last time you had a hit?"

"I told you I ain't doin' that stuff no more!" Jason yelled. "This here is a human being! Okay, maybe not human, but he's a person, and he's a good person, and I'm just gonna pray that he's generous enough to forgive us for all the fuckin' hell we put him through this past week! Now you gonna help me get these chains offa him or not?"

Eric and I had been steadily creeping down the stairs, and when Amy spoke next it was clear as a bell.

"Okay, baby," Amy said with a sigh. "You're right. I don't know what I was thinking."

"Damn straight." My brother sounded so relieved.

"Move on over so I can get in there and help, sweetie," Amy said.

My eyes went wide when I realized her words didn't match the thoughts in her head. I squeezed Eric's hand convulsively as I stood up and hollered. "Stake!"

I stumbled down the remaining steps, but Eric moved so fast that he was nothing more than a black blur, one moment hunkered gracefully beside me on the basement stairs and the next a menacing figure looming over my brother and his girlfriend. Eddie – a short, overweight vampire in a pale yellow button-down and polyester slacks – lay slumped on a battered lawn chair, a couple of thin chains of silver holding him in place.

"Don't kill me, don't kill me!" Jason screamed just as I yelled, "Eric, no!"

Eric squeezed his hand around Amy's neck a little tighter, enough to cause a choked gurgling sound to struggle from her lips. Her feet didn't touch the floor; the stake she'd intended to use on Eddie clattered to the cement, useless at her feet. I saw my brother glance toward it and quickly stepped in front of him. "Jason," I said warningly.

He blinked. I think it was the first time he'd even noticed me in the room. Totally understandable, considering he was dealing with a psycho drainer and an extremely pissed off vampire, fangs distended longer than I'd ever seen them and fire in his eyes. "Jesus Christ, Sook," he finally breathed out, "what the fuck are you doing here?"

"Savin' your skin, apparently," I snapped. I turned my back on him, trusting that he couldn't do anything too stupid in the minute or two it might take me to talk Eric down from the ledge. My eyes lit on the pile of bungee cords that Jason used to hold down his mountain bike in the back of his truck. "Eric, let her go," I said. "We'll tie her up until we get this sorted out."

His hand squeezed just that tiny bit tighter. "She deserves death," he growled.
"Yup," I said. I just couldn't disagree. I'd seen what she was going to do to Eddie. But more than that, one little dip into her head was all it took to show me that she'd done this before to other vampires. Many times. "Eddie's not her first," I told Eric. "And she's a master manipulator. But the police have to deal with her. It's what we agreed," I reminded him.

Eric hissed. His mouth with their deadly fangs was inches from her throat, his long fingers keeping her head tilted at an awkward angle.

Behind me, Eddie shrieked. I jerked, distracted enough to spin around in time to see Jason carefully removing the first of Eddie's chains. I grimaced, barely holding on to my gag reflex at the stench of smoking flesh. Jason was making soothing noises as he moved toward the other chain, and I turned back to Eric quickly. Eddie was young, just a new vampire. If Jason freed him, Eddie might not be able to control himself!

I'm not sure if it was the look of panic in my eyes or the knowledge that taking care of the injured vampire was his first priority, but Eric was already – clearly reluctantly – setting Amy back on her feet. I let out a breath that was pure relief; Amy just looked thankful for any breath at all. "We can tie her with those," I said to Eric, gesturing to the bungee cords piled on top of the dryer.

Eric did the tying up. One, because he was the strongest and could make sure she couldn't get loose. And two, because he had Amy trussed up like a Christmas turkey in about four seconds flat, with an old greasy rag shoved into her mouth for good measure. When he was done he zipped up the stairs, but all I had time to do was open my mouth in surprise and utter the first syllable of his name before he was back with a six-pack of Tru Blood in his arms, helping Eddie to sit up and holding the first open bottle to his mouth. Eric kept one eye on the vampire and the other on his cell phone, his fingers flying over the keys.

Jason and I both watched anxiously as Eddie downed the Tru Blood in one long desperate swallow. He shuddered when Eric moved the bottle away from his lips. "Thank you, Sheriff," he said weakly.

Eric's hand clamped down on his shoulder and squeezed reassuringly. You would never know from his gentle manner that a moment ago he'd been close to ripping someone's head off and bathing in her blood. "Are you strong enough to hold the next one?" he asked.

Eddie seemed to consider the question a moment, then he held out his hand. "Yes, I think so."

Eric stayed crouched beside him until Eddie took the first sip, swallowing more slowly now. Eric had told me how awful Tru Blood tasted, so I knew Eddie wasn't just savouring the flavour. I hoped he was just pacing himself, the same way humans have to take tiny sips of water if they get dehydrated. The last thing he'd need right now was to vomit that Tru Blood all over the basement floor.

When Eric felt comfortable that Eddie was doing fine on his own, he stood to his full height and stared down at my brother. If his look was intimidating his voice, when he spoke, was even more so. "So, Jason Stackhouse," he said. "What are we to do with you?"

Jason blinked up confusedly at him, hardly able to drag his gaze away from Eddie and the miniscule sips of Tru Blood he was taking in. Jason's mind was a muddle – regret, guilt, sorrow. Fear was the smallest part. He shook his head, reaching around on the floor distractedly… and then he pulled out a packet of straws from where they'd been tucked behind an old bucket. "This'll make it easier, Eddie," he said, reaching over to poke the straw into the mouth of the bottle.

"Oh, thank you, Jason," Eddie replied.
I flicked my eyes over to Eric, who for a moment looked just as surprised as I did. I didn't want to excuse what Jason did, but he was my brother. And he'd clearly formed a friendship of sorts with the vampire he was keeping captive. I hoped that maybe, just maybe, Eric would see that he wasn't cut from the same cloth as Amy Burley. Maybe he'd give Jason a chance and my brother wouldn't have to see the inside of a jail cell.

"Jason didn't mean to hurt anyone," I said quickly. I'd picked up the whole story from Jason's head in about one minute flat. "He was tryin' to let Eddie go!"

"He took him in the first place," Eric said implacably.

"I didn't mean to, I swear it!" Jason spoke up. "I was just gonna ask him for the same deal he had with Lafayette, and then Amy brought out this silver net and... it just happened so fast!" My brother swept a hand through his hair. He looked at Eric, but whatever he saw in Eric's face made him turn quickly to me. "You gotta believe me, Sook!"

"Why didn't you release him?"

It was Eric's question, but Jason kept his eyes on me as he answered. "I was goin' to, right now! You saw!" He gestured to Eddie, who was still working on his second Tru Blood. I wished I could say that the colour was coming back into his cheeks, but he looked just as pale and drawn as he had when we'd rushed down the stairs. And the raw, red scorch marks on his wrists weren't healing up much, either. "Before that... I wanted to. I did! But Amy, she's got this way of stayin' stuff so that it makes sense, and then all the decisions I made when I was talkin' to Eddie got all confused up in my head. And the V made it worse, got my head all jumbled up even more," he said, adding quickly, "but I ain't never touchin' that stuff again, I swear it!"

"You swear to many things," Eric said.

"Huh?"

"You kidnapped a man, Jason!" I rounded on my brother before Eric had the chance. "You held him prisoner! You drank his blood! How... how could you?"

Jason's head drooped. "I don't know, Sook. I'm an awful person."

I went in for the kill. "Gran would be so disappointed," I said softly.

When Jason raised his head, there were tears in his eyes. "I know!" he practically sobbed. "I been thinkin' about her a lot lately, knowin' that she'd be downright ashamed of me right now. I got no excuses for what I done." He shook his head, and turned away from me and Eric. Me, I could understand. I was just his sister. But he truly wasn't concerned about giving his back to the vampire who'd moments ago been baring his fangs, ready to kill. His thoughts were only for Eddie.

"I am so sorry, Eddie," he said. "You never done a single bad thing and I never wanted this to happen, I swear I didn't. I only hope you can forgive me."

"By human law, you will go to jail for many years," Eric said before Eddie could answer. He waited until Jason looked up at him before continuing. "By vampire law, you deserve death for what you have done."

"I kinda figured that," Jason said. He took a deep breath and stood, drawing himself upright. "And if that's what you gotta do, I'll face it like a man. It's true, I deserve it for what I almost did to Eddie."

"Jason!" I gasped. "No!"
"If someone kidnapped you, Sook, I'd rip him apart," Jason told me. "Fuck the damn law."

"On that, we are in agreement," Eric said.

Okay, nice to hear that I was that important to the two men in my life, but this was probably not the time.

"I deserve to be punished," Jason said again. He straightened his shoulders and met Eric's eyes without flinching. "You do what you gotta do."

I held my breath. I knew that Eric wasn't going to kill my brother, no matter what messed up sense of honour Jason had about this whole thing. But we had agreed that the perpetrators would be turned over to the Bon Temps PD, and much as I wanted to hope for the best I couldn't get angry at Eric if he insisted on Jason being put away in jail for his actions. I could even understand it.

Eric studied Eddie for a long moment, though I couldn't manage to look away from Eric's face to see what he saw in Eddie's. "You appear to have formed a connection of some sort with my vampire," he said when he turned his attention back to us. I sent out a mental thank you to Eddie. "And you intended to release him, albeit after you had already done grievous harm to his person."

"All that's true," Jason said, nodding enthusiastically. "Except for I'm not sure what 'albeit' means. Or 'grievous', but it sounds like somethin' really bad."

Eric's eyes met mine briefly. Yes, Eric, I wanted to say, he really is that dim. I kept my mouth shut.

"For this, and because you are the brother of my Sookie, who is my bonded and my beloved, I will... forgive this transgression."

"Really?" Jason said. He let out a shaky breath. "Okay."

"But," Eric said. His hand reached out, lightning swift, to clench around my brother's throat. "If you ever do something like this again, I will rip you into pieces and feed them to the trout in your lake."

"That sounds about right," Jason gargled out.

"As long as we understand each other," Eric said. He released Jason and strolled over the washer and dryer set, leaning against it casually like he hadn't just given me the greatest gift in the whole danged world.

I let out a shuddering breath of my own. Crisis averted.

So it was time to move on to the next crisis. "Okay, that's... I am so grateful to you, Eric, and I don't meant to rain on everybody's parade but... what are we gonna do about Amy? I mean, obviously we need to turn her in, but how are we gonna make sure that she doesn't drag Jason into this whole thing?"

Eric and I both turned to look at the tied-up girl, who looked just as hissing mad as she had when she'd first been caught. Jason, however, had apparently just caught up with what Eric had said earlier – understandable, since he'd been thinking Eric was going to either rip his throat out or turn him over to Bud Dearborne – and now he had other things on his mind.

"Wait a minute," Jason said. He scratched at the back of his neck, looking from me to Eric. "You're datin' a deader?"

"Okay, not the point right now," I snapped, "and you don't exactly have the moral high ground here,
Jason Stackhouse!

Jason's face fell. He glanced guiltily at Amy, then bent his head again. "You're right," he said. "I'm so sorry, Eddie."

"You're a good boy, Jason," the vampire said weakly. "I know that you were… unduly influenced. I too was lured by the promises of the flesh. That's how I ended up as I am today."

"Chained up in my basement?" Jason asked, his brow furrowed.

I rolled my eyes. I'd always defended my brother when others mocked him for his lack of intelligence, but sometimes he really was just that stupid.

"As a vampire, Jason," Eddie corrected. The vampire seemed to find Jason's stupidity endearing. I guess it takes all kinds to make the world go round.

"Oh. Right," Jason said. "The whole homosexual thing."

Eddie's mouth turned up in a sad smile. "Yes. The whole homosexual thing."

Eddie was looking at Jason with a kind of longing that was making me a little uncomfortable. Not like a starving man looks at a steak; more like the way Eric looks at me right before he gives me one of those soul-shaking, heart-melting kisses that make my knees weak and my heart pound rapidly in my chest. One of those looks. Which would be fine and dandy if I knew Jason had any inclination to return Eddie's interest, but as far as I knew Jason was firmly in heterosexual territory with no intention of straying. And my less than bright brother didn't seem to have a flippin' clue that he had a vampire mooning over him.

"Okay," I said, holding up a hand. "I'm glad that you two bonded and all and there seems to be no hard feelings, but none of this is solving our problem."

I looked from the two men – well, one vampire and one man – to Amy, trussed up and looking fit to spit. She was still struggling against her bonds and trying to talk around the dirty rag that Eric had stuffed into her mouth.

"We could let Eddie feed from her," Jason suggested hesitantly.

"What? Jason, NO!" I said immediately.

"It's a fitting solution," Eric said. He pushed off from where he'd been leaning against the washing machine, and his gaze when it flicked to Amy was cold and emotionless. She might as well have been a bug crawling in the dirt.

"You can't just let him drain her!" I protested.

Eric lifted a shoulder. "Why not? She drained him. She would have given him the True Death if we hadn't arrived." His mouth twitched in the approximation of a smile. "It may even be karma. Yin and yang. Help to achieve balance in the universe."

I looked from Eddie, wan and pale and too weak to move even after gulping down a couple of Tru Bloods, to Amy, her body healthy and vibrant and her eyes sparking fire. She was just like every bigot I'd ever known, setting herself above everyone who wasn't like her, thinking that people of another colour or religion weren't worthy of her notice never mind her respect. She was going to use Eddie like a personal drinking box and then toss him aside.
And yes, it didn't escape my notice that that was exactly what vampires had done for centuries. What some of them were still doing. But that didn't make it right. Somewhere out there Amy – probably – had family that loved her. Friends that missed her. Maybe she deserved to be drained for what she'd done. The Bible called that an eye for an eye, and I'd heard more than enough lectures from the pulpit on the subject through the years. But we had to be better than that. If we didn't take the high ground, we were no better than Amy with her silver nets.

"No," I said firmly.

Eric shrugged like it made no difference to him. "We should let Eddie decide," he said.

"NO! Eric, Eddie isn't exactly in the right frame of mind to make a conscious decision right now! Besides, he's…" I trailed off, because every way I could think of to end that sentence made me feel just as prejudiced as Amy.

Eric's brow rose. "A vampire?"

"That's not what I meant!" I said.

"I am awfully hungry," Eddie said from behind us.

It was Jason who put an end to it. "No," he said. "Sookie's right, Eddie. You can't eat my girlfriend, even if she is a lyin' skanky ho that I don't want nothin' to do with no more."

"I suppose you're right," Eddie said. The vampire sighed heavily. But now that I was looking at him closely I could see the twinkle in his eye. He never intended to drink from Amy at all. His gaze flicked to mine and I felt my mouth twitch in a smile before he looked away from me and back to my brother. "I suppose once I have a few more Tru Bloods I'll be strong enough to move," he said.

Jason shifted uncomfortably. There was nothing like a good subtle guilt trip to get him going. And my brother might not be the brightest bulb on the Christmas tree, but he knew his responsibilities to the people he cared for and he never backed down.

"Uh, Eddie?" he said finally. "You could drink from me? A little?"

"Oh, Jason," Eddie said. "You'd do that for me?"

"Well… sure," Jason said. He reached out to tentatively pat the vampire on the arm. "I figure I owe you at least that much."

For my part, I wasn't all too sure about this. Eddie was horribly frail, and it probably wouldn't take too much to put him over the edge once he got his fangs into my brother. I bit my lip and turned toward Eric, but he was already stepping up to tower over the lawn chair and its occupant.

"Eddie," Eric said firmly.

The vampire blinked, dragging his eyes forcefully away from my brother. "Yes, Sheriff?"

"Do you require me to watch over you? Be honest. You are a young vampire. I will not have you drain this boy unintentionally."

Eddie looked again at Jason – well, he looked at the side of Jason's neck – and licked his lips. In that moment, he didn't look like a slightly overweight, unobtrusive, middle-aged accountant. He looked like a predator. Then his gaze went to Jason's face and everything softened. His eyes were warm. Again, I saw in his gaze the same expression that Eric often wore when he looked at me.
"No, Sheriff," he answered. He drew himself up as much as he could on the old worn-out lounge chair. "I won't hurt Jason. I would never hurt him."

Beside me I could hear Jason let out a relieved breath. Eric nodded once, briskly, his hand coming down to rest on Eddie's shoulder. And he grinned. "Enjoy your meal."

Part of me wanted to keep an eye on things in case Eddie overestimated his ability to control himself, but Jason frowned at the way I was hovering. And we still had Amy to consider. I smiled encouragingly at my brother and made my way to where Eric was standing over the trussed-up girl. He was still regarding her like she was a big ol' bug that he found crawling on his shoe, but when I nudged up against him he took my hand. His palm was big and cool and his fingers closed comfortinglly around mine, and I felt better just being near him.

"And now for the lovely Miss Burley," he said menacingly.

Amy pushed against the ropes, her eyes flashing at him. She either had no idea how much trouble she was in – which would make her dumber than my brother – or she just didn't care. Maybe she figured she was doomed anyway so she wanted to go out fighting. I could respect that. I wouldn't want to whimper and beg on my way out the door, either.

"We can't kill her," I said again. Maybe if I said it out loud she'd stop fighting so much. And if letting Eddie kill her by draining her was out, then any other option was also off the table. When Eric said nothing, I squeezed his hand. "Not only did you promise," I reminded him, "but it would be wrong."

"A vampire cares nothing for right or wrong, Sookie," he told me.

I frowned up at him. "Well, a human does," I said. "And I'm human."

His lips twitched but he said nothing. "Okay," I said, taking a breath when he didn't seem inclined to take the lead. "Here's what we do. You use your whammy on Amy and get her to walk straight into the police station and confess her crimes to Bud Dearborne. You know Eddie ain't the first. She's done this before."

Eric's lips twitched some more, and he looked down at me with amusement. "My whammy?" he repeated.

I waved a hand. "The whole 'look into my eyes' glamour thing," I clarified. He knew exactly what I was talking about anyway. "Then Eddie tells the police that she kidnapped him from his house and held him out in the woods. Oh!" I exclaimed as a thought came to me. I'd just been thinking about it earlier, back when I was reading my new book and the only thing on my agenda for the evening was a bowl of Doritos and a hot bath. "There's a big ol' treehouse at the back of the Bellefleur property! Eddie could say she held him there and was takin' his blood slowly and plannin' to drain him, but he was finally able to glamour her into lettin' him go."

"And why would he not then have simply drained her in return?" Eric asked. When I boggled at him – why does every dang thing with vampires have to come back to drinking blood and killing, for Pete's sake – he merely lifted a brow. "I am simply thinking like an investigator. Any officer with even the minimum of instruction in—" Eric raised the hand that wasn't entwined with mine, his lips twisting as he sketched air quotes in the air – "'vampire awareness training' would know that a weakened vampire would have difficulty resisting his baser impulses."

"Well, 'cause he's a good vampire," I said. When Eric huffed out a silent laugh, I smacked him on the chest. "Shut up!" I said, even as I laughed along with him. "You're a good vampire, too."
"Oh, I can be very good, Miss Stackhouse," Eric answered.

How he could make me blush when we were deciding the ultimate fate of a human being I would never know. But I felt the flush from the tips of my ears to the tops of my breasts, and knew that Eric would have no trouble seeing it even in the dim light of Jason's basement. The thought also reminded me of Eddie and my brother, and I looked around to check on them. Eddie had finished his… well, his snack… and he was looking pinker already. And Jason? My eyebrows flew up my forehead as I took in the state of the front of Jason's jeans.

Ohkaaaay. So maybe my brother didn't fall quite where I thought on the Kinsey scale.

I turned hastily back to Eric, who was looking entirely too amused, and tried to focus on the task at hand.

"He didn't want to risk draining her," I said primly, going back to Eric's original question before he got me all hot and bothered, "and he was real weak, so he made his way back to his own house to get some Tru Bloods into his system. Then he planned on callin' the police to report the whole thing. And he knew there was no great rush 'cause he'd—"

"If he'd glamoured her into releasing him," Eric interrupted, "why would the police not suspect that he had also glamoured her into confessing to crimes she didn't commit?"

"Damn it, Eric!" I almost wanted to stomp my foot at the smug look on his face. "Okay. Fine. He didn't glamour her into releasing him. He escaped on his own. He went home and had the Tru Bloods 'cause he didn't want to risk draining her. And then he called you and you sent—"

"Pam," Eric filled in.

I remembered the pretty blonde who'd stood next to Eric's throne the first time I met him in Fangtasia. "Okay, Pam," I agreed. "And once she helps get him settled at home he calls the police and reports the crime, but by then Amy will have already gone to the police station to turn herself in because you're going to glamour her to do just that," I finished.

I practically crowed "Ta Da!", then stood back and waited for Eric to pop a hole in the story.

"Why?" he asked.

I knew what he meant. "Because she's been feeling awful guilty about what she's been doing," I answered right away, "and since she met my brother and saw what a good man he is – everybody knows she's been seeing Jason pretty steady for the past week or so – she just got overwhelmed and couldn't take it anymore. So she had to confess."

Eric cocked his head. I could tell that he was studying the story from all angles, looking for a loophole or something that didn't make sense. I didn't think he'd find one, and I was feeling pretty danged proud. Finally he smiled.

"You are more devious than I imagined, Sookie," he said admiringly. "It makes me want to take you right here."

"Eric!" I hissed out. I stole a quick look back at my brother, but Jason looked like he was still in his own blissed out state at the moment. When I turned back to Eric he was still looking at me all lustfully. I bugged my eyes out at him to make him stop, and he laughed before suddenly straightening.

"Pam is here," he said.
Ohhh. So that's who Eric was texting after we arrived.

"I'll go invite her in," I said. Eric was still ogling me shamelessly, and this was so not the time or place! I poked a finger into his chest to make him concentrate. "And you," I said firmly with a glance at Amy who was still fuming on the floor, "have work to do."

I left him without a backward glance and ran up the stairs, though I could feel his eyes on me the whole time. Men! They were all alike, whether they were human or vampire. He was lucky I couldn't read his mind or I'd probably be slapping his face right about now! Except... not really. In fact, I wiggled my butt a little instead. I heard him laugh again just as I got to the top of the steps.

It took me a minute to recognize the woman at Jason's front door as Eric's Pam. The only time I'd seen her she'd been in a skintight leather dress, her hair pulled back and her make-up harsh and goth-like. Now her hair was loose around her shoulders, her lipstick was soft and pink, and most surprisingly she was wearing a silk blouse and matching pencil skirt, both in dark rose. It was like expecting Dominatrix Barbie and getting Skipper. "Pam?"

"Are you going to stand there gawking all day or are you going to invite me in?" she drawled. "I didn't come all the way out to this Podunk town for the good of my health, cupcake."

Well, that was a little more like the Pam I remembered. I firmed my shoulders and opened the door before stepping back and sweeping my arm wide. "Pam, come on in."

She was inside before I could blink, and standing just a little too close for comfort. I'd have felt a lot more nervous about the way she was looking me up and down if I didn't know that her boss and maker – who also happened to be my boyfriend – was just a shout away. She still made me feel like I was a popsicle and she was a kid on a hot summer's day, though.

Her lips curved up when I didn't back away. I guess I'd passed some kind of test. "Where is he?" she asked.

I didn't know whether she meant Eddie or Eric, but since the answer was the same for both it didn't really matter. "In the basement," I told her. My hair blew back from my face as one minute she was there and the next... poof! Did vampires ever just walk anywhere? Well, I wasn't chasing her. I took my good sweet time heading back to the basement, even going so far as to stop into Jason's kitchen to snatch a cold Pepsi from the fridge and snag a straw from the little holder on his counter. Turned out rescuing kidnapped vampires was thirsty work.

By the time I got downstairs they'd adjusted the back of the lounger so Eddie could sit up straight, and he was sipping on another Tru Blood. His cheeks looked positively rosy. Jason looked pale but okay, and I noticed that he was sticking close to Eddie's side. That might be because he truly liked Eddie, or it might be because Pam was practically drooling over my brother... and I don't think it was his reputation in the bedroom that was drawing her attention. Amy was untied now and propped against the wall, just sort of staring into space with a dreamy look in her eyes.

"Uh," I said, gesturing to the spaced-out girl, "is that normal?"

"Aaah, Sookie," Eric said. His gaze flicked to Amy unconcernedly before returning to me. "She'll regain her animation when she arrives at the police station. You were right, she had done this before. Eddie was only the latest." His eyes hardened briefly. "She will confess to all of her crimes."

I nodded. I'd said it before and I'd say it again. I trusted Eric. If he told me he was going to do something, he did it. I leaned back against the washing machine. "How you feelin', Eddie?"
"Oh, much better, Miss Stackhouse. Thank you for asking," Eddie answered. He was about the most well-mannered vampire I'd ever met, not that I'd met all that many.

"He's going to need multiple feedings before he is truly well," Pam contradicted him.

"Oh," I said. I glanced hesitantly to Eric. Out of all those girls who hung around Fangtasia night after night hoping to get bit, surely there had to be one or two that would volunteer to help Eddie. "That won't be a problem, will it?"

Pam licked her lips, and her sculpted brow rose. I wondered if she got that habit from her maker. "You volunteering?" she asked.

"Pam," Eric said. There was a world of warning in that one word, and I watched in wonder as Pam's eyes dropped submissively. He kept his gaze on her until he was sure she wasn't going to look up again then turned to me. "We'll arrange for suitable donors."

"I could come over tomorrow night," Jason said.

I looked over at him in alarm. "Jason! You'll need time to recover."

"The next night then," Jason said. My brother leaned forward to clap a hand on Eddie's shoulder companionably. "I wanna make it all up to ya. Whatever you need, bubba."

"Then it's settled," Eric said. "Pam, see Eddie home and arrange for two donors to be made available tomorrow night. Take the girl with you and send her on her way to the local constabulary. Jason, you will attend Eddie the following night." My brother nodded, looking pleased at having something important to do, and Eric looked around the room as though searching for any loose ends before smiling over at me. "All is well."

"Okie doke," I said.

Pam was already shepherding Eddie and Amy up the steps, Jason following in their footsteps and mostly getting in the way. Eric and I were alone in the basement. Maybe three hours had gone by since he showed up at my house and demanded that I go with him, but it felt like much more. If this was what life with Eric was going to be like I was going to need to start stocking up on those little five-hour energy drinks.

For right now, I had my Pepsi. I took a refreshing sip from the straw and noticed when Eric's eyes zoned in my lips, his own mouth parted. And then... one moment he was standing next to the dilapidated old lawn chair, and the next he was so close that I had to tip my head back to meet his eyes. "Eric?" I said.

His hand came up slowly to lead mine back to the old washing machine. I heard the Pepsi can set down with a faint click. Then, just as slowly, he was leaning down to slant his lips against mine. The kiss started off soft and gentle but in about two heartbeats I was raising up on my toes and seeking more, and he was happy to oblige. His hand came up to wrap itself in my hair and tilt my head just so, and what was a pretty darned good kiss instantly became a completely amazing kiss. It was a really good thing he got me to put down that can of cola or there'd have been a big mess on Jason's floor.

When he released me so I could catch a breath he drew my hand up to his face, brushed his lips across my knuckles. I shivered all the way down to the toes of my tennis shoes.

"I will escort you home," he said.
It was the best idea I'd heard all night.
Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

Apologies for taking so long to post the next chapter! It gave me conniptions, especially since it was the one where I tried to earn my "M" rating. ;) I hope it doesn't disappoint.

***

By the time Sookie and I made it outside the others were long gone. She let go of my hand to take a few steps out onto Jason's gravel driveway, looking around in confusion and softly calling her brother's name.

"He's at the pond," I told her, coming up behind her to wrap my arms around her waist. Since our kiss in the basement I found I didn't want her out of my grasp; had spent the trip up the basement stairs and through Jason's kitchen touching her – my hand on the small of her back, a fingertip along the smooth column of her neck, a palm curved around her hip. She may have once given me a smile and then taken my hand to stop its wandering, but now she leaned back against me and covered my large hands with her small ones.

"He's probably pretty freaked out," she said, her eyes still searching the dark. "Do you think I should go talk to him?"

"No," I said immediately. I wanted her safely in her home; I wanted her safely in my arms. I simply wanted her. "He has much to think about. Let him do it in peace."

She turned in my arms but stayed close, resting her palms on my chest and tipping her head back to look up at me. "Thank you for letting him go," she said. "I know what he did was… I can't even describe how horrible. I know that you'd have been within your rights to insist he turn himself in."

I tried to analyze the situation impartially. Would I have been so lenient with Jason Stackhouse were he not Sookie's brother? I feared that I would not. If it hadn't been for Sookie's involvement and her rules about turning human criminals over to the authorities in the first place I would currently be sated by Amy Burley's blood and the bitch's body would be in several pieces in a local swamp. Her dim-witted accomplice may well have suffered the same fate. But the fact remained that he was Sookie's brother, and it appeared that my words to her earlier had been true: she is my woman first, and her desires supersede all other considerations.

The knowledge that my recently shifted loyalties would be sure to put me in a precarious situation with my Queen or the Authority at some point did little to alter that truth.

"Your brother cares for Eddie," I said noncommittally. The 'care' that her brother showed for my vampire was evident from the tent at the front of his trousers and his elevated heartrate. I'm sure that's one of the things he was presently thinking about.

"He does," Sookie agreed. She grinned lopsidedly up at me. "And did you notice that Eddie seemed sort of… goopy over Jason?"

"It must be the Stackhouse genes," I told her, tugging her a little closer. The warmth of her skin
rivalled that of the sultry summer night; I would swear that I could feel it seeping into my pores, heating my blood. "Vampires are unable to resist your charms."

"Well, Pam sure seemed to like my cleavage," Sookie said.

I drew back at that, frowning. It seemed that I was going to need to have a talk with my progeny. I would not have her ogling Sookie, nor making her uncomfortable with her attentions. She would give Sookie the respect she deserved or she would know my ire. Sookie used my momentary lapse to step away from my embrace, and I reached out quickly to catch her hand.

"You must remain close to me," I told her.

"I like hugging you too, Eric, but it'll be kind of difficult to drive with…” She broke off, for the first time realizing that my 'vette was no longer sheltered under the trees. "Wait a minute. Where's your car?"

"Pam took it."

"Pam?" she repeated. "But how are we—"

"She had to escort Eddie home. We can fly," I said reasonably.

Sookie danced away from me, her eyes wide. "Fly?" she squeaked out. Her long hair swayed over her shoulder blades as she shook her head, golden strands catching the moonlight. It was mesmerizing. "Are you crazy? No friggin' way! NO!"

"Yes," I replied calmly. I used my speed to capture her again, clinching her tightly around the waist. Her arms naturally twined around my waist as well, even as she protested. I settled more securely against her and successfully resisted the urge to duck my head and take her lips. Having her so near was definitely affecting other parts of my anatomy, however, and it was only a matter of time before Sookie noticed. Much as I wanted to suck that delicious lower lip of hers between my teeth, I knew that would only acerbate the problem.

I had to get her home first. Then… I would see where matters led.

"No. No, absolutely not. You must have another car," she protested. She shook her head again, more emphatically, and then her eyes lit up. "I know, I know! You told me you have a day guy that takes care of your business. You could call him and, okay, I know it's nighttime but probably he could drive you out another car—"

"Sookie."

"—or he could get someone else to do it! Or I could call Sam, he's still a little ticked off at me but I know he would—"

"Sookie," I said more firmly. I waited until I was sure the flow of words had stopped before I dip my head toward the ground. "Look down."

She followed my gaze and then let out a squeak, the arms that had been loose around my waist scrabbling up toward my shoulders and her legs wrapping around mine. "Jesus Christ, Shepherd of Judea," she breathed.

I had only taken us up about fifteen feet.

I hovered in place while she acclimatized herself to the sensation, her heart trip-hammering against
my chest and our bond vibrating with her panic until she realized we weren't about to plummet back to the earth. She squeaked again and pressed her face into the crook of my neck when I slowly lowered us back to the grass, shaking slightly when she unwrapped her legs from mine and once again felt solid ground. I quickly considered the ramifications of releasing her. If she bolted I could certainly catch her again in an instant, but forcing her kicking and screaming into a situation she abhorred was simply untenable.

I would not fly with her if she absolutely refused.

I finally compromised by loosening my grip and lifting one hand to stroke it through her hair. She didn't take advantage of my lax attention by scrambling away, so I took that as a good sign. "I will travel very slowly, my Sookie," I murmured against her hair, "and hold onto you tightly. You will be in no danger."

"I don't like heights," she mumbled. "I don't even go on rollercoasters at the fair."

"You can keep your eyes closed and your head tucked beneath my chin," I told her. I pulled away from her slightly to brush her hair back from her face and bent to meet her eyes. "Do you truly believe that I would risk you, min skatt?"

She blinked at the unfamiliar phrase, but her eyes softened and some of the rigidity left her body when she looked at me. The hands that had been clutching at the back of my T-shirt relaxed just slightly, and she shook her head. "Of course not, Eric," she said.

"Then trust me," I said.

She took a deep breath and I could feel her resolution through the bond before she gave me a curt nod. One hand released me briefly, though, so that she could wag a finger in my face. "But I swear to God, I don't care what you said about ghosts! If you drop me I am coming back to haunt you forever!"

I didn't dignify that with a reply. I merely took her hand and pressed my lips to her knuckles before I draped it around my neck and encircled her with my arms to boost her up. Her legs wrapped around my waist instinctively, and I had to fight the urge to let my fangs drop. This is the way I wanted her, always. Forever. I had been a patient vampire, letting her set the pace of our physical relationship, but I also had a thousand plus years at my back of almost instant capitulation from any female I set my eyes on. My patience felt stretched to its limit. Feeling Sookie's body melded to mine only made me want to strip away her clothes, bare her body to my gaze, lick and suck and kiss every inch of her skin.

Her breath hitched when my hand curved beneath her buttocks to hold her to me, and I saw some of what I was feeling reflected in her eyes. I held to that thought as she dipped her head to my collarbone and I took to the sky.

A trip that would have taken me two minutes on my own took nearly ten with Sookie draped around my body. The rapid beat of her heart never ceased, but halfway through the trip the tension and fear that wound the bond taut as a bowstring slowly eased. "You can look down, if you like, my Sookie," I said softly to her. "We are only barely above the tree line."

Her vehemently shaking head was my only answer, and when I ducked my chin I could make out that her eyes were still pinched firmly closed. I pressed my lips to her hair and squeezed her a little tighter, sending a wave of pride and admiration for her through the bond. I felt her surprise and then a gentle spreading warmth in return, and smiled against her skin.

When I set us down carefully on the patch of grass on her front lawn, I didn't want to let her go. Her legs were unsteady when she cautiously extricated herself from my embrace and set her sneakered
feet on the ground, but that wasn't why she kept her arms draped loosely around my neck; that wasn't why her pulse sped or her limbs trembled.

She slowly lifted her head to look at me, and my gaze focused laser sharp on her mouth when her pink tongue came out to swipe at her lips. "Eric—" she began.

I had to have her mouth. I didn't hesitate, bending to her. Her gasp of surprise allowed me to sweep my tongue between her lips, and her hands clenched at the nape of my neck, pulling me closer as her gasp became a moan. I pulled her to me, one hand at her hip to keep her flush with my body while the other wandered upward to bury itself in the tangle of her hair. Her grip tightened on my head and it was only her human necessity for breath that enabled me to draw away from the temptation of her mouth. My lips wandered to her cheek, the soft underside of her jaw, the tantalizing pulse point of her neck while her warm breath ghosted against my ear and her short nails scraped against my skull.

She pulled away to look up at me, her lips kiss-swollen and eyes wide. "Inside," she said.

Yes. I lifted her, her legs again wrapping themselves around my waist, and used my speed to take us to her front door. She blinked then, her hand releasing from my neck to pat – comically, in any other circumstance – at her side. "My keys!" she said, her brow furrowing. "I left my purse in your—"

I shook my head, raised a leg and kicked. The door crumbled inward in a shower of cracked wood and splintered glass.

"Eric!" she scolded. "You just broke my door!"

"I'll buy you another," I told her as I sped us into the foyer. The door tottered and groaned as it splintered from the frame and toppled out onto the porch; I ignored it and pressed Sookie against the wall, her legs still wrapped around me, pinning her between the wall and my body. I could not get close enough. There was entirely too much clothing separating us. My gaze darted from dining room to living room to stairs. "Where?" I asked, then bent to kiss her again before she could answer.

She moaned again into my mouth, but beneath the arousal stirring through our bond and scenting the air I could also feel the first faint stirrings of unease. I released her to rest my forehead against hers, giving her the space she needed to take another breath. Her pupils were blown wide, dark with desire, but the uncertainty and nervousness plucked a conflicting tune on the cord that bound us.

"Bedroom?" she said.

I pressed my lips to her brow, to her cheekbone, to the shell of her ear, before pulling back to look into her eyes. "Only if you are sure," I told her.

I would never force her, never rush her. Though I wanted her more than I had wanted any woman in my thousand years of existence, I would take her willing and eager or not at all.

Her anxiety peaked but she nodded. "I'm sure, Eric."

My kiss this time was less frantic, my blood cooling as her tension made her own heart race. My fangs had dropped at some point while I clutched her to me and I forced them to recede. A moment before I had attacked her lips as a hearty ale; now I sipped at them as a delicate mead, slowing my pace and sending all of my affection and encouragement to her through our bond. She sighed around my lips, her fingers on the back of my head urging me to take the kiss deeper, her eyelids fluttering and her head falling back when I released her to trail my lips along her jawline.

I took the stairs two at a time but at a human's speed. She shivered when my fingers trailed down her spine; squirmed in anticipation when my hand cupped just beneath her breast; tugged on my hair to
bring me back to her lips. I did not release her when I reached the bed, merely sitting on the edge with her still wrapped around me. With my arm free from holding her up I was able to finally touch her as I wished, and I let my hands roam over her back, across the curve of her hip, from the firm tautness of her stomach to the pillow of her breast while I continued to sup at her lips.

The curve of her breast peeking from the bodice of her sundress called to me and I bent to lave my tongue along the swell, smiling against her skin when she quivered against me.

My fingers plucked at the tiny buttons on the bodice which concealed her from me, teasing them apart one by one. Her head bowed, her eyes following the progress my deft fingers made of the small pearl buttons, but her hands had left their nesting place in my hair to drift to her sides and her spine was rigid beneath my arm.

I touched my fingers lightly to her chin to tip her face to mine. "If you don't wish to do this—"

"Oh, I wish," Sookie said. She was blushing, her gaze darting from my eyes to my lips to something over my left shoulder. "I've just never… you know I've never been with…"

"I know," I told her. I leaned forward to press a chaste kiss to her lips. "I am honoured to be your first."

Her first. Her last. Her only. No one else would ever have her. Not while I walked the earth.

Her gaze flicked to mine, and this time it held. "I love you," she said softly. "I wouldn't… I couldn't do this if I didn't." She didn't wait for me to return the sentiment; seemed not to expect me to do so. Her eyes dropped again to her lap, where her hands had come together to twist in agitation. Her words, when she was able to get them out of her strangled throat, came in faint, staccato bursts. "But you should know… there was a… when I was a little girl…"

I stiffened, my fangs descending to their full length. He would die. Slowly and painfully. I knew techniques that could stretch his suffering out for weeks. "Who?"

"Gran's brother, my uncle Bartlett," she answered without raising her head.

A relative. My revulsion of the crime trebled in my eyes, and it was only when Sookie raised startled eyes to mine that I realized I had hissed aloud.

"It could have been worse. He… touched me, but he never actually—"

"No! Never try to justify…" I shook my head, loosened my hand from her hip so that I would not crush her. "Does he live?" I gritted out.

"No," Sookie answered. She blinked up at me, and whatever she saw in my face made her eyes soften. She lifted a hand to press her warm palm against my cheek. "No," she repeated. "He died a couple of years before Gran. Do you know he had the gall to leave me over ten thousand dollars in his will?" Her chin rose defiantly. "I donated every last penny to the Haven Home in Shreveport."

The non-profit was well-known for its dedication to helping low-income residents with therapy and court costs. I made a mental note to cut a large cheque to the organization upon arising the following night. And my respect for Sookie Stackhouse rose to even higher levels. She had been mistreated, shunned, abused, isolated, ridiculed, overwhelmed by her gift of telepathy… and through it all she had maintained a fiery passion for life and never lost her faith in the decency of her kind. The people of her small town had a princess in their midst and treated her like a leper.

With me, she would be treated as the goddess she was.
"You are… astounding," I told her. The flush that infused her cheeks deepened considerably, but I felt her shock and surprised pride in my words. I lifted my attention from her open bodice and the temptations there and threaded my fingers through her hair, tilted her head and bent to take her mouth. Any hesitation she felt melted slowly away at the press of my lips, and within a moment she had opened to me and draped her arms around my neck. She arched her back, demanding, and her chest brushed tantalizingly against mine.

She was mine, and I would love her. I wanted only to remove every bad memory and replace each one with something that she would cherish.

When she gasped in pleasure I used my vampire speed, spinning us so that she lay spread out on the bed and I lay propped up against her on my side. Her hair fanned out in a golden tangle, her eyes wild, her chest heaving as she drew in a shaking breath.

Moving slowly and carefully, I slid one finger along the sculpted edges of her lace bra. She drew in a breath, then another when I replaced my finger with my tongue, licking a teasing path over the swell of her breasts and then lifting my head to blow lightly at the dampness my tongue had left behind. She shivered, and when I raised to look her eyes were hooded and dark. Her tongue peeked from between her lips and I had to kiss her again, to suck her tongue into my mouth and nip at her lips and swallow the low, needy moan that came when my fingers made short work of her bra and my hand cupped her breast and my finger circled her nipple until it puckered against my palm.

I released her to nudge my nose beneath her ear; to draw in an unneeded breath rich with the sweet scent of the blood in her veins and the heady musk of her arousal. Her own breath was wild and unsteady, and I smiled against her skin.

"So beautiful," I murmured. My gaze took in all of her. "You are beautiful, my Sookie."

Her blush covered her face, the pale column of her neck, the tips of her ears, her bosom. I trailed my lips over her skin, pausing only to suck lightly at the pulse point on her neck, but I resisted the call of her blood. This time was for Sookie.

Her breasts were small, perky, the perfect size for my hand. I palmed one, squeezing gently before lowering my head to the other, trailing my lips across her mound, kissing and sucking her tender flesh into my mouth. Her breasts swelled with the stimulation, each nip and suck of my lips and teeth driving her further; her legs kicked restlessly.

I raised my eyes to hers when I took her nipple into my mouth. Her back arched. Her mouth dropped open. I held her gaze as I sucked, pressing her bud to the roof of my mouth, alternatingly long slow swipes of my tongue with forceful flicks that rippled through her skin. When my teeth nipped lightly at her rigid nipple she cried out, a soft and needy sound that went straight to my cock.

Her fingers twisted anxiously in my shirt as she squirmed beneath me.

"Eric," she breathed out.

I lifted my head from the tantalizing feast of her breast, but could not resist swiping my tongue one last time over the taut bud and then blowing lightly against her skin. Her nipple tightened even more as she shivered. Her fingers plucked again at my shirt and I rose fluidly to strip it away; captured her tiny hand in mine and flattened her palm against my chest. She should explore me as thoroughly as I explored her.
My arms flexed involuntarily as she swept a palm over my chest. Her gaze flicked to mine hesitantly and I mastered my resolve. She raised herself up to swipe her fingers over the curve of my neck. Her fingertips scratched lightly at my pecs.

I took in another breath that I didn't need as she shyly discovered my body. No one else – no man or woman or vampire in my thousand long years of existence – had ever made me feel this way. My cock strained against my zipper, seemingly growing harder with every swipe of her hands across my skin. My body tensed. The desire to throw her down and rip away the remainder of her little sundress and take her -- fuck her -- was almost overwhelming. I could end this cautious torment, have her spread beneath me, spear her and take what I wanted whenever I wanted.

I am vampire.
I will never hurt her.

I saw the moment when she realized this and the sense of it empowered her, the knowledge that I could rip her apart in an instant and yet she was never safer than in my arms lighting her eyes and giving her newfound confidence. Her questing caresses morphed from tentative to assertive, and her touches grew bold. Her tongue lapped along the path her hands had taken.

She met my eyes and cupped my erection, the warmth of her palm seeping through my jeans to tease my cool skin. "I want you," she said bluntly.

I laughed. That was my Sookie.

Her lips twitched and her head cocked uncertainly as she took in my reaction. I pressed my palm to her cheek, my lips to hers. "Patience, my Sookie," I murmured against her lips before I deepened the kiss. My hands and vampire speed made short work of her dress and panties while I concentrated all of my effort into making her melt in my arms. She gave as good as she got, her tongue twisting with mine while her nails scratched at the hair at the nape of my neck. Her taut nipples scraped against my chest and I finally released a hand from the tangle of her hair to cup one breast and tweak one of the sensitive buds before I let my hand sweep down her side and over the lush curve of her hip.

She gasped into my mouth at the first brush of my fingers along her delicate folds.

The musky scent of her filled the room, filled me. I lifted my head to take in her rapt eyes, the rapid rise and fall of her breasts. She was wet, dripping with arousal, and my fangs dropped involuntarily at the proof of her desire. Her fingers curled reflexively around my bicep, tension that didn't come from my fingers playing on her most intimate of places trickling through our bond when she saw my sharp teeth, and I nipped playfully at her shoulder before tucking my fangs away. With the bounty spread out before me, I deserved a fucking medal.

I held her gaze as I spread her further, one finger easing carefully inside. Her body clutched at me eagerly, and her eyelids fluttered when I withdrew only to quickly add a second finger. Her channel was tight – so fucking tight – and my cock surged against my jeans. The need to be inside her was overpowering. When I bent my fingers to press against that spot that made her curl with need she shivered against me and let out a gasping whimper and I nearly came right then. It would have been a first.

"Please, Eric," she moaned.

"So pretty when you beg," I told her, and smiled when she controlled herself enough to scowl at me. Another crook of my fingers inside her had her arching her back and wiped that frown right off her face. Her breasts heaved and I couldn't resist the urge to take one peaked nipple between my teeth;
the resulting dichotomy of gentle pain and rising pleasure made Sookie groan and my cock surge uncomfortably. I released her only to lap softly at the darkened nub before I slowly made my way down her body. A kiss pressed to the underside of one swollen breast; a long lick across her ribcage; a nip on the swell of her mound above her curls.

My fingers continued their assault on her core, keeping her on the edge. Her legs were scissoring against me now, her body unsure whether it wanted to thrust forward to capture more of the sensation or pull away to end the torment. I could not remember the last time I had been so enraptured by a woman, so willing to deny my own satisfaction to draw out her pleasure. I watched her squirm beneath me, the sweat beading on her skin and her eyes dark and hooded with desire, and I was entranced.

"Beautiful," I told her again before I lowered my head.

The taste of her was… indescribable. Like nothing of this world. If sunlight and harmony could be bottled, the taste of it would surely be something like the essence of this woman. My woman.

I ran my tongue once, twice, three times through her folds; increased the pace and depth of my fingers. Let my thumb drift – finally, finally – to the hardened nub at the apex of her core that peaked from beneath its hood. She keened at the first gentle touch, and I flicked my eyes to her face. Her head tossed, her hair wild and tangled on the pillow. I swirled my thumb clockwise and watched as her mouth dropped open and her hands fisted in the comforter. Her lips formed words, and only my vampire hearing allowed me to make them out. "Please. Yes. A plea to her deity. And my name, repeated over and over.

Eric. Eric. Ericericericericeric…

When I took her clit in my mouth, she came apart. Her pussy clenched around my fingers; wet heat surged. I kept up a gentle pressure as she thrashed beneath me, her gasps and shrieks of ecstasy filling the air. I did not let up until she sagged, her breath coming in tattered gasps, her core still trembling and clutching at my fingers as the aftershocks ripped through her. I released her swollen clit and gently removed my fingers only to replace them with my tongue, eager to lap up every last taste of her. It was easy for me to see that I could quickly become addicted to this: her lithe body writhing from my touch, the pungent scent of her arousal, the honeyed taste of her on my tongue, the sound of my name ragged on her lips. Later, I may worry about the consequences. Now? I simply couldn't find it within myself to care.

I pressed a last kiss to her tender lips before kissing and sucking my way up her body, pausing only to use my speed to shed the jeans that had become increasingly uncomfortable. Her arms wrapped around me when I reached the head of the bed, and her fingers brushed against my jaw, her eyes wide. "I didn't know it would be like this."

"Like this, and more," I told her. "Better."

"Better?" Her laugh was husky. "I don't think I could feel any better than I feel right now."

"True me," I said easily. She had no idea how much I had held back. I leaned in to nuzzle against her throat and felt her stiffen just slightly when my erection nudged against her hip. I pulled back in time to see her sculpted brows rise even as her teeth found her lower lip. A sudden rush of fear and nervousness swamped the bond. I countered by propping myself on my elbow and kissing her slowly, first sucking her lower lip into my mouth before teasing her lips and urging my tongue inside. I took my time, exploring every inch of her mouth until she was dazed and pliant beneath me. Only then did I pull back to look into her eyes.
"Yes?" I said.

Her eyes were wide but she nodded quickly, and I pressed another light kiss to the corner of her mouth as I moved over her.

I eased forward slowly as her heat engulfed my cool flesh, watching her eyes carefully. My size was uncomfortable for some, and Sookie was so very tiny, her pussy tight and untouched. Her body had tensed at the unfamiliar intrusion. But her trusting gaze never left mine, and only when she breathed out did I surge forward to breach her barrier and seat myself fully inside her. She gasped, and I dipped my head to lick at the tears that leaked from her eyes. I held myself still, letting her adjust to the sensation even though every part of me wanted to thrust, to take her, to make her mine in every conceivable way.

"Eric," she said.

Her voice was pained, strained. I kissed her lips, the curve of her cheekbone; nuzzled my nose behind her ear and sucked at the skin of her neck. Her blood pulsed eagerly beneath my lips and I nipped the flesh gently with my teeth, a promise to myself that soon that desire would be sated as well. I had kissed my way across her jaw before her bosom swelled and she sighed against me.

My first stroke was slow and shallow. Another. I gauged her reaction when I pulled halfway out before seating myself again; slowly increased my pace until I was gliding smoothly in and out of her tight channel. The pressure was exquisite; the feel of her surrounding me the closest I had ever come to the divine.

Her nails released their grip on my shoulders; her hips tilted instinctively as she sought the friction she wanted. I adjusted my strokes, seeking for and finding the place inside her that made her moan and eagerly thrust her hips. When her nails found my shoulders this time it was for a different reason entirely, and I answered her unspoken wish with an increased tempo. My hips snapped, though my body tensed with the effort of keeping my thrusts within the human parameters. Later, when we knew each other's bodies, I would show her to what great heights a vampire lover could take her. Now, I needed to be cautious. To be ever mindful that she was young and innocent.

I watched her eyes flutter, watched her tongue swipe out to dart at her lips. Felt the need in her spiral ever upwards.

She was already tender from her earlier release, and it only took a few strokes of my finger on her clit to have her crashing around me. Her thighs strained as she surged up, up, up; her core clenched around my cock and I could no more hold back than stop the tide. My groans joined hers as we came together in a splash of blinding light.

I tucked her against my side and held her as her heart pounded and her breaths came in stuttering gasps. Brushed her sweat-dampened hair from her cheeks and pressed my lips to her forehead. She murmured something unintelligible and snuggled closer, her arm heavy around my waist. She basked in the afterglow while my mind turned and spun, considering and analyzing a dozen scenarios in which my relationship with Sookie Stackhouse could be used to threaten my position, my power, my progeny. Who knew that a slip of a thing wandering into a vampire bar in a virginal white gown could tear my well-ordered world apart in a few short weeks?

"Eric?"

I shook my head as I looked down at her, pushing the thoughts aside to give her a confident smile before I bent again to her lips.
Sookie was mine, in every way, and I would keep both of us safe.
I had a bounce in my step as I shut the car door behind me in Merlotte's gravel lot, and nothing – not even the nasty thoughts coming from that Deke O'Connell as he leaned up against the tree and stared at my breasts – could knock the smile from my face.

And why not? Eric had spent the last two nights at my place, and my life had… changed. I had always thought that sentiment was kinda stupid when I read it in the romance novels I checked out of the library, but it was true. Colours seemed brighter, food tasted better, and when I looked in the mirror to adjust my ponytail before heading out the door I seemed to glow. Sex was just about the most fantastic thing in the world.

Also, I had never imagined that I was capable of making those kinds of noises. My cheeks heated even now just thinking about it. But even better was remembering the noises I'd drawn out of Eric. When he groaned and arched his back or flexed his hand on my hip like I was the only thing tethering him to the world? Wow, what a power trip.

I hesitated at the employee entrance, blinking up at the sun. Everything in me, from my top of my head to the tips of my painted toenails, ached to be with him right freakin' now. But Eric had flown back to Shreveport this morning, after waking me with a long, slow kiss and treating me to a… fourth? fifth?.. orgasm with his skillful fingers. I sighed a little as I headed inside and detoured to Sam's office to stow my purse and grab an apron. It'd be nice to think that we could stay in that little bubble of bliss forever, but real life intruded as it had a tendency to do. I had the lunch shift at Merlotte's. And tonight, Eric would be catching up with all the paperwork he'd ignored and then sitting up on his big chair on the stage at Fangtasia, tempting all the humans with what they wanted but could never have. Because he was mine.

Yeah, that was a power trip, too.

I firmed up my shields resolutely, and the smile was definitely back on my face as I bounced into the bar and headed to my prep station. Holly was already setting out cutlery – on my tables as well, bless her heart – and Arlene was propped up at the bar with an iced tea. "Hey girls," I called out.

Holly looked up to smile at me, and then froze. "Oh my Goddess, you had sex," Holly said.

"Holly!"

Arlene's head popped up like a dog on point, and her eyes narrowed and then widened as she looked at me. "It's true!" she squealed. "Our little Sookie is a woman now!"

Now that was just plain foolishness. "Arlene!" I scolded. "I didn't magically become a woman just because… well, because…"

"You can't even say it!" Arlene said with a laugh. "Because you did the horizontal mambo? Rode the broomstick? Played hide the salami?"

"Oh my god, Arlene!" My cheeks flushed even as I tried to scowl at her. It was an impossible expression to hold, though, because I was just too darned happy. It wasn't even the sex… or at least, not just the sex. It was the way Eric looked at me when he moved inside me, like I was his whole world. It was his patience and understanding when I hesitated, unsure of myself. It was his confidence in me. It was being in love.
The sex was just the icing on the cake. The triple-thick, double-fudge icing. With sprinkles.

Arlene ignored the hand I was waving at her. "Who's the lucky fella?" she asked before her face fell abruptly and her voice turned mournful. "Oh Sookie, it wasn't that vampir, was it?"

"You know very well that his name is Eric," I answered. But I couldn't hold to my prim and proper tone any more than I could make myself scowl. I looked toward Holly, where if I didn't exactly get encouragement I'd at least not feel like I'd given my heart away to Hitler. "And of course it was Eric!" I gushed.

"Awww honey, I'm so happy for you," Holly said. "He seems like a good man. Or… vampire."

"Oh, he is," I assured her, nodding so enthusiastically I probably looked like the bobble-headed dog Mrs. Fortenberry had on her dashboard. I glanced back at Arlene, who looked like she smelled something awful, and only then noticed that Sam was behind the bar. His expression looked more like he'd swallowed about ten of the lemon slices he was cutting up. I shook my head and turned back to the one person who was pleased by the latest development in my life. I really ought to hang out with Holly more often. "He loves me," I said.

"Sookie," Sam cut in.

I rolled my eyes at Holly, and was pleased when she smirked back at me. "Oh, here we go," I muttered loudly enough for Sam to hear me.

"Now, I ain't gonna say nothin' bad," Sam said as I turned back to him. My arched brow must have let him know exactly what I thought of that, because he raised his hands in surrender. "I just want to point out that he is a vampire, Sook."

"Yeah, Sam," I said dryly. "The whole no heartbeat, drinks blood, burns in the sunlight, super strong thing kind of clued me in."

Sam frowned at me. He, at least, didn't seem to have a single problem holding that expression. "You never used to be this lippy."

"Oh, I was always sassy, Sam," I told him. "You just thought it was cute before I started dating a vampire."

"That's just it, Sook," he said. He added exasperation to his list of annoying facial expressions. "You're dating a vampire."

"Been doin' that for a couple of weeks now, Sam."

"They ain't like regular folks," Arlene put in. "Gosh, Sookie, they drink blood. If that ain't enough to turn you off then there's gotta be somethin' wrong upstairs."

I sighed. "Didn't you all go through this with me a while back? Ended up with me gettin' covered in cooking oil and takin' a trip to the hospital in an ambulance? Ring any bells?"

"I just want to make sure you've thought this through, cher," Sam said. "If Eric really does love you, that's great. But what about your future? You're going to grow old and he's—"

"Not," I finished. "I get that, Sam. And what, you think he'll just throw me over the first time I get a gray hair or when my boobs start saggin'? You think Eric's that shallow?"

Sam's expression now showed that he surely did think just that.
And the truth of it was, I hadn't thought that far in advance. Hell, I hadn't thought further than tomorrow night, when Eric planned to pick me up after my late shift at Merlotte's and drive me to his house in Shreveport. I was looking forward to seeing where Eric spent his days, and I knew him taking me there was a super big deal. I'd know where he slept when he was at his most vulnerable, and if that knowledge got into the wrong hands it could be catastrophic to him. But he trusted me. He loved me.

I shook my head vehemently, setting my ponytail flying. Human couples didn't know where things were going to end up at this stage of the game, either. Heck, Sam himself had dated – and then broken up with – two women in the five years I'd worked for him, and I knew from some inadvertent snooping in his head that with Sue-Louise at least he'd been thinking wedding rings. I sure wasn't going to worry about what might happen five or ten years in the future with Eric. I was going to enjoy what I had now.

"Why don't you just let me worry about that, Sam Merlotte?" I snapped out. When he dropped his head – dang it, he really did just want the best for me – I softened my voice. "And in the meantime, can't you just be happy for me?"

"Of course I can, Sook." He pressed his palms on the bar counter and nodded once to himself. "In fact, why don't you bring him over to the bar tonight? I got a full stock of Tru Blood in, and we can all get to know each other."

I smiled at the sincerity behind the words. Sam truly was a good man, even if he couldn't mind his own beeswax half the time. "Eric's got to take care of some stuff at Fangtasia tonight, so I'm on my own. But I appreciate the offer, Sam. Raincheck?"

"Absolutely," Sam said. "Any time."

My good mood came back with a vengeance then, even though Arlene still looked like she'd stepped in something nasty. I locked my shields in place and my happiness didn't waver all afternoon, not even when the entire Bon Temps Eagles football team came in and sat in my section. Every teenage boy I've ever known has a hollow leg and wouldn't know a tip if it sat up and bit 'em, but nothing could wipe the smile off my face. I served each rowdy boy cheerily, waved hello to Rene when he stopped by on his break to chat with Arlene, danced in place while serving the ladies of the auxiliary their afternoon tea – liberally doused with scotch, of course – and generally felt like I was on top of the world.

When I was calling Jane's son to pick her up after her liquid lunch, I found myself wondering if Eric could feel my emotions even when he was all the way in Shreveport. Or even when he was sleeping. Was he even now smiling in his bed as he felt my joy? We'd told each other that we'd go our separate ways tonight – I was just planning on snuggling up on the sofa with a blanket and my book about Vikings, but he had important Sheriff duties that he said needed his full attention. But I just might call him later and ask him. A phone call totally wouldn't count as breaking our word since we weren't technically 'seeing' each other over the phone. And surely he could spare five minutes between approving vampire moving requests and organizing a visit from some vampire dignitary.

The thought of hearing his voice made a shiver run down my spine.

"Miss Stackhouse?"

I blinked and realized I hadn't heard a word that Milton had said. "Sorry," I said into the phone. "So… you can drop by and pick up your mom?"

"As I said, I'll be there in twenty minutes," Milton Stackhouse answered. Before hanging up on me.
I'd say he was rude, but I did deserve it. Mooning about Eric was taking over my life.

And yet, as I spun in place and then danced across the room to the tune rolling through the speakers – nothing like a little "Twist and Shout" to really make a girl want to shimmy and shake – I simply could not stop smiling.

* * *

Six hours later, my feet were a little sore but I still felt great as I pulled into the driveway of my old farmhouse. Even the house looked different, as if before it was sad and sagging and now it gleamed with new polish in the late afternoon sunlight. Sure, it could still use a coat of paint and some flowers to brighten up the porch, but it breathed with new life now. I could feel it.

I bounded up the steps eagerly. I was planning to treat myself to barbecued chicken and a nice fresh salad for dinner, then spend the evening with my big book o' Viking lore and a notepad so I could remember what to ask Eric about later. A simple plan for my evening, but I was a simple girl at heart. Just a simple girl with a tall, lean, badass, one thousand year old vampire lover. Yup, that's me.

My enthusiasm faltered when I reached the door and was hunting in my purse for my keys. The door – the new door that Eric had bought for me and that had been installed only yesterday morning – stood open. Just a crack.

I pressed my fingertips against the solid oak and eased the door open without a sound. Peeked through the foyer into the living room, which was empty as far as I could see. Nothing and no one on the stairs. I shook my head, stepping carefully into the entranceway. I'd slept in late, then thrown on my Merlotte's uniform and grabbed a bagel before darting out the back door in the morning. I hadn't paid any attention to the front of the house.

Maybe Eric had forgotten to shut the front door all the way when he left in the morning?

I rolled my eyes at myself. Right. The Eric who had spent at least half an hour yesterday lecturing me on how flimsy my window locks were and telling me how he planned to upgrade all my windows and doors and install a security system – and who, despite my protests about the cost, had probably already made the first calls to set that ball rolling. Yeah, that Eric just left the door unlocked. Uh-huh.

I set my purse onto the floor inside the door, took a couple of steps, and held my breath.

There were rustling noises coming from the kitchen.

I paused again. The smart thing to do would be to back out, get into my little car, and drive like hell back to Merlotte's to call the police. There was a killer on the loose, after all, and he'd already indicated that I was a target. I'd lost poor little Tina. But what if it was just Jason, rummaging through the fridge for a beer and hoping he could turn those big blue puppy-dog eyes on me in the hopes I'd cook him some supper? I'd feel like a danged fool. Besides, a Stackhouse didn't run away from trouble with our tails between our legs. We faced it head on.

Decision made, I detoured to the front hall closet to snatch up the baseball bat from my softball days. Hadn't played a lick of the game since high school, but I guess Gran's hoarding habit carried down to my generation. She always said that you never knew when you'd need something again. I only hoped I didn't really need the bat right now.

The benefits of growing up in this house meant that I knew where every creaking floorboard lay. So I was able to creep toward the kitchen without making a sound, balancing on my tip toes like somehow that made a difference. I peered cautiously around the doorjamb.
There was a man in my kitchen. He had his head buried in the cupboard beneath my sink, one hand rooting around under there. There was another crash as he knocked something over even as I watched.

I hefted the bat over my shoulder in the stance that earned me the Most Home-Runs trophy in my sophomore year. "Stop right there!" I shouted.

The man jerked, his head rising suddenly and hitting something that sounded loud and (I hoped) very painful. I heard a muffled curse before he eased carefully out from beneath the cupboard, one hand raised to rub at the back of his head and the other clutched around a bottle. The look on his face was sheepish, to say the least.

"Hiya, Sookie," he said.

"Jesus Christ, Shepherd of Judea," I breathed out. My hand pressed between my breasts as if that could still the rapid pounding of my heart. I let the baseball bat thunk down against the wall and took a few steps into the room. "Rene Lenier, you scared the bejeebers outta me!"

"Sorry, cher." Rene stood, the hand that had been rubbing at his head falling to his side. "Didn't think you be home this early."

"Soooo… you thought you'd break into my house and… steal my drain cleaner?"

Rene frowned in confusion, then glanced down at the bottle of Drano in his hand and awkwardly set it on the counter. "I was lookin' for a socket wrench," he explained, rubbing a hand over the back of his neck. "Arlene's got half a dozen repairs needed at the house. Sam never seems to have the time to get over there and do his damned job, but Jason said you had a whole set of your father's tools." He shook his head and dropped his hand to dig around in his pocket, coming up with a shiny silver object. "I didn't break in, me. Jason gave me a key."

"Nice to know that my brother is just handing out keys to my house willy-nilly. I answered. I felt bad when Rene's face fell. It wasn't his fault that my brother was so damned irresponsible. He was just trying to do something nice for his girlfriend. And… well, Jason was just trying to be nice, too. Heck, knowing my brother he'd also be offering his time to help Rene out with the repairs. "Sorry, Rene," I continued. "The tools are in the front hallway, and you're welcome to borrow whatever you need."

"Thank you, cher," he said. "And in future, I will make sure to—"

When Rene stopped and his gaze moved over my shoulder, I frowned and turned around.

Hoyt Fortenberry stood in my kitchen doorway. Was everybody in Bon Temps gonna just walk straight into my house today or what? I was half tempted to look over his shoulder to see if Jane Bodehouse was behind him. Heck, maybe the entire Methodist choir could stop by for lemonade and coffee cake.

"Hoyt, what are you…" The words dried up as I really looked at him. His eyes were glazed. His head was cocked to one side, like he was listening to something I couldn't hear. It reminded me forcefully of my Gran when she was trying to tune in a station that was coming in all fuzzy on her little transistor radio. My gaze dropped to his hands… and my mouth suddenly felt like I'd swallowed a gallon of sawdust.

Hoyt was carrying a length of knotted rope.

I slammed down my shields – something that I should have done as soon as I heard the noises in the
kitchen – and was immediately rocked back on my feet. Hoyt's thoughts were as snarly as a pit full of rattlesnakes, and just as mean. I caught glimpses of vampires growling and snapping, and at least one of them I recognized from one of the anti-vampire propaganda commercials that the Fellowship of the Sun ran on the local TV station. They were laughable on any other occasion – low-budget attempts made with bad actors intending to scare people and prey on weak minds – but to Hoyt they were as real as the sun in the sky.

And worse than that… I saw Dawn, naked and sprawled out on her bed as the life drained out of her eyes. I saw Maudette, and the chipped nail polish on her fingernails as her hands scrabbled and clawed at the rope as it dug tighter and tighter into her neck. I saw one… two… three other women, women I didn't know, women from Shreveport or Monroe or Hodge, all of them struggling as the rope bit into their skin, as their eyes bulged and their skin paled. All of them dead.

I saw all of this in Hoyt's head in the moment it took for me to blink and take a single breath, yet time seemed to hang suspended while I rooted through his memories and he stared at me, his eyes wide and his breathing heavy.

"Sookie," he said.

His hand clenched on the rope, and my paralysis broke. "He's the killer!" I screamed.

I backpedaled away from the open doorway as Rene surged forward. The baseball bat was leaning up against the wall, out of my reach, and I scrambled to try to find something to use to defend myself. Salt and pepper shakers, Gran's little tchotchkes, a bottle of dish detergent, the plastic bottle of Drano… why didn't I at least have some kind of centerpiece in the middle of the table? Even a glass vase full of flowers would be something! I made a mental note to buy something that was both pretty and deadly for the centre of the table if I survived the day.

Rene didn't have the same problem. He'd snatched up the cast iron skillet from the burner and charged Hoyt with a yell. His arm arced back… but while Rene was like a pitbull when he got mad, Hoyt was still bigger and taller. He kicked out with one long leg and connected with Rene's knee with a snap that sounded like a tree branch falling after an ice storm, and Rene went down like a rock in a still pond. The heavy thunk as his head connected with the corner of the table made my stomach churn. Rene's eyes rolled back as blood pooled around his head and I stood there shaking, in shock, as Hoyt turned his attention back to me.

"It's all your fault," Hoyt ground out. He sounded like he'd been chewing the gravel in the front driveway. He gestured with the rope – toward Rene, still as death; toward the stairs that led to the bedroom, where I'd spent the last two nights wrapped in Eric's arms as he loved me; toward me, quivering in fear. "Shouldn't have taken up with them dead fucks."

I let loose with the salt shaker I'd palmed and my aim was just as good as my softball days. The tiny ceramic moose pinged off Hoyt's forehead and snapped his head back. I saw his eyes widen in shock before I bolted for the backyard.

I didn't have much of a head start. Hoyt roared behind me like a wounded animal. There was a crash that could only be the kitchen table overturning as he blustered after me. I jumped from the back porch and cleared the stairs with room to spare, landing softly on my feet just as he appeared in the doorway behind me.

"No need to run, Sook," he said. He sounded so reasonable. Like he wasn't holding the length of rope he planned to wrap around my neck and pull until I was gasping for breath. As if I couldn't see the bulge in his pants. I fought back the bile that rose in my throat. "Ain't gonna hurt ya," he said.
"Like you didn't hurt Maudette and Dawn?" I spat out.

His face... twisted, then. That was the only way to describe it. Like there was something buried beneath his skin that was forcing its way to the surface, warping his normally affable expression into something dark and horrible.

"Goddamn vampir whores, all of ya!" he snarled before he leapt from the porch. "Doin' y'all a fuckin' favour!"

I squealed and pin-wheeled back. What had I been doing, crouching there in the yard and talking to a psychotic killer? I scrambled back on my heels, trying to break out of the brain freeze I was apparently under. My car was too far – I'd never make it to the front yard with Hoyt's long legs eating up the ground behind me. If I could dart behind him I could maybe make it up the stairs and barricade myself in my room, but it would take Hoyt only one or two good kicks to break down the door. That left the woods which – to my advantage – I knew like the back of my hand.

I spun and dashed forward, my gaze focused on the tree line. I could make it.

And I very well may have if I hadn't tripped on the shovel laying in the middle of the back yard.

I had a brief moment to both curse myself for not putting away all the tools after Eric and I had taken care of burying little Tina and to ponder the utter stupidity of going out like a damsel in distress in some cheesy B-movie before Hoyt was on me. I felt my ankle twist beneath me, but the pain barely registered. I lashed out with my bent arm, hearing a comforting crunch as my elbow connected with something hard. Warm liquid gushed over my skin as Hoyt grunted behind me, and my lips wrenched into a vicious smile. At least I'd hurt him.

And I wasn't giving up yet. I squirmed away as he was distracted, managing to flip myself onto my back. Hoyt had fumbled to his knees, one hand cupped over his face. Blood dripped from between his fingers. "Bitch!" he snarled. "You broke my nose!"

"Oh, there's more of that comin'," I warned. I slid backward another foot, using my feet to dig into the soft ground where Tina lay buried. My ankle howled in pain, and I ignored it. Another foot and I'd be close enough to the elm tree to maybe use it to haul myself to my feet. And then? I had no freakin' idea. But if I was going down, I was going down fighting.

"Skanky fangbanger whore!"

"Yeah yeah, we've covered that already," I said. I wiggled another half a foot; sneered when Hoyt finally released his nose and I could see the blood coating his skin. "Don't you know any other songs? Dirty Fanger Trash is one of my favourites."

What was I doing? I should be running, not making conversation! The only explanation I could come up with was that if Hoyt was talking he wasn't, you know, killing me. And he also didn't seem to be paying any attention to the fact that I was slowly putting some space between the two of us. Of course, that was bound to end.

He stumbled to his feet, and I lurched to the side just as he sprang forward, my fingers scrabbling through the dirt and reaching for anything I could find to defend myself. My hand wrapped around something solid and I didn't think, just pulled with all my might. One end of the sturdy object braced against the ground as I swung around, and the meaty chunk as the other end pierced Hoyt's chest was a sound I would never forget until my dying day. Which, thankfully, was not going to be today.

I blinked into the sunlight as I fell onto my back. I thanked God, who had gifted me with this life and
who didn't see fit to take it from me just yet. I thanked Jason, who'd taught me how to fight dirty when we were kids. I thanked Eric, who'd thought that Tina should have a fitting memorial and who'd purchased a nice, thick, wooden cross for her grave. A cross that I'd hadn't gotten around to having Jason install for me just yet.

When the porch door squeaked it was all I could do to swivel my head. At this point it could have been Steve Newlin himself coming to toss me into a burning pit reserved for telepaths and vampire lovers and I couldn't have done a thing about it. I was spent.

"Hey, Sook," Rene said. Bright red blood covered the right side of his face from forehead to chin, and he leaned drunkenly on the doorjamb. But he was alive. A rock I didn't even realize was there lifted from my chest. "I was comin' to rescue you."

"Thanks, Rene," I said. I lifted myself onto one elbow and waved up at him wearily before looking back at Hoyt, who hung suspended on Tina's wooden cross like a bug on a stick.

And then I passed out.
Chapter 18

Sookie's terror awakened me long before sunset.

Hours, spent pacing in my light-tight bedroom. Feeling her fear spike until my fangs dropped and my hands fisted in my hair. When I felt her lose consciousness I took out my wrath on silk sheets, ancient artifacts, the Picasso that shredded like tissue paper beneath my fingernails. The rousing of our bond when she regained her senses brought at first confusion, then relief, then pain in concentric measure, the tightening spiral driving my blood lust until I could barely remember my own name. I knew only that whoever had harmed her would pay in slashed sinew and powdered bones.

I took to the sky the moment the sun released its hold on the world. The closer I came to her home the more strongly I could feel her. Still in pain. Still frightened.

The strong scent of the blood came to me as I made my descent. Three separate strains. The clearest scents were in the yard, where two of the pungent aromas mixed with that of freshly turned earth. The first was a smell I recognized but could not place. And I had no interest in dwelling on the matter when the second, much fainter aroma hit me.

That blood – sweet, like honey and crisp mead – belonged to Sookie.

My feet scarcely touched the ground as I slammed into her front parlour. I took in everything in a millisecond – Sookie, prone on the sofa, her cheek ashen beneath a purpling bruise, dried blood on the scrape on her forehead, one leg propped up on a pillow. The shifter bent over her, his body dwarfing her tiny form. One hand reaching for her throat.

In less than a human heartbeat I had the shifter in my grasp; slammed against the wall so hard that his head bounced and the plaster cracked behind him.

"Who has hurt you?" I didn't recognize the growl that my voice had become. My forearm pressed deeper into his windpipe, and I snarled as his eyes glimmered to gold. If he shifted I would end him where he stood, twist his head from his body and gorge myself on his blood. "Was it him?"

"Sam was helping me," Sookie insisted stridently from behind me. "Eric, let him go!"

I could hear her struggling to rise, and it was only that which made me release him. I ignored him as he gasped and stumbled to his knees, speeding instead to Sookie's side and pressing a hand gently against her shoulder to ease her back onto the arm of the sofa before dropping to kneel beside her. My gaze flicked again across the myriad cuts and bruises that marred her pale skin. "Who?" I ground out.

Sookie's hand trembled slightly as she lifted it to brush her fingertips against my lips. Her index finger grazed an elongated fang and it was only then that I realized how close to my basest nature I had become. I forced the teeth to recede; uncurled my clenched hands and relaxed my posture. Sookie was in no danger, now; there was no need to frighten her further with the knowledge of how close I was to ripping apart anyone who sought to hurt her.

"It was Hoyt Fortenberry," she told me. Her eyes brimmed, and she blinked rapidly. Her tiny frame shuddered. "He tried to kill me."

Fortenberry. It wasn't a name I recognized, was no one I had scented in my trips to Merlotte's or at Sookie's home. But now that I knew the danger had passed the puzzle pieces came together. The aroma that permeated the blood on the ground outside was the same as the scent that had lingered on
the corpses of the two women at the morgue. The killer. The human who hated vampires so much that he was drawn to destroy any woman who cared for them.

I settled back on my heels. The police would have arrested him, taken him to their pathetic little jailhouse. It would be a simple matter to glamour whatever yokel was on duty, to slip inside and free him. To spirit him away to somewhere private, where I could take my time and make him pay for how he'd hurt my woman.

"He's dead, Eric," she said. The tears that had threatened spilled over as her face crumpled. "I killed him."

Her shoulders shook as she collapsed against me. My arms wrapped around her instinctively, my hand catching in the tangle of her hair to pet and soothe even as my brow furrowed. The story fell from her in fits and starts – the attack in the kitchen, her friend Rene's thwarted defense, the chase through the back yard, her impromptu use of the wooden cross I had commissioned for her dead cat as a weapon. Her sorrow for the killer's death was genuine, its pull on our bond great, yet for myself I felt only confusion.

"Sookie," I said haltingly, "this is a good thing."

"How can you say that?" she blubbered against my shirt. "He was a person! With a mother and and … and a girlfriend. And I killed him, Eric!"

"He would have killed you," I said reasonably. I pulled back so that I could look at her. Even with her cheek swollen and discolored, her eyes red and puffy from crying, she was the most beautiful creature I had ever seen. The fact that she felt so deeply for this loss of life should have sickened me, repulsed me with her weakness; instead I felt an even stronger need to protect and nourish her. To cherish her. I brushed a thumb over her unharmed cheek lightly, and was heartened when she leaned into my touch. "You were brave and strong. You fought when others would have given up. You persevered and succeeded where others had failed. You are a true warrior, my Sookie. Do not grieve what you had to do."

"But—"

I pressed my finger to her open lips. "You saved lives today, Sookie. This man would not have stopped. Be proud that you did what had to be done before he could attack another woman, one who was perhaps not as courageous and resourceful as you."

She sniffled, but nodded when I released my finger. I knew this was not the last time that we would visit this discussion. My Sookie was entirely too tender-hearted, too caught up in the moralities pounded into her from the pulpit and at her grandmother's knee. It was a good thing that I was almost completely without ethics, the human concepts of right and wrong merely abstract concerns to me. It could make dealing with Sookie a challenge, but it also meant that we balanced each other nicely. At least, that is what I told myself.

I quirked a smile at her in an attempt to lighten her mood. "I told you that I would keep you safe and protect you," I said. "Yet it appears that you do not need me at all."

Her hand tightened on my arm. "I need you, Eric," she said.

I could drown in those big brown eyes. I dipped my head to brace my forehead against her brow, taking an unnecessary breath. She still smelled of honey and wildflowers, although her natural scent was tainted by the stench of cleansing ointments and painkillers. It came to me then how closely I had come to losing her, and the thought made my dead heart lurch painfully in my chest.
I have never understood mourning. Humans are born, live their pitifully short lives, and then die. Vampires remain. It was the expected order of things, and to mourn that which was unavoidable was impractical. Sookie's tears over the dead killer made no more sense to me than those she had shed for her dead feline. But the image of my long life stretching before me without this little human in it was enough to give me a small taste of what those mourners felt when they gathered around the newly turned earth of a grave.

I would not lose her. My mind worked rapidly, sorting through and rejecting various scenarios. She must come to live with me in Shreveport, of course. Her home was too isolated, her brother clearly incapable of watching out for her and her friendships almost non-existent. She would quit her job with the shifter. Sookie was clever and quick-witted; surely I could find her something in my organization that would better suit her skills. She would—

"Eric!"

It was only when Sookie squirmed in my embrace that I realized I had dragged her closer, that my hold on her had pulled her from her prone position and that her face had twisted in discomfort. I released her carefully, my eyes searching her face. The drugs that had no doubt inundated her system had masked her true pain. "You are hurting," I said. My fangs dropped as I lifted my wrist to my mouth. "Let me—"

A noise behind me, and her gaze flicked beyond my shoulder. "Sam, are you all right?"

The shifter. If not for the odor of mangy mongrel I would almost have forgotten he was there. I glanced at him over my shoulder, and noted that he eyed me warily before stepping forward. I stiffened, wanting to rise to my full height. To impress on the cur that this woman was mine; to posture and preen. Only Sookie's hand on my arm kept me at her side. And wouldn't Pam laugh at that. The great Eric Northman, neutered by a human girl.

My Queen would find it less amusing. As would the Authority.

"Eric," Sookie said softly.

Again our eyes met, hers soft and imploring. I tucked my fangs away and gritted my teeth, but nodded slightly before rising to stand at the end of the sofa. Close enough that I would be able to intervene at the slightest indication that something was amiss, yet far enough away to give the shifter some semblance of safety. I relaxed my stance slightly as he approached. Merlotte would always be a threat, but I had to reluctantly admit that he was unlikely to cause Sookie any physical harm.

"I'm okay, Sook," he finally answered her. "Takes more than a knock on the head to take me out of the game." His hand rose to rub at the spot where his head had collided with the wall as his gaze flicked to me. "And I can understand why you reacted so... strongly."

I inclined my head in response. If he only knew how close I had come to ripping his throat out first and asking questions later, he would perhaps not be so magnanimous in his acceptance.

"Thank you, Sam, for comin' over so quick, and for speakin' up for me when the paramedics wanted to take me in." Sookie shivered, though the night was warm. "I just hate hospitals."

I stiffened behind her. The first and only time she had ever been in a hospital had been only a few short weeks ago, when the hateful words of Merlotte and her so-called friends had driven her to tears and resulted in her being drenched in boiling oil. Were it not for my blood she would still be in unspeakable pain, still be scarred for life. It was yet another reminder of why she needed to move
away from this backwoods town and its hick inhabitants. They cared nothing for my Sookie.

"No problem," Merlotte said. He smiled, shifted in place. "So now that Northman's here to take care of ya I guess I should—"

Sookie nodded at his vague gesture toward the door. "Thanks again," she said.

"If you need anything—"

"You'll be the first person I call," Sookie said.

"Okay. So—"

"Good night, Sam," I said.

I fully expected Sookie to scold me as soon as the shifter was out of earshot, but she only let her head flop back down exhaustedly on the arm of the sofa. I rounded the furniture to perch on the coffee table in front of her; lifted a hand to smooth a strand of golden hair from her cheek. "Do you wish me to get you anything?" I asked. "Some sweet tea? Are you hungry?"

Sookie bit her lip. "What I'd really like," she said hesitantly, "is that blood you were offerin' earlier? I really am in a lot of pain, Eric."

"Of course."

But before I could even drop my fangs, the door behind us creaked open. I spun, my hands twisting in claws, but the redhead who led the charge didn't even hesitate. I'm not certain she even saw me.

"Oh Sookie," she said, "we came as soon as we heard! Are you okay, honey?"

"I'm sore, Arlene, but—"

"We brought you some carrot cake from the store—"

"We didn't have time to make anything," the blonde behind her continued, "but you can bet that as soon as I get home I'll throw together one of my famous breakfast quiches. I'll drop it by for you in the mornin' before work, sweetie."

"Holly," Sookie said, "you don't have to do that. I'll be—"

"Now don't be silly, we don't want you puttin' any weight on that ankle 'til it's all healed up."

"Sides, you's got to take any excuse you can to get pampered round these parts," Lafayette said as he brushed past the women. He inclined his head toward me briefly, then met Sookie's eyes. "Ain't every day we get a goddamn hero in our midst."

The redhead – Arlene – bustled forward and perched next to Sookie on the sofa, reaching past me to take her hand. Her face crumpled behind the pounds of caked-on makeup. "Oh, Sookie. I'm so sorry."

"Arlene, you didn't do anything."

"I've treated you so badly, just 'cause you'd taken up with them bloodsuckers." She stole a quick glance in my direction. So she did see me. "No offense."

"None taken," I said dryly.
"But what Hoyt did—" She shuddered. "I've had a come-to-Jesus moment, Sookie. Ain't nobody better than anybody else, and everybody is just as deservin' of living a full and happy life. Even fangers. You're not gonna hear no more criticism from me, I swear to God."

I clenched my jaw to keep from verbally debating the woman. I could name six vampires off the top of my head who were more deserving of a 'full and happy life' than the ditzy redhead. But Sookie was smiling, her hand clenching at Arlene's, so I let the moment pass.

"How's Rene?" Sookie asked.

"He's still in the hospital; the doctors want to keep him overnight. 'Cause of the head wound, you know. I'm just so proud of him. He was so brave." She leaned closer, the stench of her floral perfume making my nose wrinkle in distaste, and lowered her voice. "I think he's a keeper."

"Rene's pretty awesome, Arlene," Sookie agreed. "You tell him I'll be by to see him later, all right?"

"Knock knock," a voice said from behind us before Arlene could answer. If I hadn't been so focused on Sookie's conversation with the redhead I'd have sensed the presence as soon as he stepped foot on her property. As it was, I could only swivel my head and raise a brow. "Got room for a couple more?"

Sookie's smile lit the room. "Eddie!"

And when her brother stepped from behind the vampire, her lip trembled. I rose from the coffee table and took a step away to allow Jason to draw her into his arms. When they finally parted, Jason's face was tormented, his eyes wet. "My best friend. My goddamn best fuckin' friend. My bubba!" he said. "I swear to fuck, Sookie, if you hadn't have killed him I'd have done it myself. Slowly."

On this we could agree. Perhaps Jason wasn't as inept and foolish as I thought.

"I know," Sookie said soberly. "But I sure wish it hadn't come to that."

"I wanted to stop by and pay my respects as well," Eddie said softly. He stepped forward to take her hand in his. "You are a fine young woman, Miss Stackhouse. I'm honoured to know you."

While Sookie blushed, Arlene twitched at her side. Her face paled beneath her garish makeup. "Is he a…"

"Vampire," Sookie said firmly. "Yes, Arlene. He is."

"Well." The redhead swallowed before she firmed her chin. She straightened her shoulders and stood, holding out her hand. "Any friend of Sookie's is a friend of mine. Eddie, was it?"

She shivered when he took her hand in his, and then – to my great amusement – her cheeks reddened when he raised her hand to his lips. "A pleasure to meet you, Arlene," he said.

"Well," Arlene said again. She wobbled a little on her feet before getting herself under control and turning back to Sookie. "Well. We shouldn't stay long, honey. We don't want to tire you out. Is your vampir here gonna stay the night and watch over you?"

Sookie's eyes rose questioningly to mine. As if there was anything that could tear me from her side this night.

"I will stay," I said aloud.
I stepped back to let her friends crowd around her; watched as chaste kisses were exchanged, well wishes spoken, promises to return the next day bearing enough food to feed a small Viking village for a month offered and accepted. And I was forced, albeit reluctantly, to amend my earlier assessment. In the end, when it counted, Sookie's friends surrounded her like a shield. Her brother, while still an unabashed idiot, cared for her deeply. The shifter had rushed to her side when I could not. She still deserved a job that allowed her to use her brilliant and unconventional mind; a place by my side for her own safety. But she wasn't nearly as isolated or alone as I had thought. And as I watched her face and felt the mix of emotions swirling through her, I realized that she wasn't nearly as isolated and alone as she had thought, either.

Sookie slumped back onto the sofa when the last of her friends – Lafayette, wiggling his fingers and putting an extra sashay into his swaying hips – walked out the door. I slipped up and eased behind her, letting her rest with her back against my chest. She sighed as I stroked my fingers through her long hair; brushed my knuckles across her cheekbone. Every gentle caress left her more pliant and boneless against me, her contentment settling around my shoulders like a heavy cloak. A few more minutes of this and she would slip into sleep.

"Sookie," I murmured against her ear.

"Mmmm."

"Let me heal you."

While I wanted her strength and vigor to return, it wasn't a completely altruistic offer. I wanted – needed – to get more of my blood into her. The more times that she drank from me the stronger our tie would grow. And I had an instinctual feeling that I was going to need a robust, stable bond to keep up with Sookie Stackhouse.

When she nodded languidly against my chest, I moved to shift her into a sitting position. It was reminiscent of the first time I had given her blood. Then she had been in agony from her encounter with the hot oil; she had been left alone in her big house with no one to care for her. Then, I had begun the evening thinking that I was simply gaining an important asset for my area; I had ended it knowing that Sookie Stackhouse meant more to me than anyone, human or vampire, in my long existence.

She shivered again when my fangs crunched through my skin, but there was no hesitation when I held my dripping wrist to her mouth. Her lips fastened on the wound, and with each pull of her mouth she took more of me into her body. The bond between us sang triumphantly as my blood joined with hers. The mental cord thickened, grew brighter and stronger just as my blood strengthened her body, soothing strained muscles and healing damaged capillaries. I wanted to surge against her, my cock swelling uncomfortably in the jeans I'd thrown on before leaving the house, but I forced myself to remain still while she drank from me. Later, I would take her: let myself sink into her heat, hear her gasp and moan as I gave her pleasure threefold before I sought my own. Now she must recover from her ordeal.

I brushed my knuckles gently across her restored cheekbone when the wound in my wrist had healed itself. "Better?"

"I've said it before," she answered, "but that stuff is amazing." I watched as she lifted her leg from the pillow to twirl her ankle. The swelling had disappeared; she was good as new. "'Course, it's gonna be hard to explain how I can suddenly run around the block like I'm Usain Bolt when I'm supposed to be hobblin' around on crutches."

Presumably this Bolt was a local track star. I grunted, gathering her closer against my chest. I cared
little what her friends thought of her instantaneous recovery, but it was necessary to keep the healing properties of vampire blood a secret for as long as possible.

"Fake a limp," I said.

"I'm not exactly Meryl Streep," Sookie grumbled.

"You told me you did theatre in school," I said.

Sookie twisted her head to look askance at me. "I played the third shepherd from the left in the nativity play," she said. "I had one line!"

I shrugged. "You have a natural talent. You can pull it off."

Sookie shook her head, but turned to lie back down against me. "You seem to think I've got magic powers or somethin'," she mused as she tucked her head under against my chin. "Crazy vampire."

Listen to the world around you, Eric, Godric's voice spoke in my head. The universe will give you clues on how to proceed. Heed them.

I had done my best to bury all memories of my master once I forged the bond with Sookie. I knew that he could sense the bond, just as he could sense the link I had made with Pamela years ago when I brought her across and made her mine. I felt nothing from him – neither approval nor censure – but his sentiments on the purity of vampire blood assured me that I knew where his opinion on my blood bond with Sookie would lie.

That this memory would surface now despite my efforts to block all thoughts of Godric surely meant that I should follow the lead of my master in this.

I took an unneeded breath. "Sookie," I said, "I have something to tell you."

Epilogue

"Fairy?!?" Sookie screeched. "What in the hell do you mean I'm a goddanged fairy?!"

It's going to be a long night.

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