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**Chapter 1: Lie In the Sound**

I know what you're thinking. Really, I do. Seriously, Meg, *another* story? Don't you already have about a bajillion and a half of them in progress? Believe me, I ask myself this constantly. Trust me when I tell you it's better for my sanity to write what springs to mind, works in progress be damned. Besides, it'll be nice to have something a little more on the fluffy side to combat the darkness of HBTY (which I promise I will be getting back to just as soon as I get some plotting done). I also may have been inspired by my reread of **Zigster's** The Bitch and the Hellcat. If you haven't read that (and dear Lord, I hope she updates soon \*crosses fingers\*), you should seriously surf on over and check it out, because it is definitely one of the best AH fics I've read so far. Oh, and this Eric has a seriously dirty mouth. Come to think of it, Sookie isn't much better. Huh. Oh well. You've been warned.

This little ditty is unbeta'd, so all the mistakes are mine.

Chapter 1: Lie In the Sound

**Eric**

Sleep. A necessity of the human condition I had blindly taken for granted until my bar opened. While I'd worked my ass off to get Loki's off the ground, it had seriously fucked with my ability to crash at regular intervals. I'd made a lot of sacrifices to get where I was, but losing sleep was the one I was most bitter about. A lack of sleep made me a crabby bitch, which gave Pam fodder for teasing. Fuck, I just used the word 'fodder.' See? This whole lack of sleep thing was really starting to fuck with me.

I parked my Lime Green Monster, a 1970 Hemi-Cuda, around the side of my house. The house was way too big for just one person, but I tended to have plenty of visitors in the summer months. Living on the beach will do that to you, even if it's just Lake Michigan you're waking up to every day. The moisture in the air settled on my skin when I practically fell out of my car. I was fucking wiped.

I was seriously contemplating crawling all the way to the kitchen door, but figured it was actually less complicated to stand and walk. But I could sleep on the couch. Then I wouldn't have to climb all those stairs to my bedroom. My cell phone buzzed in my pocket. Had to be Pam. No one else would call me at almost four in the morning. Well, maybe one of my brothers would if they needed to be bailed out of jail, but they'd be shit out of luck. I was at least three hours away up in Michigan, while they were still in Chicago.

After the last time Luke got busted for drunk in public, I told him he was on his own in the drunk tank. If Jakob wasn't going to bail his ass out, I sure as shit wasn't going to drive all the way down to get him. Besides, those two knuckleheads would be heading up north soon enough. What little peace and quiet I got while in the privacy of my own home would be completely destroyed. Tourist season was looming large. Fuck, my life was about to become a serious shitstorm.

I ignored the ringing phone in my pocket. Whatever it was, Pam and I could discuss it later. I was too wiped to hear her shrill voice. She was probably just calling to remind me of the beer delivery anyway, as if I could forget something that important. As soon as the buzzing stopped, I grabbed my phone out of my pocket and turned the fucker off. Anyone with something to say could leave me a message.

I trudged up the steps that lead to the wrap around porch and paused to look to my left when something shiny caught my eye. Seriously, lack of sleep will do fucked up things to a perfectly normal adult brain. I don't recommend it. It took a moment for my eyes to focus, but then I realized what I was seeing. For the first time in God knows how long, I smiled at something that had nothing to do with successful negotiations for lower rates with my beer vendor, or all of my staff not only showing up, but being on time to boot. Believe me, either thing was rare.

Louisiana plates were screwed into place on a teal Sunfire convertible that was a few years past its prime. I'd only seen one person drive that car, so there was no mistaking who was next door. I could barely contain the smile on my face. If I hadn't been so fuck all tired, I would have gone over to say hello. Lord knew seeing her again was long overdue.

"Sookie Stackhouse." I muttered to myself as I searched for the right key to open the kitchen door.

Imagine my surprise when the door opened from the inside. I was greeted by a blinding smile, bright blue eyes and flowing blonde hair. Her tiny curvy body was posed seductively in my doorway and she was wearing nothing but a bikini top that tied around her neck and back with a very short denim skirt. Hello, hard-on.

I must have been staring at her like a four course meal, because she blushed slightly before pushing the screen door open for me since I seemed to have forgotten how to do it myself. "I wanted to surprise you." She continued to smile at me.

Mission accomplished. "I didn't know you were coming."

"That was the whole point. I hope you don't mind I let myself in." She stepped back so I could enter the house.

"I'd rather you be naked." I couldn't help but tease her right back, knowing that delicious blush of hers would only spread.

"If you play your cards right, I might end up that way." She winked at me. Minx.

"Why didn't you come by the bar? I would have welcomed you back properly." I kicked off my shoes and flipped the lock on the screen door. I left the doors open when I was home.

"Oh, I know you would." She said in a knowing tone. "I wasn't in the mood to be mounted and stuffed over your bar."

I groaned at the imagery that came to mind. She was way too good at teasing me. Way too good. I tried to rally my troops because I was definitely wanting to mount and stuff her, but my body just couldn't get on board. I was too exhausted.

"You look like shit." She said easily.

"Thanks." I muttered.

"Want me to go?" She wasn't offended by my muttering. She was being polite.

"Not yet." I braced my hands on her shoulders, spun her around and pushed her toward the stairs.

"Where do you think we're going?" She looked over her shoulder.

"You're going to come upstairs with me, get into bed and tell me about your drive up here. Then I'm going to fall asleep, have some really raunchy dreams about you and probably wake up with the worst case of morning wood I've had since last summer. That sound okay to you?" I asked as we climbed the stairs.

She giggled at my honesty, something I thoroughly enjoyed about her. She hadn't always been so open to it. In fact, it had downright rubbed her the wrong way last summer. But all of our bitching and sniping at each other had just been a thinly veiled mask for the insane sexual tension between us. Frankly, if it wasn't for one too many Patron shots last fourth of July, we probably never would have gotten over ourselves long enough to have the most amazing sexual encounter of our lives.

The chemistry between us was explosive, and we spent the remainder of the summer having mind bending hook ups that left us both somehow sated and wanting more. Letting her drive off at the end of summer had been a real bitch, but there wasn't much choice. She had to get back to Louisiana for school. Assuming all had gone according to plan, she was now a college graduate. She'd been studying criminal justice and psychology. The idea of Sookie with a pair of handcuffs was a little too much for my sleep deprived brain to take at the moment, so I pushed it away for later. No doubt it would be in the spank bank for another time.

As I asked, she got into bed next to me after I stripped down to my boxers. Sookie curled herself against my side and let her head fall into that perfect niche in my shoulder. Her slender fingers trailed up and down my abs, and the little moan that escaped her went straight to my cock, but quickly died. Too tired. This was a fucking tragedy. I'd repay her for it later, though.

"How's the bar?" She asked and pressed a series of kisses to my chest, trying to entice me into giving her the tumble she wanted. It killed me that I couldn't.

"Good. We've been busy. Pam wants to expand. We're thinking about converting the deck into a stage and having live bands play." I told her.

"That could be interesting. You've never seen me dance on an amplifier before." She licked my nipple.

Fuck, when was the last time she had sex? I could admit it had been a while for me, but the way she was going I was starting to think she hadn't had any since the last time we fucked. Which, coincidentally, had been the morning she left town. It had been hard and fast in my shower, and I'd nearly dropped her when I came. She looked sweet and innocent, but she was a tigress in the sack.

I groaned as another imagine made its way into the spank bank. "You're not making it easy for me to not maul you."

"So why aren't you?"

"Because I have about as much energy as a coma patient, and I want to make sure I give as good as I get." I told her. I was dead serious about it, too. I wouldn't leave her unsatisfied, and I wasn't sure I could give her what she was accustomed to. I would just as soon wait until I had a few uninterrupted hours of R.E.M. sleep under my belt. It would be worth it. "So, tell me about the drive."

She shrugged as much as she could for laying on her side. "It was okay. Amelia wanted to come up with me, but I convinced her to give me a head start. It was easy to do when I reminded her she would have the place to herself. Ever since she got serious with Tray..."

"Sucks being the third wheel, doesn't it?"

"Pretty much."

I didn't ask her why she wasn't dating anyone. It's not that I didn't want to know, so much as I was afraid it had something to do with me. We'd known that whatever it was we had going on the previous summer was going to end when she went back to Louisiana. Because we had never put strings on our relationship, and had been clear about the way it was going to go, there was no reason for either of us to remain faithful to each other once we went our separate ways.

I wasn't expecting her to sideline herself for me, and I knew she felt the same. I hadn't dated anyone, but then I never really had. I had fuck buddies, as Pam so eloquently called them, and I had random hook ups. I never invited any of them to my house, and definitely not into my bed. Sookie was a special case. The truth was, I liked her. And maybe if proximity wasn't such an issue, I might be okay with dating her. But it wasn't even worth going there since our lives were in two different places, and I wasn't about to ask her to give up anything I wouldn't be willing to give up myself.

"You should be dating someone, Sookie." I whispered to her before I could stop myself.

She giggled beside me and said, "Maybe, but then these little snuggle sessions would have to stop, to say nothing of the mutual exchange of orgasms."

That would be a damn shame. She was, hands down- or cock up- the best sex of my life. For the life of me, I couldn't figure out why a girl like her wasn't clubbing guys to get them off of her. Yeah, okay, so she could put up a really bitchy outer shell that was hard to crack. I got that. Man, did I understand that. She'd certainly given me one hell of a time when we first met the previous summer, but I quickly realized that had more to do with insecurity than anything else.

The girl had serious trust issues. And as well as I knew Sookie in the present, I knew there was a shit ton of her past I was missing out on that would probably lay it all out for me. Until she was comfortable showing me all of her puzzle pieces, I was never going to see the complete picture. But again, I wouldn't ask her for anything I wouldn't give myself. I'd have to be willing to go quid pro quo with her, and I wasn't sure I wanted to do that with someone. Even if I did think the pieces of her I'd already seen were amazing.

"My brothers are coming up this week." I informed her once she finished telling me about her drive.

"Uh oh." She groaned quietly. "How long are they staying?"

"Until the summer ends, or I drown them in the lake- which ever comes first."

She giggled again, and I felt myself starting to stiffen up a little over the way her breasts pressed against my side. "Awww, but they're so cute."

I growled at that. My youngest brother, Luke, had tried many times to get in Sookie's pants the previous summer. It had been part of what forced my hand with her. It was either stake my claim on her- as much as she would let me- or let her move on to someone else. I would be damned if that someone else was going to be my baby brother. I couldn't handle him gloating all over the house all summer. After experiencing some of Sookie's more feral talents, I knew I would have definitely been one miserable son of a bitch if Luke had been the recipient of them.

While there was most definitely an uncanny resemblance between me and my brothers, hearing her call them 'cute' didn't sit well with me. In fact, it brought up all sorts of insecurities and jealousies that I had no business feeling. I didn't own her. She didn't own me. We were what we were.

"I should go. You're exhausted." Sookie started to sit up, but I pulled her back.

"Stay." I nuzzled her hair.

She tensed up in thought, trying to decide if it was a good idea to stay. "Just until you're asleep, and then I'm vapor."

"Fine." If it was the best she could offer, I could live with that.

She turned onto her side, fully aware of my penchant for spooning. I draped my arm over her and breathed in the scent of her hair. She told me to loosen my hold on her, knowing damn well I'd trap her in my bed if given the chance. I closed my eyes and concentrated on the smell of her hair. I'd missed it more than I should given our situation. She smelled like the lake, apples and something that was unique to her. It was in her skin. I tasted it when I kissed her shoulder.

She played with my fingers that were dangling over her flat stomach. Her ass was tucked against my crotch, heat trapping itself between us there. I felt my heartbeat bounce on her shoulder. Her breathing became deep and even like mine, and before either of us knew it, sleep pulled us under.

So, what do we think? \*quirks eyebrow\* I went on a total binge with this, and I've written 5 chapters in 24 hours (Mama Bird isn't feeling so well. Stupid bitch at the office seems to have brought her voodoo jungle virus in to share). Yeah, see, *that's* what happens when I let the muses have their way with me. Too bad they have a horrible attention span. Seriously, never wave anything shiny in front of them. It's a clusterfuck of epic proportions. Soooo, y'all want more? Reviews are love. Peace out kiddies.

**Chapter 2: The Boy of Summer**

Wooooooooo! You guys really like dirty talking Eric, don'tcha? I'm pretty partial to him myself. Just so we're clear, **kjwrit** sunk her claws into him this afternoon and has no intentions of sharing. She's got her shivs sharpened and ready to go, so watch your six. She shanks first, apologizes never. You've been warned. She also suggested we start referring to the GP as the "Hemi-Cuda." Have I mentioned lately that I lurvs her, because I do.

For those of you wondering, this is Eric's Car: /photo/albums/userpics/10010/Jlm-Muscle%20Cars-197 0%20Plymouth%20Barracuda..jpg

It might be cliché, but muscle cars are hot. Seems only fitting that Eric would drive one. I thought about going with a '65 Stingray, but the Eric in my head is just too tall for such a little car. But the Lime Green Monster? \*fans self\* Yeah, I could see him rocking that bitch.

Chapter 2: The Boy of Summer

**Sookie**

Letting myself into Eric's house is something most guys would probably consider to be a stalkerish activity, considering he had no prior knowledge of my intent to enter his home, nor did I have his permission to do so. I did, however, know where his spare key was, as did I know if I appeared in the proper attire, he would have a hard time- no pun intended- being pissed off at me for my sneak attack.

I have to admit, I was bummed when I pulled up to the cottage that could have been a guest house for the place he owned next door. The cottage had belonged to my great uncle Bartlett. He'd left it to me in his will when he passed three years before. My gut reaction had been to sell the place. I mean, it was in Michigan, for fuck's sake. What was I going to do with a summer cottage in Michigan? Then the more I thought about it, the more I figured it might be nice to have somewhere to retreat to where I could be by myself.

You know, since my farmhouse out in the middle of nowhere wasn't isolated enough from the rest of civilization. My closest neighbor was Bill Compton, and ever since that douchetard picked up the hobby of fucking older women for kicks on the side, my desire to be anywhere near him had pretty much keeled over and died. I often wondered if he had insinuated himself into my life so he could get close to my Gran. It was a thought that chilled me to the bone, and one that could put me in therapy- or a convent- for the rest of my life if I spent too much time on it.

I'd arrived at the cottage in the late afternoon hours. Eric's impressive Lime Green Monster was nowhere in sight, suggesting he was already at Loki's for the night. I'd spent the last hour of my drive thinking of all the ways I could possibly surprise him with my arrival. It had been months since I'd had sex, and while I wasn't really known for tarting around, I'd been with a few guys. Eric was the cream of the crop. I'd never tell *him* that, but he probably knew it anyway. Well, I'm sure he assumed it.

Really, I couldn't blame him for the assumption. The things that man did to my body... good gravy. So I was understandably a mess by the time I pulled up to the cottage. I seriously considered turning my car right around and heading over to the bar. I definitely needed an itch scratched, and I knew Eric would be more than willing to scratch it for me. It never crossed my mind that he might be dating someone, although it should have.

Why he was still available was completely beyond me. Although, I suppose, if I were him, I'd play the field, too. Why put myself on lock down when I could sample all the world had to offer? Not that I thought Eric was a man whore, exactly, but I got why he didn't want to commit himself to just one person. Frankly, I wasn't sure he was built for it.

If he was married to his bar, then his business partner Pam was his dirty mistress. I liked Pam. She had no problem putting Eric in his place, something not easily done. The fact that he was built like a Viking, complete with blond hair and blue eyes that made my lady business get all up in a tizzy, was reason enough for most people to back their shit down.

Eric was one of those types where if you didn't know any better, it would be easy to think he was an asshole. He had a gruff exterior and a very low tolerance for stupid people. He detested liars and wouldn't tolerate disloyalty. He had such a big personality that it was easy to feel like you were suffocating if you got too close.

On the flip side to all that power and crustiness was a very generous heart and a fan-fucking-tastic sense of humor. If he considered you to be worth the trouble, there wasn't anything he wouldn't do for you. If his head bartender wasn't proof of that, I don't know what was. Sam was a nice guy, but he had more family drama than the Kennedys. It seemed like Eric couldn't turn around without Sam having some sort of problem, but he always bent over backwards to help the guy get his shit together. Most bosses wouldn't give a fuck.

Not to mention, Eric hadn't drowned Pam in the lake. Like I said, I like Pam, but she's a bitch. Unlike Eric, Pam didn't really have redeeming qualities that were easy to spot. She definitely didn't have the same big heart he did, although her wry sense of humor had provided me with a chuckle or two. Still, I knew it took a special kind of person to see her good side, and clearly, Eric did. If he didn't, I had no doubts she'd be fish food.

In the end, it was not wanting to fuck Eric in front of the entire town that prevented me from making a trip up to Loki's. I wanted him, no doubt, but I wasn't one for an audience. That was definitely more Pam's thing than mine. I lugged all of my bags into the cottage and dropped them near the front door. The cottage was dusty and in desperate need of fresh air. I got all of the windows and sliding doors open around the cottage. I noted I needed to replace the screen to the sliding door for the back deck.

I sat down at the kitchen table to make up a list of all the things I needed since I hadn't bothered to bring much besides my clothes with me. In truth, I didn't know how long I was going to be staying. The year before I'd had to go back to Louisiana for school, but there was nothing keeping me there anymore. My Gran died the previous winter, conveniently while I was home for winter break. I buried her four days before I had to get back to LSU.

School had been a welcome distraction. I'd thought about calling Eric, but decided it wasn't his problem to deal with. We were friends, but we weren't those kinds of friends. I didn't want to disrupt his life with my problems. Being with him was about mindless fun, and inviting him down for my Gran's funeral would have just been too weird. I needed to process Gran's death, not avoid it.

I wasn't alone in the world, after all. I had friends back home. Granted, none of them seemed to get me the way Eric did, but that wasn't the point. Besides, if he had a girlfriend, I knew two things for sure: the first being she probably wouldn't want him dropping her to be at my side, and second, if he was dating someone, I didn't want to meet her. For some reason the idea of Eric dating someone made me jealous, and I had no right to be.

With my list in hand, I headed out to the closest grocery store. I loaded my cart with all the things I needed and headed for the check out. There were fliers hanging up at the front of the store promoting Loki's. I smiled at them, and it didn't go unnoticed by the cashier.

"You a tourist?" The girl eyed me suspiciously.

"Uh, sort of. I own a house out by the lake but I only get up here for summers."

She gave me a distasteful look. The locals got bored quick with the tourists, even if they were good for local business. "Well, the owner at Loki's doesn't take too kindly to folks who aren't local, so watch yourself."

The girl couldn't have been more than seventeen. How the hell did she know Eric? I told myself to chill the fuck out. She was local, and a guy like Eric was hard to miss. Big, sexy Viking types didn't just grow on trees. Of course she knew who he was, even if she didn't frequent his establishment. I was certain they hadn't slept together. Eric might not have the highest standards, but he didn't strike me as the cradle robbing type either.

"I know Eric." I put it out there because my inner bitch was looking for a catfight all of a sudden.

"You know Eric?" She gave me a look of disbelief.

"We're neighbors." I gave her a catty grin and told myself to retract my claws before I let it slip that he'd fucked me six ways from Sunday almost every day of the previous summer. That was none of her business.

The disbelief in the girl's eyes turned to jealousy. "So you live in that dinky little guest house?"

Oh, she wanted to go *there* did she? Why was I about to lower myself to fighting with a teenager? What the hell was wrong with me? I rationalized my sudden mood by blaming her for insulting me. Even if she was right about the cottage, she didn't have to be rude about it. I opened my mouth to say something, but decided it wasn't worth it.

I handed over a credit card to pay for my purchases and signed the slip of paper. She was lucky she wasn't a waitress, or I wouldn't have tipped her. Hell, *I* was lucky she wasn't my waitress, or she probably would have served me a sneezer. I told myself to just let it go. She was a teenager, and clearly smitten with someone she couldn't have. I shoved my cart out of the store and loaded my things into the trunk.

When I got back to the cottage, I brought everything inside. I went digging for my iPod dock so I could listen to music while I tidied up. The place really wasn't so bad. It was decorated like one might expect for being on the beach. There was a nautical theme throughout the house. The furniture was made of heavy, dark stained wood. The floors were hardwood as well, which was sort of a bitch considering all of the sand that ended up getting inside. The sofas were covered in navy blue and sandy colored material. There were pictures of boats and lighthouses everywhere.

A heavy, antique anchor was hanging from the front deck's railing. There were four bedrooms and two bathrooms in the bungalow style cottage. The kitchen was large enough for a long table that seated eight. Why Uncle Bartlett needed that much space all to himself, I'll never know. The master bedroom- which included one of the two bathrooms- had been added on a few years before Uncle Bartlett died. I'd only been up to the cottage once when I was younger, and I'd come with Gran and my brother. We'd only been here a week, and Eric certainly wasn't our neighbor back then.

Still, I thought the old house had charm to it, much like Gran's farmhouse down in Louisiana. When she died, she left everything to me. Jason had inherited everything from our parents. Only it turned out the land Gran's house was on was worth much more than I ever could have imagined. The house really only had worth because of the nostalgia and sentimentality it evoked. If Eric thought his house needed a lot of work, he'd be shocked to see the kinds of things that had fallen into disrepair at the farmhouse. It wasn't so simple as a few loose floorboards, or cabinet doors that needed replacing.

I really needed to decide what I was going to do with the place. Gran hadn't left a whole lot in the way of money. There was enough to pay her final expenses and to tuck a little something away in my savings account. Jason had been furious to learn I'd inherited everything from Gran. My brother was nothing if not selfish and greedy. I would have gladly handed it all over to him if his attitude wasn't so nasty. It was his air of entitlement that pissed me off, especially considering I had been the one to take care of Gran the last few years of her life.

While it was true I wasn't there every day with her, I was home every weekend from college to look in on her. I took her to doctor's appointments and made sure she had everything she needed. Jason lived less than five miles away, but it was like pulling teeth to get him to stop by and look in on her. I spent as much time with her as I could, and I did every little chore she asked me to do. I figured it was no big deal when I thought about all the things she'd done for Jason and me after our parents died. She didn't have to take us. Hell, most people in their late sixties wouldn't want to take two little kids into their home, but Gran couldn't stand the idea of Jason and I being wards of the state.

So, she'd done the only thing she could do, and welcomed us with open arms. It had never been easy. There were lots of bills to pay and very little money to go around. Most people would probably say we were poor, but there was a roof over our heads, clothes on our back and food in our tummies. Does life's happiness really depend on whether or not you have designer gym shoes or the newest video game system? Apparently, for my brother, it does. He was resentful of the way we grew up, and frittered his inheritance from our parents so by the time he reached his twentieth birthday, he was flat broke.

We got into a really nasty argument a month after Gran passed when he started sniffing around to see if there was a way to weasel into Gran's estate. I couldn't believe him. Well, actually, I could. I told him to quit acting like a circling buzzard and be an adult. He didn't take too kindly to his baby sister giving him a lecture, but he didn't leave Gran's house with two nickels to rub together. His inability to manage money- or keep it from burning a hole in his pocket- really wasn't my problem. Gran had been blind to his antics and had indulged him.

It was then that I realized Gran was a much better person than me, because I wasn't going to coddle Jason along like she did. I loved my brother, but he made it very difficult for me to like him. I pushed thoughts of Jason from my mind as I continued to clean up. After I was done, I made myself a salad and then took a quick shower. I knew the bar didn't close until two, and Eric usually didn't get home until at least three by the time he finished getting the place cleaned up.

Still, at about two thirty I changed clothes and headed over to his place to wait for him. I thought about going upstairs to see if there were any signs of a girl taking up residence in his place, but then decided that was none of my business. I made myself comfortable on his couch, and even nodded off for a short time. It was the unmistakable rumble of the Lime Green Monster that pulled me from my slumber, and I arranged myself by the kitchen door where he always came in.

He took longer than usual getting to the house. I heard him mutter my name, which made me smile. He'd realized I was back. He struggled with his house keys, and rather than let him frustrate himself further, I opened the door. The look on his face was priceless. His eyes were a mixture of surprised, lustful and completely drop dead exhausted. Poor baby was working too hard.

Had he not looked so completely bone tired I would have jumped on him. As it was, I figured he probably didn't need that, and instead opted to just get my flirt on. While his eyes said he was tired, it was obvious by the tent he was pitching that his attraction to me hadn't waned. Damn if he didn't look good enough to eat. I was seriously considering telling him to just lay back and let me take care of everything, but I knew Eric would never go for that.

As exhausted as he was, he still managed to talk me into his bed. Not that I wasn't more than willing to go with him. In fact, my behavior was a little on the shameless side. Even if we were just about fun and some seriously amazing orgasms, I probably should make him work for it a little harder. But that got into mind fucking territory, and that was a big no-no in a situation like ours. Playing head games was the fastest way to make sure I got evicted from the Orgasm Express.

So we ended up snuggling together. When I first figured out Eric was big on snuggling, I was pretty sure I hit the jackpot. Smart, funny, sexy as hell, amazing in bed *and* loves to snuggle? Yeah, guys like Eric Northman*don't grow on trees*. So why the fuck weren't we more than just fuck buddies? I couldn't let myself think about that while I was snuggling with him, or it was going to cause me to start spewing all sorts of nonsense his brain was in no shape to process.

I tried to get out of bed so he could get some good sleep without me there to wake him up or disturb him, but he insisted I stay. I told him I would stay just until he was asleep, but I knew that was horse shit. I knew the second he relaxed and I got comfortable with his arms around me, I was going to nod off, too. And sure as shit, that's exactly what happened.

The next thing I knew a rumble of thunder overhead was pulling me from sleep. I groaned and carefully extracted myself from Eric's hold. A flash of lightning over the lake let me know a storm was most definitely approaching. After the next rumble of thunder, I counted the seconds until the lightning flashed, then divided by five when it did. If my calculations were corrected, the storm was five miles away. If I hurried the hell up I could get next door, close up my house, change my clothes and get back in bed with Eric before the storm started.

"Where are you going?" Eric muttered, his face half buried in a pillow.

"It's going to storm. I have to close up the cottage. Do you want me to come back?" I figured I should give him the choice since I'd sort of forced my way in the night before.

He rolled onto his back to reveal the second part of his plan from the night before. Morning wood was definitely present and accounted for. "There's another part of me that *needs* to say hello to you."

It was cheesy as hell for him to say something like that, but the truth was, I wanted to say hello to that part. Very much. Yes. Yes, I did. "I'll be back." I brushed a kiss on his forehead, then darted out of the room to take care of business.

I ran across the sand and gravel to the cottage. I went from room to room to close the windows and doors before going to my bedroom to find a pair of yoga pants and a tank top to lounge in. I pulled my brush through my hair, brushed my teeth and then headed out. Fat raindrops were just started to fall as I walked out of the house. I saw Eric up in his bedroom window. I could just barely make out the happy trail of blond hair that went down from his belly button. I bit my lip as I ran, and I knew his eyes were drinking in the shaking of my chest as I moved. I put a little extra shimmy in it for him, and I could hear him bark a laugh from the second story of the house.

I closed most of the doors and windows downstairs because I knew once I got going upstairs neither of us was going to want to stop to close windows. I felt the air conditioning coming to life in the house. I just hoped his Viking blood wasn't going to turn the place into a meat locker. I wasn't used to the same kind of cold he was. He was unfazed by sub zero winters and heavy snowfall. I barely liked temperatures to dip below sixty. Then again, I was convinced the extra air conditioning was nothing more than a ploy to make sure I was cuddled up next to him. He was like a big cat.

I made my way up the stairs and paused when I was half way up. Water was running. The bastard was in the shower. I bit my lip at the thought of shower sex, which I most definitely hadn't had since the previous summer. Then, before I knew what was happening, I was stripping off my clothes as I ran up the rest of the way.

**Chanel Addict** informs me I am evil for cutting the chapter here. She's probably right about that. The good thing is, chapter 3 is done and it's mostly lemons with a side of Pam!snark. So be good little reviewers and I'll feed your addiction like you feed mine. You pickin' up what I'm puttin' down? Goooood. Oh, and how adorable was ASkars at the Scream Awards with his Rupert Giles jacket? Gah! Stick him in a pair of Elvis Costello glasses and you've got the sexiest nerd ever. For realz. We were *thisclose* to having **scribeninja's** NerdStud on live TV \*still want\* Thanks for reading, baby birds!

**Chapter 3: Get What You Give**

I've had a few people ask me how I keep my stories straight since I have so many in progress. The answer to that is, they're all very different from one another. The plots are all different, and there are different emotions/personalities for the characters, even if they have the same names. HFT!Eric is obvious very different from the Eric in this story. Just like the Sookie in HBTY is way different from this new Sookie. See what I mean? Not to mention, I'm not happy if I'm not juggling projects. It's just how I roll, and it makes the muses work a little harder. Since they have A.D.D., having more than one project to focus on is a good thing. Anyway...hope that answers your questions about my squirrely brain.

As promised, here are your lemons, so if you're at work, you may not want to read this chapter. You've been warned.

Chapter 3: Get What You Give

**Eric**

A pair of small hands firmly grabbed my ass while I rinsed the shampoo out of my hair. I smiled with my eyes closed, water and suds running down my face. I quickly adjusted the angle of my face to keep said suds from going in my mouth. I knew those hands. Hell, even if I wouldn't have had the slightest inclination Sookie was in town, I would have known they were hers. My dick twitched with thoughts of what was to come- no pun intended.

I felt teeth drag across my back and I wondered if Sookie had always been a biter, or if she did it just because I asked her to once or twice. I wasn't into pain, or anything, and I definitely didn't want her to draw blood. There was just something primal about the use of one's teeth in the right place, at the right time. I growled when she nipped at the back of my my arm. Her hands released their hold on my ass- the part of me she declared to be her favorite- and I turned around to face her.

"Miss me?" She gave me a mischievous grin.

I could have answered her with words, but what was the fun in that? Besides, as far as I was concerned, we could talk about that later. Technically, were we supposed to miss each other? Feelings like those were supposed to be for real couples, weren't they? That's not what Sookie and I were. All the same, I pushed those thoughts aside and answered her the only way I could. I kissed her.

Now, when I say I kissed her, what I mean is I tried to devour her. My lips immediately remembered the way she kissed, and for a moment they gave me a stern talking to about letting them go for so long without their favorite partners. Yeah, yeah, I had a feeling my body was about to be doing all sorts of happy dances to have Sookie back. If I'm really honest with myself, I *am* happy she's back.

Her lips suddenly disappeared, and I swear my mouth kept right on going for a second. I snapped out of it when I felt her mouth on my chest instead. One of her small hands had slipped between us and wrapped itself around the the base of my erection, and slowly she started to stroke. Her grasp was firm, a summer's worth of experience told her exactly how much pressure to use when she jerked me off.

I tried to get her mouth back to mine, but she had other ideas. She dropped further down my body until she was on her knees in front of me. My breath caught in my throat as her tongue darted out to lick the length of my shaft. Her eyes found mine. There was a devilish glint to them that let me know exactly what I was in for. Her lips parted, then wrapped around me as she took me in her mouth. One hand immediate twisted in her hair while the other slapped against the tile wall of the shower.

I felt her smile around my dick, but she didn't stop. My eyes closed with the bliss of what I had been missing. Fuck me, she was good at this. The hum around my dick forced my eyes open. I was a freak for eye contact when it came to sex, and she knew it. Her head bobbed faster and faster, her mouth and hand making a formidable partnership designed to make my knees buckle.

"Sookie," I growled her name when I knew I was close. She knew it was a warning, but she didn't stop. If anything, she redoubled her efforts, taking me further down her throat than I ever remembered being.

My inner caveman grunted at the idea she'd been practicing on someone else in the last nine months. Where the fuck that came from, I have no idea. She hummed again, and that was my undoing. My balls tightened, my cocked swelled and then I exploded. She continued to stroke me with her small hand while she swallowed everything I offered before releasing me from her mouth.

"Holy fuck." I slumped to the side.

Sookie grinned up at me and moved to the side so she wouldn't get hit in the face with the spray of water that was mostly hitting my back. "So, did you miss me?"

I laughed quietly and helped her up. "Yes, I did."

We traded places and I watched her completely douse herself in water. It didn't seem rational that she should look as hot as she did when she was soaking wet, but I couldn't take my eyes off her. I watched the arch of her back as she pulled her sopping wet hair away from her shoulders. My eyes wandered farther down her body, taking in the flat plane of her stomach, the curve of her hips and then the space between her thighs. Well kept blonde curls covered her sex. I wanted to get between those legs. I knew exactly what was waiting for me there, and I wanted it. Bad.

"Eric!" Pam's shrill voice shrieked, ruining any chance I had at getting what I wanted.

"Fuck." I muttered quietly.

"Pam?" Sookie arched an eyebrow at me.

I groaned as I remembered the beer vendor was making a delivery. What the fuck time was it anyway? I hadn't even looked at the clock before getting in the shower. Pam called out again and then threw the bathroom door open.

"I'll be out in a minute, Pam." I called out to her.

She snickered on the other side of the shower curtain, and I was glad she didn't peek around to see who I was with, since I knew she could tell from the other side that I wasn't alone. "What a lucky girl you have in there with you."

I rolled my eyes, but Sookie peeked out to reveal herself. "Nice to see you again, Pam."

Pam cackled and said, "Sookie Stackhouse. Well, well, it's nice to know I can expect Eric to have a permaboner for the next three months. On the bright side, it'll be easier to get my way."

"Nonsense, Pam, we all know you always get your way."

"Don't encourage her, Sookie." I slapped her ass playfully, making her squeak.

"Oooh, can I play?" I could hear the smile in Pam's voice.

I peeked around the other end of the shower curtain. "Out, Pam."

She pouted and looked back and forth between Sookie and I. "Make it quick."

"Better yet, why don't you go meet the beer guy for me? I'll make it worth your while." I suggested.

"How worth my while?" Pam folded her arms over her chest.

I had to think of a smaller concession to give to her because I knew she would want to negotiate this, and I wasn't going to bring out the big guns unless I had to. "I'll let you have Thursdays off for the entire summer." Thursday night was poker night. Pam hated Thursday nights.

As expected, she turned her nose up with a snort. "That's the best you can do?"

"I'll let you do those stupid theme nights." I offered.

"Ha! Reward me with *more* work? I don't think so." Pam looked at me petulantly. She was going in the lake this summer. I could feel it in my bones.

"Then what do you want, Pam?" I was starting to give up because I knew the hot water wasn't going to last forever.

"You're folding like a cheap suit so quick? Sookie, you really must be a good fuck."

"Pam!" I shouted at her, but Sookie just giggled.

"Wouldn't *you* like to know?" Sookie taunted her, and it *so* wasn't the time for that. Not when Pam essentially had me grabbing my ankles.

"You bet I would." Pam's eyes glazed over with lust.

I leaned a little further out of the shower to see Sookie was nearly exposing herself to Pam. There was that caveman instinct again- the one that made me want to club everything, or anyone, who looked at my Sookie- *my Sookie? What the fuck?*- for looking at her with any hint of interest. What the fuck was going on with me?

"How about I fix you up with my friend Amelia?" Sookie offered out of nowhere.

Pam's eyes brightened a little. "You mean the Stepford friend?" I looked to Sookie who just nodded with a cheesy grin on her face. "Deal."

Seriously, that's it? That's all she wanted?

"Oh, and I want Thursdays off." She tossed in.

"Fine. Now get out." I told her.

Pam smirked at the two of us and spun on her heel. "Happy fucking!" She called out as she left the bathroom without closing the door behind her.

I looked out the bathroom window to make sure I saw Pam's car retreat down the driveway. By the time it did, the water had started to go cold in the shower. Son of a bitch.

"Looks like we need to take this party elsewhere." Sookie winked at me before turning off the water.

**Sookie**

Pam was nothing if not a trip. I knew she got on Eric's nerves at least once a day. I was pretty sure she had some sort of self-imposed quota she felt she had to hit in order for the day to be considered a success. To be honest, I enjoyed seeing Eric get so flustered. His cool calm wasn't easily shaken, but Pam knew all the right buttons to push. Cockblocking him was definitely the easiest way to piss him off. I might have been pissed at her, too, if I didn't know there were certain benefits to him getting riled up.

When the water went cold in the shower, we quickly got out and toweled off. I walked ahead of Eric, completely naked, into his bedroom. My clothes were strewn all over the house, since I'd stripped on my way up the stairs. The fresh clothes I'd picked up from my house were in a neat, folded pile on top of his dresser. Just to tease him, I went for the pile.

"What do you think you're doing?" Strong arms wrapped around my waist and pulled me away from my clothes.

"Oh, aren't we done? I thought we'd snuggle." I teased.

"Do you and Pam have some sort of pact designed to kill me slowly?" He grumbled in my ear.

"Maybe." I turned my head and snapped my teeth at him.

He growled and then threw me on his bed. We quickly became a tangled mess of limbs while we tried to devour each other. Good gravy was he a good kisser. While Eric was a very skilled lover all the way around, I think kissing him was the best part. There were some people who just never could seem to get emotions conveyed through their kisses. Eric had absolutely no trouble doing that, and it blew my mind that I could have my toes curled with just a kiss when so many others left me feeling absolutely nothing.

Eric managed to disentangle himself from me, only to pin my arms over my head. His weight settled between my legs, and I lifted my knees to run up and down his sides. He growled at me and then said, "Patience, lover."

I shivered at the use of the pet name. If anyone else called me that, I would probably barf from the cheese factor of it. It sounded so Harlequin Romance Novel. Yet, coming from Eric's lips, it was the exact right term of endearment, assuming that's what it was meant to be. His lips and tongue teased the skin of my neck, making sure to pay special attention to a spot under my ear that made my hips rocket off the bed, and Eric smile against my skin. Fucker knew how to jump start me, that's for sure.

I was getting my payback for the things I'd done in the shower. Just like Eric said, he always made sure to give as good as he got. He worshiped my breasts with as much intensity as I would pay to that fuckawesome ass of his. Damn if I didn't dream of those beautifully shaped half rounds of muscle the whole nine months I was separated from him. He'd spent the majority of the previous summer trying to convince me that his ass shouldn't be my favorite thing about him, but when I reminded him that my breasts were his favorite parts of me, he understood.

Still, he didn't stop trying to change my mind. That's not to say that his other endowments weren't just as spectacular, because they most certainly were. I just wasn't a size queen. I wouldn't tell Eric this, but if size was all that mattered to me, then I would be in seventh heaven with him. The best part was, not only was he packing some serious heat, but he knew what he was doing. There were too many pretty boys with above average goods who didn't bother to try because they thought their looks and size were enough to get by on. They were wrong.

I don't know how, but I managed to forget how orally fixated Eric could get. I was reminded when I felt his breath on my thighs. He let go of my hands and they immediate went in his damp hair. My attempts to move his head where I wanted it were futile. He wouldn't be rushed. Bastard. I was getting impatient, no two ways about it, and he was taking his sweet ass time teasing me with kisses and nips everywhere but where I wanted him to be.

He had me writhing on the bed and I knew he was waiting for me to beg. He got off on the control factor just as much as I did, and to be honest, I liked knowing that I could bend him like that. I liked knowing that I could literally be holding him in the palm of my hand, and he would beg for more. Of course, the flip side of that was he had the same power over me, and he was doing everything right to make sure I got vocal real damn quick.

"Eric, please." I whimpered.

"Please what?" He asked innocently before biting my thigh gently.

I wanted to say, "You know what." but that wouldn't get me much of anything. I told him what I wanted, making sure to look him in the eyes first. God, his eyes were intense, but it was the fastest way to get what I wanted. Knowing he had me right where he wanted me, he gave in. Before he let his tongue come in contact with my hot center, one of his hands pressed against my stomach, sending a wave of happy through me. My insides did a happy dance, knowing what I was about to get.

When he finally made contact with my clit, I screamed. I couldn't help it. I heard him chuckle, and his reward was a sharp tug on his hair to remind him he had work to do. He got right to it. He was done fooling around, and I, for one, couldn't have been more grateful. The man was a master and he knew exactly what to do to get me panting, moaning and grinding to meet the flicks of his tongue. Two of his fingers slid inside me and started stroking. He knew precisely where my sweet spot was, and didn't hesitate to go for it.

"Oh God!" I cried out, feeling the first intense waves of what I was sure would be the mother of all orgasms starting to flow through me.

He continued his ministrations until I was right at the edge, and then everything came to a screeching halt. I hadn't realized my eyes were closed until that moment. I opened them just in time to see Eric repositioning himself between my thighs. His hand was wrapped around his length, and he stroked it with his eyes on mine. I groaned loudly and lifted my hips to him.

"Please." I whimpered again. I was so close I could almost taste it.

His lips crashed down on mine, and we were still kissing when he pushed inside me. I pulled my mouth away to cry out again. My hands slid down his back and grabbed his ass to pull him deeper inside me. My body stretched to take him, and he stilled inside me once he was fully sheathed. Our eyes met again, but he stayed still until I pushed his hips back. He growled against my neck before attacking that spot by my ear, and then his hips started moving. A slew of dirty words left my mouth, and it only spurred him on. In and out. In and out. In and out. It happened over and over until I thought I was going to insane. He took me to the edge again, and then backed off.

Stamina. Eric Northman was made of the stuff. I don't know how he did it, but he did. I shouted in frustration when he backed off the second time. He pulled out and flipped me over onto my stomach. My hips raised on pure instinct, and I was soon on my hands and knees in front of him. He entered me again from behind, and I knew then that playtime was over. This was the grand finale. He pumped into me hard and fast, and I made sure to back up to meet every one of his determined thrusts. My muscles clenched around him, my throat constricting with my walls, leaving me to make a strangled sound when my orgasm unleashed itself.

As usual, my orgasm triggered his. I was still riding the waves of it when he swelled inside me, and then spilled. He let out a shout of his own, his hands holding my hips tight enough that I would probably have bruises because of it. That wasn't going to look good with a bikini, but I'd figure it out later. I collapsed face first into a pillow, taking Eric down with me. He pulled out a minute later and rolled to the side. Both of us were trying to collect the pieces of our sanity that had been burst apart on account of the amazing sex we'd just had.

The felt the bed move, and a few seconds later I heard water running. Eric came back with a lukewarm washcloth and cleaned me up before tossing the material to his hamper. He got back in bed next to me and pulled me closer to him. I didn't know what the hell to say so I just kept my big trap shut. He wrapped an arm around me protectively and kissed the top of my head. His heart was still thundering in his chest. I listened as it slowly found its regular resting rhythm, and before I knew it, we were sound asleep.

There. All better now? Hopefully no jobs were endangered in the reading of this chapter. \*snickers\* Thanks for reading!

**Chapter 4: Sleep To Dream**

Chapter 4: Sleep To Dream

**Eric**

I woke up hours later with my stomach growling at me for neglecting it for so long. I opened my eye just a sliver to see what time it was. Only a little after eleven. Not bad. That meant I still had a few hours to kill before I had to drag my ass to the bar. Fuck, I really wanted to just stay in bed with Sookie all day. Months of so-so sex will do that to a person when they get back the best they ever had. I turned my head the other way to see Sookie laying on her stomach. Her arm was stretched over my chest, though, still holding onto me. It made me smile.

I gently lifted her arm so I could get up. I went to the bathroom to take care of business, which included getting the wet towels off the floor from our shower earlier. I walked out of the bathroom to see that she'd flipped over. Her bare breasts called to me, but my growling stomach wouldn't let me go back to her. I pulled on a pair of boxers and headed downstairs with the intention of making a quick breakfast for the two of us and eating it in bed.

I was just putting bacon onto some paper towels to drain when I heard Sookie coming down the creaky old staircase. She was wearing one of my t-shirts, in spite of having brought her own clothes with her. I quirked an eyebrow at her when she walked into the kitchen. She simply smirked at me, then perked up when she saw the fresh pot of coffee warming a few feet from me. She by-passed me completely in favor of caffeine. She was an addict. Hardcore.

I knew any future frolicking would be put on indefinite hold until she got a little java in her system. She grabbed a mug from the cabinet. She strained on her toes to reach them, and I was more than happy to see my t-shirt was all she was wearing. I groaned quietly before turning around to get started on the eggs. She poured herself a cup of coffee, then swiped a piece of bacon from the towels next to the stove.

"Hungry?" I asked her.

"You have no idea." She moved over to the kitchen table to nibble on her bacon and sip her coffee while I scrambled some eggs.

"So I have to ask you something." I said without turning to face her.

"Fire away."

"You promised to set Pam up with Amelia, but I thought Amelia was serious about Tray. What's up with that?"

"Oops. Did I promise her that?" Sookie asked all innocent like.

"You know if you don't come through, it's going to be my ass in a sling, right?" I wasn't happy, but I figured there were ways for me to exact my revenge on Sookie.

I looked over my shoulder in time to see her shrug her shoulders. "Guess that means you'll have to punish me."

Fuck. "Did you bring your handcuffs?" I teased.

"Never leave home without 'em." She sipped her coffee like we weren't having a discussion about potentially rough sex. She drove me crazy in the best way possible.

"I'll remember that." I finished the eggs and divided them onto two plates that I carried over to the table.

Without her having to ask, I went to the fridge and got her the ketchup. I hated ketchup on eggs, but Sookie went batshit over it. I watched with distaste as she doused her eggs, then sprang off her chair to retrieve the bacon I'd forgotten by the stove. The only way I wanted bacon and ketchup together is if they happened to meet on a cheeseburger. Otherwise, there was no excuse for it.

"I don't know how you can eat those plain." Sookie shook her head at me as she lifted a mouthful of red covered eggs to her mouth.

"Well, I don't like to see my breakfast in reverse, for one." I took a bite of my plain eggs and chased it with some bacon. "Besides, I don't understand how you can eat a salad without dressing."

"Um, because salad dressing is gross, that's why." Sookie scrunched up her face.

We settled into a comfortable silence while we ate. When we were done, Sookie insisted on being put to work. Being the horny bastard I am, I gave her the job of loading the dishwasher, since it meant watching her bend over while she was sans clothing from the waist down. Yep, I'm a pervert. In my defense, she was fully aware of it and didn't complain at all with the task I gave her.

It didn't take long to get the kitchen back to rights, and Sookie was clearly more awake thanks to the jolt from her cup of coffee. That was a good thing, since sex with a semi-conscious person wasn't really my bag, and I planned on going at least one more round with her before I had to pry myself away to go to work.

"Are you coming up to the bar later?" I asked her.

She looked me up and down and said, "Only if you give me your word I won't end up stuffed and mounted."

I laughed at her use of the metaphor. "Depends on how tight your jeans are."

"Oh, I was going to wear a dress." She moved closer to me. "You should see the panties I picked out to wear under it."

"Why bother? You know I'll just rip them off." I shrugged.

She slapped my chest playfully. "You'll do no such thing."

"Fine." I pulled her closer to me and let my hands tug her shirt- *my* shirt- up so my hands could settle on her warm, firm ass. "Then I'll just pull them down and bend you over my desk."

Her breath caught in her throat. She rubbed against me, teasing the erection that was starting to stiffen in my boxers. "You're incorrigible."

"Thank you." Our eyes met, and I held her gaze.

Her eyes were smoldering every bit as much as I was sure mine were. She pushed herself up on her toes at the same time I dipped my head down to kiss her. I divested her of my shirt and then deposited her on the counter. She scooted to the edge and wrapped her legs around my waist to keep me close to her. We attacked each other like animals, kissing, nipping and teasing each other until her hands slipped into the sides of my boxes and pushed them down. My hand went between us to make sure she was ready, and she was. She definitely was.

I pulled her even closer to the edge of the counter and then slid inside her like I'd never left. It took longer for both of us to regain full use of our legs than it did for us to find our release. I scooped her up off the counter and set her on her feet. She followed me up the stairs and without prompting, got right back in bed with me. I made sure to set my alarm just to be on the safe side, since I had a feeling I was going to fall into a deep sleep.

I was right. Between the rain outside and the warm, purring body next to mine, I slept like a baby. I had to restrain myself from hurling my alarm clock across the room when it went off. I did not want to get up. Sookie's moan of discontent, and then wiggle of her ass against my crotch did very little to convince me that getting up was the right thing to do.

But then Pam's shrill voice echoed in my brain and any thoughts I had of a quickie with Sookie before work just flew right out of my head. Leave it to Pam to be able to cockblock me without actually being in the room. Fucking figures. I got out of bed reluctantly and went to the bathroom to start the shower. I thought about asking Sookie to join me, but knew nothing good would come from that. It would just leave me in a bad mood since there wasn't enough time to really see things through.

I stepped into the bedroom to see Sookie still curled on her side. Her eyes were closed and her chest was rising and falling at regular intervals. I decided I'd wake her when I got out of the shower. Hell, she was welcome to stay there all night for all I cared. It might be nice to come home to find her still there, ready and waiting for me.

When I got back to the bedroom a few minutes later, she was gone, as were her pile of clothes. She did, however, leave me a note on my pillow, promising she would stop by the bar later. I got dressed, ran a brush through my hair and headed downstairs. It was going to be a long night.

**Sookie**

I heard Eric's car start while I was flipping channels on the big screen TV in the living room. I didn't want to process the sinking feeling in my chest as he drove away. The beach was so quiet, but it would be for another week or so. After Memorial Day would be another story, and once kids were out of school for the summer, the little resort town would be buzzing with activities. I wanted to get over to the Dunes one day before they were crowded with tourists, but today wasn't the day.

I continued to flip through the channels until I came across Caddyshack, of all movies. My face lit up at the sight of the little dancing gopher. Seriously, how cute is that thing? I watched the movie until I couldn't keep my eyes open anymore, and then I let myself drift off to sleep. I definitely didn't sleep as soundly as I had tucked into Eric's bed. I'd noticed that the previous summer. No matter how hot it was, or how bad of a day I had, somehow getting into Eric's bed made it all better. Even if all we did was sleep, I just felt a little more weightless. The rest of the world ceased to exist.

The same couldn't be said for passing out alone on the overstuffed couch in the living room of my cottage. I'd thought the dreams had stopped. I hadn't had one since I got back to LSU the previous year. They were pretty much always the same. They starred my fuckwad of an ex-boyfriend holding me against my will and slowly cutting out my heart with a grapefruit spoon, or some such dull object. A jarring realization had hit me somewhere around Valentine's Day; I had those dreams anytime I started to have feelings for someone.

As I napped there on my couch after one hell of a good start to my day, I was shoved out of sleep by another one of those horrifying nightmares. I sat up, clutching my chest and gasping for air. God help me if I ever had one of those dreams when I was asleep at Eric's house. So far I'd been lucky enough to avoid that. I wondered if maybe I didn't because I felt so safe with him. Ugh, I really didn't want to think about that.

It seemed like a great, big waste of time. If Eric wanted to be more than friends, he would have said so. To my knowledge, he'd never had a serious girlfriend. The crazy thing is, while I didn't know if I wanted to be the Neal Armstrong of the bunch, the idea of him dating someone else made my stomach turn. That probably wasn't supposed to happen if you were just fuck buddies right? Yeah, that's what I thought.

I went to the kitchen and made myself a cup of tea. The rain had finally stopped. I slid my feet into a pair of flip flops and stood out on the deck. The ringing of my cell phone brought me back inside. Of course it was Amelia calling, probably wanting every last detail of the last twenty-four hours.

"Hey Ames." I said once I got the phone to my ear.

"I'm surprised you're conscious." She immediately teased. "Did you get some? I need details."

I rolled my eyes. "You know I don't kiss and tell."

"Fuck that. Tray is at some stupid convention until Tuesday. I'm going to live vicariously through your sex life. Now tell me all about being pillaged by that Viking of yours." She insisted.

I laughed and headed back inside to sit. I set my mug down on the end table and told her the bits I thought were worth telling. I didn't mind telling her that we had sex and that it was just as amazing as I remembered, but I'd be damned if she was going to get a play by play. The way I saw it, there were just certain things about my life she didn't need to know, nor did I need to know about her. I really didn't need to hear about Tray's sexual prowess. I wanted to be able to look the dude in the eye.

"You seriously just snuggled all night last night?" She asked in disbelief.

"Yep."

"That..." She trailed off, trying to find the words. "Nine months you two went without seeing each other, and the best he can do is some snuggles?"

"He didn't know I was coming up yesterday. If I would have warned him, it would have been different."

I didn't bother to mention that sleeping next to Eric had afforded me the best night of sleep I'd gotten since the previous summer. Amelia would latch onto that tidbit of information and flog me mercilessly until I cracked and told her everything she wanted to know. Then she would analyze my situation and begin inflicting her advice on me. If there were two words Amelia needed to get more familiar with, they would tact and discretion. She was severely lacking in both categories.

"Hmph." She grunted suspiciously. Leave it to Amelia to know when I was leaving out crucial information. "So you two are back in the saddle, then?"

"Something like that." I shrugged, though she couldn't see how flippant I was trying to be.

"So tell me again why you two aren't a regular couple." Amelia clearly wasn't going to let this go.

Dammit, why couldn't Luke and Jakob already be here? I could make up some bogus shit about them being locked out and needing a place to crash until Eric got back from work.

"Have you told him yet you might be staying there indefinitely?" Amelia asked when I didn't offer up anything on the couple front.

"I'm not going to say anything until I know for sure."

"And he's not a factor in your decision?" Amelia asked with more disbelief.

"Ames..." I sighed, not wanting to go there.

"Fine, I'll drop it for now because I know you'll just come up with some bullshit reason to get off the phone if I don't." I could practically hear her sticking her tongue out at me over the phone. "But just for the record, they're not all like Bill, Sookie. From what you've told me about Eric, he's *nothing* like Bill. He seems to make you happy."

"Amelia..."

"Alright, alright, I'm stopping. I just want you to be happy. So, is my room ready yet?" She asked like she was checking into a B & B.

"Not yet. I have to do some laundry, but I promise it'll be all set by the time you get here."

"Are you sure you're okay with Tray coming up?"

"Of course I am. Besides, if things get too crazy here I can always spend a night at Eric's. Although I will say Jake will be sad to see you've already brought a friend. Pam will be, too, for that matter."

"How is Pam?" Of course Amelia would ask about her.

"She's Pam. She walked in on Eric and me in the shower this morning." I admitted with a giggle.

"Did she join you?"

I scoffed and said, "What do you think?"

She giggled and said, "You *know* Eric's thought about it."

I don't think I could have cringed any harder if I saw a porno with my Gran in it. "He can think about it all he wants. I'm a one on one kind of girl."

I wanted to change topics because I knew it wouldn't be long before she started talking about whatever whacked out fantasies Tray had of bringing another woman into the mix, and I swear to God if my name was mentioned, I was going to have to reconsider whether or not Amelia and I could continue to be roommates. Having to listen to them rut like bunnies was bad enough when I was going through a dry spell. No way did I want to be a fly on the wall, much less the third wheel in that little scenario. If I didn't want to hear about their sex life, no way did I want to witness it first hand.

Thankfully Amelia had to get going shortly after that. She was waiting tables at a local watering hole I'd worked at until I gave my resignation before coming up to Michigan for the summer. I'd resigned because I didn't know if I was coming back, and it didn't seem fair to make them hold a job for me if I wasn't. I had a lot of thinking to do.

"So I'll see you next week?" Amelia asked.

"Yep, I'll be here." I pulled my knees up to my chest. "And Ame?"

"Yes?"

"Don't go behind my back to Eric. Whatever is going on with us..."

"It's none of my business, Sookie." She finished for me.

"I know you want me to be happy-"

"It's none of my business." She repeated, but I knew the likelihood of her keeping her big mouth shut was slim to none.

If she didn't go to Eric himself, she would say something to Pam or one of Eric's brothers. I had to prepare myself for that. That meant really examining what I wanted, and having a rather uncomfortable conversation with Eric. It's not like we'd never done the pillow talk thing, but it was never conversations about where we saw our relationship going. Talks like that were supposed to be eliminated in a friends with benefits relationship.

"I'll talk to you soon, Ames. I love you."

"I love you, too. Say hi to everyone for me."

"Will do." I promised. We said our goodbyes and then hung up.

I stretched my legs out and set my phone down on the coffee table. It was a little after six. I went to the kitchen to make myself something to eat before getting in the shower. I'd told Eric I was going to wear a dress but it was too chilly outside thanks to the rain that had come through earlier in the day. I wiggled my way into a pair of jeans instead, and paired them with an Aerosmith t-shirt. I left my hair down in waves and put on a little mascara and eyeliner.

It was almost half past seven by the time I slipped into a pair of sparkly black sandals and left the house. I locked up behind me and stared out at the lake. The sky looked almost violet thanks to the clouds overhead, which were a silvery-lavender color. I stared up, watching them move from north to south with the wind. A breeze blew my hair around my shoulders, tickling the bare skin there. I contemplated getting a sweatshirt, but decided it would be a waste. Yes, there was a chill in the air, but it would be plenty warm and crowded in the bar.

Loki's was just two miles down Lighthouse Lane. It was a straight shot, really. The tricky part was the turn off from the lane. It was gravel and narrow, and if you weren't careful it was easy to drive down the embankment into a creek that ran under the driveway. I managed to find a parking space relatively close to the door when someone else pulled out. I offered a friendly smile and a wave as thanks for their space. I pulled in and parked my car.

I could see Pam standing at the door under the overhead light. Moths were beating their wings at the plastic covering around the light, trying desperately to get closer to it. I slicked on a fresh coat of lip gloss before getting out of the car. Pam gave me one of her creepy smiles that let me know she knew something I didn't, but wouldn't be telling me what it was. She would hint at it, and definitely tease around it, but she wouldn't come right out with it.

"Amelia sends her regards." I figured starting out a conversation like that might help.

"How long will she be staying?" Pam asked.

"Um, a week, maybe two. She hasn't decided yet." I shrugged, doing my best to keep a straight face so Pam wouldn't know Amelia wasn't coming alone.

"You should go in. Eric's been a miserable bitch all night." Pam looked me up and down like she was trying to figure out what it was about me that Eric was so interested in.

Hell, if she could figure it out just by looking, I'd love it if she could tell me what it was. With Eric, it was obvious. Dude was a God among men. But me? I wasn't anything special. I'd tried telling Amelia that once and she told she would trade bodies with me in a heartbeat. While I figured I could stand to lose a few pounds, she said she would kill for the kinds of curves I had. I knew Eric liked them, but was that really all there was to it? He was just infatuated with my boobs and hips?

I really needed to stop worrying about it. I walked into the bar and looked around to see where Eric was. I stopped to get myself a drink, which came with a free hug from Sam. No sooner had we pulled apart than strong arms wrapped around my waist and a familiar scent filled my nose. Eric.

"I was wondering if you were ever going to show." Eric said in my ear. "What happened to your dress?"

"For the sake of my panties, I decided to go with jeans." I teased, then sipped my drink.

"Too bad. They would have made a lovely floor decoration for my office." He kissed my neck.

I froze. It was one thing for us to get all handsy with each other when we were alone, but it was entirely different for him to kiss me in the middle of his bar. Maybe I needed to put a little more thought into our relationship after all.

Right, so I'm about to start writing chapter 11. I've been home sick for the last two days with little else to do. Lucky you guys get to reap the benefits of my insanity. Here's the thing: I need y'all to prepare yourselves to want to bash Eric and Sookie's heads together. These two are driving me up the friggin' wall over here! I was talking with **Chanel Addict** about this (she's been a wonderful source of feedback for this story, bless her Irish heart), and yeah... definite head bashing. So, get ready. There's a few more chapters before the serious need to head bash will come into play, but trust me, it's coming. I'm working through the heart of angst, and I hope to have it all squared away in the next chapter or two. I promise to alert you at the start of a chapter when things are going to get angsty, since there are angst babies reading this story.

In the meantime, I'm glad you're all digging this so much. You guys rock my socks!

**Chapter 5: How's It Gonna Be?**

Right. So, I hope y'all are a fan of possessive!Eric because dude is going to seriously flip his lid a couple of times in this story, like WHOA. Just sayin'.

Chapter 5: How's It Gonna Be

**Eric**

She was back for less than twenty-four hours, and already I was a fucking mess. I didn't remember it being like this the previous summer. There hadn't been any jealousy, or desire to mark her as mine when we were out together. I didn't feel this clingy need to be touching her constantly so everyone would know she was with someone- that she was taken. That she was *mine*. I had no right to think of her that way. How had everything gotten turned on its ear?

What a fucking mess.

Sookie had always been easy for me to read. From the minute I first saw her, I was pretty sure I had her figured out. Not that she didn't surprise me, because she most definitely did, but I thought I had a pretty good handle on who she was. After I greeted her in my bar with a kiss on the neck, I wasn't so sure. She seemed a bit closed off to me after that. Her smiles didn't come as quickly, nor did she seem to be climbing the walls to get me alone like I wanted her to.

I couldn't get her out of my head. It had made for quite an interesting- and by that I mean shitastic- afternoon. I tried to distract myself with invoices and inventory sheets. When that didn't work I tried to organize employee files and sort through old time cards. None of it worked. Every time I heard a woman approaching my office, I straightened myself up in hopes that it was Sookie. And every time it wasn't her, I was disappointed.

It wasn't supposed to be like this.

I ended up putting in my ear buds, drowning my frustrations in the Rolling Stones. That worked for a little while. Then Wild Horses came up on my shuffle, and I stopped cold. I started thinking about what I would do if Sookie called the whole thing off. What would I do if she packed up suddenly and went back to Louisiana? I knew I wouldn't be okay with that. In fact, I would be downright miserable.

The previous summer had been a marathon of fucking and sneaking around. There was something dangerous about it, although those notions were all in our heads. I wasn't dating anyone and neither was she. We were free to do what we wanted to do. There was no one to answer to. Mostly we snuck around because of my brothers. They knew what we were doing. In fact, I'd been mocked about it on several occasions.

It was from Jakob that I learned just how loud Sookie could get in bed when he informed me that he'd heard her one night after a particularly loud round of fucking on her kitchen table. It should be noted it was hotter than Satan's ball sack that night, so all of the doors and windows were locked up and the air conditioning was cranked. Yet, Jakob had heard her as if he was right there in the room. Either he had immaculate hearing, or Sookie was a trained opera singer.

I'd been asked more than once why we weren't couple, and by various people. Pam and my brothers were more than willing to throw in their two cents on the situation, not that I'd asked for their advice on the matter. The general consensus was that everyone liked Sookie. Even better, they liked me more when she was around. Pam had less reasons to call me a crab ass, and my brothers thought I looked happier.

Honestly, I *was* happier. I wish I could say it was just the sex, but the truth is, I like having her around. We hadn't crossed that line into official coupledom because of the distance. I was in Michigan. She was in Louisiana. That's just the hand we were dealt. Only now the things she had been committed to that kept her away from me were no longer a concern. Would she stay if I asked her to?

I shook my head at that thought, reminding myself that it wasn't fair to ask her for something I couldn't give in return. I couldn't walk away from my bar. I'd worked too hard for too long to leave it. A little voice in the back of my head said I was being a dick, and I should get over myself. Girls like Sookie were rare and she deserved to be with someone who knew how special she was. I knew how special she was, I just wasn't sure I could give her what she deserved.

We were friends, yes. We had amazing sex. Was that really all it took? I drove myself crazy with these questions over and over again until it got to the point where I was thinking in circles. I ended up with three fingers of some of the most expensive scotch we carried, and I sipped it slowly, enjoying the burn as it ran down my throat. I wasn't planning to get shitfaced as a way of dealing with this. I just needed the voices in my head to chill the fuck out for a while.

Maybe, by some miracle, I would have an answer when I saw Sookie. Then I went and kissed her neck in front of everyone like a possessive asshole, and I was pretty sure I had my answer. She was being weird. I'd crossed a line. Fuck me.

Thankfully, there was a disturbance at the door with some kid trying to get in on a fake I.D. Pam could spot a fake from a mile away. She was worth her salary for that talent alone. I don't know how she did it, and I didn't ask. It was just her thing. Not that I didn't have it in me to be a hard ass, but I always tried diplomacy first when attempting to smooth over a situation. Pam was more the shoot first, ask later kind of girl. It made her perfect for working the door.

"Are you going to be okay here?" I asked Sookie before getting up to go handle the situation.

"Yeah, fine. Sam'll keep me company, right Sam?" Sookie winked over the bar at him.

"Sure." Sam smiled.

Fucker had a crush on Sookie. Hell, most guys in the place were staring at her. Maybe having her come visit me at work was a bad idea. *Better to have her here where you can keep an eye on her*, I thought to myself. I told myself I wanted her around because I could make sure she was safe, and not getting roofies mixed in her drink when she wasn't looking. It didn't have anything to do with me being able to intimidate any guy in the room into not taking her home with him for the night. Not at all.

The kid that tried to sneak in was close to pissing himself by the time I let him go. I took all of my frustration over my crazy ass thoughts in regards to Sookie, lobbed it at this kid. Rather than calling the cops, we confiscated his I.D. and I told him I would be returning it to his mother the next time I went into the bank. The kid paled considerably, and begged me not to. He swore up and down he would never try to come in again. Yeah, I'd heard that before. Not gonna happen.

Pam sent the boy on his way with a terrified look on his face. It's all fun and games until your Mommy gets involved, isn't it? I put the I.D. into an envelope in my desk full of fakes. It was the same song and dance we always gave the stupid kids that tried to sneak in. Holding their fakes with the threat of informing on them probably did more damage to their psyches than actually telling their parents. So far, we only had one repeat offender, and that one we *did* hand over to the local police.

Pam came back to my office and parked it in the chair the squirming kid had been in just minutes before. She pulled a nail file from out of nowhere and began to work on her nails while she talked. "So what crawled up your ass and died? You and Sookie have a lovers' quarrel?" The smirk on her face was pure evil. Sometimes I really hated her.

"Drop it, Pam." I didn't want to talk to Pam about this. I knew what she was going to say.

"You have feelings for her, don't you?" Pam clearly didn't get what I meant when I said drop it. I didn't dignify her with a response. "Fine. Then I guess it doesn't bother you that Quinn's out there right now putting the moves on her."

She looked up to watch my reaction with those eagle eyes of her. I did my best not to let my rage make itself known on my face. From the way her smirk returned, I'd say I was a great big failure at it. Quinn was a huge thorn in my side. I really hated that guy. He'd seduced more women under false pretenses than anyone I knew, and it killed me how women fell for it every fucking time.

He was a fisherman by trade, which wasn't too uncommon where we were at. There were plenty of local businesses that used fresh fish. It was a good business to be in. Quinn owned a small company that supplied a lot of the resort towns with what they needed. Where business was concerned, he might have been a stand up guy. I really didn't know, since Loki's didn't serve anything beyond appetizers, and all those really needed was a deep fryer or an oven.

He was constantly milking some sob story about a sick mother, and how he was supporting her and his younger sister. He was the "man of the family," and it was devastating to see his mother so broken. It was the most pathetic thing I'd ever heard in my life. The truth was, his mother had a gambling problem that was only surpassed by the addiction to the sauce. Women fell for what I considered to be the worst story ever, time and time again. Imagine their surprise when they found out the truth and they had been duped.

But then Quinn usually went for the easy barflies- the women that really didn't need much convincing to go home with someone. Sookie wasn't his usual prey and it pissed me off he had chosen her to be the one to hopefully raise the bar. The thought of Quinn going home with her made my skin crawl, and my inner caveman load a semi-automatic weapon. There was no time for clubbing. This situation needed to be nipped in the bud pronto.

"Where are you going?" Pam asked with amusement in her eyes.

"Back on the floor, of course. I can't sit in here all night." I walked around my desk like it was no big thing, when I was really restraining myself from moving at a dead run to get Sookie away from that asshat.

"No blood on the floor!" Pam shouted after me. Have I mentioned she's going in the lake? She is. She really, really is.

I scanned the crowd for Quinn's shiny bald head. Dude looked like a white version of the Genie from Aladdin. No, I'm not kidding. Even though they were nearly twenty years past being relevant, he wore tiger striped Zubaz pants. I'm not kidding about that either. No self respecting guy I know wore those when they *were* popular. Then there's Quinn wearing them twenty years too late, *and* with a mesh tank top. I cringed at the atrocity. He looked like leftovers from the 1991 gay pride parade. Oh, and did I mention he had purple eyes? At first I thought they were contacts, but that's his natural eye color. That is fucked up.

Sookie clearly looked uncomfortable beside him, but he wasn't reading her hand on his arm as a gesture to stay back. Instead, he leaned further into her, thinking she was flirting with him. When one his pudgy sausage fingers reached out to move her hair away from her neck, I about lost my shit. Sookie slapped his hand away and I could see from the look on her face that whatever words were leaving her mouth weren't pleasant ones. I knew how riled she could get, and how nasty she could be when she wanted to. I had no doubt she was putting Quinn in his place.

The fucker looked completely undeterred by Sookie's commentary. He actually threw his bulbous head back with a chortle that made my balls want to jump up inside my body so they would never have to hear that sound again. My eyes focused on Sookie, who was getting more and more pissed off by the second. I could see her chest heaving in anger, which only stoked the flames that were licking at my insides. I wanted to kick Quinn's ass in the worst way, and then claim Sookie right there in front of everyone.

*You love her, you ass. Just admit it,* a little voice in my head taunted me. I couldn't deal with that shit at the moment. At the moment, all that mattered was getting Quinn's banana hands off my woman. *My woman?* I growled at myself, but two seconds later I was wrapping my arms around Sookie from behind.

"Quinn." I nodded at him.

He glared at me. "Northman." He responded through gritted teeth.

"How's the fishing business?" I asked with a smirk.

Sookie elbowed me slightly in the ribs, catching the double entendre of what I'd just said. Quinn, on the other hand, was clueless as ever.

"Not bad. One of my boats went down last week." He looked me up and down like he thought maybe I had something to do with it.

"Sorry to hear that." Sookie said sweetly, while her hands were behind her back, discretely stroking my cock over my jeans. I grunted softly against her hair.

"You two know each other?" Quinn looked from Sookie to me.

"We're neighbors," Sookie said with a beaming smile, then turned her face up toward mine for a second before leveling Quinn with a serious look on her face. "And he fucks my brains out."

I was stunned. That might just be the hottest thing she's ever said, and Sookie has a dirty mouth when she wants it. Quinn choked on his beer. My hips rocked against her back, and she only stroked harder. I couldn't believe she'd just said what she did. I didn't think we were fooling anyone with our sneaking around. It was a small town, and word got around when I suddenly stopped so much as flirting with anyone else. Not that I went home with a different woman every night, but there had been *no* action from me after Sookie and I slept together. We weren't exclusive, since that really didn't suit the friends with benefits mold, but why did I need anyone else when I had Sookie? It just didn't make any sense.

Quinn tried to get his bearings back, and I'm sure he opened his mouth with the intention to argue that he was a better lay than I was. To prove my night of surprises wasn't over yet, Quinn actually made the suggestion that the three of us give it a go. I swear I threw up a little in my mouth. Sookie just laughed. Quinn stood there like the stupid slab of meat he was.

"Quinn, Eric's a big enough freak in the sack that it's like having two guys at once. Trust me, you couldn't keep up. Run along now." Sookie shooed him away.

Until that moment, I didn't realize how nice it was to have my cock and my ego stroked at the same time. Did she really feel that way about me? Quinn reluctantly shuffled off with a disgruntled look on his face. Sookie spun around on her stool to look me in the face.

"How long before you can go home?" Her eyes were blazing with lust.

"You got off on turning Quinn down? I think you crushed him." I smirked at her.

"I tried being nice." She said innocently through her long lashes.

"I'm sure you did. You're nothing if not a sweet southern belle."

Sookie tossed her head back and laughed. "Eric, I was just jerking you off through your jeans. That's hardly the sort of thing you'd see at a garden party."

I couldn't help but laugh along with her. "I stand corrected, then."

She looked up at me, waiting for an answer to her original question. I wanted to leave. I wanted to tell Pam I was taking off early to go have crazy, mind blowing sex and not to expect me until late tomorrow- or maybe next week. Maybe it was just the sex I was addicted to with her, and that was all.

*Liar. You love her*, that little voice in my head piped up. Sookie looked at me with expectant eyes. When I still hadn't given her an answer a minute later, she slid off her stool and grabbed her purse off the table.

"Well, I guess I'll go home alone." She looked hurt, which wasn't my intention.

"Sookie, wait..." I reached out for her, but she pulled away.

"It's fine, Eric. You've got work to do. I'll just see you tomorrow." She gave a weak smile, then headed out.

I stood there like a chump for about thirty seconds before moving to follow her out of the bar. At least I could make sure she got in her car alright. By the time I got through the crowd and out of the bar, Sookie was already backing out of her parking space. I couldn't be sure, but I thought I saw her wipe her cheek as she drove by. Was she crying? Fuck me.

**Sookie**

Guys like Quinn were more common than they should be. Why they weren't rounded up by the ASPCA is beyond me. It just stood to reason that if you were going to act like an animal, you should be treated like one. I was sure the only thing that stopped Quinn from rubbing up on me like a great big cat was Eric's sudden presence. Not that I minded the back up in case Quinn couldn't take a hint, but I was pretty sure I could handle myself.

I was a little bothered by the sudden possessive streak I was experiencing. What the fuck was that about? More importantly, why was I getting off on it? It made me feel safe and wanted, but not like I was a trophy. Bill had been good at making me feel like I was a prize poodle. With Eric, I felt like he thought he was lucky to have me. It was nice to have that sort of value placed on me.

What I didn't understand was why I was feeling that way. I didn't understand how, or when, my feelings seemed to have shifted from just pure hormones and lust to something else. The realization that my feelings toward him had changed were what spurred my tears. Feelings were the fastest way for a friends with benefits relationship to go down the drain. It scared the shit out of me to realize I didn't want to lose him.

Okay, so maybe it was unfair of me to ask him to leave work early just to be with me. And it was probably out of line for me to go stomping off like I did, but there was no way in hell I was going to let him see me cry. So I fled the bar as fast as I could. I saw him standing there in the parking lot, looking all distraught over my exit, but I didn't stop. I couldn't. I knew if I did I was going to say all sorts of things I shouldn't be saying. So, I just kept on driving.

This was *my* problem. I was a big girl. I'd deal with it. I knew what I was getting into when I got involved with him and I did it anyway. In fact, I had embraced the idea of not being beholden to anyone, and still being able to spend time with someone who didn't make me hate myself. Amelia had tried to tell me I wasn't cut out for a relationship like that. She said I felt things too deeply.

I figured I'd proven her wrong since I'd been able to go back to Louisiana at the end of the summer without feeling like my heart was shattering into a million pieces. I'd been able to turn off the summer stuff and slip right back into school mode. Although I definitely sifted through the highlight reel of some of our best couplings when I needed a little something to get me through the night. Still... I wasn't hurting or pining for him.

So when had it all changed? When was the moment where I had gone from seeing him has just a fuck buddy to something else? Not knowing was going to drive me crazy and until I figured that out, I was going to continue this rollercoaster of emotion. It took about two minutes to get back to the cottage. I slammed the door of the car a little too hard when I got out and stomped toward the water instead of going in the house. I wasn't ready to go inside yet. I patrolled the shoreline for a while, letting the sound of breaking waves soothe me.

I sat in the sand and tilted my head up toward the inky black sky. Stars sparkled easily. All of the clouds from earlier that night had disappeared. I hoped it would be sunny the next day. I really wanted to spend a few hours laying out in the sun without worrying about being accosted by horny tourist frat boys. It was so peaceful there at night.

I must have lost track of time because the next thing I knew, I heard the roar of the Lime Green Monster approaching. I pulled myself up and quickly ran to the door that opened into my bedroom. I had just closed myself inside when the roar stopped. I didn't know if Eric had seen me, but I suspected I would find out in a matter of seconds. I heard the slam of his car door and then the crunching of gravel. I waited to see if he would knock on the sliding glass door near the living room, or if he would ring the bell to wake me up.

When all I heard was the sound of retreating crunching, suggesting Eric had turned and gone back home, my shoulders sagged. Fuck. There wasn't supposed to be drama. This was supposed to be fun. Just orgasms and a few laughs. There weren't supposed to be feelings involved.

I had to fix this. I had completely overreacted, and if I didn't get my shit together, I was going to lose my friend. I didn't want that. So, before I could change my mind I threw open my bedroom door and headed across the small patch of beach that divided our houses, determined to put my little freak out behind us the only way I knew how.

Yeah, yeah, I'm evil. I know. But I have good news, baby birds! I wrote through all of the crazy ass angst that has to happen! So at least I know how that's all going to play out. Believe me when I tell you, you're going to want to slap these two silly before it's all said and done, but it's a necessary evil. I don't know how many chapters beyond the angst the story will go, but I imagine I'll get to at least chapter 20. We shall see. Annnnnd if I feel like being super awesome, I'll post chapter 6 tonight as well. Thanks for reading!

**Chapter 6: Denial Is Not Just A River**

\*snorts\* Y'all are a bunch of suck ups. I love it. Also, you should know that I plan to model Baby Brother Northman after DrunkSkars. Enjoy the ride, kiddies.

**Luke's car:** .

Chapter 6: Denial It's Not Just A River

**Eric**

I forced myself to stay at the bar until last call. I left Rasul, my head of security, in charge of locking the place down for the night. I was back at the house in little more than a minute. I was disappointed to see the lights in Sookie's cottage all turned out. Fuck. I should have left earlier. I'd spent a few hours trying to figure out why she was crying. Was she really that upset because I didn't go with her? It's not that I didn't want to, but I have a business to run. I can't just turn my back on it whenever the mood strikes me.

I felt bad for making her cry, but I was a little pissed off at the same time. Although whether I was pissed off at her or myself, I wasn't sure. I couldn't believe it. Not even one whole day had passed, and I was already completely fucked up. Maybe it would be better to call this whole thing off and just be friends. Or go back to hating each other. But I didn't want that. I liked having her around. Fuck. My. Life.

I stood there on the gravel just a step away from her front deck when I decided I was in no mood to confront her. I would end up talking a bunch of crazy shit and it would just make things worse. So I turned around and headed home. It was better to let cooler heads prevail. I'd talk to her in the morning when I'd had the chance to sleep if off and get my head on straight. Yes, that was definitely a better idea.

I went back to my house and got a beer out of the fridge. I leaned against the counter in the same spot where I'd fucked Sookie senseless just twelve hours before. That little realization didn't help me one bit. I groaned quietly as my will wavered. The knowledge that she was so close for a change and I was being a stubborn asshole didn't make cooling off any easier. I took a long pull from my beer. My head was tilted back in the darkness when the screen door opened and Sookie's small body headed toward the stairs.

Apparently she hadn't seen me standing there in the kitchen. I heard the stairs creak with every step she took. I waited until I heard her upstairs before I followed. My body took over, having made a very clear decision for me. I snuck up on her in my bedroom and tackled her onto my bed. She screamed, clearly taken by surprised. She fought against me, kicking at my legs and slapping at my hands.

"Shhh...it's just me." I whispered in her ear.

"Jesus Christ, Eric, you scared me half to death." She elbowed me in my gut.

"What are you doing here, Sookie?" I was rubbing up against her, and probably against her better judgment, she was rubbing right back.

"I wanted to apologize for leaving like I did. You had work to do and I was being a brat." She moaned when my hand snaked up her shirt.

"Apology accepted. I'm sorry I was an ass. Trust me when I tell you, I would rather be here doing this than listening to drunken conversations." I rolled her underneath me.

The admission felt good to make. I checked to see her reaction, but all she gave me was one of those seductive smiles that made me want to devour her. So that's exactly what I did. In no time flat we were both naked and writhing against each other. I had the eery feeling this was what some would consider make up sex, but Sookie and I didn't have that. Right? This wasn't make up sex.

She climbed on top of me, her knees straddling my sides and pushed herself up, using my chest for leverage before lowering herself onto my straining erection. She was hot, wet and tight, the best possible combination. She rocked against me with her head thrown back and her hands moving mine up to her breasts. Her moans were long and low. With her head thrown back like that, her hair grazed my thighs, sending shivers through me.

I pulled her forward so we were eye to eye. While my eyes searched hers, my legs bent and my hips thrust up to hers. She cried out and fisted the sheets on either side of my head. Our mouths went back to trying to devour each other while our hips moved at a furious pace. It was frenzied and fast, and I was struck with the feeling I could never get close enough to her.

And then, all of a sudden, things changed. My eyes caught hers once again and that hunger and lust I'd seen in her eyes had faded into something else. My legs straightened out and I rolled us over so I was on top of her. Her legs immediately wrapped themselves around me to keep me close. He frantic breathing slowed down. She reached up to move some of my hair out of my eyes. It was a small gesture, but one that proved maybe this wasn't just sex between us.

I couldn't stop myself from kissing her at that moment. The kissing was different too. It was like something had snapped between us. I had stilled inside her, but a roll of her hips brought me back to the moment. And just as quick as things had simmered down between us into something less animalistic, the intense need and passion came rushing back.

I hooked her knees over my forearms and pushed her legs up to thrust deeper into her. She cried out at the change of angles and cupped my face in her hands to pull me closer to kiss her. Her lips teased mine, alternately sucking the bottom, then the top one before letting her tongue slip into my mouth. I kissed her until I had to pull away to breathe. My hips pounded against hers. Her moans got louder when I found that spot on her neck that drove her crazy.

"Fuck, I'm so close, Eric." She moaned in my ear.

Her inner muscles started to spasm around me, pulling me deeper and trying desperately to keep me there. Her breath was warm against my face. Her nails clawed at my back. What had started out as moans and occasional squeaks of pleasure became cries, and then morphed into screams. Hearing my name being called in a chant while I pounded myself against her made me that much more determined to feel her explode. When she did, her arms shot up over her head and grabbed into the slats of my headboard that was banging loudly against the wall. Her muscles clamped down like a vice and her whole body shook.

Only then would I let myself go. I swelled, then released inside her, shouting my own pleasure as I watched her start to come down from her high. She was beautiful all the time, but the faces she made during her orgasms were so far beyond beautiful. To know I was the reason for her looking like that was an even bigger turn-on.

I let go of her legs and then collapsed on top of her. She wiggled against me, absorbing my weight like it was nothing. She ran her fingers through my damp hair until we were both breathing normally again. I rolled to the side and then flopped onto my back. She turned on her side to look at me and braced her head up on her bent arm. Her hair was wild and her lips were deliciously swollen from kissing hard.

We stayed quiet for a while, but it was Sookie who broke the silence. "Did we have a fight tonight?"

My breath caught. Had she been thinking all the same things I had? "Uh, I don't know. Maybe."

She nodded then rolled onto her back to stare up at the ceiling. "Just so you know, even if there wasn't a you, Quinn never had a chance."

I wasn't sure how to take that confession, but it made me feel good to know there was no way in hell Quinn would have had her. "That's good. Quinn's a douche."

"Well, yeah. He was wearing a mesh tank top." She said and we both burst out laughing.

Fucking Quinn.

o.O.o.O.o

A few days later I still wasn't sure of what to make of the Quinn incident, but Sookie and I had fallen into somewhat of a routine. My hormones settled down a little after the first three days. I didn't want to burn myself out. I told myself to go easy on her. We had all summer to fuck around.

I was helping Sookie change the propane tank on her grill one afternoon when Luke's car came rolling up the driveway. He drove the second of Dad's two muscle cars, a 1973 Dodge Charger that just happened to be purple. The Charger made about as much noise as my Lime Green Monster. It really was a thing of beauty, despite its girly paint job. Originally the car had been Jakob's, but he'd become this environmentally conscious douche who was forever lecturing us on how to be greener. He drove a Prius, ate a strictly vegetarian diet and refused to use plastic bags. Even Ziploc was unwelcome in his house.

"I do believe my second favorite Northman is here!" Sookie called out.

Luke was dressed in Bermuda shorts and a Hawaiian t-shirt over a wifebeater that was tucked into his shorts. He looked like he'd just ditched the short bus. His hair was a little darker than mine. He'd let it grow out since the last time I saw him so it was now brushing his shoulders. He looked like a surfer, if you disregarded his Boca Raton retiree wardrobe selections. The Elvis Costello glasses didn't help. Thank God he wasn't wearing socks with sandals. I really would have to kick his ass for that.

"Careful, Sookie, you'll make Erica feel bad." Luke answered without missing a beat.

"Don't encourage him." I looked over at Sookie who just shrugged. She could be worse than Pam when she wanted to be.

As Luke jogged up the steps to meet us on the deck, he tossed a folder at me. "Think fast, Erica!" He brushed right past me to pick Sookie up and hug her. Seriously, my brother was going to end up in the lake. Specifically at the bottom of it. At least he'd have Pam to keep him company.

"You two play nice." Sookie said when I slugged my brother between his shoulder blades.

"What the fuck is this?" I held up the folder.

"That's a list of how-to's to make your house more environmentally friendly. Jake noticed there were a few improvements you could make after his last visit." Luke said with a smug grin on his face.

"Oh, fuck me." I groaned. "Sookie will you start that grill, please? I have something to burn in it."

"Gimme." She grabbed the folder out of my hand and looked at the list inside. "Huh. Printed on recycled paper."

"Does he think I have nothing better to do all day than..." I peered over to look at the list. "Swap out all of my light bulbs?"

Luke laughed and said, "Dude, give him enough time and he'll have your house completely outfitted for you. He came by and did my apartment in like, four hours."

"Maybe I should send him down to Louisiana to do my farmhouse." Sookie suggested with a snicker.

"Yes please." Luke and I said simultaneously.

"Be nice!" Sookie chided both of us, slapping both of our arms one at a time.

"Wow. You a spanker in bed?" Luke wiggled his eyebrows at her.

Sookie turned bright red, which I normally would have found adorable, but not when I knew my brother still wanted to get in her pants.

"Bro, the lake is *right there*. How would you like to call it home for the next eight weeks?" I glared at my brother.

"Bring it on, Erica." He taunted, then launched himself at me.

**Sookie**

I jumped out of the way when Luke tackled Eric. Did boys ever get too old for what my Gran would have called 'wrastlin'? Looking at Eric and Luke, I had to say the answer was no. It amazed me how they could look so much alike, and have such extremely different personalities. Eric was the oldest, and therefore, the most paternal of the brothers. Lukas- who hated being called anything but Luke- was the youngest, and the most likely to stir up some shit and then disappear.

Jakob was... I'm not even sure how to describe Jakob. I guess you could call him a hippie, of sorts? He was obviously very big on environmental stuff, but he also practiced yoga and chanted. Oh, and he was also a law student. Go figure. Of all the Northman brothers, he was by far the strangest.

Still, all three brothers had their good points. While they would mess with one another constantly, God help anyone who tried to fuck with one of them on an individual basis. That was just asking for a world of pain. I sure as hell wouldn't want the three of them tracking my ass down. I tried to imagine the three of them completely pissed off, and it was something like seeing the Hulk with blond hair. Not good.

I watched the boys wrestle around on my deck, praying they wouldn't get too close to the steps. If they went tumbling down it there wouldn't be a soft landing. I'd fallen on gravel plenty of times as a kid, since my driveway at home was gravel. I'd skinned up my knee pretty bad once when I was about eight. I didn't realize until it got infected that I had bits of gravel stuck in my leg. I won't go into details, but it's about as disgusting as it sounds.

It took a relatively good shot to Luke's kidneys before the two of them called it quits. They flopped onto their backs, their chests heaving in such a way that they looked like frying bacon in the sun. Boys.

"Can I ask what it is, exactly, you two accomplish by beating the hell out of each other? Girls don't do that." I quirked an eyebrow at them.

"Hugs are boring." Luke volunteered.

"And for pansies." Eric punched Luke in the ribs.

I just shook my head and tried to step over them so I could get to the sliding glass door. Eric was already in the process of getting up, but Luke grabbed my ankle. I flew backward and thank God Eric's quick reflexes gave him the ability to catch me, or I totally would have ate it. I landed in Eric's arms like it was no big deal. His panicked eyes met mine and I nodded to let him know I was okay. His head snapped around and glared at Luke.

"Dude!" Eric growled.

"I was just playing." Luke sat up. "You okay, Sook?"

Eric pushed me upright gently until I was back on my feet. "Fine. Good thing your brother has crazy reflexes, though."

"I didn't think you'd fall like that. I was just playing. I'm sorry." Luke apologized, looking all kinds of sincere.

"She's not one of us, ass. You break her, and I'll kill you." Eric was mighty pissed off.

"Eric, chill. I'm okay." I squeezed his hand. He was shaking, he was so pissed. Oh boy.

"Yeah, I uh, I think I'm going to go take my stuff inside. Sook, no harm done, right?"

"Right." I nodded.

"Sweet. Catch you two later, then." Luke wisely took off, leaving me to calm Eric down before his head exploded.

I waited until Luke was a safe distance from my house before turning and going inside. I left Eric standing there, letting him decide for himself whether he was going to follow me or go kill his brother. At least I'd given Luke a head start. As I figured he would, Eric followed me into the cottage all full of rage and cuss words.

"Eric, you really need to chill out. I'm fine. You caught me. I'm good." I opened the fridge to get us some lemonade. Maybe I'd put a shot of vodka in his.

"That's not the point, Sookie. It's one thing for them to rough house with me, but you're different." He sat heavily on one of the chairs around the big kitchen table.

"Why? Am I some silly damsel with bird bones who can't take care of herself?" I set down a glass of lemonade in front him, along with a bottle of Vodka I'd pulled from the freezer.

"Sookie, I'm not saying you can't take care of yourself." Eric sighed as he uncapped the bottle of vodka.

"So then what's the big deal? You really think your brothers would hurt me on purpose? Come on. He was just playing around." I stood behind Eric and rubbed his shoulders to get him to loosen up a little.

While I appreciated his concern, I really did think he was getting a little too bent out of shape. It took a few minutes of rubbing him down and two glasses of more vodka than lemonade, but Eric eventually managed to stabilize. He sighed heavily and let his head sink forward. My thumbs moved to the back of his neck and started rubbing gently.

All of a sudden I had this crazy image in my head of us in a similar position, only there was dinner on the stove and kids running around that look suspiciously like a combination of the two of us. My hands immediately jerked away from Eric, and I turned my back and made myself busy.

"Why'd you stop?" Eric asked quietly.

"I uh, I have dinner plans and I need to get the house cleaned up a little."

"I thought you were having dinner with Luke and me?"

"Yeah, that's what I meant." Yes, I know, it was the best cover story ever. Don't hate.

"You're being weird." Eric accused. Hi, Pot. I'm Kettle. You're black.

"No, I'm not. I just don't like my kitchen being a mess. You know how I am about that kind of stuff." My hands fumbled with the silverware.

I could feel Eric's eyes on my back. I took my time sorting the pieces and turning them the right way before putting them in the drawer.

"Do you want me to go?" He stood up, the chair scraping against the floor as he did so.

Did I want him to go? No, no, I really didn't. *Should* he go? Yes, yes he should. "That might be for the best. I need to get cleaned up and I still have to run into town to pick up a few things for later."

"Well, why don't you ride with Luke and me when you're showered? We can all just go together." Eric offered.

"Yeah, fine. I'll uh, I'll come by your place when I'm ready." I slammed the drawer shut and then headed for my bedroom.

"See you later then!" Eric called out after me, but I said nothing.

I flopped back on my bed and watched the revolutions of the ceiling fan over my head. It seemed like every couple of days my emotions would flare up, leaving me to wonder just what the hell was going on. Some days things were fine. We got along with no problems and no emotional spikes to overcome. But then we had these little moments that just reminded me there was something in my the back of my mind I really needed to spend a little more time on. The pressure was getting ridiculous.

I resolved that I would talk it over with Amelia when she arrived in two days. I'd missed her a lot. Talking to her over the phone wasn't the same as talking to her face to face, and the things I wanted to talk to her about were better handled in person. I peeled myself off the bed and went back to the kitchen to get things straightened up.

After that I got in the shower. I stood under the warm water and let the spray pound against my back to loosen me up a little. While standing there in the shower, I came to the conclusion that I needed to make up my mind how I wanted to deal with Eric. All of this awkward tension that rose up between us was slowly driving me insane. What's worse was, those damn nightmares were happening every night I didn't sleep next to Eric.

If I was wrapped safe and sound in his arms, I slept the sleep of the dead. I was guaranteed to be sated and safe with my human blanket wrapped around me. For some reason, Bill couldn't get me there. But when I was alone that was another story. It didn't take a rocket scientist to figure out what those dreams meant. The dreams really couldn't have been more literal. It was my douchetard ex cutting my heart out slowly and painfully. There were no metaphors involved, just the gory truth.

Bill really had fucked with my head. I'd thought I'd dealt with it, but obviously my subconscious felt differently. People with no lingering psychological baggage had dreams about their ex-boyfriend performing organ removals with dull objects. Last night it was a wooden letter opener Gran had bought when we went to the zoo a few years ago before she was using her wheelchair almost all the time. The dream was graphic and a little too real for my liking.

Why, after all this time, did he still have a hold on me? I made it a point to stay away from him, but that didn't mean a whole hell of a lot in a small town like Bon Temps. I'd come home on the weekends, and inevitably I'd run into someone gossiping about him. I heard a lot more about Bill's life than I ever wanted to know. He was apparently engaged to a woman named Saleh Pumphrey. She was a successful realtor with the perfect hips for childbearing, according to Everly Mason.

Then there was me, the silly, stupid, blind-to-the-truth me with my lack of direction for the rest of my life and hips that were just big. I might have been educated, but I wasn't particularly sophisticated. I suppose I was successful for a person my age, but there were no guarantees where I was going to end up. I'd started school wanting to be an FBI profiler, but I wasn't so sure I wanted to get into the heads of psychos anymore. Being with Bill was bad enough.

And really, if I couldn't handle my own mental problems, who the hell was I to try and force someone else to face theirs? I took a deep breath, knowing I was thinking way too much. I tried to imagine what Amelia would tell me to do in this situation.

"Just follow your heart, Sook." Amelia's voice sounded an awful lot like my Gran's.

That didn't help, by the way. I was still mourning my Gran, even though I'd lost her almost five months before. It seemed like the loss shouldn't be as fresh as it was, but she was like a mother to me. Losing my parents at such a young age elevated her status in my heart. My Mom would always be my Mom, I knew that, but she wasn't the one who raised me. I wouldn't be the person I was if it weren't for my Gran. It's just that simple. Gran was everything to me, and now she's gone.

I reminded myself there was no statute of limitations on missing someone. Truthfully, it had gotten a little better. It still hurt, but not the same as it did after it first happened. Initially, there was relief because I knew Gran wasn't suffering anymore. All of her aches and pains placed on her by a body that was failing were gone. She was just this warm, loving spirit. I knew she would always be with me, but it wasn't the same. I missed being able to hug her, or have a conversation with her face to face so I knew, without a doubt, just what her advice was. Gran always knew what to say.

She would know how to help me make sense of this mess with Eric, and how to put Bill behind me once and for all. Just five minutes with her was all I needed. It was a wasted hope, I know. I just hated feeling so empty and confused all the time. Only, that wasn't entirely true. There was Eric. There were feelings there. I just didn't want to put a name to them because once I did, I knew things were going to change. I didn't want that. Not yet.

I got myself dressed in a pale blue jersey wrap around dress and a pair of soft leather sandals. I left my hair hanging loose and damp down my back to dry in the sun. I heard Eric and Luke talking in the kitchen as I made my approach to the house.

"You know this casual fucking thing can't last forever, right? Eventually one of you is going to want more." Luke's disembodied voice asked.

"Yeah, I know." Eric sounded like he really didn't want to talk about it. I could relate.

"So what are you going to do? Are you going to man up and make a move, or are you going to let some other fucktard get a hold of her?" Luke asked.

I panicked, not wanting to overhear that answer. I made all sorts of noise as I climbed the deck steps to let them know I was approaching. I knocked on the wooden frame of the screen door before stepping into the house. Eric looked extremely relieved to see me, while Luke looked like I'd just stolen the last cookie out of the cookie jar.

"What'd I miss?" I asked with a cheerful tone, even though my insides were all twisted up over what I'd almost heard.

"Well, Eric and I were just discussing-" Luke started, but was cut off.

"Whether or not we should grill the chicken or fry it." Wow. Okay, so at least I wasn't the only one coming up with lame ass cover stories.

"Right. Well, should we get going? It takes a while to make pie crust." I was planning on making an old fashioned apple pie from scratch.

"Sounds good. I'll drive." Eric grabbed his keys off the hook.

There was obvious tension in the room and I hoped it would just stay there. Being locked in a car with Eric's lead foot and his brother wasn't my idea of a good time. Luke called shotgun, but was quickly given the evil eye of doom, which resulted in him riding in the back seat with a disgruntled look on his face.

So much for leaving the tension at home.

Right. So. Make up sex isn't really allowed in a FWB ship, is it? \*scratches head\* Seriously, I want to bitch slap the two of them, and what you got here is NOTHING in comparison to what lays ahead. Oy. What do we think of Luke? \*giggles\* He's... fuck, I don't even know what the word is. Anyway, that's all you get today. I don't care how much you beg. Sheesh. There'll be more tomorrow, baby birds, I promise. Thanks for reading!

**Chapter 7: Compromising**

Okay, so this is a shorter chapter than most, but it was the right place to stop. So my apologies for that, but since I update with lightning speed, you'll get the next bit really soon. I promise. Like, when I get home from work, soon. Deal?

Chapter 7: Compromising

**Eric**

I woke up face down in Sookie's bed. My legs were hanging off the end of it since I was too tall for a double. Sookie was face down next to me, her arm tucked underneath her in a way that I knew would be painful when she woke up. I heard Amelia moving around in the kitchen, and contemplated sneaking out of Sookie's bedroom through the door that lead out onto the deck. Not that Amelia wasn't perfectly aware I was in the house. She had been the one to let me in. By the time I got home from work it was just before three, and Sookie was already asleep.

I didn't have the heart to wake her. Really, I was too tired for sex anyway. I just wanted to be close to her. My night had been shitastic, and she was the only thing I could think of that would make me feel better. I also knew I'd sleep better with her close to me, even if it meant leaving my legs dangling off her bed. She'd stirred when I sat down beside her, and smiled up when she saw me.

She'd been too groggy with sleep to say much. She just scooted closer, making herself comfortable against me, and then went right back to sleep. The habit of snuggling with her when I had a bad day was one I wasn't so sure was a good one. Relying on her for comfort like that was probably a bad idea, given that she was going to go back to Louisiana sooner rather than later. I had to find other ways of dealing with my stress.

We'd been doing this awkward dance for days. I knew there were things we both wanted to say, but neither of us seemed to anxious to bring any of it up. So rather than talk about what was going on, we just ignored it. Well, we tried to. I laid there beside her, staring at how peaceful her face was while she slept. I wondered if I looked anything like that while I was sleeping.

Her body shifted slightly and then her eyes opened. She blinked a few times before turning her head in my direction. She smiled sheepishly as she stretched. "Morning."

"Morning." I answered her with a smile.

"How'd you sleep?" She rolled onto her side so we were face to face.

"Good. You?"

"Good." She yawned in the cutest way and snuggled into her blankets. "What time is it?"

I looked over her shoulder to the alarm clock on the bedside table. "Just after ten."

"Wow." She muttered and rubbed her eyes. "I went to bed twelve hours ago."

"Lucky." I smirked at her.

"You've been wearing me out, mister." She poked me playfully in the chest.

"Are you complaining?"

"Hell no." She giggled and closed her eyes.

Her hand reached out and absently started running up and down my side. I, in return, let my thumb stroke her cheek. She scooted closer to me, angling her body so it was practically under mine. Her eyes opened again for just a moment before she stretched forward to kiss me. Her hand moved up to the back of my neck to hold me to her, and I let her take what she wanted from me. She released my lips all too soon, and planted a gentle kiss on my chin.

"You need to shave. You're too scruffy." She stroked the back of my neck.

"I thought you liked scruffy?"

"I do."

"So then what's your problem?" I arched an eyebrow at her.

"I don't like rug burn on my face." She nibbled at my jaw.

"Fine. I'll shave if you promise to never use that lilac scented lotion again."

She scoffed, her mouth hanging open. "What's wrong with lilac?"

"Nothing, except the smell of it makes me want to barf." I realized immediately that was probably a poor choice of words. It was confirmed when she moved away from me. I pulled her back and said, "I didn't mean for it to come out like that. I think *you* smell incredible. It's the lilacs that I don't get along with."

"Hmph." She grunted while she pouted.

I lowered my face into the hollow of her neck, aiming for the spot under her ear to let her know I was serious. She really did smell amazing. The fact that I couldn't stand the smell of that particular lotion and I still got that close to her should have meant something. I just figured we should be making a trade of some kind. Compromising was part of relationships, right?

*Only you're not in a relationship, you douche, because you're too big of a chicken shit to tell her how you really feel*. That little voice in my head was berating me every chance it got. Even if it was right, I just wasn't ready to deal with it yet.

I found the spot on Sookie's neck with almost no trouble. I nuzzled against it, trying to get her to roll her head just a little to give me better access to it. It took some fancy work on her actual ear before I got my way, but she inevitably gave in. We laid there together quietly, trading kisses and small talk. She had plans with Amelia to go antiquing that day.

"You want to come with us?" She threw one of her legs over both of mine.

"I'll pass, thanks. A prostate exam sounds like more fun."

"You hush." She wiggled against me.

"Do that again." I pulled her closer. She'd woken the beast. It was her own fault.

"No." She said, but then shifted her hips against me.

"That, my dear, is what they call a mixed signal." I lightly slapped her ass, and she squealed before officially pulling me on top of her.

"What about this? Is this a mixed signal too?" She ran her small hands up and down my back.

"Depends. Are you going to wiggle out from underneath me?"

"Do you want me to?"

"Never." I claimed her lips then, and it was game on.

**Sookie**

"Morning lovebirds." Amelia practically chirped from her seat in the living room as Eric and I made our way to the front patio doors.

"Good morning Amelia." Eric answered like the good sport he was.

"I can't wait until Tray gets here." Amelia looked positively fried.

She'd arrived in Michigan only four days ago. I suppose that's a long time when you're used to daily orgasms. I looked over at Eric, who just smirked at me like he was thinking the same thing. I felt a little guilty for all the fun I was having with him when I knew Amelia was slightly miserable without Tray around.

"Eric, do you want to come antiquing with us?" Amelia offered, earning me a glare from Eric.

"No, Eric's having a prostate exam." I winked at him.

Amelia snickered and asked, "Is that code for something?"

I smothered a giggle then pushed up on my toes to accept the goodbye kiss I was being offered. I pulled the sliding door open, and Eric ducked down a little to walk out of the house. He waved goodbye and then sprinted toward his house. It was completely unfair how good he looked first thing in the morning. That bedhead he was sporting was pure sex. Of course, it was partially that sexy because of the sex we'd just had.

"Well, you two seem to be getting along okay." Amelia sipped her coffee.

"Eh." I shrugged, which was a mistake because I knew Amelia was going to pounce all over it.

I headed back toward the kitchen to get my own cup of coffee. As predicted, Amelia was hot on my heels. "Spill." She demanded while I poured.

"There isn't really much to tell. We're just going with the flow."

"Did you tell him about the conversation we had?"

"God no." I shuddered at the thought.

"Sook, you can't sit on this forever. After what you heard him talking about with his brother, he's obviously been thinking about things."

"Yeah, and if he wanted something more, he would have told me. It's fine the way it is."

"You two are stubborn fools."

"Ames, it's not that simple."

"I call bullshit, Sookie. We both know that if he started dating someone else, you'd be destroyed by it. I've only been here for four days and even I can see he would feel the same way."

An evil thought popped into my mind that maybe I should try dating someone else just to see what happened. Dating someone else wasn't against the rules as far as Eric and I were concerned. As long as I made it clear to the other guy that we weren't exclusive, then it shouldn't be a big deal. But was that really fair? No, no, that was mind fucking, wasn't it? Ugh. Not knowing was making me nuts.

"Of course it would suck if he started seeing someone else." I admitted, but cut Amelia off before she could start her victory dance. "Truthfully, no, I don't want Eric with someone else. I just don't know if I want to be in a real relationship with him."

"Sookie, sweetheart, let me break this down for you. You two hang out. You go places together all the time. You consider him your friend. He considers you *his* friend. You fuck like rabbits. You care about each other. That's what a relationship is, whether you two consider it to be one or not." Leave it to Amelia to be brutally honest with me.

I sighed and stuck my face in my coffee cup. "I should get in the shower so we can get going."

"Ah, yes, you do that." She gave me a knowing stare. "I wouldn't want you leaving the house with fuckhot sex hair!" She called out after me as I walked to my bedroom.

Sometimes I really hated her.

**Eric**

I walked into my kitchen to see what was probably supposed to be homemade waffles on a plate. They looked more like hockey pucks or fucked up frisbees. The place was a mess, and I could only be grateful Sookie hadn't spent the night, or she would be cleaning it up right about then. There was a note on the fridge from my brothers letting me know they had taken a trip to the Dunes, and wouldn't be back until it was time for Poker night to start at Loki's.

Right, it was Thursday. That meant no Pam. At least there was one victory for the day. I straightened up the kitchen just enough to get all of the dirty dishes into the sink. No way in fuck was I going to clean up after those two. I'd made it perfectly clear they were welcome to crash at my house for the summer on the condition they cleaned up after themselves and kept any sexual activities to their bedrooms. No way did I want to walk in on either of my brothers shagging some random beach bunny.

All three of us were severely lacking in modesty, but I'd thought Luke would be the one I'd have to worry about keeping his drawers on in common areas. Then Jakob showed up with his new girlfriend. Her name was Laura. She was blonde and maybe five feet tall. She was a sweet girl with a wicked sense of humor and a hint of potty mouth. She fit in perfectly, to be honest. She was a struggling writer, working on her first novel. Prior to that, she'd been in PR, mostly writing press releases and photo captions for a popular celebrity blog. I liked her.

I headed upstairs to take a shower, but ended up falling into bed instead. I had a few hours to kill before work. Sleep was definitely a bigger priority at the moment. I set my alarm to go off in two hours, put a pillow over my face and went back to sleep.

o.O.o.O.o

It was during my nap that I had the first nightmare I could recall having since I was sixteen and the girl I was seeing- well, one of them- told me she thought she was pregnant. At sixteen, a pregnancy is the worst thing that can happen. Losing a limb would be easier to deal with than finding out you're going to be a parent. Aude was a sweet girl, but I didn't love her. Hell, until about three weeks ago, I never applied the word love to any of the girls I was with. Then Sookie came back into my life and everything felt out of whack. Is that what love does to a person?

I dreamt of Sookie out in the middle of Lake Michigan. She was on this platform that was rocking and throwing her off balance. The platform was surrounded by men, all of whom where trying to climb up onto the platform and grab at her. She was constantly off balance, and screaming for me to come save her but I couldn't move. I was paralyzed. Finally a faceless man with dark, curly hair got a good grip on one of her ankles and pulled her toward him. She screamed one last time, begging for me to come to her. By the time I could move, it was too late. She was already in the water, being pulled under by the faceless man. She was gone.

I sat upright in bed, sweating profusely and breathing like I'd just run a ten mile marathon at full speed. A familiar squeal pulled me out of bed. I went to my bedroom window and looked down to see Sookie running along the shoreline of the beach in a white bikini with Luke chasing her. Her body shimmered with beads of water running all over it. Rage tainted my vision and jealousy clogged my throat. What the fuck was Luke doing here when he was supposed to be at the Dunes?

*This is getting fucking ridiculous*, I thought to myself. But then I saw Luke get his arms around her and pull her into the water. She laughed as she went down with him. His hands were way too close to her breasts, and her body was tucked into his in a way that made me want to hit something. The next thing I knew, I was stomping down the stairs.

I was putting a stop to this right the fuck now.

Oh, Eric. You really must get a grip. Okay, so, next chapter marks the start of the crazy angst/drama between our lovebirds. It will be over by the end of chapter 12. You can ask **Chanel Addict, Scribeninja or kjwrit** if you don't believe me.

Oh, and one final note to **Tracee40**- BACK UP OFF MY FANFIC WIFE BEFORE YOU END UP BEING QUINN'S SEX BUNNY. I'LL DO IT. DON'T THINK I WON'T.

**Chapter 8: Beast of Burden**

Ummmm yeah.**Angst alert.** It's about to get crazy up in here. Possessive!Eric is about to make a very big appearance in this chapter. As Sookie would say, "Yikes. Yahoo. Yum." I'm trying to keep the angst to a minimum, but in order for these two to get where I want them to be, it's a necessary evil. I hope you enjoy it all the same. **Slacker Dee**, I know you're going to loooooove the stuffing out of the next couple of chapters.

Chapter 8: Beast of Burden

**Sookie**

The plan to go antiquing went out the window when Amelia and Tray got into a fight over the phone. He was supposed to be coming up in two days, and at the last minute he changed his mind in favor of going on some big ride with his biker buddies. Amelia flipped her shit and completely wigged out. The fight ended when Amelia told Tray she hoped his bike went over a cliff at the Grand Canyon. Yeah, it wasn't pretty.

She was a wailing, sobbing, pissed off mess when I left the house. She would want to talk about it later, but for now, all she wanted was to be alone and cry. She'd corner me when I least expected it. So, to save my hearing and sanity, I put on a bikini and went down to the lake. I laid out on my towel with my face pointed to the sky. My tan was developing slowly, but it was coming along. I had my ear buds in and was humming along to Johnny Cash when a shadow blocked my rays.

My eyes fluttered open and my hand rose up to cover my eyes just in case. Luke's handsome face hovered more than six feet above me. He had a mischievous look in his eyes- which were focused on my chest.

"Can I help you, Luke?" I crossed my legs at the ankles and took out my ear buds.

"This should be a topless beach."

"Ha! Yeah, well, if that were the case, I'm pretty sure Eric would run around blinding everyone." I snickered. The words escaped my mouth before I got the chance to stop them.

Luke arched an eyebrow at me the same way his big brother would, and I internally cringed. Shit. I really need to learn when to keep my big fucking mouth shut. Stupid brain filter had to pick that moment, of all moments, to go on the fritz. Fucking figures.

"Is my brother being a control freak?" Luke plopped down in the sand next to me.

I sighed and said, "No, nothing like that. Eric is remarkably *un*controlling where I'm concerned." I sounded a little too much like I was pouting for my own comfort.

"And this is a problem for you? You like men telling you what to do." He looked at me curiously.

"Forget it." I shook my head. I really shouldn't be talking to Luke about this, of all people. If Eric was going to talk to either of his brothers about me, it would be Luke.

"Hey, if you're worried I'm going to tell him what you say, I promise I won't. I know how my brother is. He won't listen to me anyway. He'll just assume I'm making the shit up. He doesn't really take me too seriously." Luke looked a little wounded with the admission.

"Aw, Luke, that's not true." I pushed myself up onto my elbows.

"Sure it is." Luke pulled his knees up toward his chest. God, he was just as sculpted as his brother. It was fucking ridiculous how cut the Northman boys were. "Eric sees the world a certain way, and fuck everyone who doesn't see it the same as him."

"He just wants good things for you, that's all."

Luke laughed and looked over at me. "You know, Eric would probably be better served to worry about himself. *I'm* not the one who's miserable."

Huh. Eric was miserable? That was news to me. "What do you mean, miserable? Eric's not miserable."

Luke shook his head and stood up. "If you say so."

I watched as Luke took off toward the water, my curiosity piqued. What was he talking about? Eric didn't seem miserable to me. I knew he'd been somewhat in a mood lately, but I really wasn't any better. We were running hot and cold with each other, but all it seemed to take was an orgasm to get us right back on track. I didn't know what to make of the situation. Clearly there was something I was missing.

I pushed myself up off my towel and followed Luke. "You can't just say something like that and then walk away."

Luke kept his eyes on the water as the waves rolled up to the shore. The water was still too cold to swim in. It licked at my toes as it sunk into the sand. It was a nice contrast to the warmth of the sun. There was a nice, cool breeze coming off the lake that kept me from being too hot. Tanning was so much easier when you didn't feel like a roasting turkey.

"Think about it, Sookie." Luke said without taking his eyes off the water. "I mean, do you really *not* see it?"

"See what?" I had no idea what he was talking about.

Like his brother, Luke was lightning quick. The next thing I knew I was being chased around the beach. I got farther out into the water than I wanted, and I screamed when he kicked water up at my back. That fucker! It was freezing. He might be a member of the Polar Bear Club, but I was a card carrying southerner. No way was I going for a dip in frigid water.

My screams only seemed to further antagonize Luke, who was hellbent on getting me completely submerged in the icy water. His arms wrapped around me and started pulling me backward. I was screaming at him to let me go, but he only held me tighter. His body was curled around mine, and I felt his wrists graze the underside of my breasts. I laughed like a crazy person as he pulled me down with him, shouting at him to stop.

I plopped into the cold water and screamed at the top of my lungs, scrambling to get back up. "Oh my God, I'm going to get you for this!" I threatened as I struggled to get free of him.

Luke was laughing behind me, splashing water at me. A water war erupted, with the two of us kicking and throwing water at each other. I was covered in sand and soaking wet. I grabbed a handful of wet sand and smashed it between his shoulder blades before I took off running again. We were having a good time laughing and wrestling with each other when Eric appeared with a very pissed off look on his face.

Everything came to a sudden stop while he stood at the shoreline, huffing and red faced. I pulled myself away from Luke, feeling guilty all of a sudden. I stood up slowly and moved toward him. He glared at his brother, his hands balled into fists. The muscles in his arms were flexing and tensing like he wanted to throw a punch.

"Hey, there you are. I thought you were at work already." I smiled up at him, hoping to diffuse the tension. It was bullshit, since the Lime Green Monster was clearly parked where anyone could see it.

Eric's eyes shifted down to mine and the intense anger and betrayal in them made me flinch. "You should just fuck him and get it over with."

I stood there, mouth gaping. Did he really just say that to me? Oh hell no! My hand acted on its own free will and slapped him across the face before I stormed off. I didn't need that shit from him. He didn't own me. Who the hell did he think he was talking to me like that?

"What the hell is your problem, bro?" I heard Luke shout at Eric as I stormed off toward my house.

I slammed my bedroom door behind me, not wanting to cross paths with Amelia who was already having a shitty day. Then I remembered my towel and iPod were still out on the beach. Fuck me. I leaned against the bathroom door, trying to decide my next step. I could hear Eric and Luke shouting at each other on the beach, and I really didn't want to hear what they were saying to each other. I'd heard enough. I went into the bathroom and started the water for a shower. I peeked out the bathroom window to see if they were still arguing, and they were.

They were right in each others faces. For a minute, I actually thought Luke was going to throw a punch at Eric, but then Eric stepped back. Eric yanked my stuff off the sand and started toward my house. I closed and locked the bathroom door before stepping into the shower. I heard the knock on the bathroom door, but I ignored it. Of course, that wasn't enough of a reason for Eric to go away, so he knocked again.

"Go away, Eric! I don't want to talk to you right now!" I was pissed off, and anything I might say would probably come out wrong.

He knocked again while I was yanking off my swimsuit. "Sookie, we need to talk about this!"

"Fuck you! Go home and leave me alone!" I shouted back.

Yeah, so, I found out the lock on my bathroom door was for shit, because all it took was Eric using his shoulder as a battering ram, and the door popped open. Not two seconds later I had a very pissed off, fully clothed man standing in the shower with me.

"What part of go home do you not-" I didn't get to finish because he kissed me.

It was one of those knee buckling, I'm going to do unspeakable things to you sort of kisses, and my traitor body was all kinds of on board with it. I was pissed off, no doubt about it, but that didn't stop me from tearing at his clothes. I backed up against the wall. Well, okay, I was pushed against the wall. Eric yanked off his shirt and dropped it on the floor while I went to work getting his pants off.

I mentally paused to wonder if there was something seriously wrong with me for being so turned on by the possessive, angry streak I didn't know he had. No sooner were his pants down than he was picking me up by my thighs and shoving me higher up the wall. My legs wrapped around his waist and without checking to see if I was ready, he pushed inside me. I bit his shoulder while my body adjusted to the unexpected invasion. It didn't hurt, but since I wasn't completely prepared for it, it felt tighter than usual.

His thrusts against me were punctuated with his grunts and my yelps. He kissed me hard, leaving me with no doubt my lips would be swollen and bruised when he was finished with me. *So this is what it's like to*really*get fucked*, I thought to myself as he pounded against me mercilessly. God, it felt good. Much better than it should considering how pissed off I'd been just a few minutes before. Hell, I was still pissed, but apparently not enough to not have sex with him.

Angry sex, that's what this was. I'd never had that before, and it was... it was amazing. My nails dug so deep into his back I knew I was drawing blood with my scratches. He hissed at me before going after my neck, sucking hard on the tender flesh there. His thrusts got harder and harder the closer I got to coming. I had to be disturbed to be as turned on as I was right then. He was an animal, and I wasn't much better.

When I exploded like I knew I was going to, I swear I left my body for a minute. I could see everything from the ceiling. I watched my own legs go limp while he thrusted into me a half a dozen more times, then finished himself with a powerful roar. I came back into my body just as he was putting me down. My legs were numb and I was shaking all over.

*What the fuck was that?*

My eyes met his. There was a red mark on his face from where I slapped him. I reached up to touch it. I wanted to apologize. As mad as I was, I shouldn't have hit him. But he stepped away before I could reach his cheek. He picked up his wet clothes and stepped out of the shower, leaving me standing there shaking and wondering what the hell just happened.

**Eric**

It dawned on me while I was sitting behind my desk at Loki's that I was using sex to communicate all the things I couldn't say to Sookie. This was completely out of control. We had to have the uncomfortable conversation neither of us seemed to want to have. We couldn't keep going like this. I knew I had completely overreacted to her and Luke on the beach.

I wanted to apologize to her almost as soon as we finished in the shower. Not only had I attacked her on the beach, then I threw her up against the wall and completely lost my shit. She didn't say no or try to stop me, but that didn't make it right. I'd seen the regret on her face when she looked at my cheek. She'd hit me harder than she probably had intended to. Hell, it was still a little red almost twelve hours later. She got me good.

I honestly can't say I didn't deserve it. I'd talked to her like she was a slut, and she didn't deserve that. I was taking my frustration out on her, and it wasn't right. If all of this wasn't a clear sign that we needed to get things out in the open once and for all, I don't know what was. I cringed when I heard Pam's cackling, along with another woman's voice outside my office. Amelia. My head snapped up and my heart skipped a beat. If Amelia was in the bar, that meant Sookie had to be somewhere close by.

I jumped out of my seat and headed out of my office. Enough brooding. Sookie and I needed to talk. Pam and Amelia were giggling in the corner over one thing or another. I quickly turned the other way to avoid being pulled into their conversation and headed out toward the main serving area of the bar. I scanned the crowd for Sookie.

I found her standing by one of the pool tables with Luke, Jakob and Laura. The four of them were laughing and talking about something I couldn't make out over the noise. Sookie was approached by one of the waitresses and was handed a drink. The waitress leaned closer to speak into Sookie's ear, and pointed across the room. I followed to where the waitress was pointing, and saw a guy with dark, curly hair raise his hand and wave.

My eyes immediately snapped back to Sookie, who smiled warmly, a slight blush painting her cheeks as she returned the wave she was offered. My brothers looked uncomfortable, while Laura stepped closer to Sookie and whispered in her ear. Sookie looked a little embarrassed and confused over the drink she'd just been sent. I stalked over to the bar to see what I could get out of Sam. I wanted to know who the fuck was sending my girl free drinks.

Yes, that's right. *My* girl. I wanted her. I fucking knew it, and because I'd been too big of a douche to tell her that, there were other guys sending her drinks. No. No, this wasn't happening. I was going to find out who this fucktard was and have him blacklisted from my bar.

"Sam, who's that guy over there?" I pointed in the direction of the dark haired man.

"Oh, you mean the one buying Sookie drinks?" Sam asked with a smug smile on his face.

Did he not realize how close to being knocked unconscious he was?

"Yeah, that'd be the guy."

"Name's Alcide, I think."

"Alcide? What the fuck kind of name is Alcide?"

"Cajun, I think."

Oh fuck me. He's a good ole boy. Fan-fucking-tastic. "How many's he had tonight?"

"Just one so far. He's been too busy keeping an eye on Sookie."

"Great." I muttered.

"Want me to refuse service?"

"No." I said quickly. "No, I'll take care of it."

Sam looked amused, which was dangerous to his health. I shuffled out from behind the bar and started to make my way through the crowd, only to realize Sookie wasn't standing with my brothers anymore. Fuck, where did she go? I looked around and found her sitting at the same table as this Alcide jerk off, who I was going to call Asshole in my head, since that name seemed far more fitting.

What the fuck was she doing with that guy? I told myself she was probably just being polite and thanking him for the drink. Sookie was well mannered, and I knew things like etiquette and manners were important to her. I stepped up between my brothers and was immediately hugged by Laura, whom I had taken to calling Mini.

"How're you, Mini?" She giggled up at me.

"Fine. I heard what you did on the beach. You got a death wish?" She arched an eyebrow. I looked over at Jakob who just gave me a smug grin. Luke wasn't much better. "I know it's none of my business, but acting like a caveman isn't going to help you."

"Fuck, do the three of you just sit around and talk about me when I'm not there?"

"We're only trying to help, Eric." Jakob offered politely.

"I've got a plan." I growled, even though I really didn't. I wanted to talk to her. That was pretty much the plan.

"How's your face? Looks like she clocked you good." Mini touched my cheek.

I growled again, not wanting to think about that. "I had it coming."

"Yeah, you fucking did." Luke said, but then quickly stepped away from me. I was still pissed at him.

He knew how I felt about Sookie because I'd told him. We'd had a lengthy conversation about it after dinner the night he got to the beach house. I'd told him about the unexpected change of feelings and how it seemed like she was holding something back as well. Luke hadn't said much on the topic, but he didn't really need to. I knew what I needed to do. I was just avoiding it. To me it just stood to reason that if Sookie wanted something more, she would have said so.

I started thinking maybe she wanted out of the arrangement we had, but I quickly discounted that since she wasn't turning me away whenever things got heated between us. If anything, she wanted it just as much as I did. I thought about how I'd accused her of mixed signals earlier in the day, and realized I wasn't much better. We were deadlocked in a stagnant place. We had to do something or it was going to get really ugly, really quick.

"Uh oh." Jakob muttered.

I whipped around to see Sookie laughing and touching Asshole in an inviting way that made my blood boil. What the fuck was she doing? I started to walk over there toward her, but Luke grabbed my arm.

"Bro, don't go over there. You're just going to make it worse."

I wanted to deck him, and anyone else who got in my way. Deep down, though, I knew he was right. Making some macho display wasn't going to do me any favors, especially after what had happened on the beach earlier. Still, my stomach was in knots and I hoped to God no one bumped into me because I was pretty sure I was going to lose my shit on the first person who touched me.

"Let's go for a walk." Mini suggested to me.

"I have work to do."

"You own this place. It'll survive without you for ten minutes." Mini grabbed my hand and tugged me toward the patio door behind us.

I'll say one thing for her- for being a tiny woman, she was as powerful as someone my own size. She pulled me outside and we walked away from the bar. We got closer to the water and walked further away from everyone else. I picked up a couple of rocks and started whipping them out into the water.

"Feel better?" She asked after I'd thrown the fourth rock violently. My shoulder hurt after that one.

"Not really." I grumbled.

"Do you want to talk about it?" She wasn't pushy when it came to emotional things, which I liked. Getting me out of the bar was probably a good idea.

I didn't really want to talk about it, but that didn't stop me from running my mouth. "What the fuck does she see in that guy?"

Mini shrugged, a sympathetic smile playing on her lips that I absolutely hated. I hated it when people looked at me like that. I didn't need her pity. I roughly ran my fingers through my hair and let out a frustrated growl.

"Why is this so fucking complicated? It didn't start out like this." I hurled another rock into the water.

"So what did it start out like? How did you meet?" Mini asked in a completely neutral tone.

I sighed, and started from the beginning. "She came up last summer a few weeks after I first moved into the house. She came up alone, and in need of a break from everything. I don't really know her whole back story, but I know she was on summer break from college and her Grandmother had been sick. We completely rubbed each other the wrong way from the very beginning. I don't even know why that is. When I think about it now, I think maybe it's because despite all of the reasons to stay away from each other, all I really wanted was to be around her.

"At first it felt like I had something to prove. I wasn't used to being rejected. I'm still not. As you can see, I don't take it very well. I'm used to getting my way, and Sookie was unimpressed with me. We argued all the time over the stupidest shit. Usually because Luke would throw a party at the house and her property would end up with plastic cups strewn all over, or people would puke on her deck, or pass out on her chairs. I couldn't really blame her for being pissed, but she was just a real bitch about it. So we fought a lot.

"The more she bitched, the more we fought and the more I wanted her. There were a couple of times where I thought maybe things were going to boil over and all I could think about was kissing her. But then she would storm off, calling me a douchetard or some other crazy name, and that was the end of it. It wasn't until the fourth of July last year that things changed. We ended up getting stinking drunk on tequila shots at Luke's insistence. I remember she was wearing this American flag bikini and it drove me crazy. I couldn't stop staring at her all day, and it got to the point where I wondered why I had let all of the insanity go on for so long.

"So there we were, sitting on the beach around a bonfire. She'd changed into this white dress with red flowers on it. She was annoyingly beautiful. I couldn't stop staring at her. She got up to go back to her cottage and before I knew what I was doing, I was following her. I told myself I was just walking her back to make sure she got in the house okay. She was staying alone by that point. She got up the stairs and slipped on something. I reached out to catch her and the way she fell into my arms... it was like she belonged there. It felt right to hold her, you know?

"She looked up at me with this innocent confusion on her face, and believe it or not, she was the one who kissed me first. She just grabbed the back of my head and pulled me down to her. It was completely unexpected, but it was just what needed to happen. It was the right place at the right time, I guess. It was like the planets had lined up and everything in my life had lead me to that one moment. Everything just fit.

"After that, things were different. It was like we'd reached an understanding. We'd seen a side of each other we didn't know was there. Slowly we let down our walls. I started to realize she wasn't the bitch I thought she was, and she let me in a little more every day. We actually have a lot in common. Things I never would have guessed. And she makes me laugh. We spent the rest of the summer hanging out and hooking up when we wanted to, which was pretty often. I knew she was going to go back to Louisiana at the end of the summer for school, and she knew I was staying here.

"So when the end of the summer came, I was sorry to see her go, but not in a heartbroken kind of way because I'd known all along it wasn't meant to last. She promised she'd be back this summer, but we didn't talk at all after she left. Sometimes I think maybe that was a mistake, but maybe it was for the better. Cutting off all contact was probably the right move. Yeah, I missed her, I know that now, but knowing she was so far away and unable to do anything about it wouldn't have made things any easier for either of us.

"I don't really know when my feelings changed. All I know is that ever since she got back, I've felt differently about her. Seeing her face to face where I could reach out and grab her, I don't know... it's like I realized what was missing." I finally finished, then sat down in the grass/sand of the beach. Mini was short enough that even when sitting, my head nearly reached her shoulders.

"Do you mind if I tell you what I think?" Mini asked politely before kneeling down in the sand next to me.

I exhaled through my nose and said, "Not at all. It's nice to have someone ask before they clobber me for a change."

"Well, first of all, your brothers mean well. I've spent a lot of time with both of them over the last couple of months. They really do just want you to be happy. Second of all, they really do believe Sookie is good for you, in spite of how crazy she seems to have made you lately. Lastly, it sounds to me like maybe there were always deeper feelings for her than you were willing to admit to. I wasn't there, so I don't know for sure, but I see the way you talk about her. I see how your face lights up when she gets near you, and if you really were just friends," she used air quotes for that last bit. "Then you wouldn't be so bothered by her maybe being with someone else. You can blame all these feelings on the sex if you like. I can't stop you. But ask yourself this question: if you never got to have sex with Sookie again, would you still want her around?"

I didn't have to think about it. The answer to that was a great big yes. "Yes, I would."

"Well, mate, there you go. That's a big step you just took. Now if you care about her as much as I think you do, then you need to man up and tell her so she can make an informed decision. Right now she hasn't got all the information she needs to know what's what. So if you don't want to lose her to this new guy, then you're going to have to make a gesture."

That's what I was afraid of.

"If you want my honest opinion, I think she feels the same. She was probably just waiting for you to make a move." Mini winked at me.

"What makes you say that?"

"I'm a woman." She said as if that explained everything.

I laughed quietly for a minute and then said, "Thanks, Laura. I appreciate your advice."

"No trouble. Now would you please stop moping?"

"I'll try."

"Good. I'd hate to kick your ass in the middle of your own bar." She patted me on the shoulder, stood up and started back toward the bar.

I laughed again, but only because I knew she was serious. I stared out at the reflection of the moon on the water for a few minutes before pushing myself up and heading back to the bar. I walked in to find my brothers and Mini engrossed in a game of pool. I looked around the bar again for Sookie, only to find her in the clutches of the Asshole, kissing him like there was no tomorrow.

\*peeks out from hiding place\* I'm not coming all the way out until the angst has passed. I know, I know, I'm evil for doing this but I swear it's going to be okay. This marks the beginning of the crazy and the need to really bonk their heads together. Or lock them in the room until they work their shit out. Before you go hating on Sookie, it may not be as bad as it looks. You'll just have to wait until tomorrow's chapter to find out what's up. Thanks for not killing me! \*ducks back into hiding place\*

**Chapter 9: Separate Ways**

And this is where things really get interesting. \*sigh\* I made a promise to **scribeninja** that the angst wouldn't completely overrun this story, and I'm going to do my best to make sure it stays that way. So just stick with me, and I promise it will only last for a few chapters. You'll be rewarded with delicious Tropicana Pure Premium explosions in the end if you do. Hopefully that's enough incentive.

Chapter 9: Separate Ways

**Eric**

I had to get out of the bar before I exploded. Shock stilled my feet for a moment. Then I felt a sinking despair in my chest that strangled my heart on its way down to my stomach. The perfect storm of disappointment, guilt and fury met in my stomach and it propelled me out the door of the bar instead of toward Sookie. I staggered outside like a drunk, and braced myself against the roof of my Lime Green Monster. I hated feeling like this.

This was exactly why I didn't get involved in relationships that lasted longer than an orgasm. Feelings meant strings. Strings meant attachments. Attachments meant painful separations. Separations meant rejection, and as we've already seen, I don't do well with rejection. I wanted to be angry with Sookie for kissing that Asshole, but I knew it was my own fucking fault. I'd brought all of this on myself. There was no one else to blame.

Hell, she made the gesture of wanting to apologize to me in the shower, even after the way I treated her. Clearly the girl cared, and I just walked out on her. Of course she thought I was a shitbag. I kicked the tire of my car and was about to slam my hands on the roof when a female voice I faintly recognized called out to me.

"Eric, is that you?" The voice was sweet and young.

I turned to see a redheaded girl behind the wheel of an SUV, looking through the passenger's side window at me. She leaned over further and smiled when I took a step in her direction. It took me a minute to place her as one of the cashiers from the local grocery store. Her father owned it, if I remembered right. Her name was Jessica, I thought.

"Anyone else drive a Lime Green Monster?" I retorted, and she giggled. Not like a Sookie giggle with a hint of mischief to it, but an honest to goodness schoolgirl giggle.

My gut was screaming at me to move on and not indulge her any further. She was in high school, for fuck's sake, and I didn't fuck around with high schoolers. Still I couldn't stop myself from getting closer to the SUV.

"You're a little young to be trolling around here, you know." I said in a more paternal tone.

"Oh, I know. I don't drink. I'm just being a good little sister. I dropped off my brother and his friends." She looked down to her lap in an innocent way.

"Good. You should get on home." I said.

"You look like you're having a bad night. Are you okay?" She asked sweetly.

"Nothing a long drive won't handle." I jangled my keys in my hands.

Her eyes snapped up to mine, and they were filled with innocence and hope. "Want some company?"

Fuck. No, this isn't happening. I walked over to her car and leaned into her window. "You look like a sweet girl, Jessica, and it's nice of you to offer, but I don't think the two of us spending time together is a good idea."

She looked a little put out for a moment before she said, "Eric, it's okay if we're friends. I know you're... well, I'm probably too young for you, but we can still talk if you need someone to talk to."

I reached into the car and grabbed one of her hands. I felt her flinch, then shudder. Yeah, she definitely had a crush. I needed to nip this in the bud right now.

"How old are you, Jessica?"

"Sevah..seventeen." She stuttered, staring down at my hand on hers. "I'll be eighteen in December." Her voice had risen an octive thanks to her nerves.

"Well, I'm twenty-six. That makes me too old for you. I'm sure we could probably be friends, but we can't be the kind of friends that go joyriding at midnight. So while I appreciate your offer, I'm going to say no and ask you to head home." I said to her as gently as I could.

She nodded, visibly upset at being rejected. Given what I was going through myself, I felt especially bad for turning her away. I retracted my hand and stood back from her car. She wiped her cheeks and then offered me a sad smile with glassy eyes. Fuck. I hate it when girls cry, especially when I know it's *my* fault they're crying. What a kick in the balls the night was turning out to be. Hell, a kick in the balls might be a nice vacation from the suckage of the night.

Jessica put the car in gear and then pulled away slowly. I closed my eyes, took a deep breath and exhaled slowly. When my eyes opened, it was just in time to see Sookie come stumbling out of my bar with her hand tucked into Asshole's. They were laughing and knocking against each other in a drunken, uncoordinated fashion. I watched as Sookie followed him to his truck and got in the passenger's seat. I wanted to go over and break it up. Was he really the kind of douche who took advantage of a drunk girl?

*Fuck you, Northman. You've bedded more than one drunk girl in your day. Not to mention, wasn't Sookie drunk the first time you fucked her? Hypocrite.* I growled my frustration and watched as the truck backed out of its space and headed out of the parking lot.

My rage returned, but now it was aimed at the Asshole who was looking to take advantage of *my* Sookie. I got in my car and followed the truck out of the parking lot. It had turned left onto Lighthouse Lane and was headed toward our houses. Oh fuck me. No way was I going to listen to Sookie have loud sex (she always got louder when she was drunk) with that guy. No. Fucking. Way.

The truck pulled into her driveway, and I watched from the road as she climbed out of the truck. She said a few words to him through the window, then pushed up on her toes to kiss him goodnight. The only good thing about the whole exchange was that he put the truck in reverse, and backed out of the driveway. Okay, so maybe he wasn't a total asshole.

When the fucker waved at me when he got to the end of the driveway, it took all the strength I had to wave back instead of flipping him the bird. I pulled into the driveway and followed the veer to the right so I could park my car on my property instead of Sookie's. I rolled up my windows and locked the doors. I closed my door quietly and pocketed my keys as I started walking. Lights were on in Sookie's house, suggesting she hadn't just fallen into bed to pass out.

I realized I didn't really know if she was drunk, and it would be acceptable to go over there to talk to her under the guise of just wanting to make sure she got home okay since her car wasn't anywhere to be seen. I climbed the steps of the front deck and knocked on the sliding glass door. Sookie smiled brightly when she saw me and quickly came to open the door.

"Hey, there you are! I was looking for you at the bar. I didn't see you anywhere." She said once I was stepping inside the house.

Was she fucking serious? Was she really unaware of the various jealous tirades I'd gone on in the last few hours? No way. Not possible. She had to know what she was doing to me.

"Yeah, well, I saw something earlier that really fucked with my head." I muttered.

"Oh. Are you okay now?" She asked gently, reaching out to touch my arm.

"Not really, no." I shook my head and collapsed onto her couch.

"Want to talk about it?" She folded herself onto the couch next to me, but not within cuddling distance. She was giving me space. She knew better than to cuddle when I was like this. Fuck. How did she know that?

I stayed silent. I could smell her perfume and it was driving me crazy. *Just tell her you love her, you fucktard. Quite being a douche about it, and just tell her already before she calls that Asshole back to give her what you're too big of a pussy to give her yourself.*

"Listen, Eric, I'm really sorry about earlier. I had no right to hit you, and I feel terrible about it." Sookie bit her bottom lip. Her eyes were filled with unshed, guilty tears.

*No! No! Do NOT CRY, SOOKIE! Not you, too!* "I was a dick. I never should have said what I said to you."

"Then why did you? That really hurt me, Eric. It made me wonder what you must think of me for the situation we're in. I'm not a slut. I don't just fuck anything with a dick."

"I know that."

"So then what's your problem?"

The fact that she was blaming me for everything that was wrong between us irked me. I knew I had my faults, but my defenses were rising. Some of this was her fault, too. I took a deep breath and reminded myself that we weren't talking about her right now, and since I had been the jealous ass, I was going to have to eat some serious crow if I wanted to fix what was wrong between us.

"Maybe we shouldn't see each other for a while." Sookie suggested.

Panic. Complete and total panic with a side of I think I'm going to hurl.

"Is that what you want?" I looked over at her.

"No," she squeaked and wiped her face. Fuck. She was crying. "But obviously we have some things we need to figure out and maybe it's better if we don't try to do that together."

"Is it because of that guy you were kissing in the bar tonight?"

Sookie's expression turned stony. All traces of sympathy disappeared. "You were watching me?"

"It was kind of hard to miss the way you two were mauling each other." I said bitterly.

"So why didn't you say anything?" She snapped.

"Why didn't I say anything? What the fuck was I supposed to say, Sookie? I flipped my shit earlier and you slapped me for it."

"That was different, Eric! That was nothing. Alcide was..."

"He was something." I finished for her.

She made a frustrated noise. "No."

"No?"

"Maybe. I don't know! I don't know, okay? I'm all fucked up right now."

"But you like him."

"I don't know, Eric." She looked down into her lap where her hands were wringing together. "All I know is I don't know what's happening with us. It wasn't this hard last year."

I snorted and said, "Yeah, that's a fucking understatement."

We were silent then for a minute. I knew I needed to tell her I remembered what Mini said about Sookie not having all the facts. But fuck if I was going to put my heart out there just for her stomp on it. If she wanted space to figure things out, I'd give her that without looking like a manipulative asshole and drowning her in my feelings. Even if it hurt like a son of a bitch to keep it to myself.

"I think maybe you were right about what you said the night I came back." Sookie played with her hair.

"What part?" I really didn't remember what I'd told her, but I had a feeling I was going to want to kick my own ass for it.

"You said I should be dating someone." She said sadly.

Yep, I'm a fucking idiot. That's what I get for trying to be chivalrous. Just what I needed- another kick in the nuts.

"Is that what you want, Sookie?" I wanted to touch her, I really did, but I couldn't. I knew if I touched her I was going to pull her closer to me and then all bets were off. Like it or not, this was a conversation we needed to have.

"I don't know, Eric." She shook her head helplessly as her tears continued to fall.

"So let me get this straight. You don't know how you feel about me but you know you want space to figure it out. You don't know if you want to be in a relationship, but you know you don't want to be with me anymore. Am I right?" I wanted to be clear on this.

All of a sudden she sprang toward me and held my face in her hands. "I didn't say I didn't want you, Eric. It's not about that."

Now was lost. "Sookie, you're not making a whole hell of a lot of sense."

She sighed and let go of my face. "I know. That's why I need time to sort things out."

I took a deep breath and decided all of this was bullshit. It was a lot of drama for nothing. If she needed to figure things out, then maybe telling her how I felt wasn't being manipulative after all. I wanted her. I knew I did. I wasn't going to get her by sitting back like the passive-aggressive douche I'd been acting like as of late.

"Well, let me tell you how *I* feel." I turned toward her on the couch.

She was curled into a ball with her knees tucked under her chin. I hated seeing her so pulled into herself like she was. Like she didn't trust me anymore. Not that I didn't deserve her being a little guarded. I'd been a real fuck up lately. I couldn't blame her. It still sucked though.

I was just about to start talking when there was a loud rumbling coming down the driveway and tires crunching on the gravel. One pair of headlights went toward my house, while the other pair parked in front of the cottage. Amelia was back. Fuck me. I was never going to get to talk to her at this rate. I sighed heavily, unsure of what to do next. Should I keep talking, or should I postpone it until we were alone again where we couldn't be bothered.

I didn't have the chance to really decide because Amelia came stumbling into the house looking even more upset than Sookie. I didn't know what her beef was, but if this was Pam's fault, I was definitely going to throw her bony ass in the lake. Sookie launched herself off the couch to hug her friend.

"Ames, what happened?" Sookie stroked the girl's hair soothingly.

Amelia just cried harder. Sookie shot me a helpless look.

"I'll just go home. We'll talk tomorrow, yeah?" I was resigned to nothing good coming from any of this.

Sookie just nodded as she took a weeping Amelia deeper into the house. I sat there on the couch for a minute, listening to Amelia cry. Looks like it was a bad night for relationships all the way around. I sighed again, then hauled myself up off the couch. I let myself out and slid the glass door shut behind me. I paused at the kitchen door of my house and looked back at Sookie's place. The lights were all out. That was quick.

"So, what happened?" Luke asked the second I stepped inside.

"I don't want to talk about it. I'll see you guys in the morning." I took the stairs two at a time without looking back. I just wanted the night to be over.

Right. So, next chapter we get to find out what Sookie was doing with Alcide. Was it as bad as it looks? \*sigh\* I really just want to post a bunch of chapters back to back just to get through all the angsty stuff so we can get to better times. What do you guys think? Thanks for reading!

**Chapter 10: Comfort**

I know, I know, I'm killing you with all the angst. I'm sorry! \*group hugs\* Just remember, it'll be over by the end of chapter 12. It'll be okay. I just finished watching Paranormal Activity for the first time. I'm traumatized. The angst in this story is a nice vacation for me. That's sad. Very, very sad. Thanks to **scribeninja**, **sarahblueiris** and **kjwrit** for snuggling me through the recovery process. Oh, and there will be a chapter about this. Yes, yes there will. Chapter 15, to be exact.

Chapter 10: Comfort

**Sookie**

I snuggled Amelia closer to me and watched her slowly drift off to sleep. I felt badly for her. She and Tray had a misunderstanding and they'd let it get out of control. I could relate. The only difference was, they were committed to each other. What the hell were Eric and I? We were playing at a relationship, but it wasn't real. It was a fucking sham, and it had to stop.

Meeting Alcide at the bar had been a slap in the face. It showed me what I was missing, and what I really wanted. He was a nice guy. He had a good job and a kind smile. He was easy to talk to. He was polite. He was from the south. He didn't try to talk me into going home with him, which was a rarity. He was also hung up on his ex-girlfriend. He apologized profusely for dragging me into his mess, but I didn't mind helping him out.

He'd subtly pointed her out. She looked trashy to me, but who was I to judge? Love was love. You didn't get to pick where you found it. So, I turned up my flirt a little. I laughed for no reason, and I didn't let go of his arm. Based on how red in the face his ex was, I knew it was working. Then when she was about to come over and say something, Alcide pulled me close and kissed me. It had taken me by surprise, but it wasn't necessarily unwelcome.

I kissed him back, but quickly realized it felt wrong. All I saw was Eric floating around in my head. I saw him looking like a sad puppy, and it just broke me a little. When I pulled away from him it was because I thought I was going to break down and cry. Aside from making a complete mess of my face, all that would do is set back all the hard work Alcide and I had done to fool his ex. But I couldn't take another second of his lips on mine, so I buried my face in his neck instead.

The smell was wrong, too. He didn't smell like Eric. I felt my heart start to hurt. All of this was wrong. What was I doing? I was so intent on waiting around for Eric to make a move that I was pushing him away? Ugh. I hated myself in that moment. He deserved better than me. Alcide had caught on to the fact that I wasn't quite right and asked me if I wanted a ride home. I sent a text to see if Amelia was ready to go and she quickly responded that she was still busy with Pam. I told her I found a ride and I'd leave my keys at the bar for her.

Alcide took my hand and lead me out of Loki's. He stumbled over a loose floorboard, sending both of us a little sideways. We laughed as we recovered. His grasp on me had tightened when we started to fall to the side. I continued to laugh as we made our way to his truck at the end of the lot. I thought I saw Eric leaning into the passenger's side window of an SUV, but I couldn't tell if it was him or not. There were too many guys with long legs and black jeans on to know if it was really him or not.

I'd been looking around the bar for him all night, but hadn't seen him. I wanted to clear the air about what had happened earlier. I really did feel badly for hitting him. What he said had hurt, no doubt about it. He basically called me a whore, then proceeded to treat me like one in my shower. There was a part of me that was almost shocked not to see some cash waiting for me on my dresser when I finally got out of the shower.

I climbed into Alcide's truck, and cringed at the country music that flooded the cab of the truck as soon as he started it up. He lowered the volume, then pushed the button to change songs. "Toes" by the Zac Brown Band started and my face lit up. I actually liked that song a lot. It wasn't as country as a lot of songs were. It was catchy as hell, and I couldn't help singing along. Alcide laughed when he realized I knew the words, and before I knew it the two of us were singing the worst duet in the history of recorded music.

We belted out the words the whole way back to the cottage. I noticed a pair of headlights behind us just as we were making the turn into the driveway. I got out of the truck just before the song ended. I ran around to the driver's side and thanked him for driving me home. He promised he'd see me around and I kissed him on the cheek before stepping back so he could go home. My mood was lifted considerably, and I decided I liked Alcide for that reason alone. He really was a good guy.

And if he weren't so hung up on his ex, and I didn't feel this crazy ass emotional tie to Eric, he would definitely be someone I was interested in. Unfortunately there were just too many things in the way of us really making a go of it. I was in the kitchen getting myself a glass of water to help shake the slight haze of my gin and tonic buzz. I hoped if I could think with a more sober brain, I'd be less emo. I was just about to get out the pint of strawberries I'd bought at the farmer's market the day before when I heard someone knocking out front.

I walked toward the front and smiled from ear to ear when I saw Eric standing there. Just who I wanted to see. I'd resolved somewhere between stumbling out of Loki's and the second verse of "Toes" that I was going to tell Eric how I felt. I was going to tell him that I thought we should try to be a regular couple and see what happened. If things didn't work out, at least we would know it and we could get on with our lives. I was sick and tired of living in limbo, and the caveman routine from earlier wasn't going to fly with me anymore.

My cheerfulness faded immediately when I saw how bummed out he was. Guilt started to creep in about having hit him, and I decided I was going to start there if he had nothing to say. Maybe he was waiting for me to apologize. So, that's what I did. I apologized for hitting him since it was wrong of me. No matter what he said, I had no right to lay a hand on him. He apologized right back for what he said to make me hit him in the first place, but I knew there was something else eating at him.

When he couldn't tell me what the problem was, I started wondering if maybe trying to be a couple was a mistake after all. If we couldn't have a serious conversation that didn't end in an orgasm, we were never going to work. We couldn't fuck our way through ever problem we had, as nice it that would be. We were going to have to use our words. If Eric couldn't do that, then I had to let him go.

We ended up arguing over the state of our relationship when I suggested we take a step back from each other for a while to figure out what we wanted. I noticed Eric didn't agree with my idea, but he didn't disagree with it either. He didn't try to tell me he had feelings for me, but he didn't tell me he didn't think of me "that way" either. I was so lost! I knew how I felt. The second I kissed Alcide back, I knew I was kissing the wrong man. I only wanted to kiss Eric, and I knew it. I felt it everywhere in my body. Every voice in my head was screaming at me that I was kissing the wrong guy, and yet, I couldn't tell Eric that. Not when he was in the mood he was in.

He looked like he wanted to fight, and I was just too emotionally exhausted by that point to even consider the possibility. So we went back and forth, not really getting anywhere. We exchanged a lot of "I don't knows" and shoulder shrugs. It felt like a pointless conversation that only served to further disenchant me with the idea that I could actually be Eric Northman's girlfriend.

I sat there, a blubbering mess, completely overwhelmed by everything I was feeling and all the things that had happened in the last twenty-four hours. I started thinking about Amelia and Tray, and how solid they had been before I left for the summer. They were happy. They were talking about moving in together, and maybe some day getting married. Now Amelia was screaming death threats at him and cursing the day he was born. How did that happen? How did two people who obviously cared about each other let things get so crazy that they were wishing each other death?

Eric was just about to tell me how *he* felt about the situation we were in when we heard the telltale signs we weren't going to be alone for much longer. I was tempted to pull him into my bedroom so we could finish talking, but then Amelia came in looking like death warmed over. I couldn't stop myself from going to comfort her. She just looked so incredibly sad. No, she looked broken. I *never* saw Amelia like that. She said I was the stronger one of the two of us, but I disagreed. Amelia never let anything get her down. She greeted every experience life had to offer with an open mind and a ready heart. She was a champ.

I was prone to pity parties and self doubt. So, okay, I'd survived the death of my parents at a young age. Yes, I tolerated a less than ideal older brother. I'd been there for my Gran when she needed me, right up until her last breath. I'd found the courage to leave a bad relationship instead of turning a blind eye the way some women would because it was better than being alone. I'd gone off to school and busted my butt for everything I had. Okay, when I looked at it like that, maybe I wasn't a weakling, but I still wasn't Amelia.

She didn't say a whole hell of a lot after Eric left. She mostly cried and mumbled things about how she missed Tray and she was sorry for being such a bitch to him. I had no idea what had brought on her crying jag, but I was sure I'd hear all about it in the morning. I rocked her gently while she cried all over me until she finally fell asleep. I stayed there with her because I didn't really want to be alone. I wanted to make sure she was really out of it before I went to my own bed.

Eventually I slipped out of Amelia's bed. I covered her over and went out to the hallway. I stood there for a moment, debating over which way to go. I ended up in my room. I sat on the edge of my bed, unsure of what to do. I felt restless. My skin was crawling, and I knew there was no way I was going to go to sleep. I put on my nightgown all the same.

I walked out onto the deck and looked over to Eric's house. The only light I could see there was the stove's overhead light in the kitchen. The rest of the house was dark and still. I took a few deep breaths, debating whether or not what I was thinking was the right thing to do. In the end, my body chose for me. I tip toed over the gravel and sand. I was careful to avoid the creaky spots on Eric's porch. There was enough give in the screen door for me to slip my small hand in the crack and lift the hook out of the eye that kept the door closed.

I slipped into the house and put the hook back in place. Luke was passed out on the couch surrounded by beer bottles. The shirt he was wearing was tugged up higher, and the hem had been looped through the neckline, making it look like a girl's shirt. He been made over with what I assumed to be Laura's makeup and some permanent marker. He was going to be pissed when he woke up, but I planned to be gone by then.

I restrained my giggles, covering my mouth with both hands to keep from waking him. I never wished harder for a camera to magically appear than I did right at that moment. I almost wanted to run upstairs, wake up Eric and show him what had been done to Luke, but I was sure he'd see it in the morning. Luke was a late sleeper and I knew Eric had to be at the bar early for a beer delivery. This was not going to end well for the parties responsible.

I crept up the stairs to the second floor. I heard the sounds of obvious nookie going on in Jakob's room and quickly kept going. I didn't need to hear that. Although Laura certainly seemed to be enjoying herself. I got to Eric's room at the far end of the hall and carefully opened his bedroom door. He was sprawled out on his bed with the pillow I usually slept on clutched close to his face. My heart stilled at the idea he needed a part of me with him in order to fall asleep.

I stood there just watching him for a while before finally gathering up my courage and going over to his bed. I gently pulled the pillow away from him. He slept like the dead, so I probably could have yanked it away without him noticing. Still, I didn't want to take any chances of waking him up. I situated myself in front of him so my body was tucked into his. I put his arm around me, and breathed a silent sigh of relief when his grip on me tightened just a little. I snuggled back against him, and even though I knew he was still asleep, I felt him relax.

I closed my eyes, and before I knew it, I was dead to the world, too.

**Eric**

I woke up enveloped in Sookie's smell. I would have thought it strange if it weren't for the number of nights she'd spent in my bed. I hadn't changed my sheets since the last time she was over two days before. I rolled onto my stomach and inhaled deeply. The scent smelled fresher than it should, but maybe that was just me wishing for it. I closed my eyes and started to remember a dream I'd had. In it, I was sound asleep and Sookie snuck in to sleep next to me. We didn't talk at all, and there were no attempts from either one of us to get more physical.

She just tucked herself against me, put my arm around her and went to sleep. It was the nicest dream I had in a while, even if it did leave me feeling like a total fuck up. We needed to talk. I'd given her the space to deal with her friend's breakdown, but now we needed to get our own shit straight. I didn't want her seeing anyone else. I didn't want to see anyone else. I wanted her and that's it. It was time she knew it.

I rolled onto my back and listened for other noises in the house to see who was up and about. I heard water running in the bathroom down the hall, so that meant either Jake or Mini were up because no way was Luke up before eleven. I pushed myself out of bed and headed down the stairs. Jake's bedroom door was wide open. The bed was made, probably by Jake himself. I liked Mini, but she was a bit of a hurricane. She definitely wasn't a bed maker.

I thumped my way down the stairs and into the kitchen. Jake was sitting at the table eating what I assumed was an egg white omlette with spinach and whole wheat toast with a side of yogurt and granola. He was also drinking iced green tea. My brother was a fruity bastard.

"I don't know how you eat that." I shook my head as I went to pour myself a cup of coffee.

"It's healthy. It gives me energy." He said without looking up from whatever he was reading.

"Yeah, sure. Great." I didn't really want a lecture on my diet, or how I was "defiling my temple" by indulging in animal fats. "Is that Mini in the shower?"

"I wish you wouldn't call her that." Jake shook his head.

"Bro, she's half your size. Literally. I could call her Pint, if you prefer." I smirked over my coffee mug.

Jake growled at me, a trait the three of us shared when it came to anyone messing with our girls. "You could just call her by her actual name."

"I could, but what fun would that be? Did she say anything to you about me calling her Mini?" I asked just to be on the safe side. If it was Laura that had a problem with it, I'd stop, but she'd never shown any signs of it bothering her before.

"No, but that's not the point."

"So it bothers you?"

"Yes, it bothers me!" Jake said as if that should be obvious. It probably should have been, but I liked fucking with my brother. He was too easy a mark. Always had been.

I decided to borrow one of Pam's favorite lines and told him to change his tampon and get over it. I went about making my own breakfast- a bowl of Frosted Flakes with banana slices in it- before asking after Luke.

"I didn't see him in his room before I came down."

Jake fought to hide a smile before saying, "That's because Luke went on a binge after you went up to bed."

"Great. He didn't puke on the rug again, did he?" I groaned at the memory of the previous summer.

He'd had about a dozen too many shots of Wild Turkey before he chucked all over a throw rug in the living room. He looked up at me with a straight face and said, "I got your rug all wet."

Sookie had died in hysterics while I was left to clean up my brother's vomit. I would have left it, except it wasn't a pleasant smell, and letting it sit overnight wasn't going to make it smell any better. I did, however, let Luke sleep in the wet spot he'd left behind. Served the fucker right, as far as I was concerned.

"No, he didn't puke on the rug again." Jake shook his head while that grin he was trying so desperately to suppress spread across his face.

"Then where is he?"

"He's passed out on the couch, I think. Unless he fell off in his sleep. I wouldn't be surprised if he did." Jake shrugged.

"Great." I set down my bowl and headed for the kitchen.

Jake, in all his khaki and polo glory, appeared at my side just as I was getting my first good look at my baby brother. He was sprawled out on his back. His clothes were all fucked up. Someone had twisted his shirt up and looped it through the neckline. His hair had been styled in a really fucked up way so he looked sort of like Velma from Scooby Doo. But the best part was, he was in full makeup. His eyebrows had been drawn on with what I assumed to be permanent marker, and there was even a Cindy Crawford mole above his lip.

"Holy shit." I said under my breath. I looked over at Jake who was beaming. "Did you do this?"

"Nope, not me." He held up his hands in surrender.

"Mini?" My eyes widened. Jake just nodded. "Shit, bro, you need to put a ring on that girl's finger. You're never gonna find a more awesome chick."

Jake proceeded to tell me how after Luke had finished off his first six pack, he started prancing around to some Lady Gaga song that came up on Mini's iPod. He'd made a complete fool of himself, bumping and grinding up against furniture and the archway until he collapsed on the couch. Since he was out cold, Mini decided to have a little fun with him. The fucked up part was, Luke was so drunk it would be easy to convince him the whole thing was his idea.

"You want to know the best part?" Jake was grinning from ear to ear by then. "I got it all on video."

"Fuck yeah! Where is it? I'm playing it at the bar next time he comes in!" I busted out laughing.

"I'm loading it onto my laptop as we speak. It'll be on youtube shortly." He held out his fist for me to bump.

"You know, just when I think you're a lost cause douche, you do something devious like this." I bumped my fist to Jake's.

Small footsteps came down the stairs, and then Mini appeared between the two of us with a proud smile on her face. "He's my pride and joy, he is." She wiped a fake tear for her eye.

"You're my fucking hero, Mini." I wrapped an arm around her before her boyfriend could, and lead her back to the kitchen.

Jake growled from behind us. "Oh cut that shit out, Northman. Your brother's not copping a feel. Although, I do have the boobs for it." Mini stuck her chest out and I just laughed.

"Not funny, Laura." Jake pouted behind us.

I winked at Laura and said, "Face it, bro, Mini is stacked."

"I'm going to remember this conversation the next time I see Sookie in a bikini." Jake threatened, and that brought all the teasing to a screeching halt.

"Speaking of Sookie, how'd it go last night? You looked a bit upset when you came in." Laura hopped up on the counter and poured herself some coffee. I swear there was more sugar in that mug than actual coffee.

"She said she wants to see other people." I couldn't make eye contact with either one of them. "I don't really want to talk about it."

Thankfully neither of them pushed. I looked over toward Sookie's cottage and was surprised to see her car already gone. I had no idea where she'd disappeared to. I was a little pissed she'd left without coming to talk to me. Then it occurred to me that maybe just Amelia had left. I finished my coffee and cereal and headed across the driveway to Sookie's.

I looked through the sliding glass door of her living room, but there was no one there. I knocked and waited, but nothing changed. Hoping that Sookie was still asleep, I went around to the door that lead to her bedroom and knocked again. I tried to open the door, but it was locked. I leaned my forehead against the door for a moment before going back to the house. As I was walking back I noticed a piece of paper stuck under one of the wiper blades on my car.

I walked over and pulled the piece of paper up, expecting to see a note from Sookie promising she would catch up with me later. I was wrong.

*Eric,*

*I know you said midnight rides were out, but if you ever need a friend, you know where to find me.*

*Jessica*

I crumple the note and dropped it in the garbage can on the way into the house. I so didn't need to get involved with a teenager. Sookie was difficult enough.

Okay, so do we hate Sookie a little less now that we know she wasn't trying to make Eric jealous by talking to, or kissing, Alcide? Ahhhh the lack of communication and bad timing is just epic, isn't it? \*sigh\* Only 2 more chapters of this nonsense to go. I promise!

**Chapter 11: Communication Breakdown**

Chapter 11: Communication Breakdown

**Sookie**

I snuck out of Eric's house just before the sun came up. I'd only gotten maybe four hours of sleep, but they were four good hours. I brushed a kiss over his lips very gently before peeling myself out of bed. I went back to my own house and got into my own bed. It took a few minutes, but I fell back asleep when I found Eric's scent on one of the pillows. I cuddled it close the same as he'd done in his own bed, and let myself drift off.

I woke to the sound of Amelia banging around in the kitchen. Shockingly enough, she didn't want to talk about Tray, or what had caused her breakdown the night before. She just wanted to move forward and get her life back on track. Her plan was to have breakfast, and then spend the day walking around the downtown area of the small resort town we were staying in. I agreed with that, since I didn't want Amelia to be alone.

I'd catch up with Eric later so we could finish talking about whatever we were, or weren't, to each other. Besides, taking the day to think it over, or not think about it at all, might be a good thing. So, we had a breakfast of blueberry pancakes and sausage. We both showered and then headed into town. We went from antique to antique store. We stopped at the farmer's market for more fresh produce. We looked around at all of the little gift shops. By lunchtime we were starving.

We stopped at a little diner called The Sugarbowl that had been recommended to me several times over by various people around town. I was just digging into my breakfast for lunch when I noticed Alcide walking into the diner. I nearly choked on my mouthful of hash-browns. I'd hoped maybe he looked better to me because the lights at Loki's were dim, and I was slightly impaired by three cocktails. Yeah, no such luck. Alcide was fucking hot.

"What's wrong?" Amelia looked a little panicked.

I jerked my head in Alcide's direction as he took a seat at the counter. "Holy fucksticks!" Amelia said a little too loud, garnering us the attention of half the diners in the restaurant. I kicked her under the table. "What? He's hottie. Is that the guy who was buying you drinks last night?"

"How'd you know about that?" I sure as shit hadn't told her, and she was already off with Pam somewhere by the time my drink arrived.

"Luke told me before we left. Apparently, Eric failed to mention he was leaving the bar after he saw you macking on Curly, over there." Amelia nodded toward Alcide.

I groaned and covered my face with my hands. "Great. I'm sure Pam's really happy with me right now."

"Oh please. Pam's the least of your worries. From what I heard, Eric lost his shit and Laura had to take him for a walk to cool him down before he broke a pool stick over his knee and clobbered your new kissing partner." Amelia explained.

"Shit." I muttered. "I didn't know he saw that much."

"You know, you two really need to work on your communication skills." Amelia took a bite of the honeydew hanging off her fork.

"Yeah, I'm aware." I stabbed ruthlessly at the unsuspecting eggs on my plate.

"So what are you doing here with me when you should be smoothing things over with Eric?"

"Excuse me, but who said I needed to smooth anything over with anyone?"

"Please, Sookie, don't even try that nonchalant bullshit with me, okay? I know you. I know the difference between Sookie with an interest, and Sookie who is smitten. And you, my dearest, darlingest roommate, are so far beyond smitten with Eric it's amazing I can keep down my lunch. Yes, Curly is damn fine, and I don't blame you for wanting to break yourself off a piece of him, but is it really worth it?" Amelia nibbled on her fruit.

I just glared at her for a minute. "Alcide isn't interested in me like that."

"Oh really? Because from what I heard, he was trying to suck your tongue down his throat in the middle of Eric's bar." She arched an eyebrow at me.

"Well, okay, yeah, that happened." I agreed.

"And you don't think that didn't hurt Eric's feelings even a little bit, whether or not it's "against the rules" of whatever it is you two have going?"

"If you would shush your piehole for more than two seconds at a time, maybe I could tell you what happened last night." I suggested.

"Fine. Fill me in." Amelia concentrated on eating while I told her what had happened after she split off from our group to go talk to Pam.

She listened and nodded, interrupting me briefly once or twice to ask questions. I explained everything to her as best I could, and then she told me what she'd heard from Eric's brothers. There wasn't a whole lot she could tell me that I didn't already know about the night before, but knowing that he'd been so upset about seeing me with Alcide made my insides twist. I didn't mean to hurt Eric. And then to make matters worse, I had to go and suggest we see other people?

I was on the verge of tears when Alcide spotted me. "Oh fuck my life." I mumbled quietly when he got off his stool at the counter and started walking toward me.

"I'll just go to the little girl's room." Amelia slid out of the booth and disappeared around the corner to where the bathrooms were.

"Mind if I take a seat?" Alcide pointed to Amelia's side of the booth.

"No, of course not." I offered a weak smile.

"So, how was the rest of your night?" Alcide asked once he was sitting across from me.

"I've had better nights." I pressed my lips together.

"Yeah, I heard this morning that you and Northman have something going on. If I would have known that last night, I wouldn't have bothered you." He looked down at his hands.

"Oh, please, don't worry about that. I don't really know how to describe what's going on with Eric and me these days. We're not exclusive, though, so it's fine." It wasn't fine. It wasn't anywhere within light years of fine, but I wasn't going to blame Alcide for any of this.

"Still, I feel bad. I hope I didn't cause you any trouble." He said hopefully with a shy smile.

There was a gentleness to Alcide I wouldn't have expected from a man of his size and stature. His skin was already bronzed from working outdoors every day. His dark hair was matted from wearing a hard hat. He was dressed in a pair of stained, roughed up jeans and work boots. He'd pulled a flannel on over it, but I could see he was wearing a tight tank top underneath that very clearly showed the lines of his body. He was as ripped as Eric. God, he was delicious. Yet, I felt absolutely nothing when I looked at him.

"It's fine." I assured him, even though it really wasn't. "How was the rest of your night?"

"Boring." He admitted with a smile that probably made hearts flutter all the time. Me? Nada. Zip. Zilch.

"So no calls from Debbie?" I wrinkled my nose.

"No. I'm starting to think maybe it's better if I just let it go. I'm sure I'll always love her, but if she wanted to be with me she would." He shrugged.

So I potentially fucked up a good thing with Eric for nothing. Great. Fantastic. I'm a fucking tool. "You've gotta do what's best for you, Alcide. You're a good guy. You'll find someone."

"Actually, I think I have." The way he smiled at me told me everything.

I slapped on my emergency smile, terrified of where this was going. "Oh yeah?"

"Yeah. She's great. She's got a great smile and an awesome sense of adventure. She also seems really sweet and fun to be around." He was looking at me with moon eyes. Fuck my life.

"That's great." I nodded, praying to God I was reading him all wrong. I was acting clueless on purpose, hoping he would get the hint that I didn't see him the same way.

"I was hoping she'd go out with me one night this week if she's not busy."

Oh no. He wasn't getting the hint. I was internally banging my head against the wall, cursing myself for letting him sit down.

"You should ask her." Did those words really leave my mouth? Why yes, yes they did. I. Am. A. Tool.

Alcide chuckled nervously and looked me up and down. "I think I will."

"Good." I started pushing my food around my plate, no longer hungry.

"Well, I have to get back to work, but hopefully I'll see you around sometime." He pushed himself out of the booth.

"Yeah, that would be nice." Just because I wasn't interested in him, it didn't mean I had to be rude.

Just then Eric walked into the diner. Oh, hell. Could this possibly get any worse? I realized right then I should *never* tempt the fates. He took one look at Alcide staring down at me with those big moon eyes of his roaming my body, and Eric turned bright red with anger. I heard Alcide talking, but I was so focused on Eric at the other side of the restaurant that I didn't hear what he was saying.

"So, Sookie, do you want to go out with me sometime?" Alcide's question finally got my attention.

My eyes lingered on Eric's, trying to figure out what the right thing to do was. I watched him pay for a to-go order and quickly pocket his change. With a harsh glare in my direction, Eric whirled around, threw the door open and stomped out of the restaurant. I slumped in my seat. Fuck. Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

"Sookie?" Alcide put a warm hand on my shoulder.

I looked up at him, completely lost for words while I tried to figure out what my answer was.

**Eric**

Nothing cured a hangover quite like the Spanish Prisoner Skillet at The Sugarbowl. Since Luke was nursing the worst hangover since Lisa Marie Presley married Michael Jackson, I volunteered to go into town to pick it up for him. I was also hoping I'd run into Sookie. I got my fucking wish when I saw her having lunch with Alcide.

She sure didn't waste any time on this seeing other people shit, did she? The fucked up part was, she saw me standing there and she did nothing but look guilty. She didn't excuse herself to come talk to me. She didn't tell Alcide to get lost. She didn't wave me over. She just sat there staring like I was a ghost. Yeah, the ghost of someone whose heart she tore out and stomped all over.

Okay, so that wasn't exactly fair to her. I was the pussy who didn't tell her how I felt. I had plenty of chances and I fucked every single one of them up. Now she was moving on. I had no one to blame for this but myself. I paid for Luke's breakfast and stormed out of the diner before I completely lost my shit and tackled the guy.

It was while I driving home at speeds that definitely exceeded the posted limit, that I realized she probably never felt the same way about me as I did about her. If she did, there was no way she could be moving on so fast. Just the idea of hanging out with someone that wasn't her made my stomach turn. I couldn't even think about sleeping with someone else. Man, I was fucked.

By the time I got back to the house Luke was showered up. His new eyebrows- which were navy blue and very Groucho Marx- were still in tact thanks to the marker used to draw them on. It was going to take acetone to get it off and I didn't have any of that in the house. If he was lucky, Sookie or Amelia would take pity on him to spare him from having to go to the grocery store looking like Super Douche.

"About time, bro. What took so long?" Luke asked when I walked through the door with his breakfast.

"You're welcome, asswagon." I dropped the to-go container on the coffee table in front of him.

"Hey! That's Mr. Asswagon to you." Luke reached for the container and flipped the lid open. He took a deep breath and smiled. "You know, a breakfast like this makes a hangover worthwhile."

"It tastes just as good when your liver isn't losing its ability to function properly." I informed him.

He just shrugged and started piling eggs, rice, beans, chorizo, pico de gallo, guacamole and sour cream onto a tortilla. I have to admit, my mouth started watering a bit. That skillet really was the best fucking breakfast I ever had. Well, except for that one time I ate crapes off of Sookie's stomach, but I really couldn't think about that at the moment. Not after what I saw at the dinner.

"So why do you look like someone just stole your favorite dolly?" Luke teased while he stuffed his face.

"I saw Sookie at the diner." I admitted. If I was going to talk to anyone about this, it was going to be Luke. Besides, I figured I owed him one for being such a prick to him.

"Yeah, so? The girl's gotta eat." He shrugged.

"She was having lunch with Asshole."

"Asshole?"

"Alcide."

"Clever."

"Eat your fucking breakfast." I snapped at him. He took another bite and moaned appreciatively. "Anyway, she was having lunch with him. She saw me standing there and she didn't do anything but stare at me."

"What was she supposed to do, Eric?" He sat back, bringing his container with him. When I tried to pick a piece of chorizo out, he swung the container away. "Mine." He growled.

"She could have said something."

"Riiiiight." Luke shoved more burrito into his mouth. "As if you two aren't having a weird enough time already, you wanted her to invite you over so you could inspect the new guy? I don't think so, bro. Welcome to the world of being an ex-boyfriend."

"I'm not her ex." I grumbled.

"Would you get your head out of your ass already? Seriously. No wonder she's having lunch with other guys! One minute you're in love with her and the next you're pretending she doesn't exist. I'm no expert on women, Eric, but if you think she's just going to sit around and wait forever while you make up your mind about what you want, you're going to lose her. Oh, wait, you already did."

"You're not helping."

"Because I'm not blowing smoke up your ass?" Luke was a little too alert for someone with a hangover. "If you want someone to mope with you, it's not me. I never would have let Sookie wonder what the hell I wanted from her, but then I never bought into that friends with benefits shit. It's a cop out."

"It worked just fine last summer."

"Worked so well you were in love with her by the time she came back this year. Look, if you want her, you're going to have to fight for her. I know you're not used to it, but if she's worth it, you'll do whatever it takes to convince her that you're serious about her. It's all up to you, my brother."

I sat back and closed my eyes. Then I remembered I had to meet the beer guy and I hauled my ass off the couch. I was just stepping outside when Sookie and Amelia pulled up to the cottage. I quickly went the other way to get in my car and head to work. I gunned the engine longer than necessary before putting the car in gear and backing away from the house so I could turn around.

I made it a point not to look at Sookie as I drove past her. Not because I didn't want to, but because I knew if I did I would never get to work, and I needed to figure out my next move.

**Sookie**

I was laying out on the beach when Laura stepped up beside me. "Is this sand taken?"

"No, not at all." I smiled at her. "How's it going over in the nuthouse?"

She smirked and said, "You haven't seen Luke yet, have you?"

I almost told her I had, but stopped myself. "No, not yet. Why?"

"He got a little makeover last night." She giggled devilishly.

"Oh, sweet Jesus, what did the boys do to him?"

"Nothing. It was all me." She said with pride.

My jaw dropped. *Laura* was the one who did all that? "Be careful. Things like that will get you engaged to one of them."

She laughed loudly and said, "It's disgusting how proud of me they are, even Luke. You'll have to see the video Jakob took. It's on youtube."

"Oh my." I laughed.

"Indeed." Laura spread out her towel and laid down next to me. "So you're from the south, right?"

"That I am." I put a little extra drawl in my voice.

It was nice to get into a conversation that had nothing to do with Eric or all of the drama that was going on. It turned out Laura was originally from Ireland and had moved to the States for college. She'd lived in New York while she attended Columbia. She'd worked for a small public relations firm for a while before she got hooked up with one of those celebrity web blogs, but then she decided to try her hand at writing. She was currently working on her first novel, but it wasn't going so well. She'd started a blog of her own about her travels in the states, and it had a pretty strong following.

"Too bad it doesn't pay, or I'd do it full-time." She complained before turning over.

"Well, if you picked up a sponsor it would, right?"

"I don't know. I haven't done much research on it yet. I suppose I should. I'm not sure the novel is going to go anywhere. I think that was just a pipe dream." She shrugged. "What about you? What's your game plan when you get back to Louisiana?"

"Honestly? I have no idea. I think I might go back and get my masters or something. I like school. I'm good at it. Besides, I'm not sure I want to do what I studied to do."

"And what's that?"

"Criminal profiling. I have a slight obsession with The Silence of the Lambs, but I don't know if I really want to spend my life getting in other people's heads anymore. Most days I think I'd like to teach kindergarten or work in a library."

"That's quite a change from working with deranged serial killers and maniacs."

"It is." I nodded my agreement. "I just think I've seen enough of the bad side of life for a while. The worst you see with kindergartners are kids who cut their own hair or don't understand why they can't eat the paste."

She laughed appreciatively. "Have you given any thought to maybe staying up here?"

Her question was completely innocent. I hadn't mentioned to anyone that I was thinking of staying. I took a deep breath and blew it out slowly. "Before everything went to shit with Eric, I was thinking about it."

She made a face I didn't quite know how to interpret. "You know he and I had a chat last night when he saw you having drinks with that other piece of man candy?"

"That's what Amelia told me when we were at lunch earlier."

"I can't tell you what all was said when we talked, but he told me about how you got together in the first place. Without knowing your side of things, it seems to me maybe you both had feelings for each other from the start that you just weren't ready to process yet. It makes sense. He's a few years older, a little more settled in his life but he's such a Peter Pan in a lot of ways. And you're still trying to figure it all out. I get it. But I'll ask you the same question I asked him, if you don't mind." She propped herself up on her elbows.

"Fire away."

"If you never got to have sex with Eric again, would you still want him around?" I knew she wasn't expecting me to answer her, it was just something for me to think about.

"That's a good question."

"I thought so." She smiled into the distance.

"Oh. My. God." I burst out laughing as Luke came jogging toward us in his swim trunks. Laura saw what I was looking at, and her laughter mixed with mine. "You're my hero."

Laura turned toward me with a gentler smile on her face and said, "Funny. That's exactly what Eric said."

Only one more chapter of crazy angst to go. Hold on, baby birds, we're almost in the clear. Thanks for reading!

**Chapter 12: Piece of My Heart**

Okay, this is another short chapter, and it ends on a cliffhanger of sorts. You'll probably hate me for this, but I'm going to make it up to you by posting chapter 13 before work in the morning, so you don't have to wait too long for an update. Sound fair? Good. Now go forth and curse these two knuckleheads for having their asshats on too tight, as **TeaCupHuman** has said.

Chapter 12: Piece of My Heart

**Eric**

Considering Sookie was living next door to me, I didn't see at all for the next few days. She made a point of being out of the house by the time I got up every morning and not getting home until after she knew I'd be at the bar. I couldn't say for certain she was avoiding me on purpose, but the fact that she didn't come to visit me at Loki's pretty much decided it.

It just so happened that one of my waitresses was at the Sugarbowl the day I saw Sookie there. She overheard Alcide ask Sookie out on a date, but didn't get to hear what Sookie's answer was because her toddler chose that moment to have a nuclear meltdown. I vaguely recalled hearing a child's piercing scream as I stormed out of the restaurant, so I believed her when she said she didn't know what Sookie's verdict was.

I wanted to ask Amelia since I couldn't seem to get a hold of Sookie, but I figured that was a douchey way of handling my problem. I needed to confront Sookie once and for all. While I didn't take rejection well, I decided purgatory was even worse. Being trapped in limbo knowing how I felt just sucked up one side and down the other.

I made up my mind that enough was enough. I was going to do whatever I had to to get her to talk to me. We needed to settle things once and for all. So, I bargained with Pam to get the night off, and made it very clear I wanted the house to myself until at least midnight. I figured that would give Sookie and I plenty of time to talk out whatever our issues were. If things went the way I wanted them to, it would give us plenty of time to make up as well.

To say I was missing the sex would be an understatement, but it wasn't even about that. I kept thinking about the things Mini had said while we were sitting on the beach. I loved Sookie, sex or not. Not being able to have a simple conversation with her, or hear her laugh at some stupid joke was torture. I hated feeling so distanced from her when we were so close.

I prepared myself for all possible outcomes. I just needed an answer from her one way or another. So, I located my balls, since they had mysteriously vanished, and headed over to Sookie's cottage. I knocked on the aluminum siding of the house. Amelia looked over and smiled at me while she waved me in.

"Hey, Eric! I thought you'd be at the bar?"

"No, I uh, I took the night off. Is Sookie around?"

"Yeah, she's in the shower, actually. Come on in." She nodded toward the back of the house.

I slid the screen door open and stepped into the cottage. "I'm glad I caught her. You two have been busy lately."

"She's had a lot on her mind." Amelia said a little glumly.

"I fucked up." I admitted right away since it was true.

"Yeah, you did, but you're not the only one. Believe me." Amelia shifted on the couch to make room for me. "Listen, I um, I'm probably not supposed to tell you this, but Sookie's already got plans for tonight."

"Oh?"

"Yeah, she's got a date with Alcide."

My heart sank, then shattered. "Right. Of course she does." I stood up to go.

"Eric, wait. Don't leave like this. Stay and talk to her. I know she wants to talk to you. She's just really, really scared."

"Scared? Of me? Why would she be scared of me?"

Amelia sighed and patted the couch. She moved a little closer and put the TV on mute. Water was still running at the back of the house. She took a deep breath and then started.

"What did she tell you about Bill Compton?"

"Who the hell is he?"

Amelia snickered and said, "Bill is the reason she's all fucked up. They dated for a few years while she was in college. They broke up not too long before she came up here last summer. She thought she was going to marry him and he was cheating on her pretty much the entire time they were together. She actually caught him with another woman once. Ever since then, she hasn't really wanted to be in a relationship. She tried to get back out there, but every time she'd get close to someone she'd make a run for it. I'm telling you all this because I've seen how different she is when she talks about you. She's going to keep on running because she's comfortable with it, but I know if you catch her, she'll stop. Just don't let her run anymore, and trust me, it'll be worth it."

I absorbed the information I was being given. "She's got a date with someone else."

"So ask her not to go." Amelia shrugged.

"Isn't that a douchey thing to do?"

"Boy, are you listening to me, or are you just as pigheaded as that woman of yours?" Amelia rolled her eyes and shook her head. "You two are perfect for each other, I swear."

"You lost me."

"She has feelings for you, you idiot!" She said a little louder than she intended, then clamped her hands over her mouth.

She did? Sookie had feelings for me? Then why the hell was she dating...oh! OH! All of a sudden it all made sense.

"So you really think it's as simple as asking her not to go out with Asshole- I mean, Alcide?"

Amelia giggled and said, "In all fairness, *Alcide's* a nice guy. The thing is, he's hung up on his ex. I think Sookie's doing it because she's lonely and so is he. I don't think he's real competition for you."

Well that certainly made me fell better. Not perfect, but better. "Thanks, Amelia."

"You breathe one word of this conversation to her at any point, I swear to God you will wish you were never born. Pam will make sure of it." She threatened me.

"My lips are sealed."

"Good." The water turned off in the back. "Wait here and I'll go tell Sookie you want to speak to her."

I nodded my assent while Amelia headed into the back of the house. I drummed my fingers on my leg and tried not to let my heart going into jackrabbit on speed rhythm while I waited.

**Sookie**

I stepped out of the shower and looked at myself in the mirror. I barely recognized the girl looking back at me. I'd accepted Alcide's invitation after we ran into each other at the grocery store two days after he asked me out the first time. He was so genuine and sweet, I couldn't help but say yes. I knew it wasn't going to go anywhere, but it would get me out of the house for a while. I was avoiding Eric, which was probably the dumbest thing I ever did, but I just figured he probably didn't want to talk to me too much. He would have found me if he did, right?

There was a knock on the bathroom door and then Amelia peeked her head in. "Hey, I know you're getting ready, but Eric's here. He wants to talk to you."

I groaned and said, "Ame, now's not really a good time. Alcide's going to be here in a half an hour and the conversation Eric and I need to have is going to take much longer than that."

"I know, I know, but Sook, he's miserable. I can tell he feels really shitty about what's been going on. Just give him a chance." Amelia pleaded with me.

I exhaled loudly and said, "Fine. Give me a minute and then send him back here."

Amelia burst into the bathroom to hug me. Thank God my towel was still wrapped around me when she let go. I followed her out of the bathroom and closed the door behind her. I finished drying off quickly and then pulled on my robe since I wasn't going to put on my dress until my hair was dry. A few seconds later Eric knocked on my door.

"Come in!" I called out while getting my brush from the bathroom.

My throat went dry and my voice got weird. I hadn't seen Eric since the run in at the diner. I missed him. He was the first thing I thought of when I woke up and the last thing I thought of before I went to sleep, and I'm pretty sure I thought of him a million times in between.

"Sookie?" He called out to me, and his voice went straight to my lady business just like it always did.

"Be right out." I braced myself on the sink, took a few deep breaths and said a silent prayer that I wouldn't fuck this up.

I grabbed my brush and started to pull it through my hair as I walked out of the bathroom. The second I saw him, I stopped. Good gravy he looked amazing, but then he always did. He was wearing pair of tight jeans and a fitted tee that left nothing to the imagination. If Alcide was fucksticks, Eric was sex pancakes. *Okay, heart, settle down now*, I told myself. Yeah, it didn't work.

"How've you been?" Eric asked.

"Been better." I didn't want to lie, but I didn't want to completely bum him out by telling him I missed him like crazy. "You?"

"My life has sucked exponentially the last few days. I feel like I really fucked up a good thing when I could have prevented a lot of the shit that's happened between us." Eric said honestly.

"Yeah, well, it takes two, right? You didn't fuck it all up yourself." I admitted, and felt a little bit better just for saying it.

"True, but I should have fought harder for you. You deserve that. I *want* to fight harder for you." He confessed, and I swear to God, my heart stopped all over again.

"You do?" I squeaked.

"Yeah, I do."

I took a deep breath and held it for a few seconds before slowly blowing it out again. "Eric, I have a date tonight."

"I heard." He nodded.

"Is that why you're here? Because you don't want me to be with anyone else?"

"I came here for you. I'm not trying to stick it to someone else, or pull any of that possessive caveman shit on you. I came here because I care about you and I want to work things out." Eric reached for my hand.

The second he touched me, I wanted to melt. His hand on me felt right. And I missed him. God, did I miss him. I hadn't felt like myself for days. I wasn't sleeping well, and every time I looked over at his house I got all teary eyed. But I was also terrified. I didn't see it right away, but I was afraid of really letting him in. It took a lot of talking with Amelia and even more soul searching to figure it out, but I'd come to the conclusion that if I let Eric in and it didn't work out, it was going to destroy me. Keeping him at arm's length sucked, but it was better than the complete devastation I would be facing if we couldn't make it work. It was just better for my heart if I didn't go there.

"Eric, I..." I realized I had a very clear choice to make right then and there, and I was going to have to live with that choice. I could tell him I didn't feel the same, and that would be it. Or I could give him the chance he was asking for, and risk losing him eventually anyway.

Thank God my cell phone rang right then, saving me from making that choice. I scrambled across the room to my night stand to answer the call. It was Alcide calling to tell me he was on his way. I tried to sound normal, and I was thankful he didn't know me well enough yet to know what normal sounded like. I hung up and put my phone on my bed.

"Eric, listen, I have to finish getting ready. Alcide's going to be here soon." I couldn't look at him.

"Right. Of course. I shouldn't have come."

"No, Eric, wait." I reached out for him when he walked toward the door that lead to the deck. "I'm glad you came. It's just not the right time."

"Yeah. Got it. Have fun tonight, Sookie." He said and then walked out.

When he walked out, it was like he took all the air with him. I couldn't breathe. I slumped against the wall and I knew right then I was making another mistake. With shaking hands and a clearer conscience, I started getting ready for my date. There was no turning back.

**Eric**

Well that was a kick in the balls. No wonder they went into hiding. I seriously considered getting in my car, going up to Loki's and getting completely shitfaced and going home with some random barfly. I paced the kitchen but had to be elsewhere when I saw Alcide's truck drive up. I couldn't watch Sookie leave with him. I just couldn't do it. Thank God there was no one home to witness my cowardice. My brothers never would have let me live that shit down.

I hid out in my house until I heard Alcide's truck drive away. My hands were shaking and I didn't know if it was because I was pissed, or because I was so far beyond broken it was disgusting. How the fuck had Sookie gotten so deep under my skin? I had no idea how or when it happened. I grabbed my keys off the counter and flung the kitchen door open. Barflies and tequila, here I come.

Only I wasn't alone. Sookie was standing there on the porch.

"Surprise." She said weakly.

\*gasp\* She didn't go on the date with Alcide! Now you just have to wait until morning to see how this all shakes out. I'll give you a hint \*whispers\* the tangy flavor of citrus in involved. Thanks for reading, baby birds!

**Chapter 13: Apologies**

Yay! The resolution to of all the angst! You can now take off your angst bonnets, bibs and/or blankets. Your reward for making it through it all is an extra long chapter full of Tropicana Pure Premium goodness. This is most definitely not safe for work. You've been warned.

Chapter 13: Apologies

**Sookie**

I was outside waiting for Alcide by the time his truck came to a stop in front of the cottage. I didn't even want him to have a chance to get out of the truck before I got in it. I moved quickly enough that I got my way. I hopped right in like I belonged there.

"Well aren't you eager?" He laughed before complimenting me on my dress.

"Thank you, Alcide." I gave a genuine smile. My nerves bounding around my stomach felt like Brontosaurs' with swinging tails, but it wasn't because of what I had to say to Alcide. "Listen, I've changed my mind about our date."

He looked rightfully dumbfounded. "You have?"

"Yes."

"And you couldn't have told me this when I called?" He sounded only mildly peeved.

"I didn't know I'd changed my mind then. It was split second decision, but one I should have made a long time ago. It's complicated."

"It's Northman, isn't it?"

I sighed and said, "That's not really important, but yes, it's because of Eric."

"You got feelings for him, right?"

"If it's all the same, Alcide, I'd rather not discuss it at the moment. Just... I just wanted you to know it's not because of you or something. It's nothing you did."

"You just want someone else. I gotcha." He said bitterly, and mumbled, "Just like Debbie."

"Hey! Now that isn't fair, and you don't know me, or the situation I'm in, well enough to pass that kind of judgment. Not every woman is going to be awful to you like Debbie was. You'll find someone who wants to be with you every bit as much as you want to be with her." I insisted.

"Oh yeah?" He snorted. "And how do you know that?"

I beamed the biggest smile I'd ever smiled in my life, and it came straight from my heart. "Because I had a Debbie of my own once who flaunted his affairs all over town and didn't care that he was making a fool of me in the process. He didn't give a flying fuck that he was breaking my heart, and when I got up the guts to leave him, he told me no one else was going to want someone as damaged as me. For a long time I believed that. Then I met Eric. Believe me when I say that he wants me every bit as much as I want him, only we've been too dumb to see it until tonight. I need him, Alcide. I can't turn my back on that. I'm sorry if I hurt you." I leaned over and kissed his cheek before opening the truck door and sliding out.

He sat there for a moment, lost in his own thoughts, before starting up his truck. I offered a shy wave as he started to back away, but then he brought the truck to a stop. He rolled down the passenger's side window and called out, "Can we still be friends?"

I giggled and said, "Yes, we can. I'd like that very much."

He nodded respectfully, and the continued to back away from the cottage. I watched until his tail lights disappeared, and then I started toward Eric's house. I saw him moving quickly around the kitchen I took a few deep breaths and was just about to knock when the door flew wide open. Eric stared down at me with a stunned expression on his face.

"Surprise." I shrugged, my voice weak with anxiety.

His eyes narrowed at me, taking in my appearance. I was wearing a white dress with red flowers on it and red heels Amelia called my 'fuck me' pumps. My hair was dry, straight and being held back by a thin white headband. I'd worn the dress once last summer for the fourth of July after the sun went down. Eric had said I looked like a candle in coal mine. I saw a flicker of something that looked to be nostalgia cross his face, before he resumed the suspicious expression he'd been sporting.

"I thought you were going out with Asshole." He closed his eyes and screwed up his face. "Sorry, I meant Alcide."

I shook my head slowly and said, "I couldn't do it." I looked up to see a hint of relief on Eric's face. "Can I come in? I have some things I need to say."

Eric pushed the screen door open and it was like he was extending an olive branch to me. My fingers grazed his on the door, and I felt that familiar shiver I got every time he touched me. *This is how it should be*, I thought to myself as I stepped into the house. It felt like I hadn't been there in years, when it had been only a few days. The door bounced shut behind me. I turned around slowly to see Eric standing in a very guarded way that only made those dinosaur tails swing a little harder. I took a deep breath, and then let it all out. All of it.

"I'm an idiot." That was how I started. "I pushed you away for all the wrong reasons, and I was making you pay for what someone else did and that's not fair. I got scared and I let that dictate my actions, but I can't keep doing that. I'm not saying it's a habit I can break overnight, but I want to try because I know you're worth that much. I know *I'm* worth that much, and the reason I know it is because of you." Yeah, so, that's when I started crying, which only made Eric flinch. He hated it when I cried. "Even when we hated each other, you were always nice to me in some way. It was in the little things you did to make up for the nasty things we'd say. You always cared and I was just too stupid to see it. When you left my room tonight, I couldn't breathe. The idea that that was it, and I'd never see you again... it tore me up. I don't know how it happened or who decided it was supposed to be this way, but it is what it is and I can keep on running from it, but it's not going to go away. So even though I'm scared to death and you probably think I'm a total whack job, I want to stay. I want to fight for you if you're still willing to fight for me because I love you."

Silence. Deafening, heart-stopping, breath-stealing silence. My eyes left his, unable to look at them because they were just too intense right then. I started to take in the fascinating pattern of the wood grain on the kitchen floor. My chest heaved with every breath I took while I waited for his response. I kept willing him to say something, but nothing happened. At first.

But then there were footsteps and hands on my face, forcing me to look up at Eric. His thumbs stroked the side of my face in such a tender way, and his eyes on mine didn't hurt anymore. I felt like I was sinking a little. Such a pretty blue I was drowning in. Then there were lips advancing downward to taste mine. He licked one of my tears away before pressing his mouth to mine. The whole world, and everything in it managed to snap into focus and then fall away completely. It was just him and me.

The kiss seemed to go on longer than I thought possible, and when it was over, I was breathless in the best way. His forehead pressed to mine. I kept my eyes open, while his closed tightly for a few seconds, but then relaxed. When his eyes opened again, he pulled back just a little, but didn't let me go.

"Everything you just said is exactly what I've been wanting to say since about two days after you got back." He kissed my forehead before continuing. "I'm sorry if I let you think I didn't want you, because that was never the case. The problem, I think, is that I've always wanted you too much and that's not something I'm used to feeling. I didn't know how to deal, and rather than taking a risk, I tried to keep you at arm's length because I figured that way I wouldn't get hurt. I was wrong. I know that now. I never wanted to hurt you, Sookie."

I nodded vigorously against him and said, "I know. I never wanted to hurt you either."

"We're a couple of fuck ups." He said, and I couldn't help but laugh.

"Yeah, I think that about covers it." I let my hands circle his wrists, which were still holding my face. "So what now?" His eyebrows wiggled and I shoved him playfully. "I'm serious, Northman!"

"So am I." He feathered little kisses on my face. "We just had one hell of a fight, lover."

Oh, my. My temperature shot up about a hundred degrees and my knees went weak. The timbre of his voice traveled down my spine and to points further south.

"Does this mean we're making up, then?" I looked up at him nervously.

"I thought we already had. Now we just need to seal the deal." Oh, there go those intense eyes of his again.

"What'd you have in mind?" I could barely get the words out. I knew damn well what he had in mind, and I sure as hell wanted it.

He let go of my face and gave me the hungriest look I'd ever seen from him. I gulped audibly, and then my jaw dropped when he held out his hand. "A handshake would be nice."

"A...wha...huh?" Stunned. He wanted a fucking *handshake*? Was he kidding me?

His eyebrows shot up into his hairline and he moved his hand a little closer to me. I didn't buy this routine for a second. I inched my hand out slowly. Yet, when my skin made contact with his, he shook my hand very slowly. His eyes stayed on mine the whole time, and when he decided we'd shook on it long enough, he raised my hand to his lips and kissed each of my knuckles. My breath caught in my throat and got stuck there.

The second I looked away from his eyes, he made his move. Remember how I said he was like a big cat? What I meant is, he's like a lion stalking his prey. I found myself tossed over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes. I would have been mad about it, but it was so unexpected, I couldn't help but squeal and laugh. Besides, my reward was staring at his ass while he made his way to the stairs.

"Eric, put me down!" I laughed.

"Not likely, lover." He slapped my ass. Oh God.

**Eric**

She came back. She loved me. She wanted the same things I did. She didn't want to run anymore. My head spun with all the things she said. It hadn't really sunk in yet what it all meant, but I was excited about it. The prospect of being committed to someone had never excited me before. Hell, the very idea was enough to send me screaming from the room. I didn't know exactly what it was about her I was so drawn to, but that didn't really matter. The important thing was, she was there and I was going to let her get away.

As if her words weren't enough, she was wearing the same dress she'd worn the night we first slept together. If it was possible she looked even more beautiful in it because now I wasn't just seeing her as a girl I wanted to fuck senseless. I loved her. It didn't dawn on me until I got her up to my bedroom that I may not have made that clear. I didn't want there to be any doubt about it whatsoever. I also didn't want to say it for the first time ever while we were having sex. To me that always seemed like just an excited utterance that came flying out because your brain was in a crazy place. I didn't want her thinking it was just some silly heat of the moment word vomit.

Her small hands reached for my shirt to pull it up and I stopped her. "Hold on a second."

"What? Did I do something wrong?" She looked scared. I didn't ever want to see her look at me like that again.

"No, you didn't do anything wrong. There's something I want to say to you, and I'm not sure it was clear downstairs. I love you. I'm *in* love with you. I'm not sure how, or when it happened, but it did, and I do. I just want to make sure we're clear on that. I love you, Sookie." I held her gaze while her eyes filled with tears again. "No crying."

She blinked once, then squeezed her eyes shut, trying to will the tears into submission. "Right. Sorry."

"You don't have to be sorry, but if you'd like to make it up to me you can do that by getting naked."

She rolled her eyes at me. "Are you sure it's not just the sex you're in love with?"

I grabbed her arm to stop her from unzipping her dress. She gasped when her eyes met mine. I was pretty sure I had an intense expression in my eyes, which as good, because I wanted her to understand that my feelings for her weren't about sex.

"I. Love. You."

She nodded slowly. "I love you, too."

I wanted to attack her. Well, no, my body wanted to attack her, but I wasn't going to do that. We'd had plenty of frenzied, animal sex. This needed to be different. I didn't want to rush it. For the first time in a long time, I was nervous. This was about so much more than just sex now. I remembered the way things had been after Sookie had left Loki's the night she met Quinn. One minute we were clawing at each other, and the next there was something more between us. We were capable of slowing down and letting deeper motions run through us.

I should have told her then how I felt. So much drama could have been avoided if I would have just told her how I felt. I wouldn't make that same mistake twice. I was determined to have my actions match the words I'd said to her. I'd told her I loved her. Now I was going to show her.

"You're not breathing." Sookie's voice broke into my musings.

I hadn't even realized I was holding my breath all that time. I sucked in some much needed oxygen and told myself to chill the fuck out. Now was not the time to panic. This should have been the easy part. We already knew we had chemistry, so that wasn't an issue. Maybe it's just because I was putting expectations on myself that I never had before.

"Your hands are shaking." I smiled brightly, happy to know I wasn't the only nervous one.

"Well you've never made love to me before." She drawled on purpose, and we both burst out laughing. "Sorry, I had to."

Turns out the laugh was exactly what we needed. There was too much between us. It was too heavy. Laughing with her felt better. It felt normal. We sobered from our laughter. She put her hand on my cheek, and I leaned into it. She drew my face down to hers slowly, and with a simple brush of her lips against mine, it began.

Just like I wanted us to, we took our time. We ended up kissing on my bed for a while. There was no frenzied urge to get naked or move things forward. We just experimented with our mouths, tasting everything we could and letting our tongues battle when we felt like it. It was calm. It was good. I tried to remember a better make out session and couldn't. Our clothes came off slowly, almost like we were taking them off when we bothered to remember they were in the way.

"Will you do something for me, lover?" I smirked down at her.

"Maybe. What'd you have in mind?" She bit her bottom lip.

I straddled her body and grabbed her hands. She looked at me curiously as I raised them over her head and wrapped her fingers around the slats of my headboard. "Keep your hands there until I tell you to let go."

Her mouth opened, ready to argue with me, but she changed her mind. Instead she nodded slowly, keeping her eyes on me as I moved. I'd let her cuff me once, and I swear, I thought she was going to kill me that night. She'd teased me within an inch of my life. It was the best kind of torture, but it was still torture. I decided now was the right time to exact my revenge. I wanted to see just how far she could go without really being restrained. She had a tendency to sink her fingers into my hair, so I doubted she'd last long. Still, I was curious.

I feathered kisses along every bit of exposed skin I could get my lips on, minus the places where I knew she wanted me to kiss her. I started all the way at her forehead and worked my way down, avoiding her lips, that spot under her ear, her breasts and then of course, her sex. I could smell how turned on she was, and it took plenty of will power not to just attack her. The horny bastard on my shoulder wanted to fuck her and get reacquainted with her second best attribute. The softer side- the one my brothers were sure to mock starting tomorrow morning- wanted to continue on with this course of taking my time.

In the end, the latter side won out because I knew if I did things just ride, the former side would be pacified as well. Sookie would eventually snap and turn the tables on me. I loved how it seemed like a flip was switched inside her. One minute she was perfectly calm and docile, content to go with whatever I had in store for her, and the next she was a wild thing. Hurricane Sookie.

By the time I got to her knees she was squirming nicely, and more than a little frustrated with me for dodging all the spots where I knew she wanted me. I paid special attention to the back of her knees. She was ticklish there.

"Eric, stop!" She tried to squirm away from me, but a nip on her inner thigh got her attention. "You're evil." She hissed.

I smirked against her skin and kept going. When I got to her feet, I kissed the top of each one, then just as slowly worked my way back up. She groaned in frustration and glared at me in an impatient way. I had no doubt she was going to get me back for this, and I looked forward to seeing how she would repay me. The only article of clothing she had on was a tiny pair of lacy red boy shorts. I planned to leave them there until the very last minute.

When I got to her thighs, she lifted her hips, expecting me to remove the offending material. Instead, I brought a hand up to push her back down onto the bed and hold her there. She groaned again and actually kicked me softly.

"I hate you." Her eyes said differently.

"You won't for long."

"Oh yeah? Well got on with it then." She pouted.

Honestly, I was impressed she'd held onto the slats as long as she had. I thought for sure she would have given up long ago. Like I said, Sookie was always full of surprises.

"Maybe I should just go home and finish myself?" Sookie lifted her head to look down at me.

I growled at the idea. "If you're going to finish yourself, you certainly won't be going home to do it."

I dipped down and kissed her through the lace that was covering her. "Yes! More!"

I chuckled at her, and the vibrations from it must have done some wonderful things because she started writhing again. Her hips bucked up toward my face. I looked up to see her knuckles were white, she was holding onto the slats so hard. She had will power when she wanted it. Stubborn girl. She wasn't one to back down from a challenge. We had that in common. I enjoyed that facet of her personality very much.

"Patience, lover." I purred against her skin, and she whimpered.

"You know I'm going to get you for this."

"Looking forward to it, love."

"I hate you." Her pout was adorable.

I continued to tease her for a while longer before finally moving up to that spot on her neck. With my body positioned over hers, she was able to grind her hips up against me to relieve some of her tension. I moved slowly from her neck to her breasts, devouring one, then the other. I honestly didn't think she would ever be able to understand just how magnificent they were. Heavy. Round. Firm. Delicious. Sexy. Mine.

Yes, she was mine. I wanted to hear her say that, but I thought it might be too soon to start using such possessive pronouns. By the time I hooked my fingers into the lace of her panties, she was rubbing her thighs together so tightly she was reluctant to part them so I could get her panties off. She did, however, and seconds later the lace was flying through the air. I kissed her glistening lower lips before using my thumbs to spread her open.

She cried out with the first pass of my tongue over her very slick heat. Her wetness had trickled down to her thighs. Further foreplay was unnecessary, I'm sure, but I wanted her taste on my tongue. There wasn't a single part of her that wasn't delectable. I put her legs over my shoulders and grabbed onto her hips. I heard her breath catch. My eyes sought hers. She was still holding onto the slats of the bed.

"Hold on, lover." I smirked, and then lowered my head.

**Sookie**

"Yes! Yes! Oh God! Eric, don't stop!" I was sweating and boneless, but it felt amazing.

After what felt like hours of torture, Eric had finally given me the relief I needed. I was so close. My heart was thumping wildly in my chest in an erratic rhythm I'd never experienced before. My heels were digging into his back. My hips rose and feel with every thrust of his fingers inside me. His tongue on my clit created the perfect counter pressure to the stroking of his fingers in my core. So close. So, so close. And then the bastard backed off. I screamed in sheer frustration.

There I was, holding onto the headboard like my life depended on it when it was Eric's life that was in danger. I'd about had it with all this teasing. Boy was going to get it. I was making a note of every single smirk and chuckle at my expense, and I planned to pay him back ten fold for it. Oh, yes, there would be revenge.

"For the love of God, Northman, either fuck me or let me finish myself!" I glared down at him. Really, was all this necessary? I wanted to stomp my foot and fold my arms over my chest in protest.

I know I could have let go of the slats, but I didn't want to give him the satisfaction. I knew I was being tested. I was just starting to compile a list of all the ways I could torture him when his head disappeared between my thighs again. I figured I could start by not giving him the loud response I knew he wanted, but my body had other ideas. I couldn't control the stream to curse words that came out of my mouth when his fingers stroked just the right spot inside me. I was close to the edge again and he knew it. He had me right where he wanted me, I'm sure.

My eyes squeezed shut, trying to will the orgasm to just come to me. I could feel him watching me even when I wasn't looking back at him, his stare was too intense. And then it all stopped again. I was going to kill him. That's it. No sexual torture for him, just pure death. I opened my eyes to glare him, prepared to let him have it.

But before I could say what was on my mind, I felt him release my thighs. He moved up my body quickly so we were face to face. "You can let go now, lover."

My hands released the slats of the headboard. My arms were a numb from being over my head for so long, but that didn't stop me from reaching between us. I wrapped my hand around his extremely hard length, and stroked him in a teasing way. My thumb circled the tip and spread the drip of moisture there on the down stroke. His eyes closed like he was trying to concentrate, and it made me smirk.

"You close, baby?" I purred in a teasing way.

"Baby?" His eyes flew open, clearly unimpressed with that particular pet name. We could work on that later.

I continued to stroke him, occasionally raising my hips to let him brush against my center. He groaned at the contact with the heat between my thighs. He was letting me tease him so it didn't count, as far as I was concerned.

"Sookie..." His voice was strained. He was getting close.

"Patience, lover." I stretched forward and bit his nipple just hard enough for him to feel it.

He growled and then flipped us over so I straddling him. His hands grabbed my hips and held me up. I positioned him at just the right angle. Our eyes met, and as he slowly lowered me down onto him, I leaned forward and whispered in his ear.

"I love you, Eric." My words brought his hips rushing up to meet mine.

He filled me swiftly. Finally! I cried out and gave him a squeeze from the inside. He let out a strangled sound of his own when I started to rock my hips against his. We found a slow rhythm at first that had us both panting and straining to hold off the rush of feelings we were both experiencing. He sat up so we were eye to eye again, and wrapped an arm around my back. He managed to roll us over again without pulling out of me. My legs circled his waist and my hands ran up and down his back. His thrusts picked up in speed and intensity, drilling into me, pounding me harder and harder against the mattress.

I let my knees go higher up his torso, getting him deeper inside me. Our mouths met in kisses that became more heated and demanding with every thrust of his hips. I knew I wasn't going to last much longer. I breathed a chant of 'I love yous' into his ear when his head dipped down to kiss my neck. I held him closer, my nails digging into his back while he pounded against me. God, it felt good.

"Eric, please, I'm so close." I begged as my walls started to spasm around him.

His mouth met mine again while his hand moved between us so his thumb could rub my clit. My moans graduated to shouts that evolved into screams when I exploded. His name tumbled from my lips over and over, and I was still off on my own high when he swelled and released inside me. My entire body shook and shuddered, then rejoiced when he dropped on top of me. We were both sweaty and shaking for the best reasons.

"I love you." He whispered against my skin, alternately licking and kissing whatever skin he could taste.

"I love you, too." I breathed deeply, and fought to hold off the tears that were threatening to spill.

**Eric**

She was so beautiful when she slept. There was a small smile on her face. I was exhausted, but I couldn't let myself drift off quite yet. Dawn would be coming soon. We hadn't let my brothers and Mini come home detract us from lovemaking. We kept right on going like we were the only people on the planet, and after several stellar releases, we were both spent. I just couldn't stop staring at her.

She was asleep on her stomach with one of her little fists tucked under her chin. I moved some of her hair away from her face and was just about to kiss her golden brown shoulder when I heard giggling and the banging of the wooden frame of the screen door bouncing off the jamb in the kitchen. What the fuck? I'd had one or two incidences of drunken idiots thinking they were at the right rental house. I'd even found a few unknowns crashing on my couch. Yet, I still slept with my doors open. I hated turning on the air conditioning if I didn't have to.

I listened to the sounds of whoever was in the house. A woman was laughing in between screeching verses to a rap song I didn't recognize at first.

"Lose yourself in the moment, like you own it. You better never let it go, go. You only need one shot to not miss your chance to blow the opportunity of a lifetime..." She trailed off in giggles as feet started up the stairs.

I gently disentangled myself from Sookie and pulled on a pair of boxers. I opened my bedroom door at the exact same time Jakob did. It wouldn't take the two of us to remove this stranger from the house, but it was good to know I had back up in case she wasn't alone. Jake stepped out of his room with a Louisville Slugger in his hands, ready to take a swing at whatever was waiting for us. I was completely unarmed, but I was a better street fighter than my brother.

We got all the way to the top of the stairs before we realized the woman wasn't alone. "Get over here, boy, I wanna lick your neck."

Jake and I cringed at each other before stepping down.

"I thought you said you wanted to climb me like a tree." Luke. Of fucking course! He had to bring home a random chick at some point. It was actually shocking it had taken him this long.

"I'll get there. Neck first." The woman slurred.

Oh, good, they were both hammered. Jake shook his head and went back to his room to leave me to deal with this nonsense. I stayed right where I was since I had no idea how undressed Luke and his friend were, and with the beer goggles my brother often wore, it was entirely possible he'd brought home a wildebeest of a woman.

"Bro, I'm glad you found a friend, but keep it down. The girls are sleeping up here." I called down to Luke.

"Sorry, Erica, we'll be quieter. Come down and say hello to..."

"Dulcie!" The woman half shouted, half purred.

"Dulcie, right. It means sweet in Spanish."

I rolled my eyes and reserved my chuckle. While I had no doubt his translation was right, I wonderd if that was a random fact he knew, or if she'd used it as a line when she introduced herself.

"I'm sure you're very nice, Dulcie, but my girl is sleeping upstairs."

"You and Sookie worked it out? Sweet!" Luke's voice was muffled and Dulcie was giggling and moaning. My cue to get back upstairs to the safety of my own room.

"We'll talk about it later. Keep it down."

"No problem, bro." Luke said, although I had no doubt I was going to be cringing for a while.

Thank God Sookie lived right across the driveway. I got back into bed to find she'd woken in my absence. She slid closer to me and kissed my chest.

"Where'd you go?" She mumbled as her hand ran up and down my body.

"Luke's home. He brought a friend. She's sweet in Spanish."

"What?" Sookie giggled.

"Nothing. I'm sure you'll meet her later."

Sookie snorted and said, "That's highly unlikely."

She was going to say something else, but then we heard Luke and Dulcie making all sorts of noise as they came up the stairs. As expected, Luke's promises of quiet had been completely forgotten. His bedroom door eventually slammed shut after too much moaning and a few more tree climbing metaphors that made my stomach turn.

"If I ever ask to climb you like a tree, I want you to toss my ass in the lake." Sookie nipped at my ribs.

I squirmed next to her for just a second. "Deal."

Giggles and groans turned into the headboard banging against the wall, and Dulcie screaming obscenities that would have made the most hardcore Marine blush. Sookie put a pillow over her head, but that wasn't going to do much.

"Let's get out of here." Sookie said after a few minutes of really awkward background noise.

"You read my mind." I kissed her softly, then got up to find her dress for her.

She pulled on her dress and I zipped it up for her. She didn't bother to put on her underthings which was good, considering I would have just ripped them right off her when we got back to her house. The noises coming from Luke's bedroom were disturbing only because it was my brother. Then there was a slap, quickly followed by Luke groaning. Yeah, definitely time to go.

"You like that?" Dulcie did a little moaning of her own.

I looked down at Sookie who was bright red. Her eyes were practically bulging out of her skull. It was one of those train wreck moments where you know you should move, but you can't. There was another slap, followed by more groaning.

"Oh, God, let's go." Sookie booked toward the stairs and I was right behind her. "That was seriously disturbing, Northman." She said once we were outside in the first rays of sunlight.

"Is it too early to start drinking?" I asked her, feeling every bit as disturbed as she was.

"In this case? No, definitely not. Besides, body shots for breakfast might be fun." She winked at me, then scampered ahead to her house, daring me to chase her.

Soooooooo was the angst worth it? And what's with Luke's new lady friend? She's sweet in Spanish, you know. I have to take a minute to thank **chanel addict** and **kjwrit** for being so awesome as to let me write them into this story. They are excellent matches for these wacky Northman boys. That said, there is no need for Dulcie to put Mini in a Lucky Charms box and stick her on top of the fridge. I would hate for Mr. Bun to get involved in this. Yeah, I know, I sound nuts, but trust me, they'll get what that means. Thanks for reading!

**Chapter 14: Settling In**

Chapter 14: Settling In

**Sookie**

I suddenly felt much closer to Luke than I ever wanted to. I had no idea who that Dulcie woman was and I was afraid if I met her I wouldn't be able to look her in the eyes after hearing her spank Eric's brother. Just the thought of it made me cringe harder than I ever thought imaginable. I found the spare key to my bedroom door in its hiding place and slipped it into the lock. No sooner did we step inside than we were surrounded by the sounds of sex once again.

"What the hell?" I looked up at Eric, who just shrugged. "You've got to be kidding me."

"You think Amelia went out last night after you left?" Eric asked.

"I have no id-" I stopped there when I heard Amelia calling out Tray's name in rapid succession. "Well, I guess I have another visitor."

"Great." Eric sighed, and wrapped an arm around me when I buried my face in his chest.

I was exhausted. I wanted to crawl into my own bed and just let the rest of the world fade away for a little while. As if Amelia had heard my silent prayers, the house went silent. I looked up at Eric who seemed just as pensive as I was over whether or not we were really going to get an peace and quiet. We stood there silently, just barely breathing for a few minutes. When the only sound either of us heard was Amelia's bedroom door opening, I quickly dashed across the room to shut my bedroom door. I flipped the lock just to be on the safe side.

"Are you sure it's a good idea to stay?" Eric arched an eyebrow.

"I guess we'll find out." I shrugged.

I closed the shades and then drew the curtains into position. The room got very dark very quick. Eric stood behind me, unzipping my dress for me. I let it fall to the floor, leaving me standing naked in front of him. I glanced over my shoulder to see him stripping off his own clothes. I pulled back the covers on my bed and slipped between the sheets. Amelia had turned on the air conditioning after I left, which wasn't at all surprising. I really wished the house had window units instead of central air. I was used to humidity and open windows. I liked the whirring of ceiling fans and chirping of birds or crickets. It felt like home.

It was even better here, since there was the ebb and pull of the lake not too far away. The calming sound of rushing water coming and going had lulled me to sleep more than once. I heard it for weeks after I'd gone back to Louisiana the previous fall. It wasn't until I'd arrived in Michigan a few weeks before that I realized how much I'd missed it.

Eric got into bed beside me, his legs dangling in a comical way at the end. His chest was the perfect pillow- firm and soft at the same time. Our limbs tangled around each others in a perfectly coordinated series of movements. I knew just where I fit, and I slipped into my place beside him with ease. The world got still.

I knew there were still things we had to talk about. He'd said some things that hurt me and he needed to know his caveman routine couldn't go on like it had. I didn't quite understand the reasons why he'd lashed out at me. Was it because of the feelings he was carrying around? Was it because of Alcide? I really didn't know. I was willing to bet it was a combination of things. Mostly, I was hoping it wasn't a quirk in his personality he'd been hiding from me on purpose. Jealousy in limited doses was fine, but Eric had gone above and beyond what I would be willing to tolerate in the long run. If this was how he behaved all the time, I needed to know it.

"Eric, why did you freak out about Luke and me on the beach?" I broke the silence that had settled over us. My head rose and fell with the deep breath he took, then blew out quietly.

"I didn't like the way he was touching you. I know now I was wrong to react like I did. I wasn't angry at either one of you. I was mad at myself for not having the balls to say what I was really feeling, and instead of coming clean with you, I lashed out." Eric explained gently.

"You know you basically called me a whore, right?" I couldn't look up at him.

I knew if I looked at him he would see the pain in my eyes. I would see the guilt in his. I knew when he said it he didn't mean it, but that didn't make it any easier to hear.

"If I could, I would take that back. I regret that." He said so quietly I could barely hear him. I knew it wasn't because he was he didn't believe what he was saying, but because he was ashamed of himself. "What about Alcide?"

"What about him?"

"Did you have feelings for him?"

For that, I sat up. I didn't want there to be any doubt about Alcide. "Look at me, Eric." I turned his face toward mine. "No, I don't have feelings for Alcide. He's a nice guy, and I'd like to be his friend, but that's all. And to be honest, I'm not really sure he's got feelings for me either. He's confused. He's still hung up on his ex. That night at the bar all he wanted was someone to help him make his ex jealous. I don't think it worked."

"Oh, it worked." Eric smirked at me.

"Not the way we intended. I didn't do that with the intention of hurting you." I assured him. I drifted off for a second before continuing. "Although when I think about it now, I don't know what I was thinking. Maybe, on some level, I *did* want to hurt you. I'm sorry for that."

He pulled me on top of him. "How about we make a deal that from now on, we talk about things instead of letting them fester?"

"You think we can stick to that?" I arched an eyebrow.

"Do you want this to work between us?"

"You know I do."

"Then we don't have a choice. There are too many instances of poor communication between us, Sookie. That's something we need to work on. And I think we need to trust each other more. You need to know that I'm not going to get bored with you and run off with another woman." He stretched forward to kiss me gently.

"And *you* need to know that you can tell me anything without worrying I'm going to run away to be by myself because it's easier to run than it is to deal." I snuggled against him.

We had identified the problems in our relationship. Now we just needed to make sure we didn't revert to old habits and fuck it all up again.

"Oh, and one more thing." Eric rolled us over quickly, settling himself between my thighs.

As if the intense expression in his eyes didn't get my attention enough, there was most definitely another part of him pressed against me demanding it.

"Yes, Eric?" I let my knees bend and slide up his sides.

He sucked in a breath and said, "Just so we're clear, I want you and no one else."

I nodded my agree me. "So we're exclusive now, puddin'?"

"Not if you keep calling me ridiculous names like that." He dipped down quickly and nipped at my neck while I playfully punched his ribs.

"What would you *like* me to call you, Eric?" I asked as he continued his assault on my neck and collarbone.

"How about God? You seem to scream it an awful lot when I'm inside you."

I gasped at his brazenness, and then laughed quietly. "Get over yourself, Northman. You're not *that* good."

His head popped up to reveal a look of disbelief on his face that quickly morphed into one of heated determination. "Oh really? We'll see about that."

Then he set out to prove me wrong. Twice.

**Eric**

Not that good. Ha! By the time I was done with Sookie she was a boneless mess, and so was I. I fell asleep wrapped around her but woke up alone. My arm stretched out first before my eyes even opened. The bed was still warm so I knew she hadn't been gone for long. One eye opened a sliver to see if the bathroom door was closed. It was wide open. She wasn't in there. I focused enough to hear hushed voices in the kitchen.

I looked over at the clock. It was noon already. I groaned and sat up slowly. I really wasn't looking forward to going to work. I wanted to spend the rest of the day with Sookie. After all the shit we'd been through together, I thought we deserved at least one day of just the two of us. Unfortunately, between my brothers and their female friends and Tray's sudden arrival, there was no way that was going to happen without Sookie and I checking into a hotel for the night.

It was also Thursday, which meant Pam wasn't going to be at the bar. Unless I wanted to close for the night, I didn't have much of a choice but to go in. The good thing about running my own business was it didn't matter if I had visitors. The more I thought about it, the more I considered all the possibilities of Sookie and I locked in my office. I'd definitely had a few fantasies about that in the past that I hadn't acted on. I would have to mention them to her soon.

I was just about to get out of bed to go check on Sookie when her door opened. She was carrying a tray full of food. I got up quickly to take it from her and she kicked the door closed behind her. She was wearing my shirt, and it looked damn good on her. I looked down at the tray and inhaled deeply. It smelled amazing.

"What do we have here?" I set the tray down on the dresser and handed her one of two plates, along with a glass of orange juice.

"Cinnamon French toast, made with day old Italian bread and sausage. And there might be a little champagne mixed in your juice." She winked at me.

It wasn't quite the breakfast body shots we'd joked about earlier, but I'd settle for it. "Well, it smells amazing."

It tasted even better. She told me how Tray had shown up not too long after she'd come to my house. They had been in the process of reconciling the fight they'd been having when we arrived. All was quiet on the western front. Tray was going to stay for a few days before taking Amelia back to Louisiana with him, at which point we would have at least one house all to ourselves.

When we were done eating, I helped Sookie get the kitchen back in order. No sooner had she turned off the water and reached for a towel to dry her hands, than I pounced on her. She looked ridiculously hot in my shirt, and I couldn't shake the idea of fucking her while she was wearing it. She must have been thinking along similar lines because she rid me of my boxers before pushing me down onto one of the chairs behind us.

She straddled my lap and kissed me hard. My hands found their way under her shirt, and she moaned against my mouth when I cupped her breasts. I teased her nipples with rolls and pinches and she rewarded me with nibbles to my neck. Her fingers trailed down my chest and then disappeared. She moaned again a moment later and I looked down to see her hand had settled between her own thighs. I groaned as I watched her.

"Lover, isn't that my job?" I licked her neck and her head rolled back.

"No," She murmured softly. "Just watch."

Minx.

So I watched. I watched and listened to every noise she made as she touched herself. Any time I tried to assist, she would slap my hand away. She was driving me crazy slowly. I wanted to just grab her by her hips and throw her down on the table, but I knew she would frown on that. So I watched as she got closer and closer to her release. I felt her wetness on my thighs. The wetter she got, the less control I had. Her eyes met mine and were intense with the pleasure she was feeling at the touch of her own hand. She leaned forward to kiss me in a teasing way, the moved farther down to nibble at me some more.

My hands moved down to her hips in hopes of being able to coax her up enough so I could slide myself inside her, but she only bit my shoulder a little harder than usual before murmuring against my skin that I should be patient. It dawned on me then that I was being punished for the torture I'd put her through the night before when I'd asked her to hold onto the slats of my headboard, then proceeded to tease her to the point of madness before finally giving her what she wanted.

"If you're trying to torture me, lover, it's working." I said against her hair.

She looked at me coyly and asked, "Why would I want to torture you, sugar?"

We really, really needed to work on this pet name thing.

"Payback, of course." I got impossibly harder when her free hand gripped me and started to stroke while she continued to touch herself.

"That better?" She dragged her teeth across my collarbone.

"I believe the proper response in this situation," I paused when her thumb swirled over the tip of my erection and then twisted on the down stroke. Fuck. She had me. "Is either fuck me, or let me finish myself."

She giggled against my neck and then let go. My stomach dropped when I thought maybe I'd said the wrong thing entirely. She got up off my lap and I started cursing myself. She was a much better tease than I was. I was a horny bastard and she knew it. She also knew what buttons to push. I watched her stand up and then kiss me with everything she had, which was quite a bit. She pulled me up with her, and then down again when she laid back on the kitchen table.

My tongue was still battling hers when she guided me inside her. Our kiss broke mutually so we could breathe, but a moment later she was pulling my bottom lip between her teeth, biting it gently as I started to thrust into her. After all of the teasing, I knew neither of us were going to last very long, and it couldn't have been much more than a dozen strokes before my knees buckled a little, and I spilled inside her while her walls squeezed hard around me. God, she was amazing.

I planted little kisses along the line of her jaw, and brushed away the hair that was stuck to her damp forehead. She wrapped her legs around me and I scooped her up off the table. I carried her back to her bedroom, reluctant to tell her I had to go. I had gotten carried away with the time, and I had to be at the bar in a half an hour. I needed to go home, shower and change clothes.

"I have to go." I whispered once she was safely tucked into her bed.

"Stay." She whispered in return, dropping lazy kisses down the column of my neck.

"I wish I could. Come see me later." I tilted her mouth up to mine and kissed her.

"Mmmm, I 'll think about it." She teased.

"Minx." I whispered against her lips, making her giggle. "I love you, Sookie."

Her small hand ran up my back and into my hair. She made a little noise of contentment and said, "I love you, too."

Those were the best four words she'd ever said to me. I knew I'd never tire of hearing them.

**Sookie**

With everything out in the open between us, we fell right back into the way we were the previous summer, only Eric and I made it a point to say we loved each other at least once a day. Usually it was more than that, and Eric would face a round of jeers from his brothers every time he said it to me in their presence. Eric didn't seem to mind it, though. Why would he? I was in love with him, he knew it and he was back to getting sex on a regular basis. The teasing from his brothers was well worth it.

Besides, it's not like Jake was completely wrapped around Laura's little finger. That girl definitely had him. I liked her a lot, though. She had a great sense of humor and wasn't afraid to go toe to toe with any of the brothers. She was also smart as a whip, and could hold her own in any discussion that might come up. It was nice to have an ally around when the boys got a little crazy.

I found it funny how easily tamed they were by women. It was actually very amusing to watch them essentially trip all over themselves to make their respective girlfriends happy. Even Dulcie, whom none of us expected to see again, had somehow managed to get under Luke's skin. It was nice to have familiar faces around instead of a never ending string of strangers like the summer before. I think it may have been the first time ever all three Northman brothers had girlfriends at the same time.

Hearts up and down the shoreline were breaking because of it.

I would go up to the bar some nights to visit Eric, but it wasn't every night. We lived next door to each other, after all, so it was important we spend a little time apart. I didn't want to become one of those girls who completely relied on her boyfriend for social entertainment. Don't get me wrong, Eric and I were together a great deal. More often than not we spent the night together. It wasn't always about sex, but that was definitely a big component of our relationship.

After Amelia left I started to consider seriously whether or not I wanted to go back to Louisiana at the end of summer. I started looking into graduate school up in Michigan. I was still fascinated with psychology, but I wasn't so sure I wanted to get as deep into it as I'd once thought. Maybe I'd be a high school guidance counselor instead. I really didn't know what I wanted to do.

In my spare time I started writing. At first it was a lot of spilling my guts about my Gran and Bill. I'd talked to Eric about both topics a bit more in depth. He'd felt guilty for not being there for me when my Gran passed, and assured me if I had called him, he would have come down to see me. It meant a lot to me to know he would have been there if I asked, but knowing he was there now to listen anytime I wanted to talk was just as good.

And I had my moments where I'd miss Gran more than I could possibly hope to express. He would just wrap me up in a great big hug and hold me until I felt better. That was the best thing he ever could have done for me. He would listen to my stories and wipe away my tears and I felt better. Everything felt better when he was around.

I told him more about Bill, and the number he'd done on me. I told him about the string of women Bill had cheated on me with, and how I'd been left feeling like it was my own fault. Like I wasn't good enough. It had taken me a long time (and a few verbal bitch slaps from Amelia) to realize I was being ridiculous. Bill was a bastard. I could have done everything just right, and things still would have ended up the same because that's who he was.

I tried not to let my residual anger toward Bill spill over into my relationship with Eric. I checked myself whenever I felt jealous at the bar. It happened more often than I ever would have liked. I would see some half drunk floozy flirting with him, and my instincts would scream at me to go over and claim what was mine. I got a taste of what Eric must have felt to see me with Alcide, and I felt horrible all over again about that.

"What's bothering you, Sookie?" Eric asked once we were tucked into his bed for the night.

"That woman at the bar earlier." I admitted.

He sighed and said, "It's a part of the job, but you know she doesn't mean anything to me."

"I know." I kissed the bare skin of his chest. He was so warm thanks to the rising humidity in the air. A storm was due to roll in the next day. "It just got me thinking about how you must have felt to see me with Alcide."

"That was different."

"Not really. You got jealous, but you didn't know it was meaningless to me."

"You don't need to apologize for that anymore, lover. It's in the past. We're together. I love you. I trust you. Do you trust me?"

I turned my face up to his. "Of course I trust you."

"Then there's no reason for either of us to worry about someone else getting in the way. You're the one I want."

"Ditto." I smiled up at him, then stretched to kiss him once more before falling asleep.

In the morning I was woken up by a cool breeze coming in steadily from the lake. The room smelled of rain. Thunder rumbled in the distance. The sound of sex drifted down the hall, most likely coming from Luke's room. Jake and Laura weren't notoriously loud, for which I was grateful. Luke and Dulcie, however, weren't at all ashamed of putting on a show for everyone. If I thought Eric was lacking in modesty, Luke and Dulcie had none whatsoever.

I groaned when I heard the familiar thumping of a headboard hitting the wall. They were two bedrooms away, and I could still hear way too much. I turned onto my other side and curled into a ball so my back was pressed against Eric's side. I felt him shift next to me, then turn as well so he was curled around me. His arm wrapped around me, pulling me closer. He nuzzled the back of my neck, but I knew he wasn't awake. Well, not all of him. I wiggled against him and he groaned. I held back my giggle.

Plans to further tease him out of sleep were foiled by Dulcie's screams for more. I cringed and pulled the comforter up closer to my ears. I shivered a little with the damp, cold air blowing into the room. A flash of light brightened the rather dark room. I opened one eye just a sliver to see the dark, threatening clouds hanging over the lake. In spite of all the wind, it didn't look like the clouds were moving.

Eric's grip on me tightened. I felt his breath at my ear and then he whispered, "It's going to rain."

"Mmhmm." I agreed, snuggling back against him. "I should go home and close up the cottage."

"No." Eric pouted, squeezing me slightly. "Too comfortable. Stay."

I smiled and rubbed circles on the back of his hand. "I have to pee."

Eric grumbled but let me go. I slipped out of bed and ran to the bathroom because of the chill in the air. I would have closed the window, but the breeze was actually nice to have. I took care of business and then got right back in bed with Eric. My body molded against his with no effort. He was right when he said it was too comfortable. We were warm and relaxed against each other. It was perfect. The sounds of sex down the hall started to fade, but by the time it was silent again, Eric and I were already asleep.

Okay, so this will probably be the last time you get two chapters in a day, at least of one story. I really, really need to finish HFT (not to mention I have about 283357 other works in progress screaming for my attention). I'm totally dragging my feet on it because I don't want to say goodbye yet \*sobs\*

On a much, MUCH happier note, **scribeninja** has brought back the lovable NerdStud of Studdybuddies fame! OMG! OMG! OMG! SOOOOOO EXCITING! He left me review love (no, really, he did! BE JEALOUS! Check out my reviews if you don't believe me!), and Linds and I got into a twitter convo afterward, resulting in the birth of NerdStud's journal. She posted the first chapter of it today. It was in mah email this morning when I woke up, and I was all 'daaaaaaaaawwww, he's so cute!' by the time I was done. GO READ! NOW!

**s/6425881/1/From\_the\_Journal\_of\_NerdStud**

**Chapter 15: Movie Night**

Right, so, here's the deal. Mama Bird is terrorized right now because I just watched Paranormal Activity for the first time, and I almost shat my pants. Seriously, that movie is creepy as all get out. I should state, for the record, that I totally believe in the paranormal. So seeing this movie really didn't help one bit. My sister said it wasn't that scary. SHE LIED! If you haven't seen it yet, you may not want to read this chapter since I'm writing through my trauma here. Be prepared for spoilers and such. Because, yeah, I'm wiggin'. **Scribeninja, kjwrit and sarahblueiris** had to snuggle me via text and twitter to get me to chill the fuck out. Yeah...hands still shaking. This could be interesting. Where's an Eric to snuggle with when you need one, dammit? \*gets back in corner to rock and find happy place\*

Chapter 15: Movie Night

**Sookie**

For the record, it should be stated that Eric was very well aware of my extreme dislike of scary movies. There were enough things in real life that scared the piss out of me without having to see them committed to film. If you have enough nightmares of your cheating ex-boyfriend cutting your heart out with dull instruments, the things horror films can inflict on your psyche start to look like an invitation for your subconscious to do its worst. No thank you.

But I digress. The lake was nothing but very rough, choppy water for as far as the eye could see. Living so close to such a big body of water when such a bad storm was rolling in really creeped me out. Being a Louisiana native it made me think of all the poor people who were flooded during Katrina, and really, the last place I wanted to be was in my little beach house when it looked like the world was going to end. Thunder was booming overhead and lightning was striking every few seconds. It was terrible.

And the rain hadn't even started yet.

I prepared myself to get through the storm alone. I'd spent the previous night at Eric's, and had come home to give him time to get ready for work. I was just about to start lighting candles in case I lost power (that had happened a few times the previous summer during bad electrical storms), when I heard footsteps in my living room.

"Eric?" I called out.

"Yeah, it's me. Get your stuff. You're staying with me." He said as he came down the hall toward the kitchen.

"What about the bar?" I kept my lighter poised near a hurricane lamp.

"We've closed for the night. Forecasters are predicting pretty big swells, and the last thing we need is to be held liable because some idiot drinks too much and decides to drive home during the perfect storm." He took the lighter out of my hands and kissed me softly. "Come on, get your stuff before the rain starts. I'll make sure everything's locked up and your chairs are under the deck."

"Thanks." I smiled and kissed him again before disappearing into my room to get a change of clothes for later. Although why I bothered with pajamas was beyond me. They would more likely than not spend the night on the floor.

Still, I grabbed a pair of shorts and a tank top to sleep in before I remembered Eric would most likely have the air conditioning turned on, in which case I needed to bring warmer clothes. I really wondered if Eric was part polar bear, he was so unaffected by cold weather. My southern blood just wasn't suited for it, which made me wonder if I really could live so far north in the wintertime. Although the thought did cross my mind that Eric would be only too willing to find ways to keep me warm if I stayed.

I got my things together, and then went outside to help Eric get the chairs stowed away under the deck. I covered the grill while Eric moved the patio umbrella to a more secure location. Across the way I could see Johan and Luke making similar preparations on Eric's property. I watched as Dulcie walked out the kitchen door and over to where Luke was bent over, securing one of the porch swing with bungee cords. I flinched when she slapped his ass.

"Dulcie's at the house?" I looked over my shoulder.

"I like her." Eric shrugged. "She gives us plenty of material to bust on Luke with."

I rolled my eyes. "Figures."

"Oh, come on, Sookie, lighten up. She's got a fun personality." Eric insisted.

"It's not that I don't like her. We've had a few nice chats."

"So then what's the problem?"

"The problem is, I don't need to know all about her and Luke's private business, and Dulcie isn't really good at keeping things to herself. You heard them this morning." I picked up my things. We were ready to head back. "You know, we could just stay here for the night."

"If things get too cramped there we will." Eric promised me. There was a hint of mischief in his eyes that made me nervous.

"What are you up to, Northman?" I glared at him.

"Me? I'm a harmless teddy bear." He kissed me sweetly.

"Hmph." I melted against his side and we walked across the gravel to his house.

I said my hellos to Luke and Dulcie before going into the house with Eric. Laura was standing at the kitchen table. There was flour everywhere, and she was putting some serious muscle into the dough she was kneading.

"Whoa, what's going on here, Susie Homemaker?" I smiled at her.

"Homemade pizza." Laura grinned at me.

"Nice." I set down my stuff. "Want some help?"

"I'd adore some. These boys are useless." She teased.

"I heard that!" Eric and Jake said from the living room.

I washed my hands and then let Laura direct me around the kitchen. "So, what are they up to?"

"Couldn't say, but they've been fumbling around with the electronics since Eric decided to close the bar for the night." Laura said as she took a rolling pin to a round of dough.

"Hmmm." I quirked up an eyebrow and tried to crane my neck to see what they were doing.

I pushed it from my mind and threw myself into helping Laura with dinner. Dulcie, being the troublemaker she is, tried to sneak pepperoni onto the vegetarian pizza Laura was making for Jake. Thankfully she spotted it before Dulcie got too carried away. Dulcie was quickly put on drink detail was just as scary as her helping with cooking. Like Luke, Dulcie had a high tolerance for alcohol, so while drinks were fine for her, they were enough to choke a horse where I was concerned. Once again, Eric would be only too willing to reap any benefits of my drunkenness.

"Need any help in here?" Eric plucked a sliver of green pepper from the bowl next to me before I could slap his hand away.

"No. Go be weird and secretive in the other room." I bumped him with my hip. "And keep Dulcie out of trouble, will you?"

Eric snorted and said, "She's Luke's responsibility."

Great.

It took almost an hour to get all of the pizzas baked, but by the time it was all said and done we had quite a variety to choose from. My personal favorite was the white pizza that included Alfredo sauce, ricotta cheese and grilled chicken. It was delicious. We joked and talked all through dinner. A couple of drinks seemed to mellow Luke and Dulcie out. The two of them were like wind-up toys. It was interesting to watch them interact with each other. They fed off one another's energy which was a touch on the dangerous side, considering Luke was like the Energizing fucking Bunny to begin with.

I was sitting at the kitchen table with Laura, enjoying a nice glass of white wine, when we heard Dulcie making wolf whistles in the living room. Van Halen's 'Hot For Teacher' was blaring out of the stereo, and the next thing I knew, Luke was doing some crazy air guitar thing. I rolled my eyes, but couldn't stop watching. He was insane. Laura and I watched Luke writhe around on the floor with Dulcie laughing maniacally.

"What's going on?" Eric looked over at Laura and I from the sink where he and Jake were doing clean up duty.

"Luke thinks he's a member of Van Halen." Laura explained.

"All he needs is some spandex." I quipped.

"Don't encourage him." Eric and Jake said at the same time.

"Pffft. You mean like recording him and putting him on the internet, then playing the video for everyone at the bar?" I shot back at them.

The plan to embarrass Luke had completely backfired. Everyone had congratulated Luke on a fantastic performance. The video had made him somewhat of a local celebrity. Having him at Loki's almost every night was even better for business than the live bands that had started to play once a week. Just goes to show you what passes for entertainment.

Although, I suppose I would probably find it more entertaining if I didn't see it on a daily basis. It's not to say that Luke wasn't good for a laugh, but it got old after a while. Sometimes I wished I could shock him with a cattle prod just to get him to chill the fuck out for a minute. It just got to be too much.

Once the kitchen was cleaned up, the four of us went into the living room to find Luke and Dulcie going at it on the couch. Eric cleared his throat and said, "Take it upstairs."

"No, man, we're cool." Luke pulled himself off of Dulcie, who just curled into his lap instead.

"So, what's on the agenda now?" Laura looked to Jake, who looked to Eric.

"Movie night." Eric's eyebrows wiggled.

"Sweet. Let me go get a blanket. You want one, Sookie?" She looked over at me.

"Yes please." I smiled at her and picked a spot on the giant sectional couch to curl up on.

"I'll keep you warm, lover." Eric smirked at me.

"Not in front of your brothers and their girlfriends you won't." I snarked right back. "What are we watching?"

"You'll see."

Uh oh. "Eric..." I said with a tone of warning.

"Don't worry, lover, it's nothing bad."

Uh huh. "It better not be, or I'll make sure you don't get any sleep, and it won't be fun."

He just chuckled while he loaded a DVD into the player. Laura tossed me a fluffy micro-fleece blanket before claiming a spot on an oversized chair in the corner. That chair was extremely comfortable. I'd napped in it a time or two myself. Rain started to fall. Fat drops smacked against the windows. Jake went to the kitchen to close the door, since we'd left that wide open. Luke managed to climb out from under Dulcie, and turned on the air conditioning.

In no time the lights were off and Eric was sitting next to me on the couch with a remote in his hand. The big plasma TV in front of us lit up, and my stomach lurched when I saw what movie had been selected. I slapped Eric's chest.

"Paranormal Activity? Are you kidding me?" I glared at him in the darkness, but he just kept his eyes on the TV. His arm closed around me, hugging me close to him.

"It's just a movie." He kissed my head without looking away from the screen.

"You suck. I'm so going to make you watch Beaches for this." I muttered under my breath, and pulled my blanket tighter around me.

**Eric**

I knew Sookie had an aversion to movies full of blood, gore and extreme violence, but I didn't think she would so affected by Paranormal Activity. There was only one scene with blood in it, and really, it was like Katie had a paper-cut. I'll be honest, though, the movie did give me the creeps. I found the paranormal to be fascinating. Sookie, having grown up in the south, was a big believer in ghosts and the like. In fact, she'd told me once that her ex's house was haunted. I wasn't sure if I believed or not, but I was still intrigued by the concept.

Sookie was fine at first, and relaxed a little when she say the first paranormal experience in the movie to be Katie's keys moving all by themselves from the counter to the middle of the floor. Of course, she gasped when not long after that, the bedroom door moved by itself while Katie and Micah slept. Unlike me, Sookie was a light sleeper. It seemed like the littlest thing could wake her, so I knew if *my* bedroom door started moving like that in the middle of the night, I'd be feeling a serious elbow to the ribs to jar me out of sleep.

I glanced down at her to see her face when the psychic came to the house to tell Katie and Micah just what they were dealing with, and she sucked in a breath when he revealed the thing that was taunting them wasn't a ghost at all; it was a demon, and it wanted Katie. I'll admit, that spooked me a little bit. Ghosts, if you believed in them, were a creepy enough business. Demons were another matter altogether.

Sookie would growl with frustration every time Micah would mouth off to the presence in the house, further inciting it to show itself. She turned her nose up much like Katie did for his macho attitude, and insistence he could handle the problem. I understood Micah's position of wanting to protect his girlfriend at all costs, since I certainly felt like that about Sookie, but even I knew there are some things you don't mess with. An enemy, or threat, you can't see is one of those things.

Sookie squirmed against me as the occurrences of being 'haunted' got louder and more violent. It didn't help that Dulcie- as it turns out- was a screamer in general and not just in bed. Sookie punched me in the side several times while glaring at me and mouthing 'I hate this,' before tucking herself into my side again. She would bury her face in my armpit and squeeze me closer to her, whimpering and telling me to tell her when the 'bad stuff' was over. She was adorable.

When Micah snapped and started to blame Katie for what was happening, Sookie scoffed loudly and said, "Oh my God, can *I* kick his ass now? What a douchetard assbag!"

Her outburst was every bit as adorable as her fright. She continued to mutter under her breath while Micah continued to commit what Sookie called acts of 'douchbaggery.' Honestly, there was something unsettling about the idea that no matter where they went, it wasn't going to stop because what the demon wanted was Katie. It wasn't attached to any one place. It was attached to *her*. There was nowhere safe for them to run because the demon would always follow.

Sookie whimpered when the psychic came back and said there was nothing he could do for Katie and Micah. By then, the violence had increased a great deal. I wondered if maybe it wouldn't have gotten so bad if it weren't for Micah taunting it like a jack ass. Even I wanted to kick the guy's ass a little bit by the time Katie was pulled out of bed by mysterious forces and dragged down the hallway, screaming for Micah the whole time.

My grip tightened on Sookie, thinking of what I would do if that ever happened to us in the middle of the night. I didn't think it was possible, but I knew Sookie did. She was shaking like a leaf at that point, and begging to know how much more she had to sit through. Honestly, she was handling it like a champ, all things considered. Any bruises that might be left behind thanks to her little punches of frustration were no big deal. At least she wasn't hitting in the exact same spot.

Sookie gasped to see what looked like bite marks on Katie's back. It was fucked up, no doubt about it. Finally, the last scene was coming up. Katie had convinced Micah she wanted to stay in the house after getting grip on a cross so tight, she cut her hand. Micah pried it away and threw it into a fire along with the picture he'd plucked from the attic. I looked to the right to see Laura half sitting in Jake's lap. Her head rested against his chest and her eyes were closed. How could she possibly be sleeping through this was beyond me.

Thunder and lightning were making themselves known, which I knew only added to Sookie's little freak outs. Dulcie was hiding behind Luke. I would see her eyes pop up from behind his shoulder once in a while, but all I saw of her on a continuous basis was her hands.

Sookie shivered next to me at the sight of Katie standing next to Micah's side of the bed, just watching him sleep for more than an hour. "That is so fucking creepy."

It was. It really, really was.

We watched as Katie walked out of the room in that zombie-like state and went down the stairs to the first floor of the house. The screaming started seconds later, and Micah immediately jumped out of bed to go after Katie. Sookie squirmed against me and turned her face so only one eye could see the TV screen, and she was only glancing up from under her blanket every few seconds. She happened to look just as a body came rushing back into the bedroom and slammed into the camera that was mounted in the corner of the room.

Katie appeared seconds later with that vacant expression on her face, and blood all over her tank top. Sookie whimpered again and squeezed me tighter, mumbling under her breath how she was never going to sleep again and it was all my fault. Katie dropped to her knees and covered Micah's body before moving over to the camera and flashing the creepiest fucking smile I had ever seen. Sort of reminded me of a cross between Johnny Depp in Alice in Wonderland and Heath Ledger's version of The Joker. It was fucked up.

For a second I thought Sookie was crying, she was so freaked out. As soon as the movie was officially over, she jumped off the couch and turned on every light she could find before declaring she needed a drink. She went to find a bottle of wine while Jake maneuvered out from under Laura. He covered her over with her blanket, but didn't attempt to pick her up and take her upstairs. Dulcie excused herself to go to the bathroom, leaving me alone with Luke.

I got up to put the DVD back in its case and turn off the surround sound. Luke started talking behind me. "So, Eric, um, Dulcie's kids are coming up next week. I was wondering if it's okay if they're here."

I looked over my shoulder at my brother. "Is the sex really that good?" I snorted at him.

He looked offended, which was surprising to me. "Not cool, man."

"What? Oh, come on, Luke, you've never taken a girl seriously before. How was I supposed to know you were serious about Dulcie?"

"Right, like you and Sookie, huh?"

He had a point. "I didn't mean to offend you, Luke. I just didn't know she was a keeper."

"She's been around for a couple of weeks. That should tell you something."

It did. It told me he found a freak like him, but I didn't want to think about that too much. I'd had my share of wilder years. I knew what he was about and I didn't want those images rolling around in my mind.

"How old are the kids?"

"Teenagers."

My face fell. "You're dating a woman with kids almost your own age? That ain't right."

"Don't judge." Luke said defensively.

"Don't you think it's going to be weird for these kids to see their Mom with a guy she can't keep her hands off of who is just a few years older than them? That's weird, bro, I'm sorry."

"So you're saying they aren't welcome here?"

"No, that's not what I'm saying. I would prefer they aren't here overnight, though. She has a house up here, doesn't she?"

"She's renting a place a few miles south."

"Okay, so, if she wants to bring them up to the beach during the day, that's cool. It's just we've got enough adults here at night. You know how it gets."

With three couples under one roof some nights, it was guaranteed at least one of them was having sex at any given time. It was a little weird. I tried not to think about it. The kids, even if they were teenagers and maybe having sex themselves, didn't need to be around it. Especially when I factored in how loud their own mother was. Poor kids would probably be scarred for life if they heard half the shit Sookie and I had been subjected to since Luke started seeing Dulcie.

"Yeah, I know." Luke sighed heavily.

"What's got your panties in a twist?" I asked him.

He leaned forward and whispered, "I like Dulcie, but honestly, I don't want to be a step-dad to her kids."

I laughed and said, "Did she ask you to be?"

"No."

"Then chill. For all those kids know, you're just her friend."

Luke gave me a look like I couldn't possibly believe that. "Right. Would you have believed Mom if she'd told you a guy my age was 'just her friend' after Dad died?"

He knew I wouldn't, which was part of the problem. To say I had a strained relationship with our mother would be an understatement. Dad died when I was twenty after a lengthy battle with pancreatic cancer. We'd known the end was coming for him, but really, how much can you prepare yourself for the death of your hero? My Dad was my best friend. He was only forty-six when he died. That was way too young, in my estimation. My parents had been married for just over twenty-five years when he passed.

I get that's a long time to be with someone. When he died, they'd each been married more years than they were single. Quite simply, they forgot how to function without a partner. Still, it pissed me off when Mom took up with some shag wit about fifteen years Dad's junior named Bentley. Dad hadn't even been gone for three months, and Mom was already moving on? I couldn't wrap my head around it. Maybe I was being a judgmental prick about it, but I couldn't support Mom's choice.

We spoke sparingly, and she had yet to come up to the house. I hadn't seen her since Christmas, and that was only because she had decided to grace us with her presence. After Luke graduated from high school, she'd moved in with Bentley. They were married three months later. In all fairness to Bentley, he didn't seem like that bad of a guy. I could see Mom was happy, but I was still pissed that she seemed to have forgotten Dad for damn fast.

"I'm going up to bed." Sookie informed me from the archway. She had a glass of wine in her hand and a scared look on her face that told me I better follow.

"We'll talk about it more tomorrow, bro." Luke released me from our conversation.

"Goodnight." I waved and tossed him the remote.

"Hey, Eric?" Luke called out from behind me. I stopped and looked over my shoulder. "You're going to have to forgive her some time. Holding a grudge isn't going to bring him back."

I knew Luke was right, but I didn't want to talk about it anymore. I just nodded and headed upstairs to get in bed with Sookie. I knew once I was there, the thoughts in my head would simmer. She always made me feel better.

Okay, so I wrote that opening A/N when I started this chapter back on Saturday night. I'm still wigging over that smile. \*shivers\* It's fucking creepy, baby birds! Yet, I still kinda want to see PA2 \*iz glutton for punishment\* In the last chapter I mentioned **scribeninja's** new story, NerdStud's journal. For those of you who can't get enough of him, check my reviews. He's been leaving me love lately. What an awesome dude he is. I owe him a sit down with Caveman!Eric. We'll have to schedule an appointment for them to meet. Hey! Maybe we should transcribe that conversation. What'dya say, Linds? Thanks for reading!

**Chapter 16: Life In the Fast Lane**

Hope y'all don't mind long chapters with citrusy goodness. \*snort\*

Also, if you're not reading NerdStud's journal... well, I have to question your sanity. And the best part is, you don't have to be familiar with Studybuddies in order to get it. \*loves adorkable Eric\* He leaves me reviews. How awesome is that?

Chapter 16: Life In the Fast Lane

**Eric**

At exactly 11:59 on June 30th, the house lights went down in the bar. The music went off, and everyone froze. I'd worked with my brothers, my staff and Mini to make sure all of this went off without a hitch. We'd made sure to keep it to just locals in the bar that night. There was a little bit of planned hysteria over the sudden power outage at the bar. Lights could be seen up and down the shoreline, suggesting we had just blown a fuse in the bar. We hadn't. I had cut the power on purpose. Well, I had Jake cut the power after telling Sookie he was going to the bathroom.

With Pam's help, we carried out a giant chocolate mint cake I'd had made for Sookie's twenty-third birthday. She stood at the pool table she'd been playing at with my brothers and their girlfriends, completely unaware of what was about to happen. The second Pam and I walked out of the kitchen, the singing began.

The crowd parted to let us through. Everyone was in on my surprise except for Sookie. I'd even let Alcide into the bar that night. I knew he and Sookie had struck up an odd friendship. I wasn't particularly crazy about it, since I wasn't convinced he wanted to be just her friend, but I trusted her. I knew she was devoted to me.

By the time we reached Sookie, it was midnight. It was officially her birthday. Sookie's face was priceless. She looked completely stunned, and she had the loveliest blush I'd ever seen creeping up her neck to paint her cheeks. She laughed through her tears as everyone in the bar sang to her, some more dramatically than others.

Sookie was holding onto poor Mini for dear life, like her knees were going to buckle any second. We set the cake down on the pool table. As soon as Sookie had the candles blown out, she was burying her face in my chest. Adorable. She was shaking, although whether it was because of emotional overload or embarrassment, I wasn't sure yet.

"Happy birthday, lover." I whispered in her ear while everyone in the bar applauded around her, waiting for her to say something.

She looked up and pulled my face to hers. "I can't believe you did all this." Tears were streaming down her face, ruining what little makeup she was wearing.

I wiped away her tears with my thumbs and said, "It's the least I could do."

She nodded, then pulled me into a kiss that had the cheers of the people surrounding us completely renewed. She giggled against my lips, almost like she was remembering we weren't alone in the room. She wrapped her arms around me and turned to face the bar at large.

"Thank you, everyone. I had no idea. I suck at surprises." She laughed. "Who wants cake?"

Another round of cheers went up. Pam produced a knife that was big enough to be considered a small machete, and handed it over to Sookie to do the honors. Plates and plastic utensils came from out of nowhere. I helped her take the candles out of the cake, holding one up for her to taste the frosting. Her eyes rolled into the back of her head.

"Chocolate mint?" It was her weakness. I knew it. "Oh my God, I'm going to gain a hundred pounds eating this cake. I don't know if I want to share."

I smiled at her and said, "You don't have to."

"Oh, yes I do. I have an American flag bikini I plan to wear the hell out of in three days. Prepare yourself, Northman." She winked at me.

Old Glory indeed. That bikini had incited a small riot with my hormones the previous summer. I was very much looking forward to its return. The lights slowly came back on, as did the music. Sookie got to work cutting the cake, but was soon too swamped with well-wishers to continue. Mini stepped right in to pick up the slack. I was really going to miss that pint-size woman when Jake took her back to Chicago for the winter.

I'm not at all ashamed to admit I paid special attention when Alcide came over to wish Sookie a happy birthday. She hugged him, and I watched to make sure his hands didn't go anywhere inappropriate. It really would have been a shame if I stabbed him to death with that small machete in the middle of Sookie's surprise party. He behaved himself, however.

Pam appeared and put a ridiculous tiara with pink gems on Sookie's head, in spite of her protests that it was unnecessary. Sookie politely changed her mind when Pam began to pout. I glared at Pam when she hugged Sookie for just a moment too long. Seriously, Pam was lucky she wasn't a man sometimes. Sookie and I sat down together with Jake and Laura to have some cake. Sookie and I shared a piece, although I think I ended up eating more of it than she did.

At Dulcie's insistence, Sookie had sampled a drink called a Cherry Popper. She fell in love instantly, and started sucking them down like they were going out of style. She giggled drunkenly when she was presented with her birthday present from Dulcie- a paddle for her birthday spankings. Dulcie's fixation with spanking was a little alarming, but Sookie took the gift with humor.

"Mmm, I think I know what we'll be doing with this later." She giggled against my neck.

Yeah, Sookie was going to go home and pass out if she kept drinking like she was. Then 'Sex on Fire' started playing, and Sookie insisted we go dance. I usually outlawed dancing in my bar, but it was a party and her birthday. I couldn't say no. I quickly got reacquainted with how uninhibited drunk Sookie was, and I had no doubt we would be spending the night at her place, since that ensured us some privacy. We were going to need it with the way she was dancing.

We stuck around for a few more drinks and maybe another dozen or so songs before Sookie decided she'd had enough for the night. We walked out of the bar together at just after two. Her face was flushed and she was damp with sweat from dancing and drinking. She giggled and stumbled, even with me holding her up. Jake had been kind enough to load her presents into my car. We were just about to pull away from the bar when Pam came running out.

"Sookie, you forgot something!" Pam waved the birthday paddle in the air.

"Oops. Looks like I've been bad." Sookie winked at me and took the paddle from Pam. "Thanks, Pammy."

"Because you're drunk, I'll let that go." Pam winked, then wished us a good night and headed back inside to close the bar down for the night.

'Stairway To Heaven' came on the radio, and Sookie moaned with delight. "I love this song." She slid across the front seat of the car and started kissing my neck.

"What are you doing?" I knew damn well what she was doing.

"Keeping myself busy." She said innocently, and went right back to it.

It took just over a minute to get back to our houses. I parked in front of her place, but left the radio on at her insistence. We ended up making out like teenagers in the front seat of the car until the song ended. By the time it was done, she was panting and starting to pull her clothes off. Drunk Sookie was all sorts of fun to be around if you got her alone.

"Whoa, whoa, wait until we get inside." I stilled her hands when they went for the button on her shorts.

"No fun." She pouted, then threw open the car door.

She clutched her paddle in one hand and her purse in the other. She left her shoes on the floorboard of my car and started toward the front deck. I followed her quickly to make sure she didn't fall while going to the steps. She dug her keys out of her purse and slipped the key into the lock. She tugged the patio door open and then pushed the screen door out of her way. She dropped her things on the couch and immediately starting pulling off her clothes.

"Slow down, lover." I smiled at her while I closed the screen door, and slid the glass door over far enough to put the security bar in place.

"Thank you for my party." She purred when she wrapped her arms around me from behind.

"You're welcome." I turned around to face her and wasn't the least bit surprised to see she was topless already.

"No one ever threw me a surprise party before." She tugged my shirt up.

"Well, I'm glad I could be the first." I pulled my shirt off the rest of the way, since I was too tall for her to do it herself.

"You're too tall." She started working on the button of my jeans.

"Maybe you're too short." I teased.

She blew a raspberry at me, then bit my nipple. Minx. Clothes continued to fly across the room one piece at a time with Sookie wiggling and grinding against me. She pushed me down on the couch and dropped to her knees in front of me. Before I could protest, since it was her birthday and all, she had her hand and lips wrapped around my cock. My eyes rolled a little in a good way at how eager she was. She was in a teasing mood, which I didn't mind at all. It just meant I would get the chance to reciprocate.

Her head bobbed and moved in a counter rhythm to her small hand that was stroking what she couldn't get in her mouth. She had attempted a deep-throat once, and it hadn't gone well. Ever since then, she didn't try to push it, and I was just fine with that. Gagging and vomiting weren't sexy. At all. I was trying to hold back, but when she started humming 'Stairway To Heaven,' it was a lost cause. I came hard and with no warning.

She giggled when she released me from her mouth after swallowing everything. She climbed up onto my lap and grabbed the paddle laying on the couch next to me. I had no idea what she planned on doing with it. Personally, that had never really been something I was into. It was one thing to slap her ass in the heat of the moment, but it was another to essentially have a weapon of choice to hit her with. I wasn't sure I was comfortable with it. The last thing I wanted was to hurt her.

"What are you doing with that, lover?"

"I'm a little curious what all the fuss is about." She stared at the small wooden paddle in her hand. It was barely bigger than one you'd see on a ping pong table, but I was sure it still left quite a sting if you were struck with it. "Have you ever done something like that?"

"No." I admitted. "I don't want to hurt you."

"I don't want you hurt me either." She smiled and dropped the paddle back on the sofa cushion. Did she think I would hurt her? I wouldn't. Not in a million years would I hurt her.

"Sookie, I wouldn't-"

"I know." She pressed a finger to my lips, effectively silencing me. "I was just curious. We don't have to if you don't want to."

I took her hand out of the way and said, "How about we discuss it when you're sober?"

"Deal." She kissed me roughly before climbing off my lap and sashaying down the hall toward her bedroom. "You coming?"

"Already did." I teased, but got off the couch. "It seems I owe you one, Miss Stackhouse."

"Actually, according to birthday standards, you owe me twenty-three and one to grow on." She winked at me.

"You're going to wish you never said that." I leered at her, then chased when she took off running.

**Sookie**

My twenty-third birthday was certainly memorable. Eric made sure of that. As if the surprise party at Loki's wasn't enough, the sex afterward was some of the best we'd ever had. I felt like an idiot when I woke up the next morning to find that paddle on the couch. I remembered suggesting we use it, and immediately felt my face burn. Yeah, no more Cherry Poppers for ole Sookie. Yet, I didn't throw the paddle away. I did, however, stash it in the back of my closet.

Eric and I made breakfast together and then spent the day at the beach until he had to go to work. I went out to dinner with Jake and Laura. I stopped up at the bar for a little bit to hang out with Eric. I ended up drinking way more than I planned with all of the shots that were being bought for me, and for the second night in a row, Eric ended up practically carrying me out of the bar.

He took such good care of me. He got me back to my house and into bed after making sure I drank a big glass of water. Unfortunately, it didn't keep the hangover away, but Eric made me breakfast in bed and kept the shades closed to keep the pounding in my head to a minimum. He snuggled with me while I mostly slept the day away in effort to kill the pain in my head. He stayed with me until he had to go to work, but made me promise to lay off the booze.

"Don't worry. I have no intention of drinking for a long time." I muttered, not wanting him to go just yet.

"I'll be back later. Do you want to stay with me tonight?" He kissed the side of my head.

"Mmmm, probably. I'll text you later and let you know." I squeezed him closer. I really didn't want to let go.

"I have to go, lover." He said a few minutes later.

"No. Stay." I pouted, pressing myself against him. "I'm all naked and warm."

He groaned. "You're not making it easy for me to go."

"Now you're getting it."

"Sookie..."

I sighed and then let go. "I know, I know. I'll talk to you later." I turned my face up toward him.

He kissed me sweetly and said, "I love you." before getting out of bed.

"Love you, too." I mumbled and turned away from the door that lead outside before he opened it.

I heard the door close, but then a few seconds later I was covered in Eric. "Ten more minutes."

I giggled and wrapped his arm around me. "Ten more minutes."

An hour later, he finally left.

o.O.o.O.o

The next night a cover band by the name of Renegade 74 was playing at Loki's the day before Independence Day. Summer was in full swing, and tourists were everywhere. With the addition of live bands playing once a week, Eric gave up any attempts to keep the tourists out of his bar. It was a hot and sticky night, even with the breeze coming off the lake. It had been humid for days. It hadn't rained since the big storm more than a week before.

There were clouds overhead. I smirked at my decision to throw on a white halter top over my American flag bikini I was wearing instead of a bra. Eric, on the other hand, hadn't been so keen on my decision. He would be even less so if the sky suddenly opened up and drenched us all.

I got why he was nervous, but when I wasn't with him personally at the bar, I was with Jake and Luke. By that point the regulars knew who I was, and that I was Eric's girlfriend. A tourist might be dumb enough to try and grope me, but a local wouldn't. Laura and I were dancing together while the band played a cover of 'Life in the Fast Lane.' The song reminded me of Eric for some reason.

Jake was watching us from a few feet away to make sure Laura wasn't trampled. I wasn't much taller than her, but those six inches were a big deal. Standing next to her, I looked like a damn giant. We shimmied and swayed together, singing and dancing along with the music. I looked around for Luke and Dulcie, but didn't see them. Come to think of it, I hadn't seen them since earlier in the afternoon.

Dulcie had become a regular fixture at Eric's place over the last couple of weeks. I was slowly adjusting to her extremely powerful personality. She was about the same size as me, but she definitely took up more space in a room than I did. It was easy to see why Luke liked her. They easily matched each other in the crazy department. Sometimes it was amusing. Sometimes it was really annoying. It just depended on the moment. They really needed to learn how to reel it in sometimes.

I would see Eric growing more and more annoyed with whatever they were doing, and rather than knocking it off, they'd kick it into high gear. Eric would usually end up spending the night at my place when he got that way. It was better than him snapping at Luke, since he was respectful enough not to bitch directly at Dulcie. Dulcie and Jake, on the other hand, had gotten into it on several occasions. They were polar opposite personalities, and he had little patience for what he deemed to be immaturity.

I don't know if he was right or not, but the bickering between them got to be a little ridiculous sometimes. I'd met Dulcie's kids when they'd come up to visit her. She had two boys who were twelve and fourteen. I agreed with Eric there was something a little off about her dating someone who was just a few years older than her son, but it really wasn't any of my business. Luke was a consenting adult and he was happy. That's all that mattered.

Besides, I had enough of my own issues to worry about. Things with Eric and me were good. Like, scary good. I was trying to live in the moment and just enjoy it all, but the freakishly adult voice in the back of my head told me I needed to start making plans for the fall. Would I stay, or would I go? I knew what Eric would say if I told him what I was thinking. I knew he didn't want me to leave.

Truthfully, I didn't want to leave. I wanted to be with Eric. I just couldn't help but wonder what I was going to do in Michigan besides hang out with my boyfriend. That couldn't be my entire life. I needed to have a job and friends of my own to rely on when things got hectic. I knew if I stayed I would be able to drive down to see Laura once in a while, which was nice, but I needed something a little more day to day to keep me away from my life in Bon Temps.

The song ended and they immediately launched into a cover of 'Yellow Ledbetter' that made me swoon a little. Eric appeared behind me, wrapping his arms around my waist. He kissed the top of my head and swayed behind me in time with the music. Lighters and cell phones were hoisted into the air. I leaned back against him and just smiled into the night.

"Good news." He whispered in my ear.

"What's that?"

"Luke and Dulcie are spending the night at her place tomorrow. They went down to watch the fireworks downtown. They won't be back until the fifth, at the earliest."

"Sweet." I tilted my head up to kiss him.

"Very." He kissed me once on my lips, then on the tip of my nose.

"This band is really good."

"I thought so."

"They sound familiar. Would I have heard them somewhere else?"

"I think they played at Strawberry Fest last summer."

"Oh yeah!" I grinned with recognition. "I remember now! They were awesome!" I felt Eric nod against the top of my head.

"Pam's closing for me tonight." Eric whispered in my ear.

"Well don't get too excited. We're not leaving until the band is done."

"Should I be jealous?" He teased.

"I don't know. The bass player was giving me the eye." I was teasing right back.

"Then we're even. Jane asked me to go home with her again." He admitted and I giggled.

"Good gravy." I muttered.

Jane Bodehouse was one of the regulars in a not good way. She drank herself into quite a stupor seven nights a week. Without fail someone ended up calling her son to come collect her just before midnight. I felt bad for the kid. It had to be embarrassing for everyone in town to know his Mom was essentially a fall down drunk. Suddenly Gran's Descendents of the Glorious Dead meetings didn't seem so bad.

"I told her she'd have to ask your permission." Eric kissed my neck and I slapped his wrist.

"You did not!" I scoffed.

"Yes I did." I felt him smile against my neck.

"You jerk!" I laughed. "Okay, fine. You take Jane home tonight. Let me know how that goes in the morning."

He'd never do it in a million years, or for a million dollars. Jane Bodehouse was... well, even if she were stone sober, she wasn't the kind of woman Eric would be interested in. Even if she were twenty years younger, he wouldn't be interested.

"And you leave you all alone? I couldn't possibly." He hugged me tighter. What a softy he was.

"I love you, you know that?"

"That's good. I love you, too." He kissed me again and my toes curled a little.

"Maybe we can leave before the encore is done." I suggested.

"No, take your time. Enjoy the band. We have all night." He winked at me, then kissed me once more before going back into the bar as a cover of 'Sister Christian' started.

The band played a few more songs before calling it quits for the night. The crowd at the bar thinned out big time afterward. I was talking with Laura when we were approached by none other than the bassist from the band. He was a good looking guy, I'm not gonna lie. He kind of reminded me of a Dave Navarro/Trent Reznor type. He was a little more rock 'n roll than I usually liked, but he was cute all the same.

"You guys were amazing tonight!" Laura beamed a smile at him, while I nodded emphatically in support of her statement.

"Thanks. There was good energy. That always makes it easier to play well." He smiled at both of us.

"I'm Laura." She offered her hand to him.

"Adam." He shook her hand, then reached for mine.

"Sookie." I smiled.

"That's an interesting name."

"It's a nickname." I admitted. No one ever called me by the name on my birth certificate except for my Gran on those rare occasions when I got myself in trouble when I was younger.

The three of us stood there talking for a while before Jake came by to whisk Laura away for the night. I stayed outside to talk to Adam. I learned he was from a suburb of Chicago, but had gone to MSU. He had a degree in art history and his day job was a tattoo artist. He was a really nice guy. He was in the middle of telling me about a show the band had played a few weeks before in which the stage had nearly collapsed, when Eric appeared at my side.

"Hey, Eric, how are you?" Adam extended his hand.

"Tired. You guys did well tonight."

"They were great." I wrapped an arm around Eric's waist.

"My girl's a fan." Eric explained.

*My girl, huh?*, I quirked up an eyebrow at him. It was a subtle display of possession, but one I was willing to let slide. After all, I hadn't mentioned I was Eric's girlfriend, but I didn't see a reason why that had to come up. I could have male friends, and so far Adam hadn't given me any reason to think he was interested in anything other than conversation.

"That's always nice to hear. We had fun playing tonight. We'd like to come back some time." Adam's eyes shifted to me briefly.

Shit. Had I read him wrong? I really didn't need this right now. Things with Eric and I were going so well.

"You should talk to Pam about that. She handles all of the booking and things like that." Eric's tone was decidedly more chilly, which told me he hadn't missed the subtle shift of Adam's eyes to me when he said he wanted to come back.

I yawned loudly and smiled up at Eric. "Are you about ready to head home?"

"Not quite. I have to finish closing up. You should head home, though, if you're tired. I'll meet you there." He kissed the top of my head.

"No car. I rode up here with Jake and Laura, remember?"

"I can take you home." Adam offered.

I swear I heard Eric growl a little at the suggestion. Was he seriously threatened by Adam? If he was, he was being ridiculous. Fortunately, I happened to see Alcide a few tables away.

"That's sweet of you, Adam, but I think I'll pass. Hopefully I'll get to see you guys play again, though." I leaned against Eric.

"Yeah, that'd be great. Well, I uh, I guess I'll go find Pam. See you around, Sookie. It was nice talking to you."

"Likewise." I watched him walk off to find Pam, but he didn't get far before Eric was planting the mother of all kisses on me. I pushed him back and glared at him. "I'm going to get a ride with Alcide."

Eric clearly wasn't happy with that option either. "I wish you wouldn't. I can have Pam take you home."

"Don't be silly. She's busy with the band. Besides, you trust me, right? It's just a ride home, Eric. I'll see you later." I walked away before he could kiss me again.

I didn't like feeling like I was being marked. It was disappointing to find we weren't beyond all of this yet. I told myself to be patient with him, but really, it was unnecessary. He knew I wasn't into Alcide. Besides, did he really want Adam to know where I lived?

"Hey, Alcide." I smiled at him.

"Hey! How'd the recovery go after your party?" He asked sympathetically.

"Well, that was okay, but it was the morning after my birthday that was a real bitch. I'm not sure how many shots I had, but I'm sure it was at least five or six too many."

"Ouch."

"You have no idea." I felt a little nauseous just thinking about it.

"Oh, I'm sure I do." He chuckled, then looked at his watch. "I would love to stay and chat, but I have to be getting home."

"Yeah, that's what I came over here to talk to you about. I came up with Jake and Laura, but they left about an hour ago. Do you think you could give me a ride home?"

"What about Eric?"

"He's stuck here for at least another hour, and I'm ready to drop."

Alcide looked uncertain. "Are you sure that's a good idea? Eric looks pretty pissed off."

"He's being ridiculous. Are you going to try and make out with me on the way home?"

Alcide laughed and said, "Well, I wouldn't be against it."

I wanted to slap his arm playfully, but I knew Eric would just get the wrong idea. "Alcide."

"Sorry. No, I promise to keep my hands to myself. Besides, I know you're with Eric. I have no intention of getting in the middle of that."

"Good. Then we have nothing to worry about. Let's go."

I looked over my shoulder once to see Eric staring right at me. He definitely wasn't happy. I got all the way to the door of the bar before I realized if I left, Eric and I were going to end up getting in a really big fight over something stupid.

"You know, on second thought, it's probably better if I don't leave with you. Thanks for... you know." I shrugged.

"Don't worry about it. Have a good night, Sookie." He smiled at me and then kept walking.

Eric was still standing right where I left him. I walked right over to him and wrapped my arms around his waist. I didn't want to play games with him. It was stupid. He must have felt the same way, since he pulled back and leaned down to kiss me. My arms wrapped around his neck and he stood up with my legs dangling since I was wearing a short skirt that would have given everyone at the bar quite a show.

"I don't want to fight with you." I pressed my forehead to his.

"I don't want to fight with you either." His fingers tangled in my hair.

"Can I go crash in your office?" I asked as he put me down.

"Of course." He wrapped an arm around my shoulder and led me inside.

Soooo what do we think of this Adam fella? Will he be back? Will he cause more trouble for Eric and Sookie? Oh the possibilities! And what's with Dulcie's spanking fetish? As a disclaimer to **kjwrit** that is not meant to be a reflection of her character. If she's into that, I have no prior knowledge of it. Just the idea of a tiny woman spanking a Northman (and him liking it) made me giggle. Had to run with it. Thanks for reading!

**Chapter 17: Feels Like Home**

If anyone has seen HFT!Eric, please send him my way. He keeps dodging out on me writing the last chapter. I don't appreciate it one bit.

Chapter 17: Feels Like Home

**Sookie**

I was sitting in the living room in my cottage when my cell rang. I smiled to see Amelia's name on the display, but my smile quickly faded when I heard the panic and anger in her voice.

"Ames, calm down. What's going on?"

"Your brother is outside, demanding I let him in." Amelia explained.

After I told Jason I wasn't going to give him any of the things Gran had left me in her will, I'd had all of the locks changed at the house so he couldn't use his spare key to get in and just take what he wanted. I made sure all of his personal property was removed from the house so had no reason to come by without me being there.

"Did you call Bud?" Bud Dearborn had been the sheriff of Renard Parish since before I was born.

"I was hoping if you told him to go away, he would listen. I didn't want to call the cops if I didn't have to."

"Amelia, he's not going to listen to me. Is he drunk?"

"Is it a day that ends in 'y'?"

I sighed heavily and said, "I'm sorry, Ames."

"Don't apologize. It's not your fault your brother's a greedy fucktard. Shit, he's trying to bust down the door."

"Amelia, hang up and call the police. Call me back afterward." I insisted. I was a little annoyed with Amelia. I felt bad since it was *my* brother, but what the fuck did she expect me to do for her all the way from Michigan?

Amelia begrudgingly hung up. I could only hope she called the police and not Tray to come over and take care of things. Then again, I had no doubt she'd called Tray before she called me. If Jason was smart, he'd get the hell away from the house before Tray showed up. Tray was a nice guy, but much like Eric, he wouldn't tolerate anyone threatening his girlfriend. It could get real ugly real quick.

Truthfully, I didn't want Amelia to call Bud because I knew he had a rather outdated view when it came to women being property owners, especially when it came to estate matters. He'd been shocked to learn the house hadn't been left to Jason when Gran passed. To him, it didn't matter that Gran and I were much closer, or that I had been her caretaker for the last few years. As the oldest heir, as well as the 'man of the family,' Jason should have been bequeathed all of Grans belongings. Never mind that he was about as responsible as a dust bunny.

Lucky for me, Gran saw it differently. I wanted to call Eric, but I knew Amelia would be calling back. I bit the tip of my thumb nervously while I waited for the phone to ring. When it did twenty minutes later, I could hear Jason and Tray scuffling in the background. I squeezed my eyes shut, feeling extreme guilt that Amelia had to deal with my idiot brother in any capacity.

Then there was shattering glass, and Jason screaming bloody murder. "What the hell just happened?"

"Jason put his fist through the front door window." Amelia sounded panicked. "Fuck, Sook, I'll call you back."

I knew she hadn't called Bud. She was going to have to now, since there was property damage involved. There was a voice in my head that sounded like Gran's, telling me not to be too hard on Jason. I shushed that voice. While I loved my Gran dearly, she had always been a sucker where he was concerned. It's not to say that he'd had total run of the roost. There had been a few instances when he was sent out to the front yard to "pick his weapon" for the punishment he was about to get. For the most part, though, Gran doted on, and indulged Jason.

*Jason never would have tried to break into your house after you told him to stay out, Gran*, I told the temperamental voice in my head. I sighed heavily while collapsing onto the couch in a rather dramatic fashion. I wished I had a better relationship with my brother. Having him arrested probably wasn't the way to go about it, but I couldn't let him think he was going to get away with what he was doing. Throwing adult temper tantrums like this was unacceptable.

I waited and waited for the phone to ring. When it did, it was Eric. "Hi."

"Uh oh, what's wrong?" Eric asked.

"My stupid fucking brother is probably either being loaded into an ambulance right now, or being arrested for breaking the window in my front door because Amelia wouldn't let him in the house." I was going to cry. Eric's sympathy would be what pushed me over the edge.

"What? Why would your brother do that?"

"I don't know. I don't know what the fuck he was thinking showing up at my house like that. Amelia said he's drunk, so who knows what's going on in that head of his." I bit my lip to keep from sobbing like I wanted to. The call waiting beeped in my ear. "Eric, Amelia's on the other line. I'll call you back."

"I love you." He said quickly before I pushed the button. *I love you, too*.

"Amelia, what's going on?"

"Sookie? This is Bud Dearborn."

I rolled my eyes. Fan-fucking-tastic. I already knew this wasn't going to end well. "Good evening, Sheriff."

"Now listen, Sookie, I can haul your brother in and let him spend the night in the drunk tank, but-"

"I want to press charges, Bud. He broke the window."

"He says it was self-defense, and from the size of Miss Broadway's friend here, I'd say Jason was right."

"Are you fucking kidding me?" I screeched into the phone. "Amelia was alone in the house when Jason showed up. He knows I don't want him in the house. Ever since Gran died he's been trying to find a way..." I trailed off. The story was embarrassing to tell. Fuck if I wanted to tell it *again*. "He broke a window in *my* home knowing damn good and well he wasn't invited or welcome. Any other officer worth his badge in any other part of the country would arrest Jason for what he did. Being drunk isn't an excuse."

"Now Sookie, your Gran would want-"

"Don't you dare tell me what my Gran would want, Bud Dearborn! You might be older'n me, but I think I knew her a might better than you did! You think she'd want Jason carrying on like a drunken idiot, breaking things when he didn't get his way? Do you think she'd want him fighting me over her last decisions? Heck no! So if you want to honor my Gran's memory, then you remember she left that house, everything in it and the land it's sitting on to *me*!" With that I hung up on the sheriff.

I knew my Gran probably wouldn't have approved of my tirade, but I knew if I stayed on the phone I would start cussing at the sheriff. It was bad enough my drawl had thickened to redneck level. That was never a good sign. Amelia called a half hour later to tell me Jason had been arrested and charged with public intoxication, DUI (since he'd driven his truck over to my house and the truck was still running when the sheriff got there), destruction of private property, aggravated assault (he'd picked up a shard of broken glass and cut Tray with it), and a few other things. I was shocked Bud had taken me seriously.

"Looks like I'm going to have to make a trip down to Louisiana." I sighed once Amelia was done regaling me the with the whole story from start to finish. Tray was being treated by paramedics. The cut wasn't too deep, thank God.

"Sookie, you don't need to do that."

"Yes I do. I think it's time I decide what to do with the house, because clearly Jason's not going to give up on this." I sighed. I was pretty sure I had a plan. "I'll talk to Eric when he gets home and I'll call you in the morning when I know for sure what's what."

We chatted for a few more minutes before Amelia excused herself to go play nurse to Tray. I started up my laptop so I could check into flights to Louisiana. I didn't really want to go back, but I had to. Enough was enough as far as Jason was concerned. I had to put an end to this bullshit once and for all.

**Eric**

"I want to go with you." I told Sookie when she announced she was going down to Louisiana to settle things with her brother.

"Eric, no, you don't have to do that. I can take care of this." She insisted.

"I know I don't have to. I want to. I don't trust your brother not to hurt you." I said simply.

She wanted to argue he wouldn't do that, I could see it in her eyes, but the words wouldn't come out. "You have the bar."

"Pam can take care of it for a few days. Let me be there for you, Sookie."

She sighed and then hugged me. "Okay. Thank you."

I expected her to fight me longer on the issue. It made me a little angry she was too worn out or upset to do that. I hadn't met Jason, but I was pretty sure we weren't going to like each other. He should be taking care of his little sister, not having petty arguments over money. When our Dad died, my brothers and I stuck together on just about everything but our Mom's second marriage. We didn't see eye to eye on Mom's relationship with Bentley, but we didn't let that come between us. There wasn't much point. Us fighting over it wasn't going to bring Dad back, or make Mom change her mind.

Then again, our Mom remarrying was a far cry from what sounded like the attempted grave robbing Jason was doing. Was money really all that mattered to him? I hated that my mind went to the negative place, but it wasn't as though he was asking Sookie for family photos or little knicknacks that had been important to their Grandmother. No, what he wanted was rights to the land and a portion of the profit if Sookie decided to sell the house. What a greedy bastard.

Sookie warned me her hometown was a total backwater place. Temperature wise, the weather was about the same. The humidity, however, was even worse than it was right there on the lakeshore. I didn't think that was possible. Bon Temps was too small for an airport of its own. The closest major airport was in the New Orleans, and it was a five hour drive from there to get to Sookie's hometown. We split driving duty, stopping in Baton Rouge so I could see LSU where she'd gone to college.

It was getting late, so we didn't stay too long. By the time we pulled into the very long driveway of her old farmhouse, it was after dark. There were no lights on in the house and the front door- well, where the front door*should* have been- was boarded up until a new door could be put in its place.

"Amelia's waiting tables tonight at a bar called Lou Pine's. It's a biker bar." She informed me with her crazy emergency smile.

"A biker bar?" Something about Amelia didn't suggest that was her crowd, but then she was dating Tray, so who knows.

"It's where she met Tray."

Figures. "They really are an odd couple."

She shrugged and said, "It works for them. Mostly."

I still had no idea what had caused Amelia's meltdown the night I'd tried to tell Sookie how I felt the first time. If I was honest, I didn't really care. I liked Amelia and Tray well enough, but I had enough relationship issues of my own to worry about without taking theirs on as well. I'd leave it to Sookie to help Amelia fight whatever fires got started.

"I guess we'll go in the back way." She sighed while digging through her purse to find her house keys. She hadn't needed them in weeks.

"It's a nice piece of land." I looked around at the the woods that surrounded the property.

"It's home." Sookie sounded defeated, which I didn't like.

She located her keys and let us into the house. It was obvious to me right away the place was in need of a lot of work. I wasn't a construction expert by any means, but I'd learned a lot while fixing up my own house. She explained that because of the high water tables in Louisiana, basements were practically non-existent. Well, that would make checking the foundation for her a little more difficult, now wouldn't it.

As we walked from room to room, she explained when each addition had been made, and by whom. Until Amelia, no one but Stackhouses had lived on the property for close to two centuries. Every member of the family that became head of household added something to the house. It had started out as one room- the kitchen, and it was her Grandad who had added the second floor for Sookie's father and Aunt.

"Why didn't your Gran leave the house to your Aunt?" I asked out of curiosity. Sookie really hadn't told me too much about her family.

"Aunt Linda died of breast cancer when I was seventeen." Sookie said glumly and pointed to a picture on the wall of a woman who faintly resembled her.

"She was pretty."

Sookie nodded her agreement. "Yes, she was. Her daughter, Hadley, was Miss Renard Parish for three years running before she got mixed up with the wrong crowd." Sookie pointed to another photo of a girl who very much looked like her.

"That's Hadley?" Sookie nodded. "She looks like you."

"Well, she's older, so I look like her, but yeah. Everyone thought we were sisters when we were younger."

"I can see why."

"She's gone now, too."

"How?"

"No one really knows. Actually, I don't even know if she's really dead. I assume she is. After she ran off, she called Gran begging for money so she could get clean, but then we never heard from her again. Then Katrina happened and we just assumed she wasn't one of the lucky ones. I've looked for her some, but I didn't really have the resources or the time with school, work and Gran." Sookie's guilt was heartbreaking. "I should have looked harder. She's blood."

I wrapped an arm around her. "I can help you, if you want."

She took a deep breath and leaned into me. "I think if Hadley wanted to be found, I would have found her."

"Well, if you ever change your mind, you know where to find me." I kissed the top of her head.

She showed me around the rest of the house before declaring she was exhausted. We made sandwiches in the old kitchen. The table we were sitting at was older than the house. I was amazed by all of the history trapped inside the collection of walls surrounding us. Since Sookie had shared something about her family, I figured it was only right to tell her more about mine.

"You know my Dad died when I was twenty." I said after wiping my mouth.

"You don't have to talk about it." Sookie looked at me sympathetically. She knew better than anyone what it was to lose a parent since she'd lost both at such a young age.

"I want to. I mean, if that's okay." I didn't want to bum her out more than she already was.

"Of course it's okay." She gave me a faint smile, then squeezed my hand to reassure me.

"Watching my Dad... the last few months of his life were, I don't even know what the word is to describe it. It was hard to watch him break down piece by piece and know there was nothing any of us could do but wait for the clock to stop. He was in so much pain all the time. And the last few days, it was like every single breath he took was a struggle. It was agony to watch his light fade out." Sookie moved from her chair and sat in my lap. I could see her heart breaking for me in her eyes. She kissed my cheek and urged me to continued. "I wanted to be just like my Dad. He started his own business from nothing, and he built it into something great. It's part of the reason I take the bar so seriously. And when he finally passed, I don't think I would have made it if wasn't for my brothers."

"You're lucky to have them. They're good guys." She kissed my forehead.

"They are. I guess that's why I wanted to meet your brother. I wanted to look him in the eye and ask him how he could be such a selfish prick. When Dad died the last thing any of us worried about was what was left to who. I didn't want to hoard his belongings, and I sure as hell wouldn't sell them. I know everyone grieves differently, but you can't put a price on someone you love. And for him to ask you to do that just to pad his own pocket is reprehensible, Sookie. If you want to sell this place, that's one thing. I would love it if you..." I trailed off there. We hadn't talked about what was going to happen at the end of the season yet.

"If I what?"

"If you stayed in Michigan. I don't want you to go. I don't want to lose you with the change of seasons, and I don't want to have to come up with some silly schedule of when we can visit each other. I will if I have to, but if all that's holding you back from staying in Michigan full-time is me, then don't let that worry you. I want you around." I know I sounded like an arrogant ass, but I wanted her to know how I felt. I didn't want her wondering if I would be okay with it.

"Well thank you for your blessing." She smirked at me.

"You know that's not what I meant."

"I know." She wrapped her arms around my neck and ran her fingers through my hair. "Look, I'm not defending my brother's actions or anything when I say this, but Jason and I were never close like you are with your brothers. We're just cut from two very different bolts of cloth. I love him because he's my brother, but I wouldn't choose to be his friend. I didn't get to pick him. We're stuck with each other, and he's all the family I have. So it might not make a whole lot of sense to you why I'm not ready to let go yet, but it's not because I don't want to be with you. Believe me, I want that more than anything. I just... I don't know if I can turn my back on this place."

"I think I may have an idea of how this could work out for everyone, and you could still stick it to your brother." I offered.

"Oh you do? Well, do tell." She looked at me with interest.

I pulled her close and whispered in her ear. She giggled at my plan. "You think I'm nuts, don't you?"

She kissed me softly. "I'll talk to Amelia in the morning and see if we can't set it up."

**Sookie**

It took very little to talk Amelia into going along with the plan I'd come up with, with Eric's help. We met with Sid Matt Lancaster to process all of the necessary paperwork. He'd never cared much for Jason either, so he was more than thrilled to help us out. I don't suppose it helped that Jason had treated Sid Matt's daughter like a cast-off and broke her heart way back when they were teenagers. Then a week later, Jason went and did the same thing to Sid Matt's niece.

My brother had bad karma written all over him. Once my brother was released from jail after talking his boss into putting up the money for his bail, I invited him over under the premise of coming to some sort of agreement. I told him I'd found a buyer for the property, and I wanted him to witness the signing over of it all so he could collect his share of the profits.

He was obviously floored I was going to cut him in after I was the one who insisted on having him arrested. Now, I realize what I was about to do was sneaky, and probably more than a little cruel. I doubt my Gran would have approved, but she was gone. And frankly, I was of the opinion Jason needed to learn a big lesson. He was about to get it.

Jason showed up right on time and parked his truck next to Sid Matt's old Buick. He came in through the brand new front door Eric had stayed around the house all day to make sure was installed properly. He looked a bit apprehensive to not only see Tray standing there, but Eric as well.

"Who's he?" Jason pointed to Eric. Such manners.

"Jason, this is my boyfriend, Eric." I motioned between them, and realized it was the first time I'd ever called Eric my boyfriend out loud. Eric noticed it, too, because he grinned at the label. "Eric, this is my brother, Jason."

There were no handshakes exchanged, only nods and looks of suspicion.

"And of course, you know Sid Matt Lancaster." I gestured to Sid Matt.

"Oh, right. How you been, Sid Matt?"

"Splendid." Sid Matt gritted his teeth. "Shall we get started now that everyone's here?"

"Yeah, we need to hurry this along. I gotta date." Shocking. Only my brother could get bailed out of jail and have a date in less than an hour.

"Well, Sookie came to me this morning to let me know that she was interesting in transferring ownership of the property your lovely Grandmother- God rest her soul- left to Sookie in her last will and testament. Eric and Tray are here to serve as witnesses to this exchange." Sid Matt handed me a pen so I could sign the paperwork that would officially transfer the deed for property over to Amelia.

"Whoa, whoa, I thought Sookie was selling everything?" Jason was always slow on the uptake. He didn't disappoint.

"I am. I'm selling everything to Amelia." I smiled at my friend, who was signing the contracts.

"Amelia?" Jason snorted.

"Got a problem with that?" Tray made a fist, and Jason backed down a little.

He was still a little roughed up from the fight he'd gotten into with Tray in the first place.

"If I could, I'd just give it to her, but I can't do that. I couldn't just give away everything Gran left me. That wouldn't be right." I stood up and turned to Jason.

"No, it damn sure wouldn't." Jason was twitchy. That was new.

"That's why I'm selling it to her for a dollar." I beamed at him, waiting for the light bulb to turn on.

"A dol...You can't... Gran would... *A dollar*?"

"Yep. A dollar." I nodded and held out my hand.

Amelia made a big show of reaching into her pocket and producing four quarters. She dropped them one by one into my hand. "There you go, Sookie. Pleasure doing business with you."

"This is... this is fucked up! You can't do this!" Jason started toward me, but two very large men quickly got in his way.

"It's okay, boys." I smiled at them and then stepped over to Jason. "Here's your half. Now we're square. I don't ever want to speak to you again, do you understand me? And if you set foot on this property from this point on without her say so, Amelia can have your ass carted off to jail anytime she wants. We're done here, Jason. I owe you nothing."

Jason stared at the quarters in his hand for a second, completely shocked by what I'd just done. Frankly, I couldn't believe I'd done it either. It felt good to stand up to my brother after a lifetime of bullying.

"And on that note, I'm going to have to ask you leave my property and not come back, Jason. Thanks for stopping by." Amelia wiggled her fingers at him.

Jason sputtered for a moment, searching for some scathing comeback to everything that was happening, but there was nothing to say. What's done is done. Amelia owned the property in name only, and had agreed to sell it back to me anytime I saw fit. I doubted I was ever going to want it, but I knew she would take care of it for me. Instead of charging her monthly rent, she just had to pay the property taxes on the place. I agreed I'd pay a percentage for the year, since I had lived there for a portion of it.

Jason stormed out of the house after pocketing his profits. I didn't know if I should feel relieved or pissed, so I decided I could feel both things. My Gran would be so disappointed in both of us for being like this, but I just wasn't going to kowtow to him. He was an adult. He needed to start acting like one. I couldn't hold his hand anymore, and I sure wasn't going to enable him in his selfishness. Eric put his arm around me, the weight of it somehow making me feel lighter.

I don't know when it was, exactly, that I'd changed my mind about moving to Michigan full-time, but it had happened. What I knew was that my Gran's place didn't feel like home anymore. I didn't get that same rush when I walked through the door. I missed the smell of the lake, and the rushing of the waves. It would only get worse if I tried to force myself to stay here when I knew it wasn't what I really wanted. Ultimately, I knew where I belonged was with Eric. I knew what nine months of not seeing him would get me, and I didn't want that. I wanted him. All the time. I just hadn't told him yet.

Big thanks to The First Wives' Club for giving me the idea on this little scheme Sookie and Eric cooked up to get back at Jason. If you haven't the movie, you should. It's hilarious.

Also **scribeninja's** NerdStud has been leaving reviews for my Eric, whom I have been referring to as "Caveman" on account of his issues with jealousy. Linds and I got to talking, and we decided to let our boys have a play date, of sorts, and thankfully gchat was there to catch the whole thing. Sooooo if you're curious to see what sort of advice these two very different Erics could offer one another (NerdStud thinks Caveman should be more modest, whereas Caveman offers NerdStud some sex advice on how to spice things up), please check out the transcript of that conversation at the **sookieverse\_lj**. We couldn't post it here due to site rules in regards to chat script.

**sookieverse\_**

**Chapter 18: Whatever You Do, Don't!**

Sorry it took so long to get a new chapter up. My muses completely abandoned me for about 36 hours. Little bastards just up and left without warning. Unacceptable. Luckily, Caveman came back so I could finish this chapter for you. Happy Halloween, baby birds!

Chapter 18: Whatever You Do, Don't!

After three nights of sleeping on Sookie decidedly less comfortable full-sized bed in Louisiana, I was dying to get back into the comfy clutches of my California king. It was all I could think about the entire flight back to Chicago.

"So, I have to ask you something." Sookie said nervously from the passenger's side of my car.

"Ask away." I reached for her hand, hoping it would soothe her nerves.

She inhaled deeply and said, "What would you think about me moving up here full-time?"

I glanced over her, trying to keep my grin from being too blinding. "Is that what you want?"

"I want you, so yes." Sookie smiled at me, her blush out in full force.

"I love you." It seemed like the best thing I could have said at that moment. If we weren't speeding down the highway I would have pulled over and kissed her senseless. "I want you to stay, but if that's not what you want, we can find another way to make it work."

"I don't want to do the long distance thing." Sookie said firmly. "I did that once already, and I know you're not Bill, but it didn't turn out very well for me. I don't want you to think I feel like I need to be here to keep an eye on you. I'm not... I don't think you would cheat on me, and I hope you know I wouldn't do that to you. I know how it feels. But I know I would go crazy missing you, and I just... I don't think it would be worth it for me to go back to Louisiana when the summer ends."

She was rambling. I liked that she rambled like that when she got flustered. "Sookie, you don't need my permission to stay in Michigan."

"I know. I just want to be sure you're okay with it. It's going to be different than it was." She was referring to last year.

"It's already different than it was last year." I raised her hand and kissed it.

She smiled faintly before sliding across the seat. I let go of her hand and slid my arm around her. She rested her head on my shoulder. I wasn't quite sure what we had just decided, but it was good to know I was one step closer to having her with me all the time. It was what I wanted. I just didn't want to put too much pressure on her. Things between us had changed so fast, and it had been a difficult process. I didn't want to rock the boat by throwing more at her.

Her breathing got deeper and evened out, and I knew she was asleep next to me. She'd tried to hide it, but I knew she hadn't gotten much sleep while we were in Louisiana. I assumed that had a lot to do with what happened with her brother, but now I was thinking maybe it had more to do with her decision to stay in Michigan. It amazed me how she could over-think things the way she did. She drove herself insane slowly with all of her thinking. She over-analyzed and she worried too much about things she couldn't control. Being Sookie had to be exhausting.

It dawned on me as I turned onto Lighthouse Lane that Sookie had only mentioned moving to Michigan. She hadn't said anything about the two of us living together. Slow down, Northman, don't push too hard. I took a deep breath and looked down at Sookie, who had barely moved in the last hour. I parked in front of her house, and trailed my fingers up and down her deeply tanned arm

"Sookie, we're home." I kissed the top of her head.

She moaned her disapproval at being woken up. "Carry me inside?" She pouted without opening her eyes.

"I think I can do that." I opened the door once she was situated on the other side of the seat.

I lifted Sookie out of the car, her arms wrapping around my neck while I carried her up the back steps to her bedroom. She unwrapped her arms to get her keys out of her bag, and slipped the key into the door. The house was warm from being closed up for three days.

"Ugh, I forgot to turn the air conditioning on before we left." She grunted when I set her down on the bed.

"I'll get it." I told her, but she stopped me.

"No, I got you. You get the bags."

"Yes, ma'am." I smirked, then headed back to the car.

It was late afternoon, about the time we would normally start on dinner, but I was suddenly too tired to bother. Sookie was already curled up in her bed, having kicked off her flip-flops. I stared at her bed begrudgingly, wondering if I could possibly convince her to upgrade from a queen. Still, I pulled off my shirt and kicked off my shoes before getting into bed next to her. She rolled over and rested her head on my chest. I wrapped an arm around her and let myself drift off.

I woke up some time later to the sound of the shower running. I slipped out of bed and headed to the bathroom. Sookie smiled at me when I stuck my head in.

"You coming?" She leered at me.

"Not yet."

"Then get in here." She winked and went back to rinsing her hair.

I didn't need to be told twice. I stripped off my jeans and boxers and stepped into the shower behind her. God, she looked amazing when she was wet like that. We didn't attack each other, but I noticed we were doing that less and less. I wondered how much things would change between us if she decided to stay full-time. The more I thought about it, the more I thought maybe it would be better if I told her exactly how I felt. We'd been doing really well with communicating lately, and this was too important a topic to let our feelings get lost in the shuffle because we were afraid of rushing into something.

After making sure we were both squeaky clean, we got out of the shower and got dressed. Sookie went in search of a takeout menu for a Chinese place we liked that delivered. She was in the process of ordering while I figured out how to phrase what I wanted to tell her. I was happy when she gave my address as the place to deliver. I loved her dearly, but no way could I spend another night in a bed that wasn't mine.

"I hope you don't mind I'm having the food delivered to your place. I figured you'd want to sleep in your own bed tonight." I scrunched her nose up at me.

"Will you be sleeping in it with me?" I pulled her down onto my lap.

"That's up to you. I totally understand if you want a night to yourself."

I didn't like that she sounded unsure of whether or not I wanted her with me. "You're welcome any time. Besides, I was thinking a lot about you moving here."

"Me too."

"And what were you thinking?"

"You first."

I took a deep breath and said, "Well, I was thinking it might make more sense for us to live together if you move here."

"You mean in one house, splitting everything down the middle?"

"Well, yeah, sort of. Is that something you want?"

Sookie looked overwhelmed. "I...I..."

"Sookie, we don't have to." I knew it was too soon. Fuck.

"No, Eric, hang on." She turned my face to hers. "I'm not saying it isn't something I wouldn't want eventually, but you and me... we're still new, and I don't want to push it, you know?"

"I know. I understand. I just wanted to put it out there that I would be okay with it."

There was an awkward silence that settled between us, which told me she definitely had a lot on her mind that she wasn't quite ready to discuss just yet. I wouldn't push, though. When she was ready, she'd tell me. She grabbed a few of her things and then locked up her house for the night. We walked hand in hand across the gravel to my place.

Poison was playing loudly in the living room. Luke's car was parked in its usual spot, while Jake's Prius was missing. I opened the screen door for Sookie and gestured for her to go ahead. She pushed up on her toes to kiss my cheek before going inside. She winked as she passed. She stepped into the kitchen and I was right behind her. I wanted to tug her closer to the stairs, but she was frozen in place.

"Oh my God." Sookie's mouth hung open, her eyes wide as saucers.

My gaze followed hers, and there in my living room, was my brother and his girlfriend, stark naked and having what could only be described as an air guitar contest of sorts. It was disturbing as fuck. Sookie turned to face me, burying her beet red face in my chest. I lifted one of my hands to my face and put two fingers in my mouth to whistle for their attention. The second Dulcie saw me, she dove behind the couch. Luke just stood there kind of dumbfounded.

"Woops, sorry, Eric." He apologized after pausing the stereo.

"Get dressed and get out." I glared at my brother.

Unfuckingbelievable.

"We didn't think you guys were going to be home tonight." He said as if that explained anything.

"I'm going to wait upstairs." Sookie stepped around me, then bolted for the stairs without turning to look back.

"Come on, Eric, don't be pissed. It's not like you and Sookie never-"

"Don't you even *think* of turning this around on me. First of all, this is *my* house, so what I do in it is *my* business. Second of all, I made it very clear to you before you came up for the summer that I didn't want you having hook ups in random places in my house. What you do with your sex life is none of my business. It's bad enough that I have to hear it, Luke. I don't want to see it, and I shouldn't have to call ahead to make sure there's no naked people loitering in my living room!" I yelled at my brother.

"Geez, Dad, chill." He snorted, and Dulcie giggled.

I wasn't at all amused by this. "I am giving you two minutes to get dressed and get out. I don't care where you go, but I don't want to see you until tomorrow."

"You're serious?" Luke looked shocked.

"You just wasted fifteen seconds. Out." I stomped into the kitchen to give them a little privacy while they got dressed.

I twisted a beer bottle open and took a good, long drink, downing nearly half the bottle. I was never going to get that shit out of my head. Not enough beer in the world. A minute later Luke quietly let me know he and Dulcie were leaving. I just nodded. I didn't turn around. They didn't apologize. It was probably better they didn't. I didn't really want to hear it.

A minute later Luke's car started. I didn't care where they were going, as long as they didn't come back. Why they couldn't take the party to Dulcie's, I wasn't sure. She had her house all to herself. Her kids had come up for a few days, and she'd attempted to be normal. It dawned on me then that Luke wasn't really as serious about Dulcie as he wanted me to think he was.

I should have known it when he mentioned not wanting to be a step-father to her kids. He was too young for her. He was too young and immature to get married and have a family of his own, but I knew he wanted those things at some point. He was never going to have that with someone like Dulcie. She was fun to be around, but she had already done the marriage and baby thing. I didn't know how old she was, but I assumed that by the time Luke wanted to have kids, she wouldn't be able to do it. It just didn't make a whole lot of sense for them to stay together in the long run.

But it wasn't my decision. The only control I had was over whether or not they fucked around in my living room, and that was definitely a no dice situation. Sookie came down when the roar of Luke's car faded into the distance. She wrapped her arms around my waist from behind and kissed my spine. I exhaled loudly.

"You know, there *is* a bright side to all of this." She nuzzled against my back.

"You discovered the formula for brain bleach while you were hiding upstairs?" I snarked.

"I wish." She slid around so she was standing in front of me. "What I was going to say was at least she didn't have him over her knee."

"Oh gross." I drained the rest of my beer bottle.

"I think I know a way to make all of this better." She rubbed against me.

"Oh yeah?"

"Yep. Where do you keep your limes?" She smiled up at me.

**Sookie**

In light of what I was now calling "Weinergate," Luke made himself scarce around Eric's house. It was for the best. I had a feeling there was more to it than just walking in on Luke and Dulcie doing whatever the fuck it was they were doing. I really didn't want to know. Luke apologized to me, which was nice of him, but unnecessary in a lot of ways.

"Have you apologized to Eric yet?" I asked him one night when I was on my way up to the bar.

"Eric and I need some time apart, I think."

"You're going to have to make the first move this time, Luke. Maybe the way he went about it was wrong, but I don't disagree with what Eric said."

"You heard?"

"Luke, you know how thin the walls are. Yeah, I heard. I know it's none of my business, but-"

"No, it's fine. I'd actually like to hear what you think."

"Honestly? I think you deserve better."

"Than Eric?" He looked shocked and confused.

"Dulcie. I think you deserve better than Dulcie."

Luke looked wounded by what I said, but I stood by it. He accompanied me to the bar in hopes of talking to Eric. It just so happened that when we walked in, two of the five band members from Renegade 74 were walking out of Eric's office. I recognized Adam immediately, but had trouble figuring out who the other one was. The drummer and lead singer were twins. I could never remember which one was Justin and which one was Dustin. The rhyming names didn't help one bit.

Of course, Adam's face lit up as soon as he saw me walking toward the office. "Sookie! Nice to see you again."

"Hey, Adam, how are you?" I smiled at him, and froze when he hugged me. I patted his back to get him to let me go.

"I'm good. We just signed a contract to play two more shows before the summer ends. We'll be back in two weeks, and then again Labor Day weekend."

"That's great." I was happy to hear they would be back.

Eric came out of his office then and stopped short when he saw Adam standing in front of me. I noticed the flicker in his eyes. I'd tried to tell myself I was overreacting to Adam. He was just being friendly. Eric was blowing things out of proportion. I could handle this. Apparently, Eric couldn't. He walked over and put his arm around my shoulders, pulling me close to him and kissing the top of my head.

"Hello, lover." He greeted in a voice that I rarely heard outside of either of our bedrooms.

"Eric." I tried not to sound too stiff. "Adam was just telling me that you resigned them to play a few more shows this summer."

"Yes." Eric said crisply. "I didn't know you were coming up tonight."

He made it sound like I never just popped in for a few minutes. I didn't usually drink, but I'd come up and say hi. I really thought we were past all this petty jealousy and territory marking bullshit. I didn't act like a weirdo every time I saw another woman compliment his bar, or wink, or smile, or even grab him. It's not that it didn't get to me, but I knew it was *my* problem to deal with. I didn't want to further encourage Eric into his jealous fits by having a few of my own. At the same time, I was less and less inclined to lean into him to pacify him in situations like these. Ugh, I didn't know what the fuck to do.

"I didn't know I needed to clear my schedule with you." I snapped back, deciding I was through with game playing.

Eric's eyes flashed something, though I couldn't tell you what. We got into a stare down that must have made Adam uncomfortable, because he said his goodbyes. I didn't look away from Eric. It seemed we were going to do this now. He grabbed my hand and pulled me into his office. When the door was closed, he backed me up against it. My stomach flip-flopped. Was this just a stupid fight to get me away from Adam and into his office so we could...

"I don't like that guy." Eric started.

"You've made that clear."

"I don't like the way he looks at you."

I rolled my eyes. "Oh, grow up, Eric! Women look at you like that *all the time*. You don't see me losing my shit over it. How would you like it if I popped up and threw myself all over you while you were talking to someone else?" Eric smirked of course, his mind going somewhere other than where I thought it would. "I'm going home. I don't want to talk to you right now."

"Sookie, wait-"

"Fuck you. I want to go home." I glared at him. I'd never cussed at him like that, but I was pissed. He wasn't taking me seriously.

"Fine. Go home." He stepped away from me. "Call me when you're not going to be so bitchy."

Did he just go there? The look on his face told me he did. I thought about slapping him again, but that wasn't the mature way to hand this. Maybe a kick to the shin, though...

"That probably won't be for a while, so don't hold your breath." I had a thing for having the last word when I was pissed. I knew it wasn't really healthy because it tended to escalate arguments to ridiculous levels, but thankfully Eric just let me stomp off.

Of course, like the dumb girl I was, I was crying my eyes out by the time I got to the parking lot.

"Hey, Sookie, are you okay?" Adam. Fuck.

"I can't talk to you right now, Adam. I have to go home. I'll see you around." I waved him off. The last thing I needed was for Eric to decide to come out to apologize and find me with Adam.

"Sookie, hey, come on..."

"Leave me alone!" I yelled at him, shoving his hand off my shoulder when he touched me.

I didn't want to yell at him, too, but it was just the wrong time. I got into my car, and pretty much floored it out of the parking lot. I was home in about forty-five seconds. Unfortunately, I wasn't alone. An unfamiliar car pulled in next to mine, and a few seconds later, Adam got out of the car. Fan-fucking-tastic.

"Adam, I'm fine. You should go." I started up the steps.

"Sookie, I'm not an expert with women, but most of them don't cry like that unless something's wrong." He sounded concerned, but I really couldn't talk to him about what was wrong.

"Eric and I had a fight, okay? Just... please go before he shows up here." I sighed.

"Call him and tell him to let you cool off." Adam suggested.

I snorted and said, "It won't matter."

"Sookie, if he tries to bully his way-"

"No, no, it's not like that!" I said quickly and pointed to Eric's house. "He lives there."

Adam spun around to see Jake and Mini on one of the porch swings. The lower level lights were on. Maybe I should go talk to Mini about this? I sighed after deciding that wasn't going to happen. She was busy with Jake, and I didn't want to ruin their night. Those two almost never fought. I don't know how they did it. It seemed like if Eric and I weren't fucking like bunnies, we were gearing up for another argument. Or maybe Jake and Mini were able to keep their fights private.

Maybe I was the silly girl who had to yell at her boyfriend in the middle of a bar to make myself feel better. I slid open the patio door and walked into the house. Adam still hadn't left. I flopped down on the couch, not sure of what to do. I wanted someone to talk to. I was pissed off at Eric. Although talking to Adam about this would be awkward, since he was kind of the problem. Then again, maybe if I confronted him with Eric's suspicions, I could get a clearer idea of what expectations Adam had.

I honestly had no idea. One minute I thought he just wanted to be friends and hang out, and the next, he was giving me these heated looks that made me think he wanted to get me naked and up against a flat surface ASAP. A little voice in the back of my head said inviting Adam in was probably a bad idea, but I told that little voice to fuck off.

"Eric thinks you're attracted to me." I said from the couch.

Adam was standing in the doorway. His expression didn't change with my confession. "You're beautiful, Sookie. You having a boyfriend doesn't change that. And honestly? Yes, I would ask you out in a heartbeat if there wasn't an Eric in the picture, but there is, so I won't. I can behave myself. I don't want to cause trouble for you and Eric, but I would like to be friends."

I thought about it for a moment. I was friends with Alcide. I was friends with Tray. I was friends with Luke (who had hit on me more times than I had fingers and toes to count them on) and Jake. I could have friends who were men. Right? Eric needed to get over it.

"Thank you for making sure I got home okay." I didn't know if that was what he was doing, but it was nice of him all the same. I didn't get the creepy, stalker vibe from him I would have gotten from Quinn if he had been the one to follow me.

"No problem. You want me to stick around for a while?" He looked a little worried about leaving me.

"No, I need some space. Eric and I are going to have a battle royale whenever he gets home. I'll see you at the bar though." I smiled faintly.

Adam opened the screen door and handed me a little piece of paper. "It's my cell number. Call me if you ever need someone to talk to."

I took the paper, but felt a little guilty for doing it. *You're just friends, Sookie. No need to feel guilty about it*, I told myself. I sighed and nodded. "Thanks, Adam."

"Anytime." He smiled softly, then turned and left.

I sat on the couch staring at his number. I seriously contemplated throwing it away. It would be one thing to chat at the bar, or after he played one of his shows, but it was another to make late night phone calls to bitch to him about my problems with Eric. If he wasn't interested in me in any way other than being friends, it wouldn't be so bad. But he *was* interested. Eric had every right to feel like Adam was stepping on his toes. What bothered me, I decided, was that he didn't trust me to handle it. He didn't trust me to keep Adam at arm's length.

But I had accepted Adam's phone number, hadn't I? I thought about throwing it away, but I wanted Eric to see me do it. I wanted him to know that he could trust me, since he didn't seem to think he could. I hauled myself off the couch and went to take a shower. I let the lukewarm water beat on my back to relieve some of the tension that had gathered. I put on a pair of sleep shorts and a tank top. It was just about closing time at the bar.

I went out to the deck and looked over at Eric's place. It was strange to see it so quiet already, but then Luke was gone. I hugged my knees to my chest when I sat on the top step of the deck. I stared up at the stars and waited to hear the rumble of Eric's car coming home.

**Eric**

I was in a shit mood for the rest of the night and it didn't go unnoticed. Pam was her usual snarky self, reminding me that with a rack like Sookie's, it was amazing I didn't have to club every guy to walk in the place. She really was no help. I ended up locking myself in the office until closing time so I wouldn't scare away the customers.

I hated fighting with her. Even as the words were coming out of my mouth, I knew they were wrong. I was pissed at Adam for trying to make a move on my girl, and I was taking out on her. Did she really not know just how gorgeous she was? There's modest, and then there's naïve. I was starting to think Sookie fell into the latter category, and that was no good. I knew she could take care of herself but I didn't want her to end up in a position where she had to.

At the same time, I knew I couldn't keep letting my inner caveman start calling the shots whenever some asshole decided to make a move on her. The less prevalent, more mature part of me knew I should be flattered, rather than jealous. Sookie didn't want Adam. She'd made that clear to me. She was just being nice and polite like she would be to anyone else. The fact that Adam wanted her was really Adam's problem, and Adam's problem alone.

By acting like a jealous maniac, I was making it *my*- no, our- problem. I wanted to leave early and go fix things with her, but I knew she was pissed. It was better to give her some space to cool off before I tried to work it out. By the time the bar closed, I was more than ready to go tell her I was a dick, and ask her to forgive me. I hated it when she was pissed at me.

I got home to find her sitting on the steps outside her cottage. Her knees were hugged to her chest. She looked as miserable as I felt, and I only felt worse for seeing her like that. I walked across the driveway to where she was sitting. I stood at the bottom of the steps and just looked at her for a moment. Her eyes avoided mine, but I couldn't blame her for it.

"Sookie, I'm sorry." I had to break the silence.

"Adam followed me home." She sniffled and wiped her face.

I felt myself stiffen. She was crying because he followed her home? Just what the fuck happened after she left. "And?" My voice was hard.

Sookie's eyes snapped to mine. "And what, Eric? What do *you* think happened?"

"I have no idea. That's why I'm asking you." I stared right back at her. "I don't like that you're crying, Sookie. Did he hurt you?"

"What? No!" Sookie rocketed up off the steps and went into her house.

I followed behind her quickly, taking the steps two at a time. She grabbed a piece of paper off the coffee table and thrust it at me. "What's this?"

"Adam's phone number."

"He gave you his number?"

"He said he wants to be friends." She laughed and wiped her face again. The crying was really freaking me out.

"So why are you crying?"

"Because first he told me that he's interested in being more than just my friend. You were right. You happy now?" She was bitter. I felt like a dick. What a fucking mess.

"No, I'm not happy."

"I want you to take that with you and throw it away." Sookie insisted.

"Why would I do that?"

"Because I don't want you thinking that I fished it out of the trash after you left. I want you to trust me, so if that's what it takes-"

"I trust you, Sookie."

"Then what's with the caveman routine, Eric? If you trust me to handle stuff like this, then why do you have to drape yourself all over me like a dog marking it's territory. I seriously thought you were going to lift your leg on me earlier. If you trusted me, you wouldn't do that."

"It's not about you, Sookie. It's about me." I sighed.

"You're fucking right it is. So you're going to take the number. I don't care if you throw it away, flush it, burn it...whatever. I don't want to know."

"What about Adam?"

"What about him?"

"What did you tell him when he told you he was interested in you?"

"I didn't know what to say."

"So you didn't remind him you have a boyfriend?"

"I didn't think I needed to, Eric. He knows I'm with you."

"Apparently he doesn't really care about that if he's following you home and giving you his number."

Sookie let out a loud groan of frustration. "Do you want me to call him right now and tell him to never come near me again? Will that get you to believe that he doesn't matter? Fuck, Eric, this is ridiculous!"

I could feel the anger coming off of her. She paced back and forth across her living room. I tried to think of something else to say. I was stuck.

"Go home, Eric. I think maybe we need a few days apart."

No. No, that's not what I wanted. "Sookie, let's talk about this?"

"What's there to talk about? You don't trust me. I don't know how to fix that. I thought I was doing the right thing by telling you what happened tonight. I guess I can't win with you, so maybe you should just go. Maybe moving here is a mistake."

My heart dropped. How the fuck had this happened? This wasn't what I wanted. I wanted to fix things, not fuck them up even worse. I tried to get her to change her mind. I wanted to stay and talk things out, but she was pissed off and in that stubborn mindset of hers where she wasn't interested in hearing me out just yet. I'd come to apologize and somehow things were even worse than when I first got there.

I didn't know what else to say, so I just turned around and left. I could hear her crying as I walked down the steps. I hated myself for not being able to do anything to stop it.

Having feelings really fucking sucked.

I'll make it better next chapter, baby birds, I promise.

**Chapter 19: A Clean Pair of Eyes**

Right. Epic long chapter here, but I promised **scribeninja** and her beloved NerdStud a resolution here. I swear, I'm nervous for Caveman's safety if he doesn't get his shirt together, ASAP. If you want to know what I'm talking about, check my reviews for last chapter. NerdStud was *not* happy with Caveman. Not at all.

Chapter 19: A Clean Pair of Eyes

**Sookie**

I tell Eric the truth, and he just gets even more mad. I can't fucking win. No matter what I do, he's acting like a maniac. I slept for shit that night. I spent the night tossing and turning, waiting for morning to come. As soon as I saw the first rays of sunlight, I was out of bed and getting a start on my day. I showered, had a quick breakfast and then got the hell out of the house. I needed to be away from Eric. I headed up to the Dunes, knowing it was going to probably be packed there in record time.

I found a spot to lay out my towel, and proceeded to just lay back and read for a while until my eyes wouldn't stay open anymore. I turned over onto my stomach and let my eyes close. I never went into deep R.E.M. sleep, but I was relaxed. A shock of cold water splashed my back, and I rocketed up off the towel. I turned to see Jake smirking at me.

"Christ, Northman, what gives?"

"You looked hot?" He shrugged.

"Where's Laura?"

"At home talking to your dumber half." He unfolded a towel and sat down next to me.

"How'd you know I was here?"

"Laura mentioned you like to come here when you wanted to be alone."

"Doesn't that tell you something, then?"

"It probably should, but I figure since I don't stick my nose in your business too much, you might be willing to forgive me just this one intrusion."

He had a point. Of all the Northman brothers, he was definitely the least nosy. "What's up, Jake?"

"I spent the night listening to really sappy music coming from my brother's room, that's what's up. If I have to hear 'Dazed and Confused' one more time, I may have to choke someone."

"First of all, Led Zeppelin is never sappy. Second of all, this is all *his* fault."

"He told me what happened. He knows he fucked up."

"Good."

"So you're okay with him being miserable?"

"No, but I'm not sure what there is to be done about the situation. I did the right thing. I was honest. I told him exactly what happened after I left the bar last night, and all he did was get more pissed off at me."

"I don't think he's mad at you, Sookie. He's mad at Adam, and he's mad at himself. He's not used to caring so much about a single person. You took him by surprise."

"So that makes it okay then? Eric's not used to relationships so I just let this shit slide, is that what you're telling me?"

Jake shook his head and said, "No wonder you two fight all the time."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"It means my brother is a shit communicator and you're hard headed."

I scoffed, trying to find the right words to argue with him, but he was right. "So what do I do?"

"Be patient with his stupid ass. Hear him out."

"How does that fix the trust issue between us? If he trusted me, he wouldn't act this way."

"You make him feel insecure."

"*I* make him feel insecure? That's bullshit, Jake." I shook my head.

"What I mean is, his feelings for you make him insecure. He's holding on too tight because he's not used to feeling this way. He's slightly emotionally retarded when it comes to you."

"You know, I thought if I told him I was moving up here, it would make things better. I thought he would understand that I'm really in this for the long haul, and that I didn't want anyone else. I thought it would help, you know? Now...now I don't know if it's worth the hassle. Maybe it's a mistake."

"What do *you* want, Sookie?"

"Eric." I said without even having to think about it. My lip quivered, and in no time flat, I was crying like a baby.

Jake moved closer and put an arm around me. I leaned into his shoulder and cried. Unlike his brother, he didn't try to talk me out of my tears or make some stupid joke to get my mind off of what was wrong. He just let me get it all out. By the time I was done, I was drained. I had nothing left. I was completely exhausted. I wasn't even sure how I was going to drive back home, I was so wiped.

"How about I drive you home, and later you and Laura can come up and get your car if you and Eric can't work things out?" Jake offered.

I nodded. "That'd be great, Jake, thanks."

I packed up my stuff and followed him to his car. We ended up stopping at the Sugarbowl for a late lunch. He told me about school in Chicago and how he and Laura were planning to move in together when the summer ended. They were going down to look at apartments the next day. She'd put in for sponsorship for her blog, and was hoping to get picked up by a travel company of some kind. I'd had the chance to check out her blog, and it was fantastic.

By the time we got back to the houses, it was late afternoon. Eric's car was gone, but that was no big surprise. Laura was sitting on one of the porch swings with her feet up, reading a book about Buddha, as far as I could tell. I waved at her, but didn't go over to talk. I needed a nap big time. I walked around the deck to the back side of the cottage where my bedroom was. I stopped short when I saw the flowers on the floor waiting for me.

I sighed heavily and bent to scoop them up. Luckily they were labeled so I knew what types of flowers they were. The Hyacinth and mauve Lilacs were readily identifiable. Gran had loved them, especially in the springtime. The flowers smelled lovely, not too strong. I carried them inside. I'd never seen China Aster before, but they were lovely as well. They looked like a cross between Gerber Daisies and Mums. The China Aster seemed like an interesting choice to me. It certainly wasn't a flower you see everyday.

I booted up my laptop, and got on the internet to see what I could find out about the flower. I Googled it and found out flowers had meanings. I never would have thought of it. Leave it to Eric to send me a message with the type of flowers he sent me. I sighed heavily, the flowers taking on more of a meaning to me just knowing how much thought he'd put into choosing them. The China Aster represented jealousy and after-thought. The Hyacinth (because they were only purple) were his apology and him asking for forgiveness. The Lilacs asked me if I still loved him.

I couldn't help but laugh a little. He hated the smell of Lilacs, yet he'd put them into a bouquet for me. I thought about what Jake said. Eric was clearly trying here, and I felt a little bad for just running from him when I should have let him talk. I got defensive. If I was just going to freeze him out every time things got hard, no wonder he was having a hard time being open with me. Once I realized my part in everything, I knew I had no choice but go up to Loki's and talk to him. I couldn't let it wait until he got home from work.

I jumped in the shower again and washed up. Afterward I slipped into one of my sundresses, and headed up to the bar. It was a beautiful day, and the walk was nice. I turned into the driveway just in time to see Eric hugging a very pretty blonde woman maybe a half a foot shorter than him. She was well-dressed and he looked very comfortable hugging the woman. My stomach dropped. I slammed on the brakes and started to back away.

If he thought flowers were going to fix this, he had another thing coming.

**Eric**

"So, what daft thing did you do this time?" Mini asked as soon as Jake left the house.

"What do you mean?"

"You look like a lost puppy, Eric. You look like this every time you fight with her. Come on, out with it." Mini gestured like she didn't have all day.

I told her the whole story from start to finish, and when I was done, she reached over and smacked me upside the head.

"What the hell?" I glared at her.

"You're an ass, you know that." It wasn't a question.

"I know it."

"You know if you don't cut this shit out, she's going to leave, and not just for the summer. Is that what you want?"

"No."

"Then quit being a fucktard."

I sighed heavily. "I know what I should do, but somehow it gets lost in translation, and instead of making things better, I make it worse."

"Might I make a suggestion?" She asked this as if I could actually stop her. Not that I would. "Before you speak, try and think of how *she's* going to hear it. Just for a moment, stop and put yourself in her place. How would you feel if she'd said the things you did?"

I thought about it. I really didn't think I'd been that harsh with her, but she was obviously upset by what I'd said.

"You should also know, I think *she* needs a swift kick in the pants." Mini stated, which surprised the hell out of me.

"You do?"

"She took Adam's number instead of throwing it right back at him after he'd already told her he had feelings for her. I get why she took it, but she still gave him a reason to think maybe there was hope. And that fucker's trying to use your place of business as courting grounds? He's lucky I don't hunt him down and kick his ass myself."

"If you do, will you call me first? I would love to see that." I joked, and got myself a second slap upside the head.

"This isn't funny, Northman." Mini glared at me. "You're going to lose her if you don't cut it out."

"I know."

"So, what are you going to do to fix this?"

"I don't know. What would you suggest?"

"I'd start with flowers. They'll soften the sting just a little, but I'm thinking you're going to need to grovel for a bit, and then pray that she'll talk to you."

"If that doesn't work?"

"You keep at it until she tells you there's no hope." Mini shrugged. "Honestly? I think a lot of this has to do with her ex. I don't know how much she's told you, but he sounds like a really controlling asshat who couldn't keep his dick in his pants to save his life. So it's not fair, but you're paying for how he fucked up. You two really need to learn how to communicate better."

I agreed. I thought we *were* doing better. Apparently, I was wrong about that. I started looking at flower arrangements on my laptop, but Laura suggested I try something less conventional. I had no idea flowers had meanings, but after Googling it, I found a whole list of what different flowers meant. I knew what I wanted to say, and it just so happened there was a really big nursery in the next town over. Mini agreed to go along with me to make sure I got the right things, since I was generally clueless about flowers unless it was the standard dozen roses.

It was disappointing that Sookie was already gone by the time I looked over at her house. On the other hand, until I knew for sure what I wanted to say to her, it was probably better she wasn't there. I didn't bother to put a note in with the flowers, figuring it would be overkill. Instead, I made sure to include what flowers were in the mix, and left the bouquet near her bedroom door.

I was just getting out of the shower a short time later when I got a phone call from Sam, letting me know a woman claiming to be my mother was at the bar, and she was asking for me. I got dressed and headed over to the bar. If Mom was in town, something had to be going on. I was a little pissed at my brothers for not mentioning she was coming up. I sincerely doubted they didn't know. Jake had remained pretty neutral where Mom was concerned, but Luke was close to her. They talked regularly.

Then again, Luke was pissed at me for what I'd said about Dulcie, so this was probably his way of getting back at me. The only good thing about her sneak attack was, it sounded like she didn't have Bentley with her. I headed over to the bar, wondering if there was a specific reason for her visit. I figured there had to be.

I pulled into the parking lot at Loki's about fifteen minutes after Sam called. Mom was standing there waiting for me. I was a little pissed Sam hadn't let her wait inside. I parked in my usual spot and got out of the car. Mom smiled when she saw me, but then she always did. I was her first born, a fact that set me apart from my brothers, although I'm not really sure what the distinction is.

"Eric, it's good to see you." Mom pushed her sunglasses up onto the top of her head. She looked exhausted, like she had in the weeks before Dad died when she hardly slept.

"Jesus, Mom, what happened?"

"Bentley and I are getting divorced." She came right out with it.

"Oh." I wasn't sure what the right reaction was. I know what I felt, but I didn't think gloating was appropriate. "Sorry to hear that." It sounded fake even to me.

"No you're not. You never liked him." She wasn't bitter about it.

"No, I didn't." No use lying to her. "But I'm sorry you're having a hard time."

"I'm also pregnant." She revealed.

"What the fuck?" I said it before my filter could stifle it. "Sorry, that was..."

"No, it's okay. It's what I said when I found out." Mom leaned against the Lime Green Monster with an appreciative look in her eyes. "You know, your father and I were in this car when I told him I was pregnant with you."

Mom always could find a way to twist the dagger in my heart, even if that wasn't her intention. "Yeah?"

She nodded and said, "We were at the drive in. The Big Chill was playing. Your Dad had a thing for JoBeth Williams."

"I remember. You kinda look like her."

"That's what he used to say, but I suspect it was so I wouldn't get jealous." Mom laughed. "Anyway...there we were watching the movie. Meg wanted to have a baby so badly, and it was just the right time to tell him, so I did. I think your father thought I was confused, at first, about what was happening in the movie. But then it sunk in that I was talking about me, *us*, and I swear, I've never seen him so excited. You think I was the love of his life? No. It was you. You and your brothers."

"Mom..."

"I know you don't understand why I did what I did where Bentley is concerned. All I can tell you is that I have missed your father every single day that he's been gone. I will always, *always* love him, Eric. I see him every time I look at you." Mom's voice cracked. Dammit with the crying women. "I see him in the way you take steps two at a time, or the way Luke holds his fork. I see him in Jake's openness. It's because of you boys that I know he's not really gone. Still, we spent a lot of years together. We built quite a life. I knew he wasn't going to recover, but I never really let myself believe I was going to lose him. Then when I did, everything was turned inside out for me.

"I didn't just lose my husband, Eric. I lost the father of my children. I lost my very best friend. So much of my world was wrapped up in that man. I didn't marry Bentley because I wanted to replace your father. Nothing could ever take his place in my heart. I married Bentley because he loved me, and I was lonely. I needed that closeness again. I missed it too much. But it was selfish of me.

"Having another baby wasn't part of the plan. I didn't even think I could. I figured I was too old, and with the troubles I had when I was pregnant with Luke, I didn't think another baby was in the cards for me. But I'm pregnant. Bentley doesn't want children. I think that's part of the reason he picked me. I'd already done the "mommy thing." My boys are grown up, and don't need me the way this baby is going to. Part of me thinks I should end it now, but I don't think I can. God is giving me this child for a reason, and it would mean a lot to me to know that you're okay with it."

I'm an ass.

"Of course I'm okay with it, Mom." I said sincerely, and then pulled her into a hug.

I stroked her hair while she wept against me. It wasn't until she said it that I realized I'd been angry at her because I thought she was trying to replace Dad. Knowing that wasn't at all why she married Bentley immediately tapered my anger. I thought I heard someone walking on the gravel, but there was no one there when I looked to the left..

"Why don't you come inside for a bit? I have some paperwork to do, but I think we have more to talk about." I suggested.

"I'd like that." She nodded as she wiped her tears away. "Oh, your shirt. I'm so sorry, honey."

I shrugged and said, "No big deal."

"Good thing you've got club soda inside." She smiled up at me in such a familiar way.

I never thought I'd feel that good about seeing her. Maybe there was hope for us after all. I showed her around the bar and introduced her to the few people who were already at work inside. We were opening earlier on account of the tourists that had flooded the lakefront for the summer. She seemed impressed with everything, which was nothing short of amazing.

"Your father would be so proud of you." She hugged my side.

"I hope so." I nodded, not wanting to get all emotional.

I lead her to my office, and gestured for her to take a seat. Instead, she walked around my desk to take a look at the pictures I had framed on it. "Who's this?" She held up a picture of Sookie and I from her birthday party.

"That's my girlfriend." I admitted. *Yeah, but for how long, you putz?*

"Girlfriend, huh? I haven't seen you with a girlfriend in years." Mom smiled down at the photo. "She's very pretty. What's her name?"

"Sookie."

Mom had a thoughtful expression on her face. "Sounds exotic."

I couldn't help but laugh. "Sookie is...well, she's not exotic. She's from Louisiana, actually. She lives in the cottage next to mine. She inherited it from a relative who passed away last year."

"Lucky break for you."

"You have no idea."

"So, you going to tell me about her, or do I have to make it up in my head?" Mom teased as she set the frame down.

I told her everything about Sookie I could think of. She nodded along as I spoke, making comments here and there or asking a question or two. She looked a bit troubled though when I told her how we'd gotten our start together.

"You're too old for that, Eric." She used her Mom voice for that.

"I know."

"Will I get to meet her?"

I froze up for a second before saying, "We're uh, we're sort of having a fight right now." Mom pressed her lips together and waited for me to explain. So, I explained it all to her.

"She's playing games with you. I don't like it." Mom said immediately.

"That's a little harsh."

"Bullshit. Eric, from what you've told me she's intentionally flaunted other men in front of you twice. I can understand being messed up by a bad relationship in the past, but you'd think that might make her try a little harder instead of make things worse for herself."

I hadn't really thought of it that way, even though Mini had said something similar to me earlier. "I don't know what to do."

"Are you sure you love her?"

"Yes, I'm sure."

Mom didn't look too happy with my answer, but given the relationship she was just getting out of, she didn't give me an lip about it. "There's nothing either of you can do to stop other men from finding her attractive. She's beautiful. It's going to happen more often than either of you might like. However, I think it stinks that she's toying with these boys, but telling you she isn't interested in them. It's immature, to say the least. I know she's younger than you based on the number of candles on that cake, but she's not so young that she doesn't know better than to play at what she's doing. Does she know how you feel about her?"

"I thought she did, but maybe I need to be more clear about it." I slumped into the chair behind my desk.

"Perhaps. Or maybe you just need to let her stew in her own juices for a while. Let her see that behaving like this isn't going to be tolerated. You made a mistake by snapping at her in front of that Adam fella, but I can't fathom why she would have let him into her home after he followed her. That's just foolish." Mom was right about that, of course.

"I hate fighting with her."

"It's a part of relationships, honey. It's going to happen, believe me. And until she grows up a little and you start saying what you mean, and mean what you say, you're going to fight more often than not."

That's what I was afraid of.

"I'm trying, Mom."

"That's all you can do, Eric." She sighed and put her hand on my shoulder.

"I'm really glad you're here."

She leaned down and kissed the top of my head. "Me too, baby boy, me too."

**Sookie**

Another woman. Great. Well, I guess I have no one to blame for that but myself. Stupid fucking head games. Why do I do this? He's the best guy I've met in...oh, I don't know, my whole life, and I drive him away. What the fuck was I thinking? Was trying to make a point really worth throwing everything away? Was being friends with Alcide or Adam really worth the risk? Why do I always figure this shit out ten minutes too late?

Does it even matter now that he's with someone else? But wait a minute! It's not like we broke up last night. I just suggested we take some space. I know he's not going to try and pull some of that Ross Gellar 'we were on a break' bullshit with me. I thought about going back to the bar to confront him, but I didn't want to see *her* again. My stomach turned just thinking about it.

I got back to the house to find Laura and Jake in the midst of making dinner. Laura waved me over with a smile on her face. It faded when she saw how upset I was. I really didn't feel like chatting. I wanted to go inside, soak up the air conditioning, drown myself in chocolate mint cookie ice cream and watch chick flicks until I couldn't keep my eyes open anymore. I really wasn't in the mood to deal with the couple of the year.

"That doesn't look like a happy face." Laura said sympathetically.

"He was with another woman." I said grimly.

"What?" Laura jumped off the swing. "Are you sure? Sookie, I know for a fact he feels horrible about what happened."

"Yeah, well, not so much that he didn't move on to someone else."

"Are you sure you weren't misreading the situation?" Jake asked.

"He was hugging her, so I doubt it."

"Who was she?"

"I don't know. She was blonde, thin, maybe a few years older than me. I didn't get close enough to really see her face."

"I'll skin him alive." Laura offered, which made me fight back a smile.

"Why don't you come in and have dinner with us?" Jake suggested.

"No, I want to go home and gorge myself on ice cream and melodrama. I'll see you guys tomorrow. Thank you, though, for your help."

"What about your car?" Jake reminded me.

Fuck. And they were leaving to go look at apartments in the morning. Son of a bitch.

"I'll figure it out." I really wasn't in the mood to drive all the way up there and back.

"You're sure?" Jake looked nervous.

"Yeah, I'll figure something out. I just really need to be alone."

"If you need anything..." Laura smiled faintly.

"I know." I nodded, then turned and headed back to the house.

I did as I said I would, and polished off a pint of ice cream for dinner. I was just getting to the part of *Say Anything* when Diane breaks up with Lloyd, when I heard Eric's car come up the driveway. I stayed curled up on the couch, and forced myself to look at the screen, even though my brain was elsewhere. When I heard Eric's feet on the gravel, then my front steps, my heart jumped up into my throat. There was a knock on the glass door.

I turned to face him. He looked like hell. My breath caught and I scrambled off the couch. If I didn't know any better I would have thought someone died. For a minute, I got so lost in how miserable he looked that I forgot I'd seen him with another woman. I pulled the patio door open and the screen door along with it before I remembered what I'd seen.

"Not spending the night with your other girlfriend?" I asked bitterly.

"What are you talking about?"

"I saw you earlier. I got your flowers. I was coming up to say thank you. I walked up to the bar and you were hugging another woman. How long has it been going on, Eric?"

He glared at me with more anger in his eyes than I'd ever seen before, which said a lot considering the events of the last few weeks. "That woman I was with was my mother. She came up to tell me she's getting a divorce and she's pregnant. Do you really think I would cheat on you, Sookie? Fuck!"

His mother? Oh no. God, I'm an idiot. "Well how the hell was I supposed to know that?"

He actually laughed and ran his fingers through his hair a little too roughly. "You could have *asked* instead of just assuming the worst of me. When are you going to get it that *I'm not Bill*? I'm not going to cheat on you. I'm not going to leave you. I'm not going to treat you like shit on purpose and expect you to just roll over and take it because I don't think you deserve better."

Because it's what I do, the waterworks started, which only made him even more flustered. What a fucking mess all of this was.

"I'm sorry, Eric. I shouldn't have assumed."

"No, you shouldn't. You said you trust me. I don't think that's true. If you did, you wouldn't have automatically thought I was fucking someone else. I don't do that, Sookie. When I say I'm with you, that's it. It's not something I take lightly. If I wanted to fuck other women, I wouldn't have gone so far out of my fucking comfort zone to try and make things work with you. I asked you to live with me, for fuck's sake. Do you really think I would do that if I was fucking other women?" He was yelling at me and he had every right to be. He shouted his frustration and it made me jump. Mostly because I felt the same as him.

"I hate this, Eric. I hate that we're fighting all the time. I hate that it's so easy for us to fall into these stupid traps with each other. Why is this so hard?" I slumped down on the couch.

"Because I love you, and you don't think you deserve it." He spat at me.

Maybe he was right about that. "What are we doing, Eric?"

He pulled me up off the couch and held onto my shoulders. "Do you want this to work?"

"Yes." I whispered.

"Then here's what I need from you. I need you to stop doing whatever the fuck it is you're doing with Adam and Alcide and whoever the hell else you have sitting on the back burner. I don't like the idea of you stringing these guys along-"

"I'm not doing that!"

"That's bullshit, Sookie, and we both know it! What do you need them for if you have me, huh? You know their feelings for you aren't platonic. They've both told you as much. So what do you want with them if you want to be with me? What are they giving you that I'm not?"

"It's not you, Eric." And it really wasn't. It was me. He was right when he said I was still comparing him to Bill.

"Then what, Sookie? I don't get it. I don't know how to make it any clearer to you that I'm in this until you tell me it's over. Sometimes I wish I didn't love you because this would be so much easier."

"Then you'd leave, right?" And there it was. Even though he'd said more than once he wouldn't, that was what I was afraid of.

"Do you want me to leave?"

"No."

"Then, Sookie, dammit, stop pushing me away." He pulled me closer to him, crushing me against his chest.

I held on just as tight. I really didn't want to lose him. "I don't like being like this."

"So don't be." His voice was much gentler, which soothed me some.

I knew I was shaking. The emotions swirling around us were intense, to say the least. I pulled back to look up at him, and the way he was looking at me...God, I don't know how I ever could have thought he was with someone else.

"What do you need from me to make this work, Sookie?" He stroked my back gently, and all I wanted right then was to kiss him, but I knew we had to finish talking first.

"I need you..." I paused, wanting to make sure I got it right. "I need you to be patient. I need you to trust me when I tell you that even with the way I've been lately, you really are the only one I want. I thought I was doing the right thing last night, and I wasn't. I fucked up, Eric. You were right to be pissed off at me. I need you to keep holding me accountable for the things I do wrong, or things that upset you. I need you to talk to me when you're upset instead of holding it back like you do sometimes. I'm so sorry if I make you feel like you can't talk to me. You can. Even if you're going to hurt me, I want to hear the truth. And if I do talk to another guy, I need you to not jump to conclusions that I'm talking to him because I'm shopping for your replacement."

He sighed heavily and said, "I can do those things. Can you do what I asked? Can you get rid of those back burner guys and just be with me?"

"Yeah, I can do that." I nodded.

"And can you tell me if I'm doing something to make you think I'm checking out on you?" He asked.

"Yes."

"Then I think we need to start over. Wipe the slate clean, and start from somewhere new. No more comparing me to Bill, and I won't wig out over every guy that talks to you." He promised me.

"You really think you can do that?" I asked and he nodded.

"Do you think you can do that?"

"I think so. I want to try."

"Good." He leaned down and kissed my forehead. "I do love you, Sookie."

"I know you do. I love you, too." I looked up into his eyes, and moved a little closer, hoping he would get the hint.

A faint smile played on his lips before he leaned in and kissed me. It was slow and sweet for all of maybe five seconds before we ravenously attacked each other.

Is this bitch serious? Is she *really* cutting the chapter here? Why yes, yes, she is serious. The important thing was to get the resolution out of the way. We'll get back to the sexy tiems next chapter. Promise. Hopefully my angst babies aren't rocking in a corner anymore \*snuggles you all\*

**Chapter 20: The King of Bedside Manor**

Well, well, reaction has certainly been mixed to this version of Eric and Sookie, which I love. Some think Eric's being a jealous a-hole, and some think Sookie's being a manipulative bitch. I like that there's controversy because it means these characters have room for growth, and that's the fun part of storytelling, in my humble opinion. These characters are both very flawed and have some issues to work through. That's part of the journey, my friends. They're trying, and that's what counts. I don't think we've passed a point of no return, although we came damn close. I would love to tell you that's the last of the angst, but I have no idea where these two are taking me. So, buckle up and enjoy the ride, won't you?

And now, on with zee lemons \*winks\*

Chapter 20: The King of Bedside Manor

**Eric**

I was done with the finger pointing and who did what to whom. It wasn't worth it to sit there and nitpick through every single mistake each one of us made. I could see she felt bad for the way she'd behaved. I had to believe she could do it when she said she would stop comparing me to Bill, and quit putting other guys on the back burner. That was amazed I was willing to forgive something like that, because I don't think I would have done it for anyone else.

There was something about her...I knew if I was patient with her, like she asked me to be, it would pay off in the end. I wanted to erase any doubt in her head over where my loyalties laid. She was the one I wanted. I think the case of mistaken identity went a long way to convincing her of just how terrible it was to be on my side of things. Maybe getting a taste of her own medicine, as unintentional as it was, was the wake up call she needed to understand where I was coming from.

I was tired of seeing her cry. It was even worse to know that I had something to do with it. Relationships weren't supposed to make you miserable. I told her I would fight for her, and I did. I didn't just walk away, even if maybe that was the smarter thing to do. The truth is, walking away wouldn't have helped. I would have gone through every day feeling like something was missing, and I would always know it was her.

Maybe it would never be easy for us, but I was willing to do battle because she was worth that much. Hell, she was worth so much more than that. Maybe what we needed was to get away from everyone for a little while and just spend some interrupted time together. No bar, no brothers, no assholes trying to get her attention, no barflies flirting with me to score free drinks, just me and her for a few days.

We agreed to start over with a clean slate. Going away seemed like the right way to start that. I made a mental note to call my friend Stan later on. He owned a cabin up in Wisconsin that was pretty much out in the middle of nowhere in Minocqua. It was secluded and on the lake. I'd stayed there a time or two myself, and had loved it. Assuming he wasn't using the place, it would be perfect for Sookie and me.

Once we'd reached our agreement, it felt good to kiss her. The best part of fighting was always the making up afterward, and this was no different. A sweet kiss meant to seal the deal between us quickly turned into the two of us devouring each other right there in her living room. Clothes were practically torn off and were left in a trail that led back to her bedroom. Our movements were frantic, both of us frenzied with need to feel that connection we felt to each other that we only felt during sex. It was a connection I never felt to another person.

My hand was between us, teasing her clit, while my mouth closed around one of her breasts. Her back arched and her hips rolled, trying to get more friction where she needed it. She panted, moaned and pleaded while I worked my way down her body. By the time I got to the part of her I most wanted to taste, her hips were lifting up off the bed. My fingers slid inside her, stroking her in a rhythm I knew would drive her crazy. My tongue on her clit countered the work of my fingers.

Her small hands were in my hair, tugging gently whenever a wave of pleasure would roll over her. I knew she was close, but I wanted be inside her when she came. I pulled back, much to her frustration, but she didn't have to suffer for long. Her legs wrapped around my hips and pulled me close. My lips met hers as I slid inside her as deep as I could. I stilled for a moment, just reveling in the feel of the hot tightness that surrounded me.

Her hips writhed against mine, her chest heaving beneath me. "Eric, please..." She pleaded against my neck.

I pulled back slowly, my eyes rolling back a little when I pushed in again. The frenzy started again. I wanted to slow down but the need was too much. We attacked each other with lips and teeth, grinding up against each other, desperate for release. It didn't take long for us to find it. We both came violently, with her name tumbling from my lips. She shuddered and shook underneath me through the waves of her orgasm. When I tried to roll to the side, she held me in place on top of her.

"Stay." She whispered before kissing my jaw. "It makes me feel safe."

I snuggled against her, but braced a portion of my weight on my elbows so I wouldn't crush her. Her legs relaxed their hold on me just a little, but her arms were still wrapped around my back, keeping my chest flush with hers. We stayed that way for a while, kissing lazily and whispering little things to each other before she would finally let me go. I climbed off the bed only to get a washcloth from the bathroom for me to clean her up.

I got back into her bed next to her and smiled to see the flowers I'd given her in a vase on her dresser. The smell of lilac hit me then, and I felt my stomach turn. I really, really hated the way they smelled. She snuggled against me and I concentrated on the smell of her hair instead. Much better.

"So do you want to tell me about your Mom? I didn't know she was coming up to see you." Sookie whispered quietly, nervously. She knew my Mom was a sensitive subject for me.

"I didn't know she was coming either. She must have talked to Luke. He's still pissed at me for going off on him after-"

"Weinergate." She butted in, and I laughed.

"Yeah, that." I don't know where she came up with that, but it was nice to be able to laugh about it. "Anyway, she wanted to tell me about her and Bentley. I think she was expecting me to gloat."

"Did you?"

"No." I squeezed her tighter against me. "I didn't like Bentley, but I never wanted my Mom to be unhappy."

"Did she say why they're splitting up?"

"Because she's pregnant. He doesn't want kids."

Sookie scoffed and said, "Did she never mention she had three of them?"

That's my girl.

"We don't count since we're adults."

"And old enough to be his little brother, if I remember right." Sookie turned so her chin was resting on my chest while she looked up at me. "How's your Mom doing with all of this?"

"I think she's really scared, to be honest. She's alone, like, *really* alone for the first time in her life. I mean, yeah, she's got me and my brothers, but it's not the same. She had a couple of boyfriends before she married Dad. Then they were together for all those years. Then she married Bentley. She's never had to do the single Mom thing. I think she's afraid of failing at it."

"That's understandable. I don't know if I could do the single Mom thing." Sookie looked away from me then.

"Hey, hold on a second." I turned her face back to mine. "If *we* get pregnant, I'm not going to run from that either."

"That's not what I was trying to say."

"Maybe not, but I saw the look on your face. I just want you to know in case it happens."

We hadn't talked about kids. In fact, we hadn't talked about a lot of things, but we could start to talk about it while we were away. I slid out from under her and turned onto my side so we were face to face. I tucked some of her hair behind her ear.

"I want us to go away together next week." I told her.

She smiled for a few seconds before asking, "Where?"

"I was thinking the cabin my friend owns up in Wisconsin. It would probably take us about ten hours to drive there, but it'd be worth it. It's secluded and not very touristy like this place. People go up for the summer, but the people who do have owned the land for generations. And where Stan's cabin is it out of the way, far from the beach so we won't have to worry about random people on the property."

"And when would we be leaving for this trip?"

"I don't know. I'd have to talk to Stan and see what he's got free. I don't know if he's up there already or not."

"What would we do up there all by ourselves?" Her eyes sparkled in the darkness.

I slithered a little closer to her. "I have a few ideas. I could show you, if you'd like."

"I think I would. I would hate to drive for ten hours just to be bored for a few days."

"Trust me, lover, I would never let that happen." And with that, I set out to show her just a fraction of what I had in store.

**Sookie**

I woke up before Eric and got out of bed to make him breakfast. I was in the middle of flipping blueberry pancakes when his arms circled my waist and I felt his lips in my hair. Another part of him was pressed into the small of my back, just waiting for a chance to say hello. I smiled and turned my face up and back toward his. His lips were on mine in an instant, and he took the spatula out of my hand. He tossed it onto the counter and pulled the pan off the burner.

"Eric, your breakfast..." I giggled when he started pulling me back toward the bedroom.

"It can wait. I woke up all wrong this morning. We're going to try this again." He insisted before scooping me up and taking me back to bed. "Off with your shirt." He instructed after setting me down.

"It's *your* shirt. I thought you liked it when I wore your clothes." I pouted.

"I do, but that's not the way we were supposed to wake up today." He stared at me intently, waiting for me to follow instructions.

"Fine." I shrugged and peeled off his shirt and dropped it on the floor. "Better?"

"Almost. Lay down."

"Which position?" I teased, making him growl a little at me.

"On your side." He said a little sternly, and it made my lady business perk up.

"Yes, sir." I winked, then crawled onto the bed and lay on my side. "Now what?"

Eric got into bed behind me and pulled the blanket up over us. He curled his body behind mine, not easily done considering his state of arousal. He moved my hair away from my neck and position his head near my ear. His hand slid over my hip, teasing the skin there for a moment before gliding down between my thighs. My breath caught and I let him moved my leg so my ankle was resting on top of his calves.

"Close your eyes, lover." He whispered to me. It was a rare command from Eric, and I did what he asked.

His lips brushed my ear while his hand moved up the inside of my thigh again until it reached my center. His fingers teased my folds, but didn't put any real pressure on me. When I started to squirm a little, he told me not to move. I forced myself to stay still, even though I wanted to grab his hand and direct it where I wanted it. He took his time teasing me, his tongue and lips working my neck while his fingers continued to tease much lower.

When I couldn't take anymore, I said, "Eric." My voice was a breathy whisper.

"Morning, lover." He whispered like we'd just woken up.

"What are you doing?"

"Waking you up the way you should be woken up every morning." He nipped at my ear.

"By being teased mercilessly?" I wiggled my butt against him and he groaned a little.

"No, no, lover, this isn't merciless. I can show you merciless, if you like." He kissed my shoulder.

My mind flashed back to the night he told me he loved me, and how I'd held onto the slats of his headboard while he showed me a fraction of how merciless he could be. I shook my head from side to side. I wasn't in the mood for that at the moment. The next thing I knew I was on my back with him on top of me. His mouth found mine while his fingers finally slipped between my folds and inside me. I moaned against his lips when he massaged the special spot inside me that always sent me into a frenzy.

His kisses were somehow lazy and passionate at the same time, his tongue working a counter rhythm to the ones his fingers were working below. Just when I was close, much like the night before, he rolled us over and pulled me on top of him. I straddled him easily and reached behind me to stroke him. His eyes met mine while my hips moved against him. His hands cupped my breasts, pinching and rolling my nipples while I continued to stroke him.

"Sookie," There was warning in Eric's voice. His hands moved down to my hips and lifted me up.

I moved back, making sure to keep my eyes on his as I slowly lowered myself onto him. I took just the head of his erection inside me and then lifted my hips again. Eric hissed at me. He wasn't the only one who could tease. If I really wanted to be terrible, I would turn around completely and deny him the pleasure of eye contact, something he definitely got off on. His eyes smoldered with lust. His hips started to come up off the bed, but I pulled up, too.

"Fuck, Sookie." He growled.

"I'm just treating you to the same mercies you showed me earlier." I said sweetly.

He growled again and tightened his grip on my hips. "Please."

I was pretty sure this was now going much differently from what he'd pictured when he'd first come to take me back to bed, but I had no doubt he was enjoying himself all the same. I slid down on him, taking him in all at once. His eyes rolled back and my walls tightened around him involuntarily. He grunted when I rocked my hips against him. I moved up and down on him slowly, taking my time and enjoying the feeling of his eyes roaming my body as I moved.

Sweat beaded on my forehead and my thighs started to shake. Eric sat up so we were eye to eye, and my legs shifted to wrap around his waist. We rocked against each other with my hands on his shoulder for leverage, his hands pressed to the small of my back. Wonderful pressure started to build deep in my belly. My feet planted themselves on the mattress behind him and I leaned back, bracing my weight on my palms. Eric held onto my hips and thrust up into me, his eyes locked on my breasts as they moved with his thrusts.

My head fell back, my moans mingling with his grunts and growls. I felt him swell inside me, a sure sign he was as close as I was. His thumb moved to my clit to rub circles around it. I righted myself and clung to him as my orgasm hit. My walls gripped him tightly. My nails scratched at his back and my teeth scraped his neck. He thrust once more, then spilled inside me. We were a sweaty mess, gasping for air and scrambling for sanity.

"I love you." I whispered against his skin, leaving little kisses all over his neck and jaw before his head turned to find my mouth.

"I love you too." I swallowed his words and let my hands slip into his hair.

My legs moved again so he could lay back, and he pulled me down on top of him. I kissed his chest right over his heart and said, "You can wake me up like that anytime."

**Eric**

By the time we got out of bed, it was lunchtime. All the same, Sookie finished making her pancakes. It was a good thing she'd put the already finished ones into the oven at a low setting to keep them warm. I was amazed they weren't hard as rocks but the time we got to them. They were delicious, but I had yet to try something of Sookie's that wasn't. Take that any way you'd like.

After we ate we went down to the lake for a bit. The water had gotten a bit warmer since she'd first arrived six weeks earlier, but I wouldn't go so far as to call it warm. We walked the beach hand in hand, talking about various things. She filled me in more about her relationship with Bill, and by the time she was done talking I wanted to hop a flight to Louisiana to kick his ass.

Guys like him pissed me off. I realize to some it might seem a little hypocritical given in inability to commit until recently, but that's just the point. I never made promises to anyone I couldn't keep. I never let a woman think I was 'hers' if I had no intention of actually being hers. I never laid claim to anyone. I was a stickler on giving equal parts.

Bill had made promises to Sookie. He had expected her compliance and unquestioning obedience. Yet, he saw no problem with running around behind her back and fucking any woman who would spread her legs for him. It was disgusting. I had never cheated on a woman, and I couldn't fathom why Bill would choose Sookie, of all women, to cheat on. I decided right then and there that I was going to do everything in my power to show Sookie just how Not Bill I was.

"Would you go on a date with me this evening tomorrow evening, Miss Stackhouse?" I asked her once we had stopped walking to look out into the distance.

"What?" She giggled, looking up at me confused.

"You know what a date is, don't you?"

"Of course I do. It's just..." She trailed off.

"What?"

"Well, I mean, aren't we a little past that?"

"We're starting over, remember? Besides, I've never done that with you, and I'd like to."

Her cheeks flushed in the sunlight, giving her a radiant glow. "Okay." She whispered.

"I'm sorry, I didn't hear that." I cupped a hand to my ear.

"Yes, I'll go on a date with you." She grinned broadly.

"Good." I reached for her hand again and we started back toward our houses. "Where's your car?"

"Oh fuck." She mumbled, and I arched an eyebrow at her. "I was a mess yesterday and Jake ended up driving me back."

"Jake?"

"Yeah, Laura sort of ratted me out to to him so he came up to talk to me. He's a good brother."

I nodded my agreement. "So you left your car overnight where?"

"The Dunes." She crinkled her nose.

"We're probably going to have to get it out of impound. I don't think you can park there overnight."

"Shit."

"Don't worry, we'll take care of it." I raised her hand and kissed the back of it.

It was nice to be able to use the word 'we,' and not see her recoil or question it. We walked back to the houses with our fingers laced together. Sookie kissed my cheek then headed into her place to use the bathroom and get her purse so we could find out if her car was still at the Dunes. I took the opportunity to call Stan.

"Northman, how's business?" Stan asked immediately.

"Very good. Expanding nicely. We're thinking of opening a second location further down the shoreline."

"Excellent. What can I do you for?"

"Well, I was wondering what the status is on that cabin you have up north?"

"In Minocqua or in the Black Mountains?"

"Minocqua."

"Empty as Paris Hilton's head, why?"

I bit back a laugh and said, "I was wondering if I could borrow it for a few days next week."

"Yeah, sure. I haven't been up there in a while so it's probably a little on the musty side, but it's all yours if you want it."

"Excellent."

We made arrangements for me to swing by and pick up the keys to the place. He warned me there was no internet connection up there and the power got a little wonky- his word, not mine- during electrical storms. Sookie came out of the house with two bottles of water just as I was hanging up.

"Who was that?" She handed me a bottle.

"That was Stan. His cabin is free next week. Would you like to go?"

"Where is it again?" She quirked an eyebrow.

I explained to her what little I knew about the small town as we walked over to the car. She slid in beside me and rolled down her window. It was a warm day, in the upper eighties. The Lime Green Monster didn't have air conditioning, so open windows were a must. I watched her sweep her hair up into a messy bun she secured to the top of her hair. Stray pieces of hair were pulled free in the wind, but she didn't complain once. She slumped a little in her seat and put her bare feet up on the dashboard. If anyone else would have done that, I'd have barked order for them to knock it off.

Live came on the radio, and Sookie squealed with delight before leaning over to crank up the radio. "I love this song!" She grinned at me, nodding along with the opening riff.

I love Sookie, I really do, but the girl can't sing worth a damn. She was so into the song, though, that I couldn't have silenced her if I wanted to. I reached across the seat to take her hand, which she offered me willingly. When the song ended, her head flopped back against the seat and she smiled over at me.

"Sorry. I know I can't sing."

"I don't mind. I like seeing you smile that way."

She blushed a little and looked the other way. We both sang along to 'Crazy Train' and 'In the Air Tonight.' Before we knew it, we were pulling into the parking lot where she'd parked the day before. Thankfully, her car was still there but there was a whopper of a ticket under her windshield. She cringed at the amount, but fought me when I tried to take it from her.

"This is my fault. I shouldn't have left my car here."

"And you wouldn't have done that if we hadn't fought."

"And we wouldn't have fought if I wasn't being a dumb ass."

"Can't argue with you there." I shrugged, and she slapped my arm playfully.

"Jerk." She muttered and stuck her tongue out at me.

"You, my lover, are quite the sweet talker." I pulled her closer and kissed her. I tried to get the ticket from her again, but she wouldn't let me have it.

"Mine." She said possessively, shoving the ticket down her shirt, like I wouldn't go in there after it.

"I doubt you want me to grope you in public, love." I wiggled my eyebrows at her.

"Try it and you'll be sleeping on a couch while we in Minocqua." She threatened before stretching up to kiss me again. "I'll meet you back at the house. I have to go into town and get a few things."

"I have to go up to the bar for a bit. Corrupted Muses is playing tonight. You should come up and check them out. I think you'd like them." I smiled down at her.

"Okay. Tight jeans or short skirt?" She winked at me.

"Surprise me." I loved that she asked.

"Deal. Have a safe drive back, Mr. Northman." She swatted me on the ass, and then got in her car.

For those who don't know, Minocqua is a real place. My extended family is from the lovely Cheese State. My Gram grew up on Blue Lake. Her parents ran a resort up there back in the 20s & 30s. It's amazing they managed to stay in business during The Great Depression. It wasn't until there was an electrical fire that the resort was forced to close. I'm not sure what's on the land today, but I do know my Gram's niece and her husband own a cabin on the lake, which is what I will be basing Stan's place off of. I wish I had pics on my lappy, but sadly they're buried somewhere in photo albums. Guess I'll just have to shop around on the interwebs for something close to it.

Don't you just love my little history lessons? \*snort\* They're *almost* more fun than my lemons. \*dodges flying fruit\* Hey! Not cool, readers, not cool. Thanks for reading anyway \*naked Caveman hugs\*

P.S. I've had a few of you tell me that you're not getting alerts. I'm sorry to hear that, but there's nothing I can personally do about it. That's a malfunction of the website beyond my personal control. This site can be extremely fail when it wants to be. Sorry, lovelies.

**Chapter 21: Awkward Last Words**

For those of you who have been asking, Luke will be back soon. Just not in this chapter. Sorry.

Chapter 21: Awkward Last Words

**Sookie**

Eric asking me out on a date was completely unexpected, but not at all unwelcome. Our relationship had progressed strangely. We fought, we fucked and we fell in love. Yeah, we'd hung out in between, but there hadn't ever really been any of the usual 'courting ritual' type stuff between us. We hadn't done the meeting the parents or the awkward kiss goodnight at my doorstep. We were sort of going backwards in order to go forward. I was all for it if it meant we could get past the problems we were having.

I'd come to realize there was a lot about Eric I didn't know. I didn't want to know it all at once, but I was hoping that I'd learn a few of those things by spending a few days in Minocqua with him. I did a little research on-line about the town since I'd never heard of it, much less been there. In fact, I'd never been to Wisconsin at all. All I knew about the state was cheese and the Packers. The town was actually more touristy than Eric let on, but we couldn't really complain since we were tourists ourselves.

There were forty-five lakes in the area, making it more like an island than anything else. The pictures I found were beautiful. By the time I was done researching, I was excited about the trip. According to Google it would take about 8 hours, but when I factored in what was sure to be heavy traffic through Chicago, it would probably be closer to ten hours like Eric had suggested. I compiled a list of activities and restaurants in the area. Eric had warned there was no internet capabilities at the cabin.

Thankfully, Eric had a GPS unit, or we would probably get very lost up there. I left my hair piled up on my head and got in the shower just to wash up a little. I loved Eric's car, but since it didn't have air conditioning I usually felt a little on the grimy side after riding in it for an extended period of time. Leather seats didn't help that feeling one bit. Once I was fresh as a daisy, I moved to my closet to sift through my options.

I stepped outside for just a moment to get a feel for the temperature outside. It was hot and sticky. What a surprise. I went back inside in search of a skirt to wear. I found a strapless plum colored dress I was pretty sure Eric had never seen on me before, and plucked it from its hanger. I rubbed on some shimmering lotion and put on just a hint of makeup. I took my hair down only to repile it on my head in a slightly more organized fashion.

I brushed my teeth and spritzed on a little perfume. I found my favorite pair of sparkly black sandals, and grabbed my purse before heading out. I was just getting to my car when my cell rang. It was Eric, of course.

"Where are you, lover?" I could hear the band playing in the background. Hell, I could almost hear it from my deck.

"On my way. I had a little trouble deciding what to wear."

"What did you decide on?"

"You'll just have to wait and see. I'll be there in two minutes."

"Park next to me. I had Pam keep a space for you."

"That's very considerate of you, Mr. Northman." I got in the car and started it.

"I'll be waiting for you." He promised.

"See you in a minute." I said, then hung up.

A minute later I really was pulling into the parking lot. Eric was standing in the space he'd had Pam reserve for me. Eric opened my door for me, and held out his hand to help me up. I smiled up at him as I stood, and turned slowly so he could take in my dress. It wasn't all that fancy, but my tan set it off nicely and it clung to me in all the right places.

"With the way that dress looks on you, I may have trouble keeping my caveman in check." Eric winked at me.

"Do the best you can, Mr. Northman." I stretched forward to kiss him, and he met me half way.

"I should warn you," He pressed his forehead to mine after laying a kiss on me that curled my toes. "My Mom's inside and she wants to meet you."

"Oh." I seized up a little.

"Don't worry, it'll be fine." He rubbed my shoulders.

"I've just never done the meet the parents thing."

"You never met Bill's parents?"

"Bill was raised by his uncle. His parents died when he was young." I said quietly.

"Just be yourself, Sookie. It'll be okay." He kissed my temple, then led me inside.

I noticed Pam glared at me a little, and I figured she was probably pissed about the fight Eric and I had gotten into. Being on Pam's shit list was no fun, but I knew she would keep herself in check so as not to end up on Eric's bad side. It made me nervous that there was no friendly wave, much less an inappropriate comment about how good my breasts looked. I was used to Pam hitting on me as a sign of her affection. The fact that she was stone cold didn't bode well.

The band that was playing sounded like it had been heavily influenced by The Smiths and the Smashing Pumpkins. I wanted to go check them out, but Eric led me to his office. He opened the door to reveal the blonde woman I'd seen him hugging the day before. My breath caught and my fingers laced with Eric's. He squeezed my hand and smiled at me reassuringly.

"Mom, this is Sookie Stackhouse. Sookie, this is my mother, Patricia Rollins." Eric gestured between us.

"It's nice to meet you." I held out my hand, unsure of what to call Eric's mother.

"Likewise. Eric's told me a lot about you." Her tone was a bit on the icy side, which made me nervous.

As if on cue, Rasul appeared, needing Eric for something. He excused himself, leaving me alone with his mother. He closed the door behind him and I took a seat on the chair in front of Eric's desk after turning it toward the sofa where his mom was sitting.

I didn't know where to start. I didn't know much about Eric's mom outside of the fact that she was a widow, about to be divorced and pregnant with her soon to be ex-husband's baby. None of those topics seemed to be the right one to start on.

"How are you finding Michigan so far?" I asked her politely to get conversation started.

"It's nice. I've been staying with Luke. I wanted to stay with Eric, but he's got a pretty full house right now."

"That he does." I nodded my agreement. "So you've met Dulcie, then?"

Patrica narrowed her eyes at me. "I have. I'm not sure she's right for Luke, but it's not my decision to make."

I kept my mouth shut on that since I figured anything I said was likely to make its way to Luke, and I'd already said my piece where Dulcie was concerned.

"So, how long have you and Eric been seeing each other?"

"Well, we met last summer when I came up to see the cottage that was left to me. I ended up spending most of the summer here. We didn't get along at first, but by the fourth of July, we'd seen the error of our ways." What? Like I was going to tell her we got stinking drunk on tequila and fucked our brains out? I think not. "We weren't officially dating last summer, but we did spend time together. When the summer ended I went back to LSU to finish up my senior year. I graduated this spring with BA in criminal science and psychology. I thought I'd take the summer to decide my next step, so I came back up here and Eric and I just picked up where we left off. We realized we wanted to start dating officially a few weeks later, and we've been together ever since."

"And what about the end of this summer? Will you be staying in Michigan?" She was interrogating me, which I wasn't sure I liked.

"Well, Eric and I are still discussing it, but yes, I think I want to stay." I smiled at her, hoping it would set her at ease.

"Are you looking for a job?" Damn, she wasn't lightening up.

"Uh, well, not yet. I didn't want to do that if I wasn't sure of what I was going to do." My smile faltered a little.

"I'd hate to think you're sponging off of my son." She sighed.

Sponging? Was she serious? "Listen, Mrs. Rollins, I don't know where you got that idea, but I'm not that kind of girl. I worked two jobs in college, got straight A's and applied for every scholarship and grant I qualified for. I've never had anything handed to me in my life until my Great Uncle died and left me his cottage. If all I was after was money, I'd sell it and go back to Louisiana. I care very deeply about your son, and it has nothing to do with whatever money he might have."

For the first time she cracked a hint of a smile. "Good. I'm happy to hear that. Hard work is good for the soul. Eric's father built one hell of a business from nothing."

"He told me." I nodded. "I'm also sorry I won't get to meet him. From what Eric says, he was an incredibly man."

"Yes, he was." She nodded, looking a bit sad.

"I didn't mean to upset you." I apologized when tears sprang to her eyes.

"It's the pregnancy hormones." She shook her head. "Eric told you about that, I assume?"

I nodded slowly. "He did."

"You probably think I'm crazy for having a baby." Why the hell did she care what I thought.

"What I think doesn't matter." I said as neutrally as possible.

"It probably is crazy, but..." She trailed off and waved her hand. "Nope, not going to talk about it. I don't want to get all emotional. Well, more emotional than I already am. Do you want children, Sookie?"

If I had a drink, I would have spit it out at her. "Well, I uh, I..." I stammered because I wasn't sure what the right answer was. I settled on, "Someday."

"With my son?"

What the fuck?

"It's a little soon for us to be talking about that."

"But you *are* sleeping with him." It was a statement, not a question.

I blushed which gave me away, but I wasn't comfortable discussing this with his mother. "That's private, if you don't mind."

"I'm just curious as to who might be raising my grandchildren is all." She said defensively. Those pregnancy hormones were no joke. I had a serious Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde personality sitting right in front of me.

Thank God Eric came back then to rescue me from his mother. "How's it going?" He asked with a smile that faltered when he saw the panic in my eyes.

"Splendid. Eric, sweetheart, I think I'm going to step outside and get some fresh air. It's so smoky in here." She stood and kissed his cheek before walking out of his office.

"What happened?" He asked as soon as she was gone.

"She asked if we were going to have kids together." I slumped back.

He grimaced and asked, "What did you say?"

"Well I told her I wanted kids some day, but you and I hadn't discussed it." That was really only half true, since he'd mentioned he wouldn't be running screaming in the opposite direction if I got pregnant. Still, I didn't see it as a real discussion about having kids.

"What else did she say?"

I went over the conversation we had, leaving nothing out. He apologized for how blunt she was, and explained she was just being protective.

"Like mother, like son." I smirked.

"Something like that." Eric stood behind me and rubbed my shoulders. "You really do look amazing in that dress, lover."

"Thank you." I smiled up at him, and he bent down to kiss me.

"Would you like to go listen to the band for a bit? I have some paperwork I need to do."

"Why, Mr. Northman, are you kicking me out of your office?" I pouted at him.

"Of course not. I just figured you'd be bored sitting there watching me."

"Probably. You are pretty boring." I teased.

He snickered and then went over to his desk. We talked a bit about the research I'd done on Minocqua. I tried to get him to tell me where we were going on our date the following evening, but he wouldn't so much as give me a hint. Eventually I did get up and leave so he could get his work done. I promised to wait for him outside. I stopped at the bar to get a drink and headed outside to listen to the band. I found myself wishing that Jake and Laura were around. I didn't know if she'd met Patricia or not, but I would love to hear what she had to say.

I was swaying along to the beat of the music, not really paying attention to my surroundings. I sipped my drink and occasionally looked over toward the lake. Someone tapped my shoulder and I turned to see Adam standing there. My stomach dropped into my feet. What the fuck? I never saw the guy hanging around, and now he was a regular?

"Fancy seeing you here." He smiled at me.

I really wished he would just go away. I was starting to regret ever meeting him. "Hi, Adam." I told myself to be polite. Just because I couldn't be friends with him didn't mean I had to be rude about it.

"You never called."

"I didn't need to. Eric and I talked things out."

"Good. That's good." He was disappointed.

"Look, Adam, I don't think it's a good idea, us being friends." I came right out with it since there was no point in dragging it out.

"Why not? Because of Eric?"

"Because you want to be more than my friend and I'm already dating someone. I love Eric. I don't know if I made that clear to you before, but I do. I don't want to mess things up with him."

"So you can't have friends?"

"I have friends. I have plenty of friends." I said defensively. "But I don't have friends that are just hanging around waiting for the right moment to pounce on me."

"Wow." He looked offended. Maybe I was wrong and reading way too much into things, but he *had* said if Eric wasn't in the picture, he'd ask me out.

"Don't be like that."

"Be like what?"

"All pissed off like I owe you something."

"I just think it sucks that you can't make up your own mind."

Oh hell no.

"I *am* making up my own mind. Just because I'm not giving you what you want doesn't mean I'm some puppet. Besides, you can't tell me if the situation was reversed, you would want me hanging out with Eric."

"No, I don't think I would."

"Well, there you go. You're a nice guy, Adam, but it's just not going work. Now if you'll excuse me, I have to go find my boyfriend." I walked past him, proud of myself for nipping things in the bud.

I found Eric behind the bar talking to Sam. He smiled when he saw me, but his smile quickly disappeared when Adam's shoulder hit mine hard as he walked past me.

**Eric**

One minute I was behind the bar going over some inventory changes with Sam, and the next I was smiling back at Sookie. She was standing near the patio doors, playing with the straw in her drink. I was staring right at her when Adam came from out of nowhere and slammed into her shoulder, sending her flying forward into a group of girls. I was immediately pissed off, and rounding the bar to let Adam know just what I thought of him nearly bowling my girlfriend over like that.

"Asshole!" Sookie shouted at him, which surprised me.

Adam just kept walking like he didn't know he'd nearly knocked her over. I was going to go after him, but Sam held me back.

"He's not worth it, man." Sam had a surprisingly strong grip on my upper arm.

I jerked away from him and told him to get a round of drinks for the girls Sookie had bumped into. Sookie was apologizing to the girls she was shoved into, all of them telling her not to worry about it since they had seen her get pushed.

"Are you okay?" I asked Sookie when I got to her.

Rage filled her eyes. "Physically, yeah, I'm fine. Emotionally, not so much."

"What did he do?"

She grabbed my hand and pulled me off to the side away from everyone else. "I was outside listening to the band when he came up to me. I told him I didn't think it was a good idea for us to be friends, and he accused me of being a puppet and not thinking for myself. I told him it wasn't like that, but he was still pissed. I walked away from him to find you, and the next thing I know, I'm flying toward those girls over there."

"What a dick." I wanted to tell her to hang out for a minute while I went and pummeled Adam in the parking lot, but I knew that wouldn't win me any points with her.

"Pretty much." She sighed looked down with tears in her eyes.

"He's not worth being upset over, Sookie. If he could treat you like that as a friend..." I trailed off, not willing to think about what he'd do to her if she was his girlfriend and she disobeyed him.

"Why do you two look like sad clowns?" Pam appeared from out of nowhere.

"It's nothing." Sookie tried to perk up, but her eyes completely betrayed her.

Thankfully there was some sort of emergency behind the bar that Pam had to go mediate. I squeezed Sookie's hand, hoping she would give me a genuine smile. Didn't quite work out the way I hoped.

"Do you want me to take you home?" I asked her.

"No, I'm fine. I mean, I will be. Can we just go sit outside for a while?" She asked nervously.

"Of course." I smiled down at her.

She wrapped her small arm around my waist and leaned against me as we walked toward the patio doors together. I was already running through the list of the other bands that had been vying for spots on our performance nights. It'd be a cold day in hell before I let Renegade 74 play in my bar again. I also made a mental note to remind Rasul that under no circumstances was Adam allowed back in the bar. The next time I saw that clown, there was no guarantee I wouldn't give him the same treatment he'd given Sookie.

"Men" who were pedophiles or picked on women or children were the biggest of scumbags, in my opinion, and I sure as hell wouldn't be paying Adam to potentially abuse my girlfriend. I couldn't punch him in the balls like I wanted to, but I could hit his wallet. Yeah, I was punishing the whole band, but I couldn't feel guilty about it.

"Where are you taking me tomorrow?" Sookie asked, breaking me out of my revery.

"I told you, it's a surprise." I kissed her temple.

"Come on, just a little, tiny hint?" She batted her eyelashes at me.

"My lips are sealed."

"Really?" She turned toward me with the most alluring look on her face. "And there's absolutely no way I could unseal them?"

"Nope."

"Not even if I..." She pushed up on her toes and whispered a slew of dirty things in my ear, some of which may have even made *me* blush.

"That's very tempting, lover, but no."

She blew a raspberry at me, but dropped it. "Will you at least give me a hint on what to wear?"

"Mmm, a dress would be nice. Panties optional, of course." I teased, and got playfully elbowed in the ribs for it. "You asked."

"Yeah, I did." She laughed and leaned against me. "I don't think your mom likes me."

"She's just being protective."

"She was being rude. What did you tell her about us?"

Everything. Well, almost everything. "She knows we were fighting."

"You told her about that?"

"I was angry with you. You said you wanted a break, and I didn't know if that meant a few days, weeks, or if it was just a matter of time before you pulled the plug altogether." I explained to her.

"I'm sorry I did that. It wasn't fair."

I didn't agree with her only because I knew she felt guilty about already. I didn't need to keep throwing it up to her. "We're starting over, right? That's all that matters."

She nodded, but said nothing. Eventually, she decided she'd had enough and wanted to go home. "Will I see you when you get off work?"

"I think I might go home and sleep in my own bed. I wouldn't be disappointed if you were waiting when I got there." I confessed.

"I'll see what I can do." She smiled up at me, then stretched forward to kiss me. "Thank you for not going apeshit and killing Adam. I know you wanted to."

"I did. It wouldn't have been worth it, though." I stroked her back.

"I love you." She whispered against my lips, then kissed me again.

"I love you, too." I walked her through the bar and out to her car.

I stood there watching as she drove off. It wasn't until I turned to go inside that I realize all four of my tires were flat. Motherfucker.

Hmmmm...who slashed Eric's tires? \*taps chin\* Guess we'll have to wait and see. What do we think of Mama Northman? Is she just being protective like Eric said, or was she out of line? \*sigh\* I love flawed/complex characters. They're so much more fun to write. Thanks for reading!

**Chapter 22: The Ability To Create A War**

Hmmm well, the reaction to Mama Northman was mixed. Some of you thought she was justified. Some of you thought she was a bitch. I'm not really sure of what to make of her character yet. I guess we'll just see where that goes.

Chapter 21: The Ability To Create A War

**Eric**

I stood there in the parking lot, completely furious. How the fuck had someone managed to slash all four of my tires with no one noticing? Granted, my car was parked around the side of the bar, but that wasn't the point. There were plenty of people milling around in the lot. Someone had to have seen something. Then it occurred to me that Sookie had just given Adam the boot. She was heading home. Alone.

"Fuck!" I shouted and reached into my pocket for my cell, only it wasn't there. Where the fuck was my phone? Right, charging in my office. Fuck me. I was running for the front door when Mom appeared.

"Eric, what's wrong?"

"I need to borrow your car. Now." I said impatiently. Mom looked me up and down, not impressed with my lack of manners. "Please, Mom, this is important."

"Fine." She dug into her purse and dangled her keys out to me. "Where are you going? And why aren't you taking your car?"

"Some fuckwad slashed my tires, and I think I know who it was. I'll be back in a few minutes." I promised, before bolting toward her car.

It unnerved me that Jake wasn't around. He and Mini were spending a few days down in the city looking for a place together. Mini was living in Wicker Park and Jake was in Lincoln Park. They wanted to find a place a little farther north so Jake would be closer to school. Of course they had to be out of town the night Adam decided to become a bunny boiler. I peeled out of the parking lot as quickly as I could, which wasn't easy to do with all of the drunken fools stumbling and loitering around in the lot.

I floored it back toward the houses, filled with panic that I was going to arrive home to find Sookie being assaulted, or worse, by the time I got there. I slammed on the brakes in the driveway half way between our two houses. Both of them were dark. Sookie had said something about waiting for me at my place, but her car was parked in front of her place.

The only relief I felt was that her car was the only one there. I looked back and forth trying to decide which house to check out first. My decision was made when I saw a light flip on in Sookie's bedroom, then heard her scream a moment later. I took off in a dead run toward her house. I practically flew up the back steps toward her bedroom.

I reached for the knob on the door, but it was locked. "Sookie! Let me in!" I pounded on the door.

I was completely prepared to break the door down if I had to, but it wasn't necessary. The lock turned and the door opened. Sookie stood there looking spooked. "Eric? What are you-"

She didn't get to finish because I crushed her against me. She stood stock still, letting me hold her and kiss her head. I pulled back to look at her, and her eyes told me she was lost as to why I was being such a weirdo. I grabbed her face and kissed her hair. She gasped in surprise, but quickly responded. When she had to breathe, she pushed me back.

"Eric, what the hell is going on?" She asked nervously.

"Someone slashed my tires." I gasped for air.

"What?" Her eyes widened and her jaw dropped. "Did you run here?"

"Mom's car." I shook my head.

"Why did you come here? Do you think I slashed your tires?"

"No!" I said quickly. "Adam."

"Adam?" She stepped back. "*Adam* slashed your tires?"

"I don't know. I turned around after you left and I saw my tires were slashed. After the way Adam just slammed into you like that I thought maybe it was him, and he was just trying to make sure I got held up at work." I explained, but the look on her face told me she wasn't getting it. "He knows where you live, Sookie."

She sputtered for a second, then looked like she might faint. "Oh my God."

"Is anything out of place in the house?" I asked her.

"Not that I noticed." She shook her head absently.

I took her hand and led her into the bathroom. There was no one in there. "Stay here. Lock the door. I'm going to go look around."

"I'll go with you." She immediately argued.

"No you won't. Just stay here. Do *not* open the door for anyone but me, okay?" I looked into her eyes, pleading with her to just go along with me.

She sighed and relented. I kissed her once more, then walked out of the bathroom. I heard the door lock. I knew it wouldn't do much to keep someone out, since I'd been able to get the door unlocked myself, but it was the best either of us could do. I listened for the sound of footsteps or other telltale signs of movement, but only heard the distant crashing of waves and the occasional scrape of a tree branch on the roof of the house.

When I got to the kitchen I grabbed the big barbecue fork off the counter. It wasn't the ideal weapon, but it was better than nothing. I moved slowly around the room to the sliding glass door to make sure it was still locked up. It was. I went to the first spare bedroom and checked the closet and under the bed before I was satisfied it was clear. I did the same with the other two bedrooms, the linen closet, the pantry, the small laundry alcove and then the guest bathroom.

The sliding door in the living room was open a few inches, but Sookie's shoes were close by so I just assumed she hadn't closed the door the whole way when she'd come home. The house was clear. There was no one in there but the two of us. Still, I didn't like the idea of her being alone in the house. I went back to her bedroom and knocked on the door.

"It's me." I announced in a normal voice.

She unlocked the door and cracked it open. "Find anything?"

"No, it's all clear." I pushed the door open gently when she stepped back.

"I can't stay here tonight. I'm all freaked out now." She admitted, and I was happy she volunteered it before I had to try and coax her into staying with me.

"You can stay with me." I reached for her hand.

"He knows where you live, too, and if he slashed your tires..." She trailed off.

What a mess we were in. If it weren't already well after midnight and I didn't have four tires that needed replacing, I would suggest packing our bags, picking up the keys and heading up to the cabin. Instead, I told Sookie to get a change of clothes together.

"But Eric..."

"We'll be fine at my place. I have an alarm, I just never use it." I told her.

She sighed and looked less than sure we were going to be okay. I felt like an ass for getting her all freaked out. I watched her go through her closet and dresser with a slightly broken look on her face. I'd never wanted to hunt Adam down more and kick his ass. Already I was sure the contract we'd established with his band was going to be voided out. I was also considering talking with some of my contacts in the area to make sure it was difficult for the band to get picked up elsewhere. I mean, who wants a guy around who's going to rough up the female crowd.

That happens, the men get riled and the next thing you know, you've got brawls happening right and left with people breaking shit and throwing blind punches. By walking away, he proved he was nothing more than an instigator and a coward. I went to the living room and locked up the sliding door and closed the vertical blinds. I grabbed Sookie's shoes and brought them back to her bedroom for her.

She followed me up to the bar so I could return my Mom's car. She waited outside for me while I took the keys in. Mom was sitting at the bar talking to Pam when I walked in. Both she and Pam wore matching expressions that told me they wanted to know what was going on.

"Sookie's fine. Her house is clear, but she's going to stay with me tonight. I think we might head up to Minocqua early." I told them.

"How early?" Pam arched an eyebrow at me.

"As soon as I can get the keys." I wasn't asking for her permission.

"That's a good idea." Pam said, while Mom looked disappointed.

"What?" I asked her.

She exhaled loudly and shook her head. "I don't like you sticking your neck out for this girl."

Pam's eyes widened, then she looked to me. I took a deep breath and tried to remember that Mom was just being protective. "What happened tonight wasn't her fault, Mom. She tried to tell the guy as nicely as possible to take a hike, and he shoved her. He's lucky I didn't follow him out of the bar and beat the shit out of him in the parking lot."

"And what would that have done, aside from making you feel better? Why not call the police? If he shoved her and maybe slit your tires, don't you think that's grounds for calling the police?"

Mom was right. "In the morning, Mom. Right now, I just want to take her home. I'll call you tomorrow. Both of you." I promised, and motioned for Pam to follow me back to the office.

Once we were in the office I pulled the contracts we'd put together for Renegade 74, and handed them to Pam. "Let me guess, these should be voided immediately."

"And if you wanted to do what you do best, I would be okay with that." I smiled at her.

Pam flashed me her brightest smile, the one that always told me she was up to no good. For once, I was happy to see it. I had no doubt she would go out of her way to make life a little more difficult for Adam.

"Eric, are you sure she's worth all of this?" Pam asked in a softer tone. She was attempting to be considerate, so I didn't take her head off.

"We've had our problems, Pam, but I love her." That was the only answer I could give. "Yes, she's worth it."

Pam nodded and said, "Then I'll run along and play."

**Sookie**

Eric was a live wire of tension. I couldn't blame him, really. I was proud of him for not going after Adam like I knew he wanted to, even if there was a part of me that wished he had. He'd scared the crap out of me when he'd shown up at my house just a few minutes after I got there, pounding on my bedroom door like a maniac. Not having the warning of his car rumbling up the driveway threw me off big time.

I didn't want to think Adam was responsible for vandalizing his car. It made sense, I guess, but it just seemed pretty extreme of him. Once Eric and I were tucked into his house for the night, he got himself a beer while I went upstairs to wash my face and change clothes. I came back down to find Eric sitting at the kitchen table with his laptop open, looking at security cameras.

"What are you doing?"

"I'm thinking maybe we should install a few cameras outside at the bar." Eric pointed at one of the cameras. "It has night vision."

I sighed and said, "I'm sorry."

He looked up at me and put his beer down on the table. "Why are you apologizing? This isn't your fault."

"I feel bad. If I never would have gotten involved with him-"

"Stop. Right there, just stop. Neither of us knew what was going to happen. You're not responsible for Adam, you hear me?" He said in all seriousness. I nodded, but I knew it would be a while before I let it go.

I left Eric to his research while I went to the living room to watch TV. I channeled surfed for a while before coming to a stop on *I Love Lucy* reruns. It was the episode where Ricky gets mad at Lucy for taking off her wedding ring, and they end up having to rebuild a barbecue in the backyard when they think the ring is lost. It felt good to relax and laugh at the sheer silliness of it. Lucy was always getting herself into these jams, and yet, you couldn't help but love her a little bit more for it.

It was nearly three in the morning. I watched Eric in the reflection of the window. He was still clicking away on his laptop. My eyelids started drooping, and before I knew it, everything went black. I felt Eric scoop me up off the couch and carry me upstairs. I snuggled into his bed and let myself relax when his arms wrapped around me. Neither of us said a word. I felt him kiss the back of my head, and then the rest of the world just disappeared.

We woke the next morning to the sound of the doorbell being pressed way too often. I groaned next to Eric, who was already pulling on a pair of jeans a little roughly. I frowned when his gorgeous ass was hidden by the denim. I pushed myself up, but Eric just pushed me back.

"Oh, no, lover, you stay right there. I have plans for you." He winked, then kissed me in a way that left very little question as what his plans were.

I snapped my teeth at him and said, "Hurry back."

He gave me a little growl, then disappeared. I listened to the heavy thud of his feet as he went down the stairs. I felt bad for whomever was at the door, because no way in hell was Eric going to be polite. I looked over at the clock to find it was already after eleven. Well, at least whomever it was had the decency not to show up at at the ass crack of dawn. That would have meant a death sentence that even *I* wouldn't object to.

I heard Eric's voice, and then the voice of another woman. It took me a few moments to figure out it was his mother. I sighed heavily, and resigned myself to the likelihood that whatever Eric had planned for my wakeup call was officially canceled. I got out of bed and put on a nightgown, since it wasn't really a good idea to show up downstairs wearing the same clothes as I'd had on the night before.

I wasn't sure what to call Eric's mom, but she didn't seem to like me all that much. She hadn't really given me a chance to tell my side of the story, but I suppose she didn't really need to. My feelings weren't what she was interested in protecting. Eric was her son. Besides, as awkward as our first meeting was, it could have been much worse.

I was just walking out of Eric's room when he jogged up the steps. "Mom's here." He didn't look happy about it. I knew the feeling.

"Is she allergic to a phone?" I grumbled.

"She wanted to make sure we were okay."

"We?" I snickered and said, "I think she wants to make sure *you're* okay. I don't think she likes me very much."

Eric held out a hand to me. "Just be yourself, and she'll fall in love with you like I did."

I looked at him skeptically. I trailed behind him down the stairs. His mom was cracking eggs into a big mixing bowl, and sausage was already frying in a skillet. Eric grabbed a whisk out of a drawer to save his mother from having to search all over the kitchen to find it. I stayed out of the way, since the two of them seemed to have everything under control.

"Good morning, Sookie." She greeted me with a warm smile when she turned around.

"Good morning, Mrs. Rollins." I figured I was safe by calling her that.

"Call me Trish." She chided, then passed me the bowl of eggs. "Would you whisk those for me? I have to get started on the pancake batter. Do you like blueberries?"

I was taken aback. She was like a completely different person. "I do."

"Oh good! I picked some up at farmer's market in town this morning. They're so sweet."

I looked at Eric, who just shrugged and smiled. Was this change in personality really due to pregnancy hormones? Yowza.

"Yes, they are. I've been putting them in pancakes all summer." I said as I whisked.

"Oh, no, dear, you've got to put your wrist into it. Like this." She grabbed the whisk from me and really went at it for a few seconds before offering the whisk back to me.

"Right, sorry." I said.

I listened to her chatter on and on about all sorts of things before her tone turned a bit more serious and she asked Eric if he'd called the police yet to report what had happened to his car.

"You woke us up, Mom. I haven't had the time." Eric pointed out.

"You really shouldn't wait on it, Eric." Trish sighed, and began to poor ladles of pancake batter onto a griddle.

"After we eat, I promise I'll call."

"So, I guess this is a lesson not to invite strange men back to your house, right Sookie?" Trish smiled at me, but her eyes were a bit menacing.

I sputtered, since I wasn't really sure of what to say. I wanted to argue that I didn't do that, but it wasn't entirely true. Adam hadn't been invited, but I *had* invited Alcide. Although, Alcide was never any trouble. In fact, I heard rumors he'd started seeing someone, and I couldn't be happier for him. I set down the bowl of eggs, slightly offended by Trish's accusation.

"I didn't invite him, he followed me. There's a big difference." I argued in my own defense.

"Yes, but if you wouldn't have led him on, he wouldn't have thought to follow you." Trish countered.

I glared at Eric. Just what the fuck did he tell her about us? I stayed silent, since there was no point in arguing further with Trish. She was going to think what she wanted to think of me, regardless of what I had to say. It wasn't really worth the struggle just then. Eric flashed me an apologetic look, but that wasn't going to be anywhere near good enough to get him out of the hot water he was in. Fight or no fight, there are some things he just didn't need to tell her.

It dawned on me then that maybe he had never intended for me to meet his mother. That was a big step in a relationship. Maybe he didn't want to go that far with me. I excused myself and went back upstairs. I heard Eric and Trish arguing in hushed tones, and forced myself into the bathroom so I wouldn't be tempted to eavesdrop on what they were saying.

I breathed a sigh of relief when I saw Jake's Prius pull up. I knew Eric wasn't expecting them back for another day or two, so I was curious as to why they came back. I was even more stunned when Luke's car appeared a few seconds later. I hadn't seen Luke for quite a while. According to Laura, Luke and Dulcie had gone their separate ways. When he stepped out of the car, it was obvious Luke hadn't gotten much sleep lately. Poor guy.

It's not that Dulcie was a bad person. The problem was, she just wasn't right for Luke. He deserved to be with someone on his level, and all Dulcie seemed to do was indulge his wild side. In the long run, that relationship really wasn't going to go anywhere. Although it made me sad to think I may have had something to do with the sour expression on Luke's usually cheerful face.

When I heard more voices downstairs I decided it was safe for me to go back down. I got a quick hug from Laura, who whispered in my ear we needed to have a chat later. I promised her I would be around before moving on to Jake. I saved Luke for last, and he seemed a bit reluctant to get near me. I stood by what I'd said in regards to him and Dulcie.

I was surprised when Luke wrapped me up in a great big ole bear hug. "Thank you." He whispered in my ear.

I wasn't quite sure what he was thanking me for, but I just nodded. He put me down and gave me a smile. He looked haggard. I wanted to ask how he was doing, but it wasn't the right time. I'd talk to him later on when things were a bit less crazy. Slowly, the buffet Trish had been working on started to come together. She cracked more eggs to accommodate the late arrivals. Laura and I got to work making, then buttering toast.

For a little while, it felt like your average family breakfast. We all sat down together in the rarely used dining room. It was obvious Laura had met Trish before, and the two of them got along famously. So when Trish made more than one or two snarky comments in my direction, Laura was quick to come to my defense.

"Come on, Trish, blaming Sookie for what happened last night is like blaming a crayon for a child writing on the wall." She had an excellent point, and she winked at me so I'd know she had my back. Mini was an excellent ally.

I didn't quite understand how Trish could run so hot and cold with me. One minute she was staring daggers and the next she was treating me like her long lost daughter. I was starting to wonder if maybe she was manic. I saw similar mood swings in Luke sometimes. He could be high as a kite one minute, and a total kicked puppy the next. Being them had to be exhausting.

Still, I tried to be polite about the whole thing. I would be patient and bite my tongue for Eric's sake, since this was his mother we were talking about. We'd just gotten off on the wrong foot. I was still wondering, though, if he had ever planned to introduce us. I'd have to ask him about it later when we were alone.

Only, alone never happened. After breakfast he ended up going into town to get new tires for his car, taking both of his brothers along. Trish made herself scarce, opting to take a walk on the beach. I needed to get home and shower. Laura and I made plans to go into town for a while and maybe go see a movie or something away from the zoo that was Eric's house. I never realized how much I liked the quiet until it was stolen from me.

After catching a late showing of *Back To the Future*, Laura and I headed back to our houses. I decided I was going to go home. I had laundry to do, and there was packing that needed to be done for the trip I was taking. Laura told me about a girl she'd set Luke up with. They had a date set up, which made me happy. It would be nice to see Luke with a spring in his step again.

It crossed my mind that maybe it wasn't Adam who had slashed Eric's tires after all. Dulcie was a bit of a nutter, if Weinergate was any indication of her mental status. Maybe she was the one who did it. I didn't know and I wasn't about to go pointing fingers since there was no evidence that any one person had been responsible.

I was standing at the kitchen table folding socks when there was a knock on the patio door in the living room. I glanced at the clock over the stove and realized it was almost two in the morning. I hadn't realized it was so late. I walked down the hall to the living room and smiled to see Eric standing there. Lightning flashed over the lake behind him.

I pulled the patio door open for him, and no sooner had he stepped inside than I was scooped up and being carried back toward my bedroom. "What's gotten into you?" I smiled at him.

"I owe you from this morning, lover? Did you think I would forget?" His lips crashed down on mine.

After more than making it up to me for having to ditch me earlier in the morning, we were snuggled up next to each other. Eric legs were hanging off my bed in an almost comical way. My bed really was too small for him. If I was going to stay, I was going to have to get something bigger.

"I have good news." He told me in the darkness.

"Oh yeah?" I smiled at him.

"I got the keys from Stan. We can go whenever we're ready."

"What about the police?"

"What about them?"

"You filed a report, right? What did they say?"

"They said they'd look into it, but without any evidence or witnesses, figuring out who did it wasn't likely to happen."

"You don't sound too upset about it."

"I am and I'm not. I'm more worried about you being here alone, knowing that Adam has a dark side and he knows where you live. I'll feel better when we're out of here for a bit." He kissed my forehead.

"Me, too." I snuggled closer.

"When do you want to leave?" He asked.

"Mmm...how about the day after tomorrow?" I suggested.

"Sounds doable."

"How long will we stay?"

"As long as you want."

I snickered and said, "You don't think Pam might have an issue with it if I said I wanted to stay for a month?"

"She'd get over it. Besides, I'll make sure to give her equal time off when we get back. She also loves being in charge, no matter how much she gripes about it." Eric had told me more than once Pam was as bossy as she was lazy.

"You don't think she'll be just a little bit jealous knowing we're off in a secluded cabin somewhere fucking like bunnies while she's stuck running the bar?" I nipped his ear.

"Is that what you have planned while we're gone?" Eric smirked.

"Come on, Eric, you've seen Friday the 13th. What else are cabins by the lake good for besides fucking like bunnies and getting your head cut off?" I teased.

"I guess you'll find out." His eyebrows wiggled.

When I tried to ask what he meant, he simply covered my mouth with his own, and got started on a preview of what was to come while we were at the cabin.

If you want to know more about Luke's date, check out the side story collection I've started called "Just Watch The Fireworks." I'll be writing more stories featuring this cast of characters, so if you have a request, don't be afraid to shout it out. \*hint\* I love writing flashbacks. Later, bb birds!

**Chapter 23: Changes In Latitude, Changes In Attitude**

**DISCLAIMER:** No furry woodland creatures or cattle where harmed in the making of this chapter.

Chapter 23: Changes In Latitude, Changes In Attitude

**Sookie**

The drive up to Wisconsin wasn't as bad as I'd thought it would be. We timed our trip so that we were getting into Chicago after the morning rush was over, and that was really the roughest part of the trip. Once we got through there, it was smooth sailing. I was surprised by how quickly we got into Wisconsin. We stopped in a small town called Appleton for lunch at a truck stop/diner just off the highway.

I had the best bowl of broccoli cheddar soup I'd ever tasted, and after a trip to the ladies' room, I got behind the wheel of Eric's car for the first time ever. I could see he was a bit nervous about letting me drive. He'd shown me how to drive manually since I'd never bothered to learn. I was careful about shifting gears, and did so when he told me to. I really had no desire to ruin his baby. It would be a terrible way to get this trip started.

"Soooo, since I'm driving, does that mean I get to pick the music?" I looked over at him.

His face froze up. We didn't really have the same taste in music, and he knew I wasn't going to spend the remainder of the trip north listening to whatever classic rock he had stuffed onto his iPod if I could help it. He inhaled deeply, contemplating my request.

"Please?" I pouted when he took too long. "It'll help me concentrate."

"That's the biggest load of bullshit I've ever heard. I can guarantee you that Lady Gaga helps *no one* concentrate."

I scoffed and said, "You didn't mind her so much when you got that lapdance last week."

He grinned then and said, "That was different. I knew there was a very big benefit to tolerating that irritating voice of hers. I can suffer through that...whatever it is, if it means I get to fuck you senseless when it's done."

"You are all class, Mr. Northman." I snorted and rolled my eyes. "You know, I could just sing from memory."

"No!" Eric said quickly, panic on his face. We both knew I couldn't sing if my life depended on it. I wasn't offended by his quick attempt to shut me down. "Fine, listen to your iPod."

"Thanks, baby." I blew a kiss at him and he cringed.

"We really need to work on this nickname thing." He reached into the backseat for my iPod. "Which playlist?"

"The Roadtrip one, of course." I kept my eyes on the road.

He plugged my iPod in, and pushed play. Country music started, and Eric was cringing next to me. "Really, Sookie?"

I ignored his protests and continued to sing and dance along to 'Man! I Feel Like A Woman,' watching Eric cringe and grimace out of the corner of my eye. I saw him open his mouth a few times to say something when both of my hands would leave the steering wheel, but he never actually said anything to me. I always got my hands back to ten and two before he could.

We continued on that way until we stopped again in Wausau to get gas. Eric decided he wanted to drive the rest of the way, and I suspect it had more to do with not wanting to listen to Shania's greatest hits anymore than it did with wanting to give me a break, like he so sweetly insisted. I pulled him close and kissed him hard, breaking away just as he was really getting into it.

"Now *that* is the biggest load of bullshit I've ever heard, baby." I squeezed his ass, then got in the driver's side and slid over the smooth leather seat.

"What's gotten into you today?" Eric asked once he was in the car next to me.

"I'm not allowed to be a in a good mood? I seem to remember being like this an awful lot until we *both* got all emo on each other." I wanted to squeeze his hand, but he was in the process of shifting gears.

My iPod had been relegated to the backseat for the remainder of the journey. Classic rock had resumed playing, and Eric practically petted his dashboard in a soothing, apologetic way. I rolled my eyes again and kicked off my flip-flops. I propped my feet up in the open window and slid over on the seat so my head was resting on Eric's shoulder.

"Comfy?" He looked down at me.

"Not yet, but I'm getting there." I smiled up at him mischievously, and then started to sink down further.

"What are you-" He stopped asking when he felt my head on his thigh. "Sookie..."

"Eyes on the road." I ordered when he looked down at me. "You need to concentrate." I unbuttoned his jeans and slid down the zipper.

This was a new frontier for me, but I was willing to give it a shot. The hardest part- yeah, yeah, roll your eyes- was not whacking my head on the steering wheel behind me. Getting myself twisted around in a comfortable position wasn't too easy either, since I didn't want my ass sticking up in the air. Being subtle was key. Somehow, I managed, and Eric only let the car start to drift over once. He learned how dangerous it was to jerk the wheel back when I nearly bit him.

I knew he wanted to pull over. I could see it in his eyes when I looked up at him, but I wasn't having any of that. He would just have to pay me back later, and I had no doubt he would- and most likely with interest. His already heavy foot jammed down harder on the accelerator when he came, and I was just tucking him back into his jeans when the sirens started.

**Eric**

I didn't realize I was going ninety until the flashing lights got my attention in the rear view mirror. Seconds later the sirens started, and by then, it was too late. I was still trying to catch my breath when the Wisconsin State Trooper approached my window on the side of the road. Sookie was sitting up next to me with a smug smirk on her face.

"Driver's license and insurance." The officer demanded without saying hello.

I dug into my wallet for my license and reached into the glove box for my insurance card. I handed both over without even attempting to argue with the man. It wasn't worth it. He ran my license and gave me a lecture about abiding by speed laws before handing over a ticket in the triple digits. The cop went back to his car and I waited on the side of the road for him to pass me by before starting the car again.

"I'll pay for that." Sookie immediately offered.

"No, you won't." I stuck the ticket in the visor.

"Oh, come on, Eric, you wouldn't have gotten that if I-"

"Don't even think of apologizing for that." I turned and smiled at her. Her blush was reward enough, and she looked down at her lap with a smile. "We're good."

She nodded, then reached for my iPod. I didn't say a word when she changed songs. We stopped at a grocery store a little farther north than the cabin to pick up the necessities before heading back south again. The cabin was a rich chocolate brown color, and not very big. When we walked in, it was obvious it hadn't been used in a while. Sookie immediately went about airing the place out. The weather was nice, thankfully, and in no time the musty smell went away, only to be replaced with the smell of the lake.

The place was definitely rustic, no doubt about it. It looked like it hadn't been redecorated since the 70's. I knew Stan really only used the place for fishing trips a few times a year. There were only two bedrooms. One had a queen size bed in it and the other had two sets of bunk beds. The appliances in the kitchen were outdated, but I assumed Stan didn't do a whole lot of cooking while he was staying in the cabin. He did, however, have a state of the art coffeemaker that Sookie eyed like she was considering running away with it. My girl did love her coffee.

I realized I hadn't called her that in a while, and it made me smile. Things between us had gotten so fucked up. If I had known a simple change of venue was all we needed to help us put things to rights, I would have done it immediately. Better late than never though, right?

"Eric get in here!" Sookie shouted from the end of the hall.

"What?" I ran toward her voice, assuming I'd find a mouse or some giant spider, which had been the reason for her screaming bloody murder the night Adam slashed my tires.

"Look." She said when I got to the bathroom.

It definitely didn't match the rest of the house. It had recently been remodeled. I grinned like a fool when I caught sight of the shower. There was enough room for at least three people in there, with dual shower heads hanging down from the ceiling. My mind went to all sorts of dirty places, already planning all the different ways I could fuck Sookie in that space. When I looked over to see her looking back at me, I realized she was thinking the same thing.

We put all of that on hold, though. There were things to do before it got dark. I went outside to check the grill. Stan had said there was a full propane tank in the shed I was welcome to use. The keys were located in one of the kitchen drawers, just like he said. I went about getting that set up while Sookie put fresh linens on the bed and put away the groceries.

Inside she had the TV turned on to the evening news just for a little background noise while she started slicing up vegetables for the kabobs we were having for dinner. Potatoes were already washed, poked and foiled for their trip to the grill. I stopped to kiss her temple before taking them outside and putting them on the grill.

"Where's the wine?" I asked her once I was inside.

"In the fridge. Beer's in there, too." She smiled at me.

"There's a restaurant not far from here I want to go to for breakfast." I informed her.

She giggled and said, "Eric, we haven't even had dinner yet."

"I'm only warning you because we have to be up early. The place opens at seven and is packed pretty much from the time they open until the time they close."

"So why not make a reservation?"

"They don't accept them. They serve everything family style, and the line moves pretty quickly, but there may be a bit of a wait. I just want to give you a head's up."

"And you don't think waiting until our second day would be a good idea. I figured we'd be up late tonight." She winked at me.

I had no doubt we would be. "I'm sure we will. Neither of us are known for early bedtimes."

"Sooo why can't it wait?"

"Trust me, once you've eaten there, you'll understand way I dragged you out of bed." I promised her.

"It better be worth it." She warned.

"Or what?"

She sucked in a breath, turned to me and in her most seductive voice said, "You're going to find out what it's like to sleep on a bunk bed."

Minx.

Dinner was nice. We ate together at the small table out on the patio. Loons sent out their call all around the lake. Stars sparkled overhead. We lit a fire in the pit built into the deck. It was nice. There were no interruptions from one of my brothers or their respective girlfriends. I didn't have to worry about some bar emergency that would pull me away. Hell, our cell phones didn't even get service where we were. There was a land line in the house, but the only person with that number was Stan.

Pam knew how to get in contact with Stan in case of an emergency, but she also knew what emergency meant. Someone better be dying. I trusted her to handle everything else as far as the bar was concerned. My brothers or Mom could leave me a voicemail. Anything they might consider an emergency I wouldn't be able to be at their side immediately anyway.

Sookie was wrapped up in a throw blanket next to me on the porch swing. Her head rested in that perfect niche on my chest that seemed to have been carved out just for her. If it weren't for the warmth from the fire, it would have been too cold to sit outside. It got considerably colder up that far north than it did in Michigan.

I felt her shiver next to me and asked, "Do you want to go in?"

"Not yet. It's nice out here." She snuggled against me.

"You know, if you think *this* is cold, you're going to hate winter up here."

"You'll keep me warm." She said in a relatively sleepy tone.

"About that..." I trailed off. "When you said you wanted to stay, did you mean in your place, or with me?"

She sat up slowly and pulled the blanket a little tighter around her. "I don't know. I guess... well... I don't know." She smiled weakly.

"I've been thinking about it. A lot." I confessed to her.

"And?"

"And there's a part of me that says it's silly that we're maintaining two separate households when we spend pretty much every night together anyway."

"And the other part?"

"The other part says if things are good the way they are, we should stick with it until we know for sure we want more."

"So you're not ready?"

I looked deep into her eyes. I wanted to be ready. I thought I was. Then I realized it had more to do with trying to cling to her for the wrong reasons, to prove that I had her and that I was the one she wanted. It's not that I didn't think I'd want it eventually, but I didn't want to do to it for the wrong reasons. I told her as much, and hoped she would understand.

"Eric, it's okay. Honestly, just getting used to being in Michigan full-time is going to be enough for me. When the time is right, we'll know, and we'll talk about it again." She assured me.

"You're sure?"

"Yes! Look, Eric, I would never ask you for something I couldn't give myself." She snuggled against me again.

I couldn't have said it better myself.

**Sookie**

Eric wisely woke me with a kiss and a cup of coffee. We hadn't gotten to bed until well after midnight. All we'd done when we came in for the night was go to sleep, but we'd had a good talk about some of the things in our relationship. There was still a lot of ground to cover, but we were making progress. There was no need to hash it all out in one night. We'd figure it out.

"Good morning, sunshine." He smirked at me when my eyes opened.

"What time is it?" I muttered.

"A little after eight. We should get going soon." He set the steaming mug down on the nightstand. "How'd you sleep?"

"Like a rock." I admitted, and pulled him down next to me. "How about you?"

"Very well." He smiled at me.

"Do we really have to get out of bed? I promise if you stay I'll make it worth your while." I threw one of my legs up over his hip and kissed his neck.

"Temptress." He whispered, then groaned when I nibbled on his collarbone.

His hips bucked against mine, and I knew I was just a little closer to getting what I wanted. I thought about reminding him of what I'd done in the car the day before, but decided against it. When he was good and ready, I'd get my comeuppance.

"Shower." He grunted in my ear.

"Do we have to?" I pouted.

"If you want to go to breakfast with bedhead, I don't care, but I know you do." He kissed my forehead.

He was right, of course. I sat up slowly and reached for my coffee. He'd doctored it perfectly and I took a few gulps before setting it down again. Before I even got out of bed I pulled off my shirt and whipped it across the room toward the hamper. Eric watched me with sparkling blue eyes as I got undressed and the padded to the bathroom. He followed behind me, watching the sway of my hips as I walked.

I stepped into the enormous shower and turned the water on. It took a few minutes for the water to heat up, and by the time it was good and warm, I'd brushed my teeth and combed the tangles out of my hair. Eric stepped into the shower behind me and we set about washing each other off. At first, he was all business, but it didn't last. What started out as him innocently washing me off quickly changed when his hand slipped between my legs.

The next thing I knew I was up against the wall with one leg drawn up over his shoulder. His tongue and fingers working together in marvelous ways as water fell from the ceiling. I reached for something to grab onto to steady myself, but all I could do was let my fingers tangle in his hair. He nibbled, sucked, licked and stroked until my walls were clenching around his fingers and the leg I was standing on went weak.

He let my other leg down and slowly kissed his way up my body before planting a toe curling kiss on my mouth. "I think that makes us even, lover." He whispered against my lips.

I felt a little numb from the waist down and just nodded. "Yes, I think it does."

"I'm sure I'll be in your debt again soon." He nipped at my ear while his hands played with my breasts.

I wrapped my arms around his neck and waited to feel his hands slide down. Instead, he pulled his mouth from mine and turned me around. He picked up my hands and brought each one to his mouth to kiss the back of it before putting my palms on the wall. His fingers trailed down my spine slowly as he tugged my hips farther away from the wall. My breath caught when water hit the small of my back. I'm not sure how he did it, but Eric must have crouched a little before he entered me from behind.

I gasped at the fullness I felt. He kissed my shoulder, then pulled out almost entirely, only to slide right back in. He leaned forward and laced his fingers with mine, leaving them up against the wall while he continued to thrust into me slowly. He whispered things in my ear, and kissed me gently when I turned my head as far as I could. When my legs started to shake again, he pulled out and turned me around so I was back up against the wall.

He lifted me easily, and slid right back inside. My arms and legs wrapped around him as I went up and down against the wall. I rocked my hips against his and our mouths met in a kiss that had our tongues battling for dominance. I sucked on his bottom lip, then his top before giving his tongue access to my mouth again. The speed of his thrusts increased as my orgasm began to build.

I moaned in his mouth and bucked my hips a little harder against him. I felt him beginning to pulse inside me. He had a firm grip on my ass so I unwrapped one arm from around his neck and let it sink between us. I nibbled his lip and then used his own words against him.

"Watch me, lover." I purred in his ear, then looked down so he would follow suit.

He watched the movement of my fingers against my own skin. He growled and grunted as we got closer and closer to our release. My core spasmed, then tightened around him, milking his orgasm from him as mine crashed down on me. Our moans and shouts of pleasure mingled together. My body shook, while his tightened, then relaxed. He crushed me against the wall and planted another toe curling kiss on me before letting me down.

"Now are you glad I woke up up?" Eric kissed the tip of my nose.

"Mmm, I guess." I wrapped my arms around him. "Can we get out of the water? I'm cold."

He kissed me while he reached behind me to turn off the water. We stepped out of the stall together and he passed me a towel to get dried off. A half hour later we were both dressed and ready to go. He'd told me where were going was nowhere near fancy.

"You could go in a pair of those tight pants you like so much that I'm convinced you wear only to torment me-"

"Yoga pants, honey." I filled in the blank for him.

"Whatever. They make your ass look amazing." He winked at me.

I looked down at the low-rise jeans I was wearing and said, "I guess these'll just have to do. I could go change if you want?" I was teasing just because I could.

"No, no, no, we have to get going. I'm starving." He pulled me toward the door.

"Tell me again what's so great about this place?" I asked as we walked to the car. He went off on a bit of a tangent as he talked about the restaurant. "Sounds like breakfasts Gran used to make."

"Did I mention they hand out fresh donuts while you're waiting? They're amazing." He said with excitement.

"Donuts, huh?" It was nice to see him to animated.

"Buttermilk dipped in sugar. Trust me, you'll love it." His enthusiasm was adorable.

We pulled into the large parking lot a short time later, and just as Eric predicted, there was a line that stretched pretty far back. "Wow." was all I could say.

"Don't worry, the line moves quick." He wrapped an arm around me.

True to his word, staff members were offering donuts to customers while they waited. We stood in line for nearly a half hour before we were finally shown to a table. It was family style, just like he said, and there was no need to wait for a waitress to come by and take your order. Everything we needed was right there on the table. All we had to do was serve ourselves.

All that was missing were fresh biscuits, and it really would be like having breakfast with Gran. I got a little sad just thinking about it. Eric reached across the table and squeezed my hand, asking if I was okay.

"Just thinking about my Gran. I miss her." I confessed.

He nodded and squeezed my hand again. I was glad he didn't ask any questions since I didn't really want to talk about her. We took our time eating, and when we were finished, we stopped by the little bakery. We got a loaf of bread, a box of donuts and some fudge. I noticed that just about every place we stopped sold fudge, cheese and bread. It was interesting.

We were both stuffed and sleepy by the time we got back to the cabin at just after noon. "I need a nap." I told Eric when we got out of the car.

"Me too. Why don't you run and put the food inside, then meet me down by the water?" He suggested.

"Why?"

"Because I have a surprise. Trust me, you'll like it. Now go do what I said." He winked.

"Yessir." I smirked, got popped on the behind, then went in the house.

I grabbed a blanket off the couch and then went down to the water. My face lit up like a Christmas tree when I saw Eric's surprise.

Just a head's up, I'm working some crazy hours this week so I don't know when the next update will come. Hopefully this'll tide you over until I get to update again. Also, if you haven't already, I've posted 2 side stories for LTS, so please check out "Just Watch the Fireworks." Thanks for reading, bb birds \*smooches\*

**Chapter 24: 32 Ways to Make You Smile**

You guys are adorable, wanting to know what Eric's surprise is. Hopefully it was worth waiting for. Oh, and this chapter was heavily influenced by Caveman's conversation with NerdStud, so if you haven't read it yet, you should.

**sookieverse\_**

Chapter 24: 32 Ways to Make You Smile

**Eric**

My surprise wasn't that big of a deal, but you'd think it was the way Sookie's eyes sparkled as she ran toward me. There was just an old hammock hanging between two very sturdy trees. We would be in the shade. There was a nice breeze and it was a warm day. It seemed like the perfect location for our nap. Getting into the thing proved to be a bit more tricky than I thought it would be, but we managed.

The combination of full stomachs, fresh air and gentle rocking had us both out in a matter of minutes. I woke when she shifted next to me. I looked down to see her eyes were already open. I didn't move, though. I just stayed right where I was and stared at her.

"I like it here." Sookie volunteered quietly.

"How did you-"

"You snore a little." Sookie kissed my chest.

"I do not." I argued.

"Sure you do, *pumpkin*." She squeezed me.

"Oh yeah?" I wiggled and the hammock responded nicely.

Sookie yelped and held on tighter. "Eric, don't you dare flip us out of this thing!"

"Then take it back."

She laughed loudly and said, "Fine, I take it back."

"I thought you might." I kissed her head.

"Doesn't make it any less true." She mumbled.

Yeah, so we knew wrestling in a hammock was a bad idea, but we did it anyway. The next thing I knew we were being flipped out, both of us landing on our sides and laughing like fools. Sookie pouted underneath me when I rolled on top of her.

"What?" I asked her.

"My hip hurts." Her bottom lip stuck out in the cutest way.

"Show me." I winked at her, and she obliged. I slid down her body and tugged her already low jeans even lower to kiss the sore spot. "Anywhere else?"

She nodded and silently pointed out other spots that "hurt," for me to kiss better. It was all going very well until a spider landed on her arm and she screamed bloody murder. She shoved me off of her, flinging her arm around wildly. She jumped up off the ground , sending the poor spider flying through the air to land God knows where. I laid there laughing, which only made her face flush a little deeper red.

"It's not funny, Northman." She was pouting again.

"It was a spider, lover, and not the deadly kind." I was on my feet easily.

"I don't. Like. Spiders." She punctuated each of her words.

Yes, yes, I knew she didn't like spiders. "Then you should do something about the one on your leg." I pointed.

She looked down and that was when I made my move, tossing her over my shoulder and heading to the cabin. She wiggled and shrieked, threatening the whole way to 'get me for this' later. I welcomed any sort of payback she might be willing to offer me. I dropped her on the couch and we picked up where we left off on the grass, sans spiders.

An hour later we were a boneless mass of limbs wrapped around each other, sated for the time being and trying to collect our breath. Sookie got up to go to the bathroom to get cleaned up a little while I turned on the TV. The evening news was on already. Had the day really gone by so quickly? We'd completely lost track of time. Huh. The forecast called for rain the following day, and that gave me a few ideas. We were going to need to make another trip to the grocery store, since we'd only bought enough stuff to keep us going for the first few days.

Sookie came back to me dressed in those yoga pants she knew I loved and a tank top. No bra. Life was good. She slumped down on the couch next to me and produced a pair of boxers before kissing my cheek.

"I noticed you weren't wearing any." She winked, then grabbed the remote out of my hand to see what else was on.

"I have to make a trip up to the grocery store." I told her.

"Yeah, I know, I made a list." She smiled up at me. "Let me go put a-"

"I'll go." I offered her.

"I can go with you."

"I want to surprise you with something, and it will be hard to do that if you're right there next to me."

She smiled brightly and asked, "But what about the ax murderer?"

I laughed and said, "Sookie, sweetheart, there are no ax murderers up here."

"How do you know?" She stuck her tongue out.

"Because not every lake comes complete with its own ax murderer. You'll be fine."

I got dressed quickly, wanting to get up to the store and back as quickly as possible. Sookie handed over the list she'd written up for me, although when she'd had time to do it, I hadn't the slightest idea. She kissed me goodbye at the door with the promise of getting a jump start on dinner.

**Sookie**

I was curious as to what Eric's surprise might be, but so far anytime he surprised me it went well, so I had high hopes this time would be no different. I started the grill before going back inside to rub the pork chops we'd picked up the day before with a special blend of spices. I got the chops on the grill and sliced up veggies for roasting, and potatoes peeled for mashing.

I got Eric's iPod going, settling on the 90's rock list he had. I didn't mind that so much. I would always prefer pop and country, but I knew it bothered him. The potatoes were boiling and I was just turning the pork chops when Eric came back. I went inside to grab the foil packet of veggies for roasting and put them on the grill before going over to Eric's car to help him carry things inside.

"Holy moly, did you by out the store?" I joked when he opened the trunk.

"Close." He smiled and reached in for bags. When I reached in, too, he looked over at me. "What do you think you're doing?"

"Helping." I said as if it should be obvious.

"No you're not. You're going back inside. I got this." He insisted.

"Eric, I can help." I stuck my hip out in defiance.

"I don't want you to help me. I want you to go back inside." His eyebrows jumped up in a very authoritative way.

"Fine." I huffed, then headed back to the cabin.

I got barbecue sauce out of the cabin and the brush from one of the drawers so I could go baste the chops on the grill. I ignored Eric as he made various trips in and out of the house, carrying load after load of bags into the house. I kept my back to him, pretending to be interested in the food on the grill. When I went inside for a clean platter for the meat, Eric was putting things away.

"Can I help yet?" I grumbled.

"Are you really mad at me, or are you just pouting?" Eric countered.

I huffed again and said, "I was pouting, but now I'm considering getting mad."

"Well don't." Eric walked out of the house, leaving me standing there staring after him.

I stabbed at the potatoes that were boiling away, hoping it would relieve some of my frustration. I wasn't even sure why I was getting all huffy with him, but I could feel my blood pressure rising. He was being all weird and secretive with me, which I wasn't used to. He was up to something, I realized. I told myself to chill the fuck out, remembering that none of his previous surprises had disappointed me. I just needed to relax and trust him.

The potatoes were done. I went in search of a colander to strain them. I found one and dumped the potatoes into it. I grabbed some butter and milk out of the fridge and found a masher in the drawer. Usually Id' use a hand-held mixer to mash the potatoes, but when in Rome...

I was smashing the hell out of the potatoes when a large bouquet of flowers I couldn't identify by name was in front of my face. I dropped the masher and took the flowers from him, curious as to what he was trying to tell me now. My frustration was immediately replaced with curiosity and a wave of love for him. Eric didn't always get it right, but he was getting much better at it.

"What are these?" I smiled at him, inhaling the blend of scents emanating from the flowers.

"Jonquils, Larkspurs, Primrose, yellow and orange roses, and tulips." Eric recited as I fingered the various blooms.

"They're beautiful." I stretched up to kiss him. "Thank you."

"You're welcome." He smiled, then reached into a cabinet for a glass pitcher since there weren't any vases available.

"So what do they mean?" I asked him.

"What do you mean?" He asked with a sly grin.

"Come on, Eric, it's not every day a guy gives his girlfriend Larkspurs."

He explained the meaning of each flower, once again proving he'd put thought into his gift. "The Jonquils represent desire, love and returned affection. The Larkspur symbolize an open heart. The Primrose represent young love, and the feeling that I don't want to live without you." He looked into my eyes when he said it, and I could see the honesty there. My lower lip started to wibble a bit, and I felt tears rushing into my eyes. "The roses represent passionate thoughts." His eyebrows wiggled at that, momentarily quelling my tears into submission while I laughed. "And the tulips are variegated- striped- which is a symbol for beautiful eyes."

I was stunned. I set the flowers down on the counter and kissed him. I kissed him like it was the first time I'd ever kissed him, and everything I felt in that moment, I poured into it. If it weren't for the mutual growling of our stomachs, I would have put dinner on hold to better thank Eric for his thoughtful gift. As it was, we pulled apart and finished getting dinner ready. I couldn't stop staring at the flowers and smiling.

**Eric**

The smile on her face when I told her what the meanings of the flowers were made her pouty frustration all worthwhile. I was beyond thankful when she didn't cry. I didn't want to make her cry, even if they were happy tears. The whole thing just made me uncomfortable. Dinner went nicely. We cleaned up the kitchen together afterward, not that there was much to clean up.

When we were done, Sookie disappeared into the bedroom for a few minutes. I figured she was either changing clothes or getting naked altogether. Either way, I was glad she was occupied because I had plans that went beyond the flowers. That was just the starting point. I had a few things planned for the next couple of days. I'd come to the conclusion before this trip had even occurred to me that there was an entire chunk of relationship we were missing.

We'd gone from one extreme to the other in our relationship. I'd talked to Jake about it a little, since consulting Luke wasn't really an option for me. Things were still rocky on account of his breakup with Dulcie. He didn't exactly blame me for it, but I knew there was some bitterness there because I'd pointed out how ridiculous their relationship was. And really, it was a little hypocritical of me to be handing out relationship advice when my own relationship was floundering.

Jake had suggested going back to square one. If we were really going to start over, then I was going to have to do things differently this time around. That meant doing all the little things I hadn't done before. Like bringing her flowers because I wanted to, and not because I fucked up. Talking about things that mattered, and not just whatever dirty thoughts happened to be in my head at any given moment. Yes, it was good I could share those things with her, but there had to be more than just sex. I knew there was, or I wouldn't love her.

But I'd also figured out there were a lot of things about Sookie I didn't know. This trip was about changing that. I didn't expect to learn it all in just a few days, but it would be nice to return to Michigan with a more solid foundation. So, I took the advice Jake had given me to heart. I was just about to move on to the next phase of my plan when Sookie appeared from the bedroom with a box in her hands.

"What's in the box?" I asked, trying not to sound too curious about it.

Sookie sat down on the couch and patted the cushion next to her. "Come sit down."

I took a seat next to Sookie. She handed me a smaller box that I hadn't noticed on account of the bigger one, and gestured for me to open it. I peeled off the ribbon and gift wrap to reveal one of those velvet boxes you'd expect to see jewelery in. I arched an eyebrow at her.

"Keep going." She insisted with an amused look on her face.

The box creaked open and inside was a lighter. "A lighter?"

"Yes. You're going to need that for part two."

My curiosity was definitely piqued. I tore the paper from the second box when Sookie handed it to me, and lifted the lid. After folding back the tissue paper I discovered there were books inside. Some of them had little locks on the side and it took me a minute to figure out these were her diaries.

"Sookie?" My eyebrow seemed to be permanently arched.

She took a deep breath and said, "This trip is about starting over, and starting fresh. It's about letting go of all the things in the past that have fucked us up. We have a lot of things to work on, but before we can fix us, we have to fix ourselves. So, I'm giving you these journals as a symbol of me letting go of my past. No more blaming Bill when things get hard. No more hiding out in bad memories because it's easier to expect the worst than it is to fight for the best."

I was stunned, to say the least. I wasn't at all expecting the gift she was giving me, but I was more than grateful to get it. She sat there anxiously, waiting for me to say something. I wasn't really sure what the right response was.

"Are you sure you want to do this?"

"I love you. I want my life to be with you, so yes, I want to do this. All of this stuff... it's the past. It doesn't matter. I don't need it anymore. I want to be here with you, right now, and look into the future. I don't want this holding me back anymore. And I know it's not these books that have been doing it, but I don't want to be tempted to sink back into that life. It's okay, Eric. I'm ready." She said with a big smile.

She looked so sure of what she was proposing. One by one I lifted the books out of the box and handed them to Sookie. She took them over to the fireplace and pulled the screen out of the way before dumping the books inside. I turned the lighter over in my hands before handing it to her.

"What are you doing?" She asked.

"You should do this. It's your past, Sookie, not mine. You don't need me to do this. It's yours."

She opened her mouth, but said nothing. Instead, she got the lighter started, and began to light the various books on fire. We stood side by side as the pages slowly caught the flames. It took longer than I thought for the books to burn, but eventually, all that was left was a pile of ashes. Sookie's arms were wrapped around my waist. She squeezed me tightly and snuggled against my chest.

We didn't say anything for a while. We just stood there and watched until the flames died down. I kissed the top of her head, proud of her for what she'd just done. I was going to hold her to her promises of not running from me when things got difficult. I was hoping she'd do the same for me.

"Will you wait here until I come get you?" I asked after a few minutes of silence.

"Where are you doing?"

"The other room. Just put in your ear buds and relax, and I'll come get you." I promised her.

She smiled, just a hint of uncertainty on her beautiful face. "Okay."

"Thank you." I bent to kiss her, then led her over to the couch to sit while I finally got to start the next phase of my plan.

**Sookie**

I was proud of myself for burning those books. It was time to let it all go. Carrying them around wasn't going to do me much good. I knew burning those books wasn't going to erase everything. I was going to have to work at it every day, and make sure I didn't backslide just because it was easy. I meant what I said when I told Eric I didn't want to hide out anymore.

What Bill did to me was shitty, but he'd taken enough from me. I wasn't going to let him take Eric, too. Not if I could help it, anyway. I did what Eric asked and put in my ear buds. I lay back on the couch and let my eyes close while I sank into the music. It was soft and melodic, and in no time at all, I was half asleep.

Suddenly my music disappeared and two strong arms were picking me up off the couch. "I didn't mean to take so long." Eric said as he carried me toward the back end of the cabin.

"What were you doing?" I snuggled against him, completely prepared to just go to sleep for the night. I was relaxed and happy.

The scent of lavender filled my nose, and my eyes fluttered open. Light flickered around the room, and I gasped to see just about every flat surface besides the bed covered in candles. No wonder he was gone so long. He set me down gently, then reached for my shirt.

"Eric, I'm kind of tired." Never since we started doing it, had I turned him down for sex.

He smiled at me and said, "It's not about that."

I arched an eyebrow at him. "Oh no?"

"No. Just trust me." He'd said that to me a lot in the last twenty-four hours. "Lay back."

I did as he asked. When he grabbed the waistband of my pants, I lifted my hips so he could tug them off. He left my panties on though, not that that meant much. He positioned me on the bed where he wanted me, propping me up with pillows under my chest.

"What are you doing?" I looked over my shoulder and bit my lip when I saw that his shirt had disappeared. "I thought you said this wasn't about sex."

"It's not. Just relax." He leaned over and kissed my temple.

I let my head drop down onto the pillows that were piled underneath me. He gathered up my hair and clipped it up high, which only added to me confusion. Then there was something warm and wet on my back. When his hands started to slide down my spine, I figured it out. A back massage? He'd never done that before.

Flowers, candles, massages...this wasn't the Eric I was used to. I stayed quiet while he worked. Damn if he didn't have amazing hands. As if I wasn't relaxed enough to start out with, I was practically comatose by the time he was finished with me. True to his word, it wasn't at all about sex. If we hadn't already carved out some time earlier in the day, I would have been worried.

I must have dropped off to sleep again because the next time I opened my eyes, Eric was laying in bed just staring at me. It wasn't the first time I'd woken up to find him looking at me, but it felt different. The expression on his face was one I couldn't easily decipher. I got slightly self-conscious. I was laying there, mostly naked, and not really sure of what was going on in Eric's head. I appreciated all the things he was doing, but it just didn't feel like him.

"Can I ask you something?" I was nervous, but I had to know.

"You can ask me anything."

"What's all this about? You're not dying, are you?"

He laughed quietly before answering me. "You mean the flowers and stuff?"

"Yeah." I nodded. "Don't get me wrong, it's lovely. I appreciate it, but it's just..."

"It's not me." He finished.

"Yes. I'm sorry. It's not that you don't do nice things for me but-"

"Sookie, it's okay. You don't have to explain. I wanted to try something different because that's what all of this is about. If you're not into it, I won't do it anymore." He brushed a stray lock of hair away from my face.

"It's not that. You've done a great job. I didn't know you could be like this." I smiled at him, slightly embarrassed of the admission.

"Truthfully, I didn't either. I'm not sure it'll ever be my first instinct to do stuff like this, but I thought it was worth trying out. Thank you for being my guinea pig."

I laughed quietly and said, "Thank you for trusting me enough to let me be part of something new."

"I did have one more phase planned for this evening." He pushed himself up on his elbow and looked down at me. "But it means getting naked."

Did she...what the...I can't believe she...dammit Meg! Yeah, yeah, I know. But come on! I can't go giving it all away in one chapter! There'll be more soon enough. Also, if you're not reading it, check out **Chanel Addict's**Life, Accidental. Contrary to what some of you may think based on the description it is NOT a scene by scene rip off of Life As We Know It. It's an awesome story, and I'm not just saying that because yours truly was given a guest spot (although I totally was, and I flirted with Eric \*gasp\* Don't give me that look! You know you would too!).

**Chapter 25: Heaven's Already Here**

Sorry, I know it's been a long time since I updated this. I've been writing Luke & Emma like whoa. Also, there's been planning to do for the **Happily (N)ever After Contest** I'm hosting with **scribeninja** and **slacker dee**, my epic brainmates. I also have some promo fic to write for that contest, so updates on things will be slow for a bit. Anyway...enough outta me. Enjoy the chapter!

Chapter 25: Heaven's Already Here

**Eric**

The next couple of days went well for us. We finished out our second night at the cabin with a long soak in the tub until Sookie told me she felt like jelly. That was the plan. We'd both slept incredibly well, and I was rewarded for my efforts in the morning with some of the best morning sex I'd ever had. We spent the rest of our time up at the cabin just relaxing and getting to know each other better.

I learned that she got thoroughly annoyed with me for not using coasters. She learned I almost never remembered to put my socks in the dirty laundry. I actually found myself getting excited over the little things we were learning about each other, even if it resulted in us getting frustrated or annoyed. It was good to see the little cracks in what we had each presumed to be perfection. It made everything that much more real for us both.

We took turns making each other breakfast in the morning, although we did go back to Paul Bunyan's once more for breakfast the day before we were set to head home. We went out to dinner once or twice, but we mostly stayed close to the cabin. Stan had a small motor boat he used for fishing that we took out on the lake a few times. We both got a little bit tanner while we swapped stories or napped in the Adirondack chairs bolted down at the edge of the pier.

All in all, I would say the trip was a success. It got us away from the crazier elements of everyday life, and allowed us some time to decide what we wanted for our futures. Sookie started talking about applying to graduate school up in Michigan. It was nice to hear her talking about putting down some roots that would tie her to her new home. She talked of finding a job, and I told her she was more than welcome to come tend bar for me if she wanted to. She'd make a killing, and we'd get to spend more time together.

She looked a little nervous when she said, "Don't you think it's a bad idea for us to spend too much time together? We already live on top of each other. If we work together too, we'll never have the chance to miss each other."

"You want to miss me?" That was weird, wasn't it?

"I want to have my own stories to tell you. I want to be able to talk about people you might know by name or by drink of choice, but that's all. I want to be able to come home and bitch about the boss without worrying I'm going to hurt by boyfriend's feelings."

"I would *never* get upset at you for bitching about Pam." I smirked.

"Ass." She muttered in frustration.

"Sookie, I understand what you mean, and it's fine. Just know that the offer is out there if you change your mind."

"Thank you." She was still pouting.

"So tell me about school. What do you think you're going to study?"

She talked about being a guidance counselor and wanting to make a difference in someone's life. It was an admirable pursuit. I had no desire to work with teenagers. She was looking into getting into Western Michigan University- Southwest over in Benton Harbor. If that didn't work out, her second choice was Siena Heights University, also in Benton Harbor. Sookie was an excellent student, so I doubted she would have much trouble getting into her first choice school. They'd be morons not to take her, as far as I was concerned.

The drive home from Wisconsin wasn't nearly as eventful as the drive up. We stopped in Chicago for a night, and stayed at Jake's place. We spent some time down by the lakefront and had some of the best pizza I'd had in a long time. There was a purpose for us stopping at Jake's place. He'd decided he was going to propose to Mini at my Labor Day party in a few weeks.

He had our grandmother's engagement ring and he planned to give it to her. I honestly couldn't be happier for him. Mini was a great person and she made Jake less weird. That was no easy feat, either. I didn't tell Sookie about Jake's plans. Not that I was worried about her letting it slip to Mini beforehand, but I wasn't ready to start talking about marriage just yet. We were just finally getting on track with each other. I didn't want to go pushing the envelope by bringing up something so serious.

So we spent the night at Jake's very Eco-friendly apartment, and then drove the final leg of the journey home. We got back to Michigan in the early afternoon. Jake and Mini weren't at the house when we got back. I took Sookie's bags over to her place. She wanted to wash her clothes and do a little cleaning. It was going to be weird not to have her right in the next room.

"I'm going up to the bar later on to check in on things. You want to come along?" I asked her once I had her bags in the house.

"I'll think about it." Sookie said as she began to unpack. "It might be a good idea to spend a night apart."

"I think that's a terrible idea." I wrapped my arms around her and hauled her back toward her bed.

We fell backward, both of us laughing. She tried to wiggle away from me and we ended up wrestling on her bed until I let her pin me. Frankly, either way I was going to win, whether I got on top of her or I let her get on top of me. The wrestling turned into making out but Sookie put a stop to it before we could go any further.

"Okay, you need to get out of here so I can do some cleaning and go grocery shopping." Sookie climbed off of me.

"You're no fun." I pouted at her.

She rolled her eyes as she got up. "Eric, we just spent the last week eating, sleeping and fucking. You'll survive for the next twenty-four hours."

"Cruel and unusual punishment." I teased in a dramatic fashion.

"Be a good boy and let me do my cleaning and *maybe* I'll surprise you later." She said as she pulled the rest of her dirty clothes out of her bag.

"Fine." I got up and went over to kiss her goodbye. I really let her have it, but pulled away before she could get too into it. "See you later, Sookie."

"Jerk." She muttered, then went back to her chores.

I left while still chuckling and headed back to my car to get my own things out of the trunk. Truthfully, Sookie was probably right to want to spend some time apart. I needed to check in with the police department to see if they were able to dig up any information on who had slashed my tires. I wasn't counting on them finding anything out, but there was always that possibility. I headed inside and wasn't the least bit surprised to see the place was spotless.

Jake was a neat freak. Mini...well, she was clean, but she wasn't quite so enthusiastic about a clean house as my brother. Thankfully, she was a good cook, so I didn't mind if she was a bit messy. She made up for it in other ways. I checked the answering machine to find I had a few messages waiting for me, but none of them were from the police. I had one from the manager for Renegade 74, talking about filing a lawsuit against me for canceling the contract. It was bullshit.

There was a clause written into the contract allowing us to cancel the performances at any point, provided we gave at least ten business days worth of warning. They didn't have a leg to stand on. It was all big talk designed to hustle money out of us. It wasn't going to happen. I plucked my phone from my pocket and called Pam.

"You're back. About fucking time." Pam muttered.

"I missed you, too, Pam. I'll be in later but I was wondering if you've been having any trouble with Renegade 74?"

She snickered and said, "Those fools won't be setting foot in this bar anytime soon. In fact, I'll be shocked if anyone locally will sign them for a while."

"You work fast when you want, don't you?"

"This was a particularly enjoyable task." Pam always did have a special talent for ruining the lives of others. It was fun to watch as long as you weren't on the receiving end of her wrath. "I also had a chat with Officer Bumbles about the tires."

"And?"

"And they've got nothing. The cameras you ordered have been installed."

"Good. I'll check it out when I come up later." I hung up shortly after that and started a load of my own laundry.

It was good to be home.

**Sookie**

I sat down at the kitchen table to go through the mail, and smiled broadly when I saw the applications I had requested from a few local universities had come. I was going to need to make some phone calls down to LSU to have my transcripts sent up, but that was no big deal. The last week had been one of the best of my life. I learned a lot about Eric. We had a great time together. I hoped it wasn't just because of the change in locales, because we couldn't stay on vacation forever.

There was the real world to consider. We couldn't stay locked away from everyone else all the time. If our relationship was really going to work, we were going to have to let in the rest of the world. There could be more guys like Adam just waiting in the wings to cause trouble. I'm sure there were plenty of women who would shank me in the kidney if it meant getting a shot at Eric. We were just going to have to deal with problems as they popped up instead of letting it all fester like we'd done in the past.

I moved from one chore to the other before hopping in the shower to get cleaned up. My head said I should spend the night at home, relaxing and giving myself time to miss Eric. My body said I was bored and needed to get off my ass. I threw on a navy blue cropped, fitted tee with cut outs just under the scoop-neck, revealing plenty of cleavage for Eric to drool over. I pulled on a pair of tight, white denim mini shorts and grabbed a pair of flip-flops from the back of my closet.

I arrived at the bar not five minutes later. Pam looked me up and down when she saw me. There was some tension between us on account of what had happened before with Adam. I couldn't blame her for giving me the stink eye. She was protective of Eric. I couldn't blame her. When I looked it everything that had happened from an outsider's perspective, I realized just how horribly I had behaved. The fact that Eric even bothered to stick around amazed me quite a bit.

"You look...rested." Pam smirked.

"It was a good trip." I nodded as I approached her.

"He seems happy. Don't fuck it up or they'll never find your body." Pam warned.

"I never meant to hurt him, Pam."

"You know what they say about the road being paved with good intentions, right?"

"I know."

We stared each other down for a moment before Pam gave in and said, "You're lucky I like you."

I had no doubt Pam would make my life hell if I crossed Eric again. Even going back to Louisiana with my tail between my legs would do me no good. I went into the bar and headed straight to Eric's office. He was sitting at his desk, leaned back in his chair and reading a piece of paper.

"Hey." I smiled at him but he didn't look up. "Eric?"

"I'm reading the police report again." He kept his eyes trained on the paper.

"From the night your tires were slashed?" I moved around the desk and slid into his lap.

He wrapped an arm around me and pointed to a piece of paper on his desk. "Pam took notes of all the cars that were in the lot that night. Do any of them look familiar to you?"

I scanned the list, but knew next to nothing about cars. Obviously, one like Eric's would stand out. How many people drove a lime green Hemi-Cuda? I scanned through a list of Toyotas, Hondas, Fords, Chevys, and Kias before shrugging my shoulders.

"Not really."

"There's one car that I didn't give much thought to until I saw it again in the lot tonight." Eric sat forward and punched a couple of keys on his keyboard. A few clicks later, I was staring out at the parking lot.

"New cameras?" I smiled back at him.

"Yes. They cost a fortune, but they're the best in the industry." He pointed to the screen. "See that white SUV?"

"Which one?" I smirked. There had to be at least four of them.

"The Honda, smarty." He pointed to the CR-V with the vanity plates.

"Yes, I see it."

"I've seen that car before. The night you left with Alcide, Jessica Hamby approached me to see if I was okay. She was driving that car. She'd dropped off her brother and his friends."

"She approached you?" I teased. "Awww...that's so cute she's got a crush on you." I stopped teasing when I saw the troubled look on his face. "Why the face?"

"Because she left a note for me on my car the next morning and I didn't think it meant anything."

"And you didn't think this was worth mentioning?"

"I figured it was just a silly crush."

"And now you think she slashed your tires?"

"I don't know. I mean, people get obsessed, right?"

I wanted to argue he was being ridiculous, but then I thought of Adam. "It's possible, I guess."

"I'm just trying to consider all of the options." Eric sat back again.

"Well, wait, Jess is still in high school, right? No way Pam would let her in. So if she's not sitting out there right now, then who came here driving her car?"

"Good question." Eric smiled, then lifted me off his lap. "Would you car to accompany me out to the bar?"

I smiled as he stood up. "I'd love to." I tilted my face up to kiss him, then wrapped my arm around his waist as he led me out to the bar.

I stopped for a drink while Eric found Rasul to talk about the SUV and see if he knew who had come in it. I sipped my gin and tonic, then caught sight of Alcide at a table nearby. He smiled and waved me over. He was with a woman I'd never seen before. She curly honey blonde hair that hung down to her shoulder blades. She was wearing a plaid bustier top and a matching dark gray corduroy skirt with a pair of really cute cowboy boots I would punch a kitten for.

"Sookie, hey, I want you to meet Evangeline Theriot. Evangeline, this is Sookie." Alcide introduced us.

"Nice to meet you." We said with identical accents.

"Alcide's told me so much about you. Call me Angie." She reached a hand out to me.

"All good things, I hope." I smiled at her.

"Well, he was a bit disappointed when you started seeing Eric." Angie confessed, and I arched an eyebrow at Alcide, who just looked embarrassed. "I can't say I blame you. He's a looker." Angie nodded to Eric, who was walking toward us.

"Well, I don't kick him out of bed for eatin' crackers." I laughed as Eric stood behind me. "Eric, this is Evangeline Theriot. She's a friend of Alcide's."

"Girlfriend." Angie put her arm around Alcide, who lost a little of the hard edge that had appeared on his face in all the talk about Eric. "Call me Angie."

"Nice to meet you, Angie." Eric shook her hand.

"This is your bar, right?" Angie asked.

"Yes, ma'am."

"Oh, sweet Jesus, don't call me ma'am. That's my mother." She giggled and took a pull from her beer, then squealed when the game of pool nearby ended. "We're up, baby. We'll see y'all later."

"What was that?" Eric asked once they were gone.

"Alcide's new girlfriend, apparently. Good for him. She seems sweet." I shrugged and leaned against Eric. "What'd you find out about the car?"

"Rasul remembered seeing Jonah Hamby come in a while ago, but I don't see him around here anywhere. I was going to check the patio." Eric's fingers trailed up and down my spine.

"I'll wait here." I smiled over at him.

Eric kissed my forehead, then headed for the doors that lead out to the patio. I sat on one of the stools at the table and sipped my drink. The bar was definitely busy, but that was to be expected. It was hard to believe summer was more than half way over already. All too soon, Labor Day would come, which meant cold weather. The worry that maybe all Eric and I were good for was a summer fling crept into my mind. Would we still feel so cozy with each other six months from now?

Eric came back with a look of disappointment on his face. "No luck?"

"Nope, didn't see him."

"Maybe he's in the bathroom? Or he left with someone?" I suggested.

"Maybe." Eric shrugged.

"We'll figure this out, Eric." I hugged him since there was nothing else I could do.

"Have I told you how sexy you look in those shorts?" He whispered in my ear.

"Mmmm, not yet."

"I think you should come to my office. You'll be able to hear me better there." His lips were soft, but hungry on my neck.

"Lead the way." I squeezed him, then slid off the stool to follow him.

I have plans for this story, but I have some coordinating to do with the side story I have going since they share characters. \*sigh\* Why, oh why do I do this to myself? Oh, right, so Lindsay doesn't kill me in my sleep. \*face palm\* Later baby birds!

**Chapter 26: Fitting In With the Misfit**

Hi bb birds! I'm sorry for the gap between updates. My brain is all over the place these days. I swear, I'm trying to unfuck my brain and get myself back on track. Seriously, I have so many plot bunnies in cages, it's disgusting. This chapter is a little shorter than usual, but it accomplished what I need it to and I want the next part to be in Eric's POV, so I had to cut here since there's a time jump to the end of summer on the horizon. Anyway...enough yakking out of me. Happy reading!

Chapter 26: Fitting In With the Misfit

We weren't able to locate Jonah Hamby. After doing some asking around, Eric learned he'd left with a local girl. So he *had* been in the bar for a while. Eric wanted to talk to him but it would have to wait. He contemplated slipping a note under Jonah's windshield wipers but since there was a possibility someone might come to get the car, he decided it was better if he didn't. Instead, Eric asked Jonah's friend to relay a message for him to give Eric a call sometime.

I ended up going back to Eric's house, in spite of my earlier plans to spend the night apart. I figure I could have spent the night alone, but I knew I wouldn't sleep as well. I woke up before him and started on his laundry since I didn't have anything else to do. Laura was in the kitchen reading a magazine and filing her nails when I came downstairs.

"Good morning." I said brightly as I headed for the laundry room.

"Oh, hey! How was your trip?" Laura asked over her shoulder.

"It was great," I smiled over my shoulder as I stuffed dirty clothes into the washer. "I think it was just what we needed. It was nice and quiet. No interruptions, no distractions, just the two of us."

"Sounds wonderful. Did you guys get things square?"

"About as square as they're going to get." I started the machine, added some soap and closed the lid. "How were things here?"

"Okay," Laura shrugged and turned a little in her seat to watch me move around the room. "Dulcie came by looking for Luke last week. She had a fit when I told her he has a new girlfriend."

"He does? What's she like?" I was definitely in the mood for gossip and sat down at the table to hear it.

"Her name is Emma. She's a friend of mine. We met through my blog a few months ago. She's originally from Nebraska but decided farm life wasn't for her. She's sweet and a little on the shy side. She's relatively soft-spoken and has this innocence to her that is just the total opposite of Luke."

"Sounds interesting." I smiled.

"Very," she nodded and added, "She's also a virgin."

My jaw dropped. "A virgin? How old is she?"

"Twenty-three, I think? I forget when her birthday is."

"Wow." I sat back in my chair.

"It's not that strange."

"No, of course not. It's just... well, it's unusual these days."

"She also looks like a pin-up model."

"Say what?" I couldn't help but laugh. "So let me get this straight, Luke, the guy who can't even go to church without flirting is now dating a pin-up model virgin from Nebraska?"

Laura and I both laughed for a few minutes over that one. "He's been really well behaved, from what Emma tells me."

"Wow. Well, good for him."

Dulcie had her moments, but she was mostly just trouble. There was nothing about Luke and Dulcie that made sense in the long run. She was great summer fling material, but I couldn't see the two of them together for longer than a season. I mean really, how awkward would it be at your high school graduation to have a step-father there who was young enough to be your big brother? It was just creepy. Maybe I had no right to judge but I did have a right to my opinion.

"You'll get to meet her when they come up for the Labor Day party." Laura informed me.

It would be nice to see Luke again. If nothing else, he was always fun to hang out with. Laura and I made plans to go into town for lunch. I told her about running into Alcide at the bar the night before, and it turned out she'd already met Angie. I thought Angie was sweet. I liked her bubbly personality. I could see just a little bit of sass and spitfire to her, which would make her an interesting person to have around.

"Every time I see her, she's in cowboy boots." Laura shook her head.

"So?"

"We're in Michigan," she said as if that explained everything. "We're on the beach, for fuck's sake! Why the hell do you need boots at the beach? It makes no sense."

Okay, so she had a point, but I still thought the boots were adorable. Laura was definitely the most fashion conscious person I'd ever met. She was always very well put together and never left the house without makeup on. I was more the wash 'n wear sort of girl. There'd been days at LSU when getting out of my pajamas just didn't appeal to me and I'd go to class in yoga pants and a t-shirt. What was the point of getting all dressed up to lay out on the beach all day and sweat? Then you factor in swimming in the lake, and who wants mascara running down their face the whole time?

I was just making myself some breakfast when Eric came downstairs. I handed him a cup of coffee, knowing the smell would wake him up better than the drink itself. He sat down at the table while I started making him breakfast. I had some toast with peanut butter and I sliced up an apple. When I told Eric I was going to lunch with Laura, he gave me puppy dog eyes until I agreed to bring him one of those Spanish Prisoner Skillets from the Sugarbowl.

A short time later I was running home to shower and get ready for lunch. I wound my hair up in a bun and slipped on one of my sun dresses. I met Laura in the driveway where she was talking to Jake. He smiled and waved at me before kissing Laura goodbye and sending us on our way. The two of them together were such a contradiction, yet they somehow worked. Eric and I had our differences, no doubt about it, but Jake and Laura made it look so easy.

"Can I ask you something?" I asked Laura once we were on our way into town.

"Fire when ready," she turned left.

"Do you and Jake ever fight? You two always seem to get along so well."

She laughed and said, "We definitely bicker, but we don't fight a whole lot. He is who he is and I love who he is, even when he drives me nuts. I know I do things that irritate him just like he does things that get on my nerves, but that's part of the fun. None of the things about him that bug me are deal breakers."

"Well, I learned this week it's not worth it to get upset over the little things. Eric has plenty of quirks I never knew about, or never paid any attention to, and it's just not worth fighting over. I was wondering about bigger issues than putting empty cups in the dishwasher or taking your shoes off at the door." I explained to Laura.

"We've had a few arguments. Most of them have come lately, believe it or not, and have been about where we're going to live. With my lease being up on my place and all, it seems silly to renew. We've been talking about living together for a while and I don't want to move twice. It's not easy to combine two lives. Jake, as you can clearly see, looks like he lives for Restoration Hardware, whereas I'm much more of a fan of French design. Making it so those two things can co-exist isn't easy. We're going to have to compromise. Not getting my way isn't something I deal with easily, but because I love Jake, I'm willing to make certain concessions if it makes him happy. Does that answer your question?"

I nodded and said, "Yes, I think so."

I knew right then and there that if Jake and Laura got married, she was going to be a nightmare bride. I was willing to bet she saw things in a very specific way and wasn't going to be willing to bend on it. We arrived at the Sugarbowl a short time later, both of us bitching over how annoying 'Single Ladies' by Beyonce was.

We were three steps into the diner when Angie flagged my attention by practically screeching my name. I heard Laura groan beside me, but she slapped on a smile and followed me over to Angie's table.

"Y'all should join me!" she said with excitement, gesturing for us to take the free side of her booth.

I looked at Laura who just shrugged and motioned for me to go first. I slid into the booth and prayed Laura would be able to get along with Angie long enough for us to have lunch. Angie got a cheeseburger and fruit, Laura got a cup of soup and half of a club sandwich and I got chocolate chip pancakes. Angie did most of the talking, filling us in a little better on the details of how she'd met Alcide, which led to Laura talking about how she met Jake. I'd never heard the story myself, so it was actually fun to hear it.

"I was at a company golf outing and Jake was there playing golf with the boys. Luke was goofing off as usual and Eric was sprawled out in the golf cart. I wasn't really playing so much as I was along for the socializing and drinks. Golf greens and Louboutins don't exactly mix, you know. We were goofing around on the cart and someone behind me yanked my ponytail. I turned around to yell and hit Jake with the golf cart." Laura told us.

"No you didn't!" I was stunned, but very amused.

She nodded enthusiastically and without a hint of shame. "Yes, I did. I didn't run him over, thank goodness, but I did break his baby toe and bruise up his shins. When we hit, I went flying forward slammed into the steering wheel. Rather than check on his poor injured feet and legs, Jake came to make sure I was okay. I apologized profusely for hitting him, while Luke said Jake did that sort of thing all the time to meet women. It was a little crazy, but we sorted things out over a drink and Jake decided I should meet him for dinner to check on his injuries. It was the least I could do. We've been together ever since."

"So what about you and Eric, Sookie? How did you two meet?" Angie asked me.

"Oh, yes, how did you meet? I haven't heard the story either."

"You haven't heard the fourth of July story?" I raised an eyebrow at Laura.

"Well, yes, *that* story I've heard, but I haven't heard how you actually met."

"It's not that great, but it's actually sort of similar to Laura's story." I laughed at the thought of it.

"You ran him over with a Vespa?" she joked.

"Not quite. No, I was at the grocery store and Eric just walked right into me. He was yapping on his cell phone and was paying no attention to anything. He just walked right into me and kept on going. Then I found out he was my new neighbor. We spent the next month flirting and fighting until we get stinking drunk of the fourth of July and slept together." I told them.

"You two are so ridiculous." Laura rolled her eyes.

"What?" I laughed, confused by her statement.

"When you saw him, what was your first thought?"

"I thought he was a dick for running into me."

"No, no, I mean when you really looked at him, what did you think?"

I thought for a moment. No one had ever asked me that before. "Well, of course I thought he was good looking, but-"

"But you decided to stifle that part and just concentrate on hating him instead?" Angie asked and I got the feeling I was being ganged up on.

"He's not the same Eric to me now he was then, and believe me, *that* Eric was worth not liking. I think we both had preconceived notions about who the other one was. It took time-"

"And a lot of sexing," Laura interjected and I glared at her while Angie laughed.

"Before we figured out how wrong we were about each other." I finished and contemplated spilling Laura's iced tea in her lap. Since when was she on Laura's side anyway?

Our meals came a short time later and we ate while we continued to chat. I sat back and let Laura and Angie do most of the talking. Angie talked about the town she'd grown up in. Laura asked a lot of questions about Louisiana, and was slightly appalled when I didn't know much about the city. I knew Bon Temps and Baton Rouge. I'd only been to New Orleans a handful of times.

By the time we were done with lunch, it was like Angie and Laura were old friends. I was happy to see they were able to patch up whatever differences they may have had. We promised we'd see Angie again, and Laura even invited her and Alcide to the end of summer party at Eric's house. I was impressed with the quick turn around.

"So, I thought you were annoyed with her?" I asked once we were in the car headed back to the house.

"I can admit when I'm wrong. I still hate her makeup, though." Laura smiled as she drove.

"What's wrong with her makeup?" I sighed and rolled my eyes.

"Let's start with her eyeliner..."

Hope everyone had a fantastic holiday! I know I did. I also figured out you know you're an adult when you're excited over new Tupperware. Totally got a set to keep in storage for when I move. It's very exciting. How sad am I? Happy New Year, in case I don't update again before 2011 starts. Thanks for an amazing 2010 \*hugs to all\*

**Chapter 27: Thorn In My Pride**

Chapter 27: Thorn In My Pride

It took a few days, but I finally got word back from Jonah. He stopped in the bar one evening on his way home from work. Sam had taken off on another of his family emergencies, leaving me without a bartender for an undetermined amount of time. Pam was itching to fire him, and I was damn close to letting her. Enough was enough.

"I heard you were looking for me?" Jonah asked when he took a seat at the bar.

"I am. You heard about my tires being slashed, right?" I asked as I got him a beer.

"I did. That sucks, man. That car of yours is a piece of art." Jonah said sincerely, but then took stock of the expression on my face. "Whoa, you don't think I had anything to do with that, did you?"

"I don't know, man, but I was hoping you could tell me if you were here that night." I passed him the beer and leaned against the bar.

Jonah took a drink, quirked his eyebrows in thought and said, "No, I wasn't here that night."

"You're sure?"

"Yeah, I'm sure. I had a date with Kim Withers that night. You know Kim, right?"

Yes, I knew Kim. She was a sweet girl, from what I knew of her. "Yes, I know Kim."

"We got set up by a friend of hers. We were on our first date that night and we didn't come here since the whole town is here on the weekends. We went up to... it doesn't matter. The point is, Eric, I didn't have anything to do with your tires being slashed. Why would you think it was me?" Jonah looked angry instead of scared.

I sighed and said, "Because I was looking at the security tape of the parking lot that night and I saw an SUV I've seen your sister driving, but she's underage and we don't serve minors. So I thought maybe you were driving the car that night."

"That still doesn't explain why..." Jonah trailed off.

"I'm not accusing you, Jonah, I'm just trying to figure out what happened. If you didn't do it, you didn't do it. End of story. I'm not going to run around town saying it was you." I promised him.

Jonah thought for a moment before saying, "You might want to check out where Jessica was. My parents are usually at Bible study in the evenings, which leaves Jess with the car."

"Do you know something, Jonah?"

"She's a little obsessed with you, Eric. Has been ever since you moved here and started coming into the store. At first I thought it was just a crush, but lately she's been... well, crazed, would be a nice way of putting it. Jess isn't the type to lash out, usually. Sure, she can be bitchy sometimes, but what teenage girl isn't? I didn't really think anything of it, but now..."

"Now you're not sure?" I took a deep breath.

Fuck. Why couldn't Adam be responsible for this? If it were Adam, it would be much simpler. I'd have no problem filing charges against him for the damage he'd done and that'd be the end of it. If it was Jessica, I didn't feel comfortable pressing charges. She was a kid. Maybe a little on the crazy side, but a kid all the same. It wasn't so long ago I was a teenager.

I remembered all too well what it was like to really like someone and feel destroyed when they chose someone else. Being over six feet tall before your freshman year of high school has a way of making you a bit of a freak in the eyes of your classmates, and it took me some time to learn how to control my rather awkward- and very long- limbs. I didn't hit "chick magnet" status until I got to be a junior. Until then, I was just awkward.

"I don't want to go pointing fingers, but it's possible. I can talk to her, if you want?" Jonah offered.

"No, no, it'd be better if the police handled it." I shook my head.

"The police?" Jonah paled.

"Yes, the police. Look, Jonah, if she didn't do it, it's not a big deal. They'll just ask her a few questions. If she's innocent, she's got nothing to worry about it."

"Eric, come on, can't we settle this without getting the cops involved?"

"They're already involved. I called them when it happened. They just didn't have any leads. Look, if it *was* her, I won't press charges. I just want to know who it was, that's it." I promised him.

"I'll talk to her." Jonah stood up to go. "Just give me a chance to talk to her before you get the police involved, okay? You don't know our parents. They'll disown her for this if she did it. She's just a kid."

Great. Just great. I relented and decided to let Jonah talk to Jessica before I called the police. Three days later he brought Jessica with him to the bar. She was a wreck and visibly upset about something. She apologized profusely and confessed to what she'd done. She offered to make retributions for what she'd done in place of the police being notified. Part of me thought the police should know, since they could get her in to see a counselor, or something, but the other part of me figured she was just a kid. She made a mistake- albeit a bad one- and wouldn't do something like that again. I agreed to let her pay for the damages and keep the cops out of it, but she had to tell me why she'd done it.

She looked to Jonah, who took that as a cue to walk away. Jessica took a series of deep breaths in attempts to calm herself down. She dabbed her eyes with a napkin I'd handed her when she started bawling. At first, I'd thought it was an act for sympathy, but then I thought of all the times I ran into Jessica around town. She seemed genuinely sweet, and based on what Jonah had told me, the whole thing really did seem like an isolated incident.

"I was jealous. I remembered how upset you were the night Sookie left with that other guy, and I saw you two together and I just snapped, okay? I know it was wrong, and I swear, I'll never do anything like that again. I'm sorry, Eric." she apologized and stared crying again.

I could tell she was waiting for me to hug her, but I couldn't do that. Instead, I signaled for Jonah to come get his weeping sister. I told him I'd keep the police out of it and he promised he'd be back to sort out the financial stuff with me later. I really hoped I was doing the right thing in giving Jessica a break. Only time would tell there.

And time definitely flew by. Life settled into somewhat of a routine. Things were going well with Sookie. She applied to grad school at a few of the nearby universities and got a job waiting tables at the Sugarbowl. She worked the dinner rush, which was really the best shift for her since I was at work myself by that point. We were still trading nights back and forth from one house to the other, but I preferred when she stayed with me.

We had more privacy at her place, but my bed was bigger. On her nights off, she would either come up to Loki's, or have dinner with Angie and Mini. Jake was constantly mumbling under his breath, trying to find the right combination of words to say to Mini when he proposed. I warned him he was building it up far too much in his head, when really, all he needed to say was, "I love you. Will you marry me?" But for Jake, that wasn't good enough.

I was also anxious to meet Luke's new girlfriend. By all accounts, she was nothing like Dulcie, but I knew my brother. There had to be *something* off about her if she was dating Luke. Sookie just smirked and rolled her eyes when I told her that, giving me the impression she knew something I didn't. I tried to get it out of her, using every creative technique I could think of, but Sookie was locked up tighter than Fort Knox. Whatever she was holding onto must have been good.

Before I knew it, summer was all but over. The weather had yet to cool, but the tourist season was coming to a close. That meant I'd have more time to spend with Sookie, as well as to start planning the new club Pam wanted to open. The hope was to have the space she'd found renovated in time to open the following spring. She was going in a very different direction thank Loki's, and Pam didn't mind being a touristy hot spot.

The décor she had in mind alone made my stomach turn, but she felt the same way about Loki's. She didn't like that it looked so worn down and second hand. I wasn't interested in running a glitzy place. I wanted consistent customers. I wanted a solid reputation. Pam's business wouldn't be able to operate year round. A nightclub in a resort town like ours just wasn't necessary. If we were closer to the universities, it would be another story, but Pam wanted to operate close to the lake.

Between planning for the new business, spending time with Sookie and working at Loki's, I lost track of how quickly time went by. As soon as I mentioned the end of summer party at my house, Mini took the reigns and did most of the planning and coordinating for it. With Sookie's help, the two of them cleaned my house from top to bottom on the inside and had Jake power washing the outside. Mini was relentless when it came to party preparation. It made me a little nervous as to how she would be once she was engaged, but that would be Jake's headache.

Two days before the party, Luke and Emma arrived. Luke was his usual goofball self, dressed like he'd closed his eyes and walked into a dark closet and grabbed whatever he found first. Being around my brothers made me feel validated in my normalcy. Between Jake's new age, politically/environmentally aware ramblings and Luke's screwball sense of humor and very questionable fashion sense, I looked like Ward Cleaver. That's fucked up.

I took one look at Emma and was shocked I didn't see any signs of brain damage. She was a beautiful girl with long dark hair and sparkling eyes. She looked like the lovechild of Dita Von Teese and Audrey Hepburn, to be honest. How the fuck was she with Luke? Sookie was no fool and immediately caught my reaction. She elbowed me in the ribs and glared at me before going to introduce herself to Emma.

"Sookie, how are you? What the hell are you doing still dating my brother?" Luke asked as he hugged my girlfriend and grinned at me over her shoulder. I may or may not have given him the finger.

"I could say the same thing to your new friend. I'm Eric," I held out my hand to Emma, who blushed slightly as our hands moved up and down.

"It's nice to meet you, Eric. I've heard so much about you both." Emma smiled politely.

"Ignore these two. All three of these boys together are nothing but trouble." Sookie shook her head and looked back and forth between Luke and me.

"We're angels." Luke flapped imaginary wings.

I fake coughed and said, "Fairy."

It was good to have my brother back in town.

**SPOV**

Emma was every bit as sweet at Laura had told me she would be. Unfortunately, I had underestimated just how beautiful she was. I figured Laura had to be exaggerating. I was wrong. Emma definitely had the body of a pin up. She arrived in a pair of high-waisted navy shorts and a red and white striped boatneck top. Her hair was styled in a vintage way and she was wearing designer heels I would expect to see on Laura's feet.

She was very sweet, but very shy. She clung to Luke, but not in a territorial way. She was obviously nervous about fitting in, and if she wasn't with Luke, she was with Laura or Jake. I didn't take it out on her that I kept catching Eric giving her the side eye. More than once, I pinched him for staring at her.

"Would you stop that?" Eric glared at me after I caught him staring at her from the kitchen window.

"Funny, I was just about to say the same thing to you." I got the iced tea out of the fridge.

"I don't know what you're talking about." Eric shook his head and handed me a glass.

"Oh, please, like you haven't been staring at Emma almost non-stop since the second she got here? Don't think I didn't notice the way you were staring right at her tits." I warned him.

Eric laughed and said, "You're being ridiculous."

"Am I?" I shouted sarcastically. I didn't think I was being ridiculous at all. "You know, if you saw me staring at some guy's ass the way you've been checking out *your brother's girlfriend*, you'd be pissed at me."

"I'm not checking her out, and I definitely wasn't staring right at her tits." Eric argued with me.

"Oh yeah? Then what color are her eyes?" I demanded.

Eric grumbled something and said, "Are you kidding me? I don't even know what color Mini's eyes are, and I've been looking at her all summer! Hell, I didn't know what color *your* eyes were until after we slept together."

Was he serious with this? I set down my glass and walked toward the kitchen door.

"Where are you going?" he asked from behind me.

"Home. When you realize what an asshat you're being, I'll come back. Until then, enjoy your eye candy buffet." I stomped out.

About ten seconds later I realized I was overreacting, but my pride wouldn't let me go back and admit it. So, I went home, put on my favorite bikini and headed down to the beach to bake in the sun. I stretched out on my towel and aimed my face at the sky. I wasn't alone for long before Emma came over and sat down next to me.

"Sookie?" she spoke softly with just a hint of country lilt to her voice.

"Hi, Emma." I shifted slightly.

"Listen, I um, I heard the argument you had with Eric."

"Ugh, I'm sorry. I was being silly. I'm not mad at you." I felt like an ass, as I should.

"No, it's okay. It's...it's actually kind of flattering," Emma said with an awkward blush. "Don't take this the wrong way, but Eric is definitely a good looking man, but I'm happy with Luke."

"That's good. Luke seems happy with you. It's nice to see him happy."

"He's a goof." Emma smiled down at the sand.

"That he is. Have you seen the Lady Gaga video?"

"He was in a Lady Gaga video?" Emma looked stunned and I had to restrain myself from laughing.

"Uhh no, not exactly, but I promise you this one is just as entertaining and doesn't have any of those artistically draped political messages." I grabbed my phone and found the YouTube video.

"Oh my gosh," she gasped and laughed as we watched the video right there on the beach. "I heard about it, but seeing it..."

"What's so funny?" Luke asked as he approached us.

"I didn't know you could move like this, Luke." Emma grinned up at him.

"I'm going to kill Mini." Luke pinched the bridge of his nose and shook his head.

"She's right, Luke, you sure can move. Show me that swivel thing you do." I shimmied slightly.

"I have a better idea! How about you go inside and turn my brother's frown upside down before he goes all sad panda on everyone and is impossible to be around?" Luke suggested.

I furrowed my brows at him, but mostly because I knew he had a point. I took a deep breath, gathered my things and headed back toward the houses. I really hated being wrong. I dropped my beach stuff off at home, threw on a sun dress over my bikini and went to Eric's. He was sitting in his living room reading a book when I walked in. He didn't look up, which was probably for the better.

I walked over to him and took the book out of his hands. I set it face down on the arm of the couch to keep it open to the page he was reading. He looked up and let me climb onto his lap so I was straddling him. I rested my hands on his chest and took a deep breath.

"I'm sorry. I was being a silly, jealous bitch before. I overreacted, and I shouldn't have snapped at you like I did." My voice cracked and tears welled in my eyes. I really, really hated fighting with him.

"You don't have anything to worry about, you know. I'm not going anywhere, Sookie." He ran his fingers through my hair.

"I know, I know." I closed my eyes and took a deep breath.

"If you did, you wouldn't have freaked out like that," he pointed out, and dammit if he wasn't right about that, too.

"It would help if you didn't stare at other women, especially ones staying in your house, like you want to devour them. I know I wasn't making that up." I wouldn't give up so easily, even if I had gone about it wrong the first time. "It's okay if you think she's pretty, Eric. Hell, *I* think she's gorgeous. I just..."

"I know what you mean," he saved me from having to explain it. "It's how I felt when I saw you with Luke. Or Alcide. Or Adam."

"Is this payback?" My jaw dropped.

"No," he said quickly and forcefully. "I had no idea what Emma was going to look like when she showed up here today. Honestly, I didn't expect Luke to end up with someone like her after his fling with Dulcie."

"Yeah, you're not the only one." I snickered, then smiled when he pulled me down to kiss my forehead.

"I love you, Sookie. You're the one I want. You're it," he promised me.

"I love you, too, Eric." I gave him a real kiss that quickly resulted in Eric carrying me up the stairs so we could really make up.

Yeeeeeeeeeeah so there's no makeup lemon, but I just don't have it in me to write it today. I think I spent all my lemon power rewriting the shower scene for Blood Buzz. Trust me, it'll be worth it. Also, I have to apologize to **Chanel Addict**. I swear Mini will get her ring next chapter! Also, if you want to know more about Luke and Emma, check out Just Watch the Fireworks, since the story of how they met is posted there. Happy New Year, bb birds! \*throws confetti\*

**Chapter 28: Ring Around Her Finger**

Chapter 28: Ring On Her Finger

I walked into the house at just the right time to hear what sounded like Luke and Emma arguing. Great. Well, at least Sookie and I weren't the only ones. We'd made up after what had to be one of the stupidest fights we'd ever had. Did she really think I was interested in Emma? If she did, we had much bigger problems than just a little bit of jealousy.

To be honest, I was of the opinion a little bit of jealousy wasn't a bad thing. It was how you handled it that mattered, and the fact that Sookie basically had a tantrum made me a little nervous. Sookie was sitting at the kitchen table with her college brochures spread out in front of her. She was dressed for bed. I was surprised she wasn't sleeping already. Maybe the fighting had woken her up.

"What's going on up there?" I asked as I walked over to her and kissed the top of her head.

"Luke and I were talking and Emma came down at the wrong time. I think she got the wrong idea." Sookie gathered up her brochures.

"What sort of wrong idea?"

She sighed and said, "I can't really go into detail because Luke confided something personal about Emma that I don't think she would want everyone to know about, but trust me when I tell you, it's misunderstanding. If I thought it would help, I'd go up there and explain it all to her. His heart is in the right place. He's just confused and frustrated."

"So it's a sex thing." I deduced.

"What makes you say that?"

"Guys get frustrated over very few things. Sex is at the top of the list." I shrugged and went to the fridge for a bottle of water.

Emma came downstairs as I was taking a drink and stopped short when she saw me. She was carrying a suitcase and it was obvious she'd been crying, even though she was trying to hide it. She wiped her face and kept her eyes on the floor as she spoke.

"Sookie, could I stay at your house tonight?"

Sookie looked to me and I just shrugged. The decision was hers to make.

"Yeah, sure." Sookie got up, kissed me on the cheek and headed over to her place.

"Sleep well, Eric." Emma said over her shoulder before following Sookie out of the house.

I kicked off my shoes near the kitchen door and headed upstairs. I paused outside Luke's room, but figured it was better not to go in. I knew if I were in his place, I wouldn't feel like talking. Instead I went on to my room and got in the shower. The smell of booze and smoke clung to me and I hated going to sleep with that smell on my sheets. By the time I got out of the shower, Sookie was waiting for me in bed.

"How's Emma doing?" I asked her.

"Miserable," Sookie said sadly, and patted the mattress next to her. "Got me thinking about how easy it is to just assume the worst of someone, and that's what I did earlier. I know I said I was sorry, and I really did mean it, but I understand why I got so freaked out now. I jumped to conclusions and I assumed the worst of you and that wasn't fair."

I slid into bed beside her and pulled her close. I could understand why she'd done it. I'd done the same in the past where she was concerned. Technically speaking, we weren't a couple at the time all of those things had happened with Alcide and Adam. We hadn't said anything about being exclusive with one another. We were still just friends with benefits, fucking when we felt like it. I got jealous because I wanted more but didn't have the balls to say so. I'd wasted a lot of time on my own pride instead of just telling her how I felt.

"Sookie, do you honestly think I was checking Emma out?" I was really curious as to what she thought.

"Yes, I do, but not in a coveting sort of way. I don't think you would cheat on me."

"Are you sure about that?"

She squinted at me with pursed lips, scrutinizing me. "Before we got serious, I probably would have said yes, but you're different now. I can see that when you commit yourself to something, you take it seriously. It's one of the things I love about you."

"And I love that even though it may take a while for you to see it, you can admit when you're wrong." I teased her, earning me a slight punch in the gut.

Sookie climbed into my lap and ran her fingers through my hair. My eyes closed and I was just starting to nod off when her lips made contact with my neck. Sleep quickly became the last thing I wanted, and it wasn't long before her clothes were discarded and I had her pinned under me on the bed. Her legs wrapped around me waist as I slid inside her, kissing her deeply as I did so.

We took our time, moving slowly and kissing lazily as we got closer and closer to our release. At the last minute, I rolled us over and watched her move above me. She rolled her hips and moaned loudly, her hands braced on my chest as she started to move up and down on top of me. My eyes met hers and I pulled her down to kiss her. My hands tangled in her hair and my hips raised to drive into her. She gasped in my mouth and pinched the flesh she was grabbing onto.

"More," she moaned against my lips, and my feet planted on the bed so my knees where bent so I could continue thrusting hard up into her.

A string of cuss words left her mouth when she came. She bit my ear before sucking gently on my neck. I finished just after her, both of us sucking air as fast as we could. I felt her heart beating against my chest as I hugged her close to me. She relaxed and pressed little kisses to my neck and collarbone, while I did the same to her forehead and temple.

"I love you, Eric." she rolled off of me.

"I love you, too." I kissed her deeply, then watched her walk to the bathroom.

She came back after cleaning up and brushing her teeth. She pulled on a nightgown and got into bed beside me. I rolled onto my side and spooned her from behind. I fell asleep breathing in the scent of her hair. I slept deep that night, and woke in the morning to another cool breeze blowing in. Rain smacked against the windows. Sookie snuggled against me, then groaned as she slowly woke up.

"Morning." She mumbled against my chest.

"Morning." I kissed her forehead and pulled the blankets up around us when she shivered.

"Is it raining?" her eyes hadn't opened yet.

"Yep."

She blew a raspberry of disappointment. "That's got to be a bad omen."

"Nah, I'm sure it'll clear up." I hoped it did because we were expecting dozens of people in a matter of hours, and I didn't want the whole damn town tromping through my house.

"It better," she sighed and burrowed even closer to me. "What time is it?"

"Just after nine."

"Good, then we still have time." I felt her smile against my skin, and then the small kisses she planted along the lines of my ribs.

When her eyes opened, there was no doubt what she meant when she suggested we had time. Yes, we definitely had time.

**SPOV**

Eric and I were barely out of the shower when Laura came upstairs to make sure we were awake. There was so much that needed to be done, and Eric and I had definitely gotten carried away with our time in the shower. Eric and I might have problems in other areas, but we definitely didn't have issues when it came to sex. Although, it worried me that maybe we were using sex as like a patch kit for the things that were broken between us.

Eric made us an omlette to share while I helped Laura get things put out where we wanted them on the deck. Luke and Emma emerged from my house hand in hand, looking for all the world like they hadn't fought the night before. Emma offered to lend a hand in the prep work for the party. Laura tasked the boys with getting the tables and chairs set out while we worked on the food and did some last minute cleaning in the house.

Before too long, people started to arrive. The weather had cleared up, giving us a beautiful, sunny day in the lower eighties. It was perfect weather for a cook out and running in and out of the lake. I ran home to throw on a bikini and a skirt, and walked in on Luke and Emma making out in my living room. It was awkward, but it was also sort of sweet. It was good to see Luke happy, and not just in that sexed up way like when he was with Dulcie. It sounds silly, but Emma made him happy in his eyes, not just in his boxers.

"Sorry, Sook." Luke apologized when I cleared my throat. Emma turned bright red and hid behind Luke's large frame.

"It's fine. I just wasn't expecting to see you two here... like that. Yeah, I'm gonna go change. See you on the beach." I waved, spun on my heel and went back toward my bedroom. I could hear them giggling as I closed my bedroom door.

I tied on a pink sequin string bikini and made sure to double knot the top. I styled my hair quickly with a messy chignon gathered just above my neck and my bangs French braided to the side. Little wisps of hair came loose near my ears, as they usually did, but I just left them. I grabbed a denim skirt from the closet and slipped it on. I found a pair of pink flip-flops and grabbed my beach bag off the dresser.

By the time I got back to Eric's, there had to be at least two dozen people gathered on the deck. Music was blaring from Eric's iPod, and I pitied the fool who tried to change the song without asking. Eric was a total music Nazi, and would have a serious hissy fit if someone touched that little gadget. Not that I could really blame him, even if we didn't share the same taste in that regard.

It was just after two in the afternoon, and there were already people drinking beer. It was a little early for me, but far be it from me to tell people when it was okay to start drinking. I stuck around Eric for a while, making small talk and mingling with the guests before the heat of the sun beating down on me started to get old.

"I'm going for a swim. Wanna come?" I smiled up at him.

"Don't you think I should stick around and talk to people?"

"Just ten minutes. I'm sure Laura can handle it alone for ten minutes." I pouted at him.

"Fine, you win," he made it sound like I had to threaten to smash his windshield first and I just rolled my eyes.

We got down to the beach a few minutes later to find Luke and Emma already splashing around at the shoreline. Emma was, once again, dressed like a pin up girl. She was wearing a very retro one piece swimsuit that hugged all of her curves. It was sexy, but not too revealing. Luke had definitely hit the jackpot with her.

"Seriously, what does she see in my brother?" Eric sighed as I dropped my towel.

"You know, if you keep asking that I'm going to start thinking you'd rather be with her. Who cares what she sees. She's happy. He's happy. They're happy together. That's all you need to know." I unzipped my skirt and let it fall onto my towel.

Eric licked his lips and chased me into the water. It wasn't long before Emma got roped into a game of chicken. Emma was surprisingly strong, but since my boyfriend is a great big cheater, she was the one to go under. She came up sputtering just a little, but starting laughing almost immediately.

"I want a rematch!" she declared, and was on Luke's shoulders instantly.

To see us goofing off like we were, you'd have thought we were still kids. It was fun, though, and probably just what all of us needed. Eventually, Jake came to get us. Mini was having a bit of a panic attack with all the people that had shown up. I gave Eric a kiss before he ran off with his brother. Luke quickly followed them while Emma and I stayed behind to dry off a little.

"Sorry you got dunked like that. Eric and his brothers..." I sighed and shook my head.

"It's fine. I have two sisters who are older than me, so I get it." Emma laughed and reapplied her sunscreen before offering me the bottle.

"Thanks," I took the lotion from her. "So, Laura told me she set you two up?"

"Yes, she did. At first I thought she was crazy. I haven't been in the city for very long and it's just been kind of hectic, trying to figure out what my next move is going to be and all that."

"I hear ya. It's not easy moving away from what you've known your whole life."

"You're from Louisiana, right?"

"Born and raised."

"What made you want to move up here?"

"I inherited the house from my great uncle. I came up last summer just to check it out, which is how I met Eric."

"Yeah, I heard you two had quite the interesting start to your relationship."

"You could say that." I laughed and pulled on my skirt. "It's crazy how you can meet someone who just completely turns your world inside out, isn't it?"

"Yes, it definitely is." Emma agreed and followed me up to the houses.

I got to work helping with the cookie and replenishing of plates, cups, napkins and whatever else needed replacing. Luke and Emma went on a beer run, which pretty much meant driving up to Loki's and raiding the cellar. Things were going pretty well. People were having a good time laughing, chatting and telling stories about the things they'd done over the summer.

Loki's was closed for the night since just about everyone would be making an appearance at Eric's house. Pam pulled me aside to talk about plans she was putting together for a Halloween event at the bar. She wanted to have a costume party, and needed my help in convincing Eric it was a good idea since he could be a 'party pooper.' I laughed at her calling him that, even if she was right. Eric wasn't really much for conforming, although I had a feeling he might feel differently about Halloween.

Still, I agreed to do whatever was necessary to get Eric on board, if for no other reason than it would keep me on Pam's good side. I went inside to use the bathroom and then checked my phone for messages. I'd missed a call from Amelia, so I decided to call her back real quick. We hadn't talked in a few days, so I figured it was best to call before she started getting worried about me.

"Sookie, thank God!" Amelia sounded like she'd been crying.

"Ames, what's wrong? Is everything okay?" I wanted to be there in the room with her. An upset Amelia was hard to calm over the phone.

"I'm pregnant." she blurted out.

"What?"

"Pregnant. I'm pregnant." she repeated, and started crying again.

"Is this...I mean, are you okay with this?"

"I'm...I'm...so...ha...happy." Amelia squeaked out between sobs. She didn't sound happy, that's for sure.

"Ames..."

"I know I sound a wreck, but I swear, Sookie, it's good. Tray is over the moon about it." she promised me.

"That's great, Ames, I'm happy for you." I was, really, I was. I was just surprised, and told Amelia as much when she didn't seem convinced.

We talked a while longer, and I learned she was due the following spring. She was hoping for a little boy that looked just like Tray. They still hadn't talked marriage, but I wouldn't be the least bit surprised if they went the Goldie Hawn/Kurt Russell route, and just "lived in sin" for the rest of their lives. Besides, a few more years together and they'd be common law married anyway.

Eric started calling for me so I said my goodbyes to Amelia and headed downstairs. I figured he needed something, but instead he lead me over to where Jake was just about to sneak up on Laura, who was talking to a group of ladies that hung out at one of the local antique shops on a regular basis.

"What's going on?" I looked up at Eric, who was watching Jake, who looked like he was going to pass out.

"Just watch." Eric wrapped his arm around my shoulders and pulled me close.

I watched as Laura turned around and Jake got down on one knee. There was a collective gasp from the crowd, myself included. A quick glance up at Eric told me he'd been in on this plan. Jake produced a small box from his pocket, and opened it to reveal a beautiful diamond ring. I gasped again, and even before he started to speak, I had tears in my eyes.

Laura looked completely flabbergasted. Her lower lip quivered while Jake spoke of how much he loved her and how he couldn't imagine a life that didn't include her. He got a little choked up himself, which wasn't a surprise at all. It was a sweet thing to witness. I'd never seen someone be proposed to in real life before.

"I want to grow old with you, Laura. I want your face to be the first thing I see for the rest of my life. I love you. Will you marry me?" Jake asked.

Laura squeezed her eyes closed and she took a deep breath as tears rolled down her cheeks. She nodded her head at first, unable to speak, before finally squeaking out a yes. Jake quickly slid the ring on her finger, and then pulled her down to sit on his knee so he could kiss her. It was adorable how even though he was on one knee, they were just about eye to eye.

"You knew about this, didn't you?" I looked up at Eric, who wiped a tear from my jaw.

"That's why we stopped in Chicago. I had to get the ring for Jake," he explained.

"Sneaky." I returned Eric's kiss when he offered me one.

Eric and I hung back and waited for our chance to congratulate Jake and Laura on their engagement. They really were a sweet couple, and it was never more obvious just how in love with each other they were. There was a good vibe going at the party. Everyone was in good spirits and having a great time.

Then Dulcie showed up.

**EPOV**

I don't know what Dulcie was thinking coming to my house at all, much less on a day when I was throwing a party for my friends. Or, at the very least, people I liked in some capacity. Dulcie didn't make the cut. Hell, I'm not even sure I'd give her a water ration if I saw her dying of thirst in the desert. I wanted to tell her to leave, but she got the message loud and clear when she tried to put her hands on Luke.

"Dulcie, you should go." Luke told her as politely as possible, with Emma standing at his side giving Dulcie the stink eye.

"Aren't you at least going to introduce me to your friend?" Dulcie stared Emma up and down.

Emma reached out and firmly planted a hand on each cheek of Luke's ass and said, "I'm Emma. I'm the only girl allowed to put her hands on him. You can go now."

I didn't see that coming. I didn't think little wallflower Emma had it in her, and based on the expression of shocked pride on his face, Luke didn't either.

"You heard the lady, Dulcie." Luke gave one of his dopey smiles.

"You'll be back." Dulcie shrugged, then sauntered off, seemingly unfazed by being dismissed like that.

"Don't hold your breath." Luke responded quietly.

"What a fucking nutter." Sookie shook her head as Dulcie walked off.

Later on I was talking with my brothers on one side of the deck while our girlfriends had gathered on the other side, all of them fawning over the ring parked on Mini's finger. I knew it was too soon to start seriously contemplating marriage where Sookie was concerned. We still had some issues to straighten out. We'd gotten better at communicating, but it seemed trust was still somewhat of an issue, and until we got that straight, we had no business talking marriage.

I glanced over at Sookie and saw her looking back at me. I smiled at her and she smiled back. I wanted to go over and talk to her, but then she was lost in wedding talk and Luke started talking about a bachelor party for Jake. He may or may not have suggested male strippers. Jake shot down the idea in its entirety. Yeah, like that was going to happen.

"So, Jake, after you guys are married, should we expect you to take Laura's last name?" Luke teased, earning him a glare from Jake.

"You guys suck." Jake rolled his eyes while Luke and I laughed.

Like it was our fault he's a fruity bastard.

So, what'd ya think about that? Dulcie got told off. Jake & Mini are engaged. Eric & Sookie are still gettin' frisky. I plotted out 5 chapters last night, si I think there's maybe 10 to go before this story ends. It'll depend on whether or not I stay on track. Sometimes the words get the better of me.

For anyone interested, I put together a photo album for this story. So if you want to see who/what/where has been in my head while writing this story, you can. Just remove the spaces and take out the.s. I really hate this site doesn't allow us to link things within chapters \*sigh\*

http: makesmyheadspin/ LovinTouchinSqueezin? authkey= Gv1sRgCKCS9aKp8eG07gE& feat= directlink

**Chapter 29: Lead Me to Your Door**

Chapter 29: Lead Me to Your Door

We left early on the morning Jake and Laura were moving into their new place. They were leasing a townhouse with the option to buy after a year. Based on the pictures they'd sent, it was a nice place. Laura was all a flutter with planning. I started wondering why she wasn't involved with design or party planning instead of blogging. She and Jake set a date pretty quickly for the following summer while he was on break from school.

I'd seen some of the plans Laura already put into place, and I was impressed. She didn't waste any time, that's for sure. Then again, they were looking at less than a year before they were married. She couldn't afford to waste time. I was happy for them, though. The two of them functioned like a well oiled machine, but that was mostly because Jake knew when to shut his piehole and let Laura have her way.

We arrived at Jake's apartment at just after ten. They'd hired movers to get the really big stuff. I quickly found out just how coordinated Laura was about moving. She really was an organizational wizard. She had things color coded and clearly labeled as to where it was supposed to go in the new house. There was a room's worth of stuff that was divided in half. One half was going to charity and the other half was going into storage because 'it didn't fit her design scheme.'

I was willing to bet not much of Laura's stuff was going to end up in storage, or being picked up by charity, but I figured that was true for most couples. I tried to imagine what would happen if Eric and I ended up moving in together. He hadn't brought it up in a while, which I was thankful for. I liked having my own space to retreat to when I needed it. I liked being able to say I was going home and I'd see him in the morning.

It was funny how he never really asked me to stay with him, but he never told me to leave, either. I could come and go as I pleased. Was that normal? Sometimes I worried something wasn't right because he wasn't begging me to stay. Otherwise, everything was going along just fine. I'd gotten accepted to all of the schools I'd applied to for the spring semester the following year, so our routine would have to change some, but things were going well.

I'd made a few friends in Michigan as a result of starting my job. I was hanging out with Angie on a regular basis, and usually Eric and I had dinner with Alcide and Angie one night a week. He figured out Alcide wasn't such a bad guy, which I was thankful for. They had both become good friends to us. It was nice to have them around. It was also nice to not have one of Eric's brothers underfoot all the time.

Don't get me wrong, I loved Jake and Luke, but not having privacy got old after a while. I adored Emma, though, and I was thrilled to see her again. It was obvious to me almost instantly there was something different about her, and when I saw Luke slap her ass in front of his brothers, I knew exactly what it was. Emma wasn't a virgin anymore.

I started thinking about how I'd lost my own virginity, and I felt a bit sad. I was still a teenager at the time, but I was behind the curve. Bill had been my first, and looking back on it, I realized I'd done it because I didn't want him to leave me. I'd convinced myself that sex was the only way I could show him I loved him, and if I wanted him to stay with me, I was going to have to sacrifice something precious to me to make my point.

So, while we were making out in his car one night, he started to initiate sex and for the first time, I didn't try to talk him out of it. It wasn't anything special. There were no candles, no romantic music. Just Bill, me and the backseat of his car. It hurt a lot, and he didn't seem to notice. I should have known then that my feelings didn't matter to him, but I just figured I was doing it wrong. I thought that with time, and practice, it would get better, but it never really did.

Bill taught me that if I wanted to get off, I was going to have to help myself along, because as soon as he was finished, *we* were finished. He was selfish, to say the least, and not at all concerned with whether or not I was enjoying the sex. Finding out he was cheating, only made me want to try harder, which I now realize is crazy.

But I was stupid and insecure, and didn't really realize there was better out there, or that I deserved it. He had me convinced he was the best I'd ever have. I don't know why I let him convince me of that. I know now he was an asshole, but that still doesn't explain how I let myself get so deep with him. I should have listened to that little voice in my head that told me something wasn't right.

Instead, I stuck around for all of the abuse he heaped on me. It scared me to think I probably would have stayed, even if he hit me, which he never did. Then I looked at Eric, laughing and joking with his brothers and I wondered what the hell he saw in me. I knew enough to know that love wasn't about finding the perfect person, but seeing their imperfections perfectly, but still... I had to wonder.

The boys took off with a truck full of furniture, while us girls stayed behind to load the other with boxes and other little things. We had two more loads to go at Jake's place before we moved on to Mini's apartment. I stayed quiet for the better part of the day, mostly spending time in my own head and trying to figure out if Eric and I were ever going to get to the place Jake and Laura had gotten to.

"Will you be able to come down for a dress fitting next week?" Laura asked, breaking me out of my thoughts.

"Uh, yeah, sure. The dresses will be in already?"

"They're in already, but I thought since we're moving it would be better to put it off for a week."

"Have you seen the hotel yet?" Emma chimed in, carrying in a box that would have toppled Laura.

"I looked on the website, but that's it." I admitted.

"Oh, it's gorgeous!" Laura went off on a tangent about the amenities the hotel had to offer.

Since neither she or Jake were very religious, they were having their ceremony on-site at the hotel in the where their reception was going to be. The ceremony would be in an atrium at the center of the hotel, then everyone would move to a ballroom for the reception. She was working with Luke to find a DJ for the wedding, since he knew people who were into that sort of stuff. As happy as I was for Laura and Jake, I was actually pretty glad I was up in Michigan so I didn't have to hear about the wedding non-stop.

When we finally got to the townhouse to start unpacking, it was late afternoon. The house was a decent size. Laura walked us around, giving us a tour of what was guaranteed to be a beautiful house by the time she was finished. She'd cut pictures from magazines and taped them to the doors or walls of a room so she had a guide when she was decorating.

The walls had already been painted the right colors for each room, which I thought was impressive. I was surprised to see that, despite the French style design Laura had chosen, the majority of the house had a fairly masculine tone to it. It was a nice balance between them, since Laura was definitely girlie in nature. The boys brought in the furniture. The movers had deposited a great deal of it into the garage since the walls were still being painted when the furniture had been picked up.

It was a nice townhouse. There was a basement where Jake's office and their home gym was going to be set up. Then on the first floor, they had their kitchen, living room, dining room and a half bathroom. Up on the second floor were three bedrooms and two bathrooms. There would be plenty of room for kids, which Jake was outwardly more excited about than Laura. But then she would see something designer for babies on the internet, and she'd start gushing about having a daughter she could dress up in Baby Dior, or some other such silliness.

They had a small patio out back, and what was probably supposed to be a yard, although it wasn't very big. Still, it was obvious they were happy and excited about their new home. I couldn't fault them. Buying your first house was a milestone. Laura talked about design schemes and what was going to go where. I latched onto whatever she was saying just to keep my brain from thinking too much about Eric, or he state of our relationship.

"Are you okay? You've been pretty quiet all day." Eric finally cornered me in the dining room when I was unpacking some of the dishes.

"I'm fine." I shrugged and reached into the box in front of me.

"I know what that means," he grabbed my hand gently and led me toward the front door.

"Eric, come on, I have to finish that."

"It can wait," he pulled open the front door and closed it behind us once we were standing outside. "Tell me what's going on with you."

"It's really nothing. I just have things on my mind."

"And?"

"And maybe I don't want to talk about it, so just back off. Can we please go inside and finish so we can go home? Please?" I pleaded with him.

He let go of my hand, opened the door and said, "Go ahead."

"Thank you." I stomped back into the house and flinched when he slammed the door behind me.

**EPOV**

Sookie was in a mood, and had been pretty much all day. In fact, if I was completely honest, the mood had started right around the time Jake and Mini got engaged. I figured it was just stress related to getting into school and work and shifting routines and schedules. I could admit my own mind had been on other things from time to time, but I wasn't anywhere near as off as Sookie had been.

"What's the deal with Sookie? She's been moody all day." Luke asked from the other room, both of us watching as Sookie unpacked dishes by herself in the dining room.

"I don't know. She's been weird for a while now," I shrugged as we moved the table where Mini wanted it to go.

"Maybe she's pregnant." Luke meant it as a joke, but I failed to see the humor.

"Dude. Not. Funny." I glared at my brother.

Luke laughed and said, "Aw, come on, you two will make beautiful babies."

"Shut up." I grumbled under my breath.

Luke was quiet for a minute and I felt him watching me as I moved chairs into their places. "Seriously, man, is everything okay?"

I didn't answer because I didn't want to lie, and I honestly didn't know what the truth was anymore. There was this distance that seemed to have wedged its way between us. I'm not even sure when it happened. Things were going well after we got back from the trip. Pinpointing the problem wasn't easy. I waited until Jake and Luke went to get one of the couches out of the garage before I moved into the dining room.

I had to practically drag Sookie outside with me to talk to her, and as soon as we were out there, she bitched me out. Sort of. Rather than continuing to fight, I just let her go back inside like she wanted. I was pissed, though, and pulled the door shut behind her. Of course, my brothers overheard the quick exchange from the garage, and Jake came over to talk.

"Not now, Jake," I shook my head.

"I was just gonna say if you guys wanna take off, it's cool. That's all." Jake held his hands up in surrender.

"Thanks," I nodded, but stayed where I was for a few minutes to cool off. I didn't know what Sookie's malfunction was, but I wasn't anxious to get in a car with her for three hours.

Mini ended up ordering pizza, and we all sat around the island in the brand new, never used kitchen. After a couple of glasses of wine, Sookie lightened up a little bit. Luke found an old boom box in with some of Jake's stuff they were planning to put down in their gym, and he tuned the station in to the one he worked for. He was currently interning, but was hoping to have a regular on-air position soon.

"You're going to scare the hell out of people." I laughed as he started air guitaring to Metallica's 'Master of Puppets.'

"I think his voice is sexy." Emma interceded on his behalf.

"Me, too," Mini and Sookie agreed, leaving Jake and I to stare at our girlfriends.

"You boys pick on each other too much." Sookie shook her head at me.

"It's how we relate." Luke said as he moved behind Jake and pantsed him. Thank God Jake always wore boxers.

Wine came out of Mini's nose, which was quite a thing to see. She chased Luke around the house with a fly swatter, but he just laughed every time she managed to catch him. I had to admire Mini's spunk. Even when she got frustrated over something, she didn't let anything stand in her way. She just powered right on through it like it was never there at all.

I realized, as I was watching Luke try to get Mini off his back, that it was the first time I'd heard Sookie laugh in days. I pushed that thought away for later as something to bring up on the ride home. Actually, if I was lucky, Sookie would have just enough wine to make her incredibly sleepy and I could avoid the whole thing until later. I just wasn't in the mood to fight with her.

We ended up hanging out in the kitchen, playing cards for a while until Sookie started yawning. I figured that was our cue to get on the road. I was used to being up all night, but even I was getting tired. It had been a long day, and I was feeling it mostly in my arms. I stretched a little before leaning over and asking Sookie if she was ready to go.

"Whenever you are," she smiled at me, then leaned in and kissed me. It was a little more than what was probably appropriate considering the company we were currently keeping, but I couldn't push her away.

"Enough, you two." Mini gave a faux warning glance.

"Don't worry, Mini, we're not going to christen your kitchen." Sookie giggled.

"Speaking of christening a kitchen, we should get going, too." Luke wrapped his arm around Emma's shoulders.

"Yeah, I'll be going home to sleep. That'll be a party for one." Emma quipped. I liked that she wasn't afraid to put Luke in his place. It was easy to see why she and Mini got along so well.

Slowly, the six of us made our way to the front door. Mini sent us home with the leftover pizza, since they didn't make deep dish the same up in Michigan. After a round of hugs and well wishes, the girls confirmed they would meet the following week for wedding stuff. Sookie and I went to my car, while Luke and Emma headed to Luke's.

After backing out of the driveway, we headed in different directions. Luke and Emma headed north toward the Ravenswood area, while Sookie and I headed south to get on the Kennedy. The cool air of the early October night felt good. Sookie grabbed one of my sweatshirts out of the backseat and wrapped herself in it.

"We can close the windows if you want?" I offered her.

"No, I like the air. I can smell the lake. It's like being home," her head rolled toward mine and she had a sleepy smile on her face. "I'm sorry about earlier. I know I was a bitch."

"What was that about?" I reached for her hand, which she gave me willingly.

"I don't know. I guess..." she trailed off for a moment and looked out the window toward the lake. "I guess being around Jake and Laura is just a reminder of where I want to be."

"What does that mean?"

"Well, they're settled, you know? He's going to be a lawyer. She's going to be... well, I don't know what Laura's long-term career goals are, but she's getting married. She's ready for that responsibility and all the things that come along with being someone's wife. They're happy together. I'm happy for them. It just reminds me I don't have those things."

Ouch. I let go of her hand.

"What?"

"What about me, Sookie?"

"Eric, I didn't mean to..." she sighed and turned her head the other way. "I wasn't suggesting I don't consider you something I value in my life."

"That's great, Sookie."

"What?"

"You're serious right now?"

"What did I say that was wrong?"

"You want to know why I'm not rushing out to propose to you? Because you can't tell me when something is wrong. You told me up at the cabin you were going to put the past behind you, but I don't think you have. I think you're still waiting for the other shoe to drop."

She scoffed and pulled herself into a ball. "Is that what you really think?"

"Well, you're obviously not happy, Sookie."

"I'm tired,"she hung her head. "Can we talk about this later, please?"

"Whatever." I muttered. She wasn't the only one who was tired.

She fell asleep shortly after we crossed the Skyway into Indiana. I spent the remaining drive home listening to Robert Plant sing about lost love, or love gone wrong. 'Dazed and Confused' had me looking over at Sookie. I thought back to when I first met her, and how all I wanted was to get her in bed. All I saw when I looked at her back then was a fuck. Granted, I was pretty sure it would be amazing, but I didn't see myself falling in love with her. I didn't see a real relationship as a possibility. I knew she had the ability to snub me and be hostile.

I pursued her because I refused to accept the rejection. I'd never had to work so hard to get someone to pay attention to me in my life, and the fact that I seemed to be flying outside her radar drove me crazy. It was the challenge that kept me going. And then, once we slept together, I realized just how worth it was. The sex, regardless of the state of affairs in our relationship, was still dynamic. Chemistry like that was rare, but was it reason enough for us to stay together?

I loved her, I didn't doubt that. She tried my patience, sometimes to the point of me wanting to tear my hair out, but I couldn't walk away from her. She was the first woman since... well, ever, that I found I genuinely gave a shit about. It was that heaven/hell complex, where I felt a little bit of both when we were together, and I felt like an absolute failure at life when she was gone. What a fucking mess.

By the time we got home, she was leaned against me. I'd wrapped my arm around her to keep her warm, since I couldn't very well lean over and roll up her window. She mumbled something in her sleep, but the wind whipping around us kept me from hearing what she said. It was probably just gibberish anyway. I pulled into the driveway just before midnight. I'd been up since five that morning. I was thoroughly exhausted.

"Sookie, we're home," I wouldn't normally wake her, but my arms were killing me. No way could I carry her inside.

"Five more minutes," she mumbled against my chest.

"Lover, we're in the car. Come on, come inside."

"Carry me?"

"I can't, Sookie." I rubbed her shoulder, slowly coaxing her into being awake.

She sat up slowly, and with the mother of all pouty faces. I slid out of the car and she followed behind me. I wrapped an arm around her, half holding her up as we walked toward the house. She always got like this after drinking wine. I should have cut her off. I ended up throwing her over my shoulder and carrying her upstairs that way since she fell asleep again while leaning against the wall.

I laid her down on the bed and started to pull off my own clothes. She was out cold. I took off her shoes and pulled off her jeans. She hated sleeping in jeans. I closed the bedroom windows half way, then headed to the bathroom to brush my teeth and take a quick shower. When I got back to the bedroom a few minutes later, Sookie was curled into a ball with her legs tucked under my sweater.

I sighed, threw back the covers on my side of the bed, then moved around to the other side to rearrange Sookie. She groaned again in her sleep, but whatever it was she was trying to say was unintelligible. I climbed into bed beside her, but didn't pull her close like I normally did. Instead, I stared up at the ceiling and wondered what my next move was going to be.

Whatever it was that was going on between us wasn't working.

I've hashed out the rest of the story as of tonight, so I can tell you things look to be wrapping up at 40 chapters, barring I don't deviate from my outline too much. An HEA is still possible for these two, but it's going to take a lot of work for them to get there. Just remember, no relationship is perfect, and they both have flaws. Thanks for reading!

**Chapter 30: A Night to Remember, A Morning to Forget**

Okay, so before we get to the main event, I have to say a quick thank you to **scribeninja** and **chanel addict** for not kicking my ass for bits of this chapter. They know why, and I love them dearly for it, even if I sometimes run away screaming.

And now back to our regularly scheduled programming...

Chapter 30: A Night to Remember, A Morning to Forget

**SPOV**

When Amelia called to tell me she and Tray wanted to come up for Halloween, I was beyond thrilled. A taste of home might just be the shot in the arm I needed to snap out of the funk I was in. After our trip down to Chicago to help Jake and Laura move, I realized I was being unfair to Eric about a lot of things. I was frustrated with myself, and taking it out on him. It wasn't fair, and I owed him big time for not dumping my silly ass.

The following week I went down to the city for the dress fitting. Eric drove down with me and went to a Bears game with his brothers. The dresses Laura had chosen for the wedding were beautiful. The bridesmaid's dresses were bubble gum pink, with two inch beaded straps and had an empire waist. Laura's dress was sleeveless with a sweetheart neckline. The bodice was beautifully beaded and the skirt was one of those tiered ones that was draped in all the right places. The dress looked like it weighed more than Laura.

Thankfully, the bridal party consisted of just Laura, Emma and myself, so there were no little girls to fit for flower girl dresses. Our dresses got pinned up and taken in where they needed to, but it was Laura's dress that took the longest to fit. We went to lunch afterward, knowing we would have plenty of time before the boys got back from their game.

It was nice to have some girl time. We talked about the usual girl things, mostly gossiping about other girls we knew. Laura went off on a small tangent about a particular female celebrity that got on her nerves due to her unfortunate fashion sense, and her most recent claim to be a jeweler, in addition to being an "actress." It was funny to watch Laura get all fired up, and it wasn't long before Emma was sliding away Laura's Diet Coke.

"All I'm saying is beige belongs on walls, *not people*." Laura said with a final huff before snatching her Diet Coke back from Emma.

The two of us were in stitches over the rant. Laura had succeeded in scaring a few of the surrounding customers with her raving, but she settled down right around the time the bill came. After arguing who was going to pay the tab, we ended up paying for our own food. After that, we headed out to do some window shopping. We ended up at a Pier 1 where I learned about Emma's obsession with floor to ceiling bookshelves. I didn't quite get what the big deal was until they explained it to me.

"Atonement," Emma and Laura said simultaneously.

"Atonement?" I arched an eyebrow.

"Yes, the movie. Have you seen it?" Laura asked.

"No," I shook my head, and they both gasped.

"Ohmygosh!" Emma looked at me like I had two heads.

"What's the big deal about Atonement?" I was clearly clueless.

"Amazingly hot sex up against bookshelves," Laura shivered, and Emma agreed with a grin.

"Really?"

"Oh, yes," they said at the same time.

"I'll check it out." I smiled, then moved on to look at a display of candles.

A couple of hours later we were back at the house when the boys got back. All three of them were completely wasted, and celebrating because the Bears had won the game. I forgot how much fun Eric could be when he was drunk. In addition to getting very silly, he also got very horny. Based on the wiggles of their eyebrows, it was a shared trait among the Northman boys.

"We should get metals for this," Laura rolled her eyes as each of us was covered in our very own Northman brother.

"Know what *you* should get a metal for?" Jake asked her.

Laura grinned and asked, "What?"

"You're pretty," Jake slurred, then buried his face in the crook of Laura's neck, making her laugh.

I somehow ended up in Eric's lap and he was kind enough to announce to the entire room that he loved my boobs. "Oooookay, I think it's time to go home," I got off his lap.

"But we just got here." Luke was pouting, his arms wrapped around Emma.

"Yeah, but before this turns into a family reunion no one should ever have, I think it's better to go our own separate ways." I grabbed Eric's hand, but only succeeded in getting myself yanked back into his lap. "Eric!"

"You're welcome to stay the night." Laura offered, having freed herself from Jake's clutches.

"I have classes tomorrow." I said more as a reminder for Eric than for Laura.

Then the pouting began. All three of them had the same pout. Unbelievable. Three giant, drunk, man-children were pouting away in the kitchen. It took me promising Eric a stop at Al's Beef, and a few dirty deeds when we got home, to get him to agree to leave. He handed over his car keys to me without a fuss, and headed out.

Eric ate in the car while I drove us home. He was a mess by the time he was done eating. I could only hope the food would soak up some of the alcohol in his system. He threw the wrappers in the backseat and slumped in front as much as he could. He stared out his window, watching the landscape whiz past as I drove. His head rolled toward me and his large, warm hand landed on my thigh.

"I love you," his voice took on an emotional edge I'd never heard before.

"I love you, too, Eric," I smiled over at him.

"Do you really? Sometimes I don't think you do," his head moved again so he was staring up at the ceiling. "Sometimes I think you're just with me because it's convenient."

I didn't know what to say. Was this just because he was drunk, or did he really feel this way and I'd been too caught up in my own head to notice it? He didn't say anything else. In fact, he fell asleep a short time later. I held his hand the whole way home, and by the time I pulled into the driveway, I still didn't have any answers.

I managed to get Eric in the house, although I'm not sure how. He passed out on the couch since there was no way I was carrying him up the stairs. I went up to change clothes, and came back down to find him snuggled against one of the throw pillows. I grabbed a fluffy blanket off the overstuffed chair in the corner and draped it over him. I sat on the coffee table and watched him sleep for a little while.

I saw the subtle movement of his eyes under his lids, and I wondered what he was dreaming about. The steady rise and fall of his chest was a bit mesmerizing. I wanted to lay down next to him, but decided it was probably better not to. Eventually, I grabbed the Marilyn Monre biography I'd been reading and curled up in the chair to get back to it. I was in the midst of highlighting a quote (a habit I picked up in college) when Eric's head popped up.

"How long have I been out?" he asked, rubbing his eyes.

"A few hours," I said without looking up from my book.

"About what I said in the car..."

"Eric, it's fine. You had a lot to drink." I wanted to believe that was all it was.

"Yeah," he nodded, but there wasn't much conviction behind it. "I'm gonna go take a shower."

I marked my page in the book and closed it. "Want some company?"

"Always," he smiled and we headed upstairs together.

**EPOV**

We were using sex to communicate. All the things we couldn't seem to say to each other came out when we were in bed together. While it was true we'd always been adventurous and had a tendency to get a little rough with each other. It was never really about anger, so much as overwhelming need. Somewhere, that changed. What had once been need and passion started to feel like anger and bitterness. It was almost like we were punishing each other.

Yet, we kept at it because... well, I wasn't ready to give up on her just yet. There were good moments between us. It wasn't all fighting and avoiding each other. Sookie dove right in, helping with the planning for the Halloween party at Loki's. The year before we'd done a vampire theme, and we'd decided to do zombies this year. Pam was coming dresses as a zombie version of Holly Golightly- the chick from Breakfast At Tiffany's- since it meant she could still be dressed rather fashionably. Personally, I think she just liked the idea of wearing a tiara all night.

After much debate, Sookie managed to convince me to let us do a couples costume. We would be going dressed as zombie versions of Mr. & Mrs. Brady. Amelia and Tray were coming up for a visit, and they would be dressed as zombie versions of Lucy and Ricky Ricardo. I found I was looking forward to Amelia and Tray's visit as much as Sookie.

I thought maybe spending a little time with one of her best friends would help her sort things out. Whatever she was going through-and she was going through something, despite her protests to the contrary-she obviously needed to talk to someone about it. I could understand if maybe she didn't want to talk to me about it, but she needed to tell someone. Whatever was festering inside her wasn't going away on its own.

Beyond that, we also started making plans for Thanksgiving. Sookie wanted to cook a big dinner, so we invited my brothers and my mother to come up for the holiday. Emma was flying home to Nebraska to be with her own family, but everyone else was going to make the trip up. Mom even offered to come a few days ahead of time to help get things ready. Sookie had reluctantly agreed, since she knew it was important to me.

I knew I was partially to blame for her and my mother getting off on the wrong foot. Mom had shown up, out of the blue, at the absolute worst time she could have shown up. She caught me at a point where things weren't great with Sookie. Although, it seemed ever since we tried to be more than fuck buddies, our relationship had more downs than it did ups. And it seemed we were no better off.

I hoped that Amelia's visit would change that. They arrived two days before Halloween. They'd flown into O'Hare, and then drove up from there. The car was barely even in park when Sookie was flying off her porch to go greet her friend. I hung back a moment and prayed my hearing would survive their reunion. Tray rolled his eyes before looking over at me with a smirk.

Then all of a sudden, he came prancing over with arms flapping, "Ohmygawd! I missed you so much!"

"Shut up, me too!" I slapped at him like the girls did each other sometimes.

"You guys suck!" Amelia yelled from the car.

Tray and I had gotten to know one another a little during the course of his visit up to Michigan, and then my trip with Sookie down to Bon Temps. He was a good guy, and it was obvious he was crazy about Amelia. I wasn't quite sure what to make of Amelia. I liked her well enough, but I liked her more in small doses. She could get slightly obnoxious, at times, and she didn't seem to know when to keep her mouth shut. She lacked tact. She had no problem asking questions that had answers that weren't really her business. She said what was on her mind, which was a more admirable trait when used sparingly.

Sookie and Amelia parted long enough for Sookie to give Tray a hug. The girls continued on into the house, leaving Tray and I to get their bags. Sookie's house smelled amazing. She'd spent the morning putting together one of Amelia's favorite meals. Southern Soul Food was pretty delicious. Sookie didn't make it often since it wasn't the healthiest cuisine, but when she did, it was amazing.

I got a fire going on the outdoor fireplace on my patio with Tray's help. Since it was a nice Fall day, we figured dinner outside would be nice. Pretty soon it was going to be too cold to stay outside for long. As it was, weather reporters were already forecasting snow in the coming days. Sookie was excited about it since snow in Louisiana wasn't a common occurrence. What's more, it didn't stick for too long after it fell. I gave it three blizzards before she became just as disenchanted as us Yankees, as she sometimes called us.

When the girls appeared they were laden down with dishes of food covered in foil. Sookie set hers down and headed inside to get plates and silverware, refusing Amelia's offer to help. I followed behind her, leaving Tray and Amelia to enjoy the fire. I walked into the kitchen to find Sookie braced against the counter with her back to me.

"You okay?" I asked from behind her.

She jumped, then reached up for plates. "Fine," she sniffled.

I was getting really tired of this. Every time something was wrong lately, she told me she was fine.

"You're not fine. You're crying." I said as I took the plates from her.

"I'm just happy for Amelia, that's all. She's excited about the baby, and things are good with her and Tray."

"Then why do you look miserable?" I put my hand on her shoulder. I expected her to pull away, but she leaned into me instead.

"I'm not miserable. It's just... never mind," she shook herself and tried to smile. "This is a good day. Let's just go enjoy dinner."

"Sookie..."

"Eric, please? Let's just go. We'll talk later." Only I knew later was never going to come.

I seriously contemplated throwing the plates and getting into it with her right then, but that wasn't fair to Amelia and Tray. They didn't need to get dragged into our fight. I grabbed a few beers out of the fridge, along with a pitcher of iced tea. I followed Sookie out to the deck and tried my best to slap on the same fake smile that was on her face.

All through dinner, Amelia monopolized the conversation, talking about her plans for the baby's room and all of the little modifications they'd done to the house to make sure the place was baby-safe by the time their child came home. Sookie nodded along, offering tidbits of advice once in a while. Amelia had never been the sort who seemed interested in kids until she found out she was pregnant. I could relate, if only because I hadn't really thought about having kids of my own until I met Sookie.

I knew she had a nurturing side and she loved taking care of other people. She had a good heart underneath whatever was keeping it hardened. I knew Bill was at least partially responsible for why Sookie was the way she was, but that wasn't all of it. I got lost in the conversation, thinking back to how different things had been when we were away from everyone else.

When it was just us, I'd seen how good things could be between us. We did things together. We cooked dinner and went for walks. We sat on the swing down by the water and pointed out constellations or made up stories about the shapes of the clouds. It was a lot of silly little things that managed to bring us closer. Yet, that didn't translate well once we were home. Something changed, and I didn't know what it was. We couldn't stay in that little bubble forever, as much as I might have liked to. We had lives to live, and they couldn't just be about each other.

"Eric?" Sookie said sharply.

"Sorry, what?" I shook myself and looked up at her.

"Do you want pie?" she asked with amusement.

"Uh, yeah, sure, I'll go get it." I started to get up, but everyone laughed.

"It's right here," Amelia pointed to the pie plate at the center of the table.

"Geez, where did you go?" Sookie looked at me with confusion.

My happy place. "Just thinking about the party," I said, not wanting to bring it up in front of everyone else.

"Oh, the party!" Amelia clapped her hands with excitement, while Tray rolled his eyes.

"I can't believe I'm doing this," he muttered.

"Hush, it could be worse. I could have gotten us costumes for Robin Hood and Maid Marion." Amelia reminded him with a nudge.

Now *that*would have been a sight to see, considering Tray was about the same size as me, but not at all Nordic in his features. He was the kind of guy who shaved in the morning and had stubble by lunch. I hoped, for the sake of their child, they weren't having a daughter. Still, from what Sookie told me Amelia had found some sort of traditional Cuban Matador type outfit and a bongo drum for Tray to carry around. What a lucky fella.

My costume wasn't going to be much better but I knew not to complain about it. It was a done deal, and it was only for a few hours. Besides, if it would make Sookie happy, I was willing to give it a chance. Not to mention, I'd be covered in gobs of zombie makeup. How bad could it be?

**SPOV**

I found out rather quickly that Eric wasn't really built for retro suits. It was a bit on the snug side, and I thanked my lucky stars that men had worn tighter pants back then. Still, as Laura would say, I could see his future children from across the room just by looking at him. I'd cut up our clothes and dirtied them a little. The mini dress I was wearing had practically shredded bell sleeves and barely reached mid-thigh. I was going to have to be very careful about how I bent and moved in my dress.

Amelia was dressed in a retro 50's style dress with layers and layers of skirt that was also torn up and dirtied. We had fun creating wounds and scars with the makeup we'd bought. Getting the boys to sit still was a bit tricky, but they were pretty good sports about it. We arrived at the bar an hour before it opened so Eric could make sure everything was in order.

Pam came strutting in shortly after we arrived, dressed very well for a zombie version of Audrey Hepburn. Her hair was immaculately styled, her tiara safely nestled in place. The dress she'd found was a strikingly convincing reproduction of the one in the movie. She even had the necklace and cigarette holder planted firmly between her fingers. It was quite a sight.

"Look at you, Pam," I smiled at her as she approached.

"If I can't get this zombie goo off me, I'm holding *you* responsible for this." Pam warned, then moved toward Amelia like she was going to bite her.

Apparently, Tray didn't see Pam as any sort of threat. I had to wonder if that was because Amelia was pregnant and sublimely happy to be so. Pam hadn't taken the news nearly as well, and had moped quite a bit for the week after Amelia called and told her. At least Amelia had the class to call Pam herself and tell her. I really would have hated to be the one to give Pam the news.

I stayed out by the bar with Amelia and Tray, while Pam went back to find Eric in his office. I knew she found him when I heard her unmistakable cackling coming from the back. Really, he was a site with his hair gelled in a completely different style from his usual bedhead chic look. Not to mention, Eric was usually the sort to wear well-worn jeans and band t-shirts with Vans, Chucks or the occasional pair of shitkickers. Tonight he was wearing a ridiculous shit brown suit with navy blue patches on the elbows, tight bell bottom pants and these loafers with a one inch heel on them. You know, since Eric wasn't tall enough already.

Pam quickly decided she was going to call him "Disco Dave," instead of Mr. Brady. I just rolled my eyes. Pam went off to go work the door while Amelia, Tray and I claimed a table near for ourselves. I knew Alcide and Angie would be making an appearance at some point as well. Whether or not they were coming in costume was anyone's guess. In honor of the holiday, Eric had put together a pretty huge mix of music that mentioned death, ghosts, goblins, witches and anything else Halloween related. He kicked it all off with the movie Halloween's theme song.

It wasn't long before people began to stagger in- literally. Horror movies were playing in place of the usual sporting events that were broadcast on the screens at either end of the bar. There were spiderwebs everywhere, along with black lights hanging over the bar in place of the usual low-watt bulbs. There were some pretty interesting costume choices. I saw a zombie John Wayne, Buffy the Vampire Slayer, Kurt Cobain, and even a George W. Bush- who didn't look much like a zombie at all.

The kicker was when another Audrey Hepburn turned up. I swear, it was like that episode of *I Love Lucy* where Lucy dresses up like Harpo Marx, only Pam was ready to kill someone for stealing her idea. We all swore Pam had pulled it off much better, which seemed to calm her just a little bit. There was a general rule about dancing in the bar, but Eric had repealed it for the occasion.

You might be surprised to hear this, but Eric is actual a pretty good dancer. Considering his size, he's fairly graceful, and he's got an ear for rhythm. Now, you combine that with alcohol and a curvy girlfriend he has a hard time keeping his hands off of, and we were having a very good night. He was practically getting a lapdance from me when Angie and Alcide arrived, dressed as zombie versions of Katy Perry and Russell Brand.

As a group, we had just taken a shot aptly named 'The Zombie,' when Eric started to pull me back toward his office. His hand slipped under one of the tears in the back of my dress. I looked over my shoulder at him with an expression of daring. He wiggled his eyebrows at me as we walked through the office door. The next thing I knew, the door was slammed shut and I was up against it.

"You look so fucking sexy," he breathed against my neck.

"I look a mess." I argued.

"Not to me."

"So even if I was a zombie who only wanted to eat your brain, you would still love me?" I giggled at the idea while his hands moved under my skirt to move my panties out of the way.

"I love every part of you." His lips crashed down on mine, kissing me hard.

His fingers worked their magic until I was begging him to fuck me. I went for his belt, but his hand captured both of mine and held them over my head. His eyes met mine. They were blazing dark blue, and I whimpered in attempts to get him to move on with it. Teasing time was over, as far as I was concerned.

Slowly, he extracted his hand from my panties and got his own pants open. It was a true testament to his dexterity and the nimbleness of his fingers that he was able to do it all with just one hand. His eyes never left mine. I hitched one leg up around him, and then the other. I was pinned against the wall, arms over my head, pleading for him to fuck me.

"Please, Eric, I need you," I practically whined.

I must have said the magic words, because he enter me then with one swift, hard stroke. I bit my lip to keep from crying out. His thrusts were hard and fast, his lips nipping and sucking on my neck. It didn't take long for either of us to finish, we were so worked up. His thumb found my clit and rubbed hard until I was clamping down on him in an orgasm so powerful, I couldn't even scream. My eyes closed tightly and colors exploded behind my eyes.

"Fuck, I love you," he muttered, kissing my neck and face after he came.

He pulled back to reveal his makeup was smeared. I giggled as he set me down, finally releasing my arms. He rubbed them gently to get my circulation going again. I tilted my face up to his and stretched forward to kiss him.

"I love you, too," I told him, and got myself another round of toe curling kisses.

Finally, it was Pam who came to break up our fun. "You *are* on the clock, Eric. No fucking on company time!"

He growled, fixed his clothing and walked me to the employee bathroom across the hall so I could get cleaned up, while he went out to the main serving area of the bar to mingle with the customers. My legs were still a bit shaky, but for the best possible reason. I looked at myself in the mirror, figuring my makeup was pretty much a lost cause.

"Sookie?" Amelia called after a loud knock on the door.

"Come in!" I shouted back, then went about trying to salvage what I could.

"I think I need to go to the hospital," she was pale, and not just because of the makeup.

"What's wrong?"

"Cramps," she clutched her stomach.

Without waiting for me to turn away, she hiked up her skirt. Blood. There was blood everywhere. I gasped and she started to cry. There was too much skirt in her way for her to see.

"How bad?"

"I'm going to get Tray. Wait here for me, okay? Just sit down, and I'll be right back." I promised her.

She was crying before I even got out of the bathroom. I shoved my way through the people in the crowded bar until I found Tray.

"Sookie, what's wrong?" he asked when I yanked on his arm.

"We have to take Ames to the hospital. She's bleeding."

**EPOV**

I wanted to go with Sookie, Amelia and Tray to the hospital, but we had a fight break out when two college age kids couldn't get it through their heads that they were fighting over a girl who wasn't interested in either of them. We ended up calling the cops, and I spent the night straightening that mess out. As if the fight itself wasn't bad enough, my pool table got wrecked and a girl who was standing in the wrong place at the wrong time ended up getting punched.

It was a huge clusterfuck that kept me at the bar until dawn, dealing with paperwork and phone calls to my insurance company. By the time I got home, Sookie was asleep in my bed with her cell clutched in her hand. The rental car was gone, so I assumed Amelia and Tray were still at the hospital. I got undressed quietly, and cursed myself for not washing off the makeup from my costume. I started the shower and brushed my teeth while I waited for the water to warm.

I was in the middle of washing my face when I heard the rings of the shower curtain scrape back. Sookie got in the tub behind me and wrapped her arms around my waist. Her face pressed against my back, and the trembling of her body told me she was crying.

"What happened?" I stilled while I waited for her answer.

She sniffled and said, "Amelia lost the baby."

I just wanted to say a quick thank you for all of your reviews last chapter. The ending is pretty much set in stone at this point and only 2 people other than myself know how it's going to end. I really want to wrap this up ASAP so I can focus more on Blood Buzz, so expect to see more frequent updates here. Thanks for reading!

**Chapter 31: The Song Remains the Same**

Soooo...I'm sorry for the long wait for an update with this one. I got everything all planned out for the end of the story, and then the muses decided to take a vacation. I think they were resting for the battle that's to come. I swear I had no intention of this story to be so angsty when I started it. But then I realized, as I was writing, this just felt more real to me. The events of this chapter are a long time coming, and really the only way I could see fit for the story to continue. It's not over, but this chapter needed to happen.

Don't kill me \*bats eyelashes\*

Chapter 31: The Song Remains the Same

**SPOV**

After Amelia was released from the hospital, the decision was made to cut their trip short and head home. I couldn't blame her. I would probably want to mourn in private as well. I sat outside with her while Tray went in to pack up their things. We weren't alone but thirty seconds when Amelia started in on me.

"I talked to Pam last night, Sookie. She told me you and Eric aren't doing so well. That was a shock to me since you've been saying everything's just fine. I'd like to believe your side of the story, but I remember what you were like when you were with Bill. I know what your idea of 'fine' is, and honey, it's not right. I don't know why you're so happy being miserable, but Eric loves you. And it's not like how Bill used to say he loved you, then he'd go off and find some slut to fuck behind your back. Eric really, truly, hearts-in-his-eyes loves you. If you're not careful, you're going to lose that because no man is going to stick around forever if he's not feeling appreciated. So if your goal, after everything you've been through, is to end up alone, just keep on going like you're going."

I was stunned. Slap in the face sorta stunned.

"Ames, it's not-"

"And don't even think about trying to bullshit me, Sookie Stackhouse," she said in a very 'angry mother' tone. "Let me tell you something, baby... that anger you're holding onto over all the bad things that happened to you? It's poison, and it's slowly eating you alive. You might be able to fool some people into thinking you're fine, but I knew you before a lot of these things touched you. I know about the light in your eyes, and honey, it's fading fast. I don't know if you're waiting for a hero to rescue you, or if you're content to sink into a life you think you deserve because some dumbfuck told you you didn't deserve more than that. What I *do* know is that if you don't wake up and start taking notice of what's happening around you, you aren't going to get a choice. Everyone you love is going to up and leave you because they're tired of waiting. Life's too short to spend it alone, honey."

"Amelia, I appreciate your concern, but really-"

"I know, I know, you're fine," she said bitterly and shook her head. "You know, I hope for your sake that's actually true. Just remember, Sook: don't be reckless with other people's hearts, and don't put up with people who are reckless with yours." Amelia stood up slowly, pulling on the railing next to the steps the whole time.

Tray came out of the house with their bags. I helped Amelia down the stairs and over to the rental car. Tray put the bags in the trunk, while I hugged Amelia goodbye. We hadn't gotten to talk as much as we wanted to, but she'd certainly made a point of using what little time we had left. I got Amelia settled in her seat and closed the door for her. I waved to Tray as he got in the driver's seat. When the car started, I stepped back, and I watched the drive away.

I waited until they were gone to let the tears flow. Whether I was crying for the things Amelia said, or because I was sad for her loss, I wasn't sure. I was sitting on my front steps, enjoying my cry, when Eric found me. He came and sat down beside me. Without a word he wrapped his arm around my shoulders and pulled me closer to him. His familiar smell and the warmth he provided made my heart ache a little.

"Do you feel like I take you for granted?" I asked him quietly.

"Where is this coming from?" his tone was gentle and a little concerned.

"Does it matter? Just...do you?"

He breathed deep and held that breath for a moment before saying, "I think sometimes it's easy to get so caught up in our own stuff that we forget to see what's going on in the world around us."

"What does that mean, Eric?"

"It means yes, sometimes it feels like you take me for granted."

"I'm sorry," I mumbled.

His words should have jarred me. They should have snapped me out of whatever mental funk I was in, but instead, they just bounced right off. There was no real impact to what he was saying. We sat there until the sky got dark, and then walked over to his house together. I liked the feeling of being wrapped in his arms. It was nice. It felt safe.

**EPOV**

Thanksgiving was always a pretty big deal in my family, if only to see which one of us boys could put away the most food. The year before had been Pam and I traveling down to Jake's apartment. He made some crazy ass meatless turkey that had us ordering Chinese food instead. I tried to embrace my brother's chosen lifestyle, but it was Thanksgiving, for fuck's sake. I ended up staying over at Luke's place and making our own version of Thanksgiving dinner while Pam was out shopping with Mini.

But Sookie decided she wanted to make dinner for everyone up at my place. I was okay with it, since it meant I didn't have to leave my house. Not to mention, Sookie seemed excited over the idea, and there were few things that seemed to make her happy anymore. I'd been told by various people in various ways I should just cut my losses and run.

Every time I tried to talk to Sookie about the problems we were having, she wound find a way to change the subject, or talk in circles until I got so frustrated I didn't want to talk anymore. I knew ignoring the problems wouldn't make them go away. I was running out of options faster than I was running out of patience. I didn't want to give up on her, but I was holding on to a version of her she had buried.

We invited my brothers, Mini, Emma (who declined because she was going home to Nebraska for the holiday), my mother, Pam, Alcide and Angie. Sookie threw herself into planning the dinner. Mom arrived a few days early to help out. Sookie had everything meticulously planned, although she had wisely left a few slots open for items I had warned her my mother would insist on making.

Sookie was making some traditional southern dishes we wouldn't normally see on our table at Thanksgiving, and none of them included taffy apple salad or broccoli bake. Just thinking about the broccoli to cheese ratio had me drooling. Then Mom walked in with her giant cloth bags (courtesy of Jake for mother's day the year before) full of groceries, and I contemplated asking her to move in with me just so she'd cook. Not that Sookie didn't cook well, because she did, but Mom was just... well, Mom.

"Mom, you should have called when you were close," I glared at her, rushing over to help her with her bags. She was about six months pregnant and had ballooned up quite well. It was weird to see her pregnant. I was too young to really remember when she was pregnant with my brothers.

"Don't worry, son, there's more in the trunk." Mom handed over her bags without argument.

I carried them the rest of the way into the house for her, and glared at her again when she started to make another trip. I'll say one thing for my mother, as dependent as she might be for company, she wasn't afraid of doing just about everything else on her own. I looked over her shoulder, hoping to see Sookie stick her head out her door, but she didn't.

"Where's that girlfriend of yours?" Mom asked once we had everything in the house.

"Uh, probably taking a nap. She had to work the breakfast shift this morning." I started to unload everything that needed to go in the fridge. It was a good thing we had two kitchens to work from. We were going to need it.

"Are things any better between you?" Mom asked as gently as she could.

I'd talked to Mom as somewhat of a last resort. Given that she already had a pretty low opinion of Sookie, I didn't want her to show up for the holiday and make things any more awkward than they would already be. She had promised to be on her best behavior and keep her opinions to herself. She'd told me I was smart enough to know when I'd reached my limit of tolerance, and if Sookie wasn't willing to meet me half way, then I would be well advised to give her her walking papers.

"It's about the same. She's been in a better mood with the planning for dinner, but it's not what it could be." I explained as I shuffled some things around in the fridge.

"Eric, can I speak freely? I promise this is the last I'll say on the subject unless you ask for my opinion."

"Sure," I knew she was going to say what she had to say no matter what. It was just easier to agree.

"All your life, you've always been the one that reminded me most of your father. You have his humor and his sense of value where family is concerned. Not to make you sound like a sissy, or anything, but you were the one who never balked at the idea of getting married or having children one day. You always seemed to embrace those things, and it's obvious to me you still want them. I'm sure seeing your younger brother get engaged was a reminder of the things you're chasing. I wish I could tell you to hang in there and fight for Sookie, but there comes a point where she's got to fight for you, too. So far, it doesn't sound like she's really done that. It sounds to me like she's pushed you away time and time again, and you keep on chasing her.

"I'm sure there's more to her than the immature brat I've seen so far. She's young, and seems to be very confused about her life, so maybe she just needs some time to grow up and figure things out. In the meantime, she's using your heart as a punching bag, and I can't say I like her all that much. If she's the woman you choose, I'll make my peace with it and try to see the things about her you love. But if you're as unhappy as I think you are, then baby, you have to let her go. You both deserve better than to settle for what you've got because you're afraid of moving on." Mom gave me a hug then.

"Thank you, Mom. I'll think about it." I really didn't want to have the discussion, mostly because I knew she was right about everything she was saying.

No one was encouraging me to try and work things out with Sookie. I took that as an omen. I figured it would be one thing if just one person was telling me to give her up, but it wasn't; it was everyone. And it's not like their reasons weren't legit, because they were. Everyone was saying the same damn thing. I was dragging my feet because in spite of everything, I still loved Sookie.

"Now, will you please go sit down and let me put this stuff away?" I gestured to the table with a box of Velveeta cheese in my hand.

"See? Just like your father," she muttered, then waddled over to the table to sit.

**SPOV**

Thanksgiving was hectic, to put it nicely. Patricia was polite to me, which was a little surprising, considering the way she'd treated me in the past. Maybe Eric finally said something to her about being so snippy to me. I didn't ask. I figured it was better not to rock the boat. She asked about my plans for grad school and whether I was enjoying living in Michigan full-time.

Pam dropped by, and it was a little frustrating to see how easily they took to each other. I swear, I was just waiting for Eric's mother to comment on how Pam would make a much better partner for Eric than I would. It was stupid to be jealous, I know. I swallowed the feeling back and tried not to be a baby about it. Besides, I was more Pam's type than Eric was. All the same, it was easy to see Patricia preferred Pam to me.

I thought about the reasons why, and decided maybe she had a right to be less than enthusiastic about my presence in her son's life. I'd had a lot of time to think about things. I thought about what Amelia said before she left. Most people didn't bother calling me out on my crap. They gave me a free pass on account of what I'd been through with Bill, and it was easier to just let people skate on by than it was to verbally slap them silly.

I knew I wasn't happy. It wasn't Eric's fault, of course. I just didn't know how to go about fixing it. I thought loving him was going to be enough, but it wasn't. I was missing a piece of the puzzle, I just didn't know what it was. Angie told me she'd overheard some people talking to Eric at the bar one night when I wasn't there. They were saying he'd be better off without me, that he was always in such a shitty mood when I was around.

It hurt to hear that. When Eric realized Angie was there, he looked guilty. I don't know what that means, exactly, but I'm guessing it meant he agreed with what they were saying. I was hoping a little visit from his family would help perk things up. Maybe I'd get a chance to work things out with his mother. If nothing else, Luke would be his usual entertaining self, and I knew Laura had some things for the wedding she wanted me to take a look at.

I worked with Eric's mother to get Thanksgiving dinner ready. People began trickling in around noon. If everything wen according to plan, we'd be having dinner promptly at four. The boys got settled in the living room to watch football while the women congregated in the kitchen to talk wedding and baby plans. Patricia was excited to finally be having a little girl.

"You know, with three older brothers watching her like a hawk, that poor girl won't have a boyfriend until she's thirty." Laura shook her head, getting a laugh from the rest of us.

"It's just strange that their sister and my grandchildren are going to be so close in age," Patricia sipped her tea.

"Oh, Jake and I are a few years off from kids. We wants to finish law school first and I still have no idea what I'm going to do with the blog."

"Well, there's Luke and Emma," I shrugged. I wasn't about to go volunteering Eric and myself to start the next generation.

"She's such a nice girl," Patricia beamed. "I'm so glad you put her and Jake together."

I realized it was my own fault, but I was jealous of the way Patricia fawned all over Laura. The two of them got along so well. I didn't want her to hate me, but I'd made too many mistakes were Eric was concerned for her to really have my back in any of it. I just didn't know how to fix it.

Patricia wanted to see the bridesmaids dresses, so all of us ladies went over to my place since mine was hanging up in my closet. I sort of stood off to the side with Angie while Pam, Laura and Patricia talked fashion and color schemes. I went to the kitchen and started to get ingredients out to make taffy apple salad. Angie helped me dice apples while I quartered bite size Snicker bars.

"Feel like an outsider?" Angie whispered to me.

"Patricia doesn't like me all that much." I looked over my shoulder before whispering. "Eric and I were fighting when she and I met, and we just got off on the wrong foot. With all the problems we've been having lately, I guess her opinion hasn't really changed all that much."

Angie nodded and said, "I'm sorry. That can't make things easier for you."

I shrugged and said, "She's not around a lot. If she lived closer, it would be a bigger problem. I figure there are plenty of women who don't get along with their boyfriend's mother."

"Still, it'd be nice if you didn't feel like you had to fake it around her." Angie reached for another apple. "Can I ask you something?"

"Sure," I said as I ripped more candy bars from their packaging.

"Why are you and Eric still together?" Angie asked quietly. "You both always seem so sad."

"I'm with Eric because I love him." I said simply.

"That's it? That's the only reason?"

I started chopping the candies and asked, "What other reason do I need, Angie?"

**EPOV**

The day after Thanksgiving I was at the bar paying bills just to get a little space from everyone. Sookie had spent the night at her own house. Tensions between her and my mother were running high and since there really wasn't anything I could say to appease them both, I figured it was just better to get the hell out of dodge for a few hours.

A knock on the door jarred my concentration. I looked up to see Jessica standing there with a shy expression on her face. "Jessica, what are you doing here?"

"Well, I um, I know I still owe you for the tires. I was wondering if we might be able to take it out in trade. I'm uh, I don't want to work for my father anymore. I was wondering if there was a way I could work here instead?" She stepped into the office with her hands fidgeting in front of her.

"I don't know if that's a good idea." I sat back in my chair.

"Look, I know I screwed up before, and you have no reason to trust that I'm not going to flip out on you again, but I really need to get away from my parents. I need to find my own way and that's never going to happen as long as they're watching me all the time. I know it's not your problem. I just figured there was no harm in asking." Jessica stared at her shoes.

I thought it over for a minute before making my decision. "We'll give it a week to see how it goes. I assume that since you're still in school you'll only be able to work evenings and weekends?"

"Yes, but I can be here at four Monday through Friday and any time you need me on the weekends."

"Well, you can't be here past eleven because of curfew," I rubbed my eyes. "Come in tomorrow afternoon and fill out the paperwork with Pam. If the first week goes well, we'll talk about getting you on the regular schedule."

"Thank you, Eric." Jessica was beaming like she had light bulbs for teeth.

"Listen, Jessica, a single mistake doesn't have to define you. Sometimes we all need a second chance." I was giving her one because I knew she would take it. I believed her when she said she was sorry.

"I promise, Eric, I'm not going to screw this up."

I nodded and said, "I hope you're right. I'll see you later."

"Thank you," she said again before disappearing from my office.

I was about to get in my car a few hours later when Mom pulled into the parking lot at Loki's. She hauled herself out of the car and waddled toward me with a smile on her face. She looked like she had something important to say, so I waited for her to speak first.

"I'm heading back home. I just wanted to come say goodbye before I left. I want you to understand something, Eric. I want you to be happy. I didn't see a genuine smile out of you the whole time I was here, and that breaks my heart. Suffering like you are doesn't make you noble and it won't strengthen your character. Suffering will only make you petty and vindictive. I know you love Sookie. I can see it in your eyes. But sometimes that's not enough of a reason to stay together. Just promise me you'll think about it." Mom held her arms out to me.

"I will. Thank you for coming up, Mom. It was good to see you." I kissed the side of her head.

"Same here, baby," she patted her stomach.

"Take good care of my sister." I smiled at her.

"I will. You take good care of you." Mom gave me one more squeeze and then let me walk her back to her car.

I watched Mom drive away and then headed home myself. Sookie was sitting in my living room in front of the fireplace when I got home. She was dressed in a pair of dark jeans and a heavy knit sweater. Her hair was piled on top of her head and her skin was still tan from the summer. She looked beautiful sitting there with the fire light dancing on her skin.

"Your Mom left," she whispered without looking away from the flames.

"I know. She came to say goodbye." I hung up my coat.

"She hates me."

"Can you blame her?" I wasn't trying to hurt her. I'd meant it as a rhetorical question.

"Would it kill you to take my side?" Sookie looked over her shoulder at me.

"That's all I've been doing, Sookie, is taking your side. The problem is, we should be meeting half way." I sat on the couch. "Jessica is going to be working at the bar to pay off her debt."

Sookie whipped around with a shocked expression on her face. "Are you insane? Eric, that's a terrible idea."

"Maybe it is, but I believe her when she says she's sorry. I believe she wants to change, and I'm going to give her the chance to prove it to me." I wasn't really willing to discuss it.

The glare I got from Sookie was nothing short of epic. It was obvious she thought I was making a huge mistake, and was hellbent on convincing me she was right. The decision was made. I wasn't going to change my mind. She seemed to think I was picking Jessica over her when nothing could have been further from the truth.

I couldn't take anymore. I loved her. I *do* love her, but it's not enough. She didn't get it, and she was never going to. The ranting and raving went on and on about how irresponsible I was being by playing into part of Jessica's fantasies. For the first time since I met her, she sounded like the psychologist she had studied to be. She tossed around words like 'enabling,' and 'borderline personality,' like she didn't have issues herself. It was just too much.

"Stop!" I roared at her loud enough to make her jump. "Just stop, Sookie. I can't do this anymore."

She glared at me for a minute before saying, "Fine. Well, come find me at home when you change your mind."

"I don't mean that. I mean us. I can't do this anymore," I gestured between us. "If we're not fucking, we're fighting, or you're running off to whatever corner of your mind gives you a warm 'n fuzzy. I'm sick and tired of waiting for you to figure it out. You say you want what Jake and Mini have? Well, stop pushing me away. We could have those things together if you would stop shoving me away every fucking time I try to get close to you. I know that Bill broke your heart and fucked with your head, but I'm not him.

"And I can't even blame you for everything because I'm the one who stuck around, thinking if I loved you enough things would get better. But you don't need me because you have your anger and your fear to keep you company. You're not in a relationship with me. You're still chained to the ghost of the son of a bitch who broke you."

"I am *not* broken." Sookie insisted.

I growled and ran my hand through my hair. "Fine, fine, you're not broken, but every fucking promise you ever made me is. You keep saying it's going to get better, or we'll talk about it later, but that never happens. It's the same shit every day and I'm sick of waiting for you to figure it out, Sookie. I've been here with you. I've been waiting for you to open your eyes and realize that I love you, but you... you just don't get it."

"So that's it, you're just going to leave?" she folded her arms over her chest.

"I'm not the bad guy here, Sookie. I'm doing us both a favor. See, I can't take anymore, and you don't have to stay in a relationship that doesn't make you happy."

She didn't argue with me. There was no rush to explain what was going on in her head, or why she had been so distant from me. She just stared through me like I wasn't even there. She wasn't crying. There was no sadness, no attempt to get me to change my mind. Just silent acceptance.

"Well, I'm sorry I make your life so miserable," she mumbled under her breath, her eyes suddenly cast down to the floor. Finally, there were tears.

"Don't do that, Sookie. Don't play the bitter dumped girl. Stop blaming everyone else for your mistakes. Take some responsibility for the situation you're in. If you're not happy, you're the only one you have to blame for that, and I'm *so* done being your scapegoat, Sookie. I'm just done."

I waited for her to say something, anything, to keep me there. Hell, I would go to couples counseling if she asked me to. I just wanted a reason to keep fighting for her. Instead, she just nodded her head and exhaled a deep breath.

"Well, I guess there's nothing more to say. Thank you, Eric, for being honest with me." she was ice cold. I walked over to her and held her face in my hands.

"Look at me, Sookie," I waited for her eyes to meet mine. I leaned down and kissed her one last time and forced myself to swallow back the ball that had risen in my throat. I moved to her ear and whispered, "I gave you everything. I wanted to give you my future. I thought you were the one. I hope you find what you're looking for."

I had to walk away before I took it all back. That's how much I loved her.

Right, so, I think I managed to write the first story in FFN existence where people were *begging* for a breakup. You got what you wanted. I know a lot of you are annoyed with Sookie's immaturity and the way she treats Eric. I get pretty annoyed with her, too. I look at it from a perspective of that she's still young and there are a lot of things she needs to figure out. Not just for herself, but for how to deal with relationships. Maybe those are flimsy excuses for her shoddy behavior, but I think everyone has at least one breakup skeleton in their closet where they wish they would have handled it better. I know I do. So, the question is, where do they go from here? Only time will tell. Thanks for reading!

**Chapter 32: Settle For A Slowdown**

Yep, I'm incredibly lame for taking so long with the update here, but then the characters started talking to me again and I wrote 7 chapters over the course of a few days between all the packing and moving. Soooo...you'll get a few chapters. I'm really hoping I'll get to finish this in the next week or so. It'll depend on how crazy things are with getting my new apartment all settled. Happy Saturday!

Chapter 32: Settle For a Slowdown

**SPOV**

Numb, that's the only word there was to describe the way I was feeling. At first I was sure it was just a dream. Eric and I had been fighting so much lately I figured it had to be my brain's way of clearing some of the stress from my subconscious. Any minute now, I would wake up next to Eric and we would still be together. Of course, that's not what happened. I walked across the gravel between our two houses and paused on my front porch to look at his place.

He had closed the kitchen door behind me when I left. The curtains and shades were closed; he never closed them. My eyes filled with tears as it all started to hit me. Eric really had broken up with me. We were over. I had succeeded in pushing him away. I swallowed the sob that had lodged itself in my throat and let myself into my house.

I squeezed my eyes closed and forced back the tears. For the longest time I stood with my back to the glass door, afraid that if I moved at all, I would just melt into an angry puddle of tears and regret. I told myself it was a mistake. We would take a night off, sleep in our own beds and the next day we would talk things through.

I would apologize for being such a distant bitch and Eric would tell me there was no way he could live without me. Except I knew that wasn't true. I was pretty sure Eric would do just find without me. If anything, he was probably better off without me.

I started to wonder if he ever really loved me. He said he did but if you love someone, you don't give up. You don't turn your back on them when they're hurting, or having a hard time. My head and my heart were in conflict, fighting more fiercely than they had in the past. The rational side of me said Eric had done the right thing; I would never tolerate someone treating me the way I had treated him. My heart, on the other hand, felt like it was shattered and would never be able to mend itself.

Eventually I gave in to the sadness and spent the night in bed, bawling my eyes out and cursing myself for being such a big idiot. I'm pretty sure in those first few days I ate twice my body weight in rocky road ice cream and peach pie, but I didn't care. I stayed home as much as I could and I was miserable at work. After a week of keeping myself sequestered from everyone Angie finally showed up at my house.

"Jesus, Sookie, what in the world happened to you? I've been calling for days," Angie looked around at the empty pie plates and ice cream tubs.

"Eric and I broke up," I said blankly and shuffled back to the couch. It was three in the afternoon and I was still in my pajamas. If you looked up 'pathetic' in the dictionary, you'd see a huge color picture of me looking all slovenly and sloppy.

"When? What happened?" Angie picked the only chair in the room that didn't look like I'd pulled it from a dumpster.

I rehashed the story with her, too worn out to cry even though I wanted to. The anger had passed and I was into the regret part of the healing process. I had spent the last few days listing all the shitty things I'd done to Eric and all the reasons he had for dumping me. He was right; I knew that. That knowledge didn't make it hurt any less. It felt good, though, to get it off my chest. I had been holding it all in. I hadn't even called Amelia. I knew she was going to lecture me about how I should have been more considerate of Eric and I didn't need a lecture. I didn't need Amelia telling me how badly I fucked up.

Angie was definitely more objective since she didn't know me, or Eric, that well. She didn't know a lot of things about me and she wasn't weighing my past into the present the way Amelia did. I had mentioned Bill in passing, but I hadn't really shared the dirty details of just how awful he had been to me. And deep down I knew it wasn't fair to keep playing that card. I had a choice and I consistently made the wrong ones.

"Have you talked to Eric?" Angie asked me when I finished telling my story.

"No," I shook my head absently. "When I woke up the day after we broke up there was a box of my stuff on my porch and a note asking me to put my key to his place in the mailbox. I waited until he was at work before I did that. We haven't talked since we broke up."

With that, the tears I thought were gone for good started up again. I missed him. I missed my friend. I missed telling him about my day and having someone to laugh with. I missed climbing into bed with him at the end of the night and listening to the waves break on the beach while he held me. I missed seeing him smile over breakfast or the way he would reach over randomly and tuck hair behind my ear when I was reading. I missed curling up on the couch and watching a movie or the flicker of flames in his fireplace. My life felt alarmingly empty without him in it.

"Aww, honey, come here," Angie moved over to the couch and wrapped me up in a hug.

I let her rock me gently and stroke my hair in a soothing, motherly way. She had listened patiently to my story and she hadn't judged me for a single thing I said. She was a good friend. Before I knew it, I was sound asleep. If I dreamed, I don't remember what I dreamed about. When I woke up, however, country music was playing quietly in the kitchen.

The pie plates and ice cream containers were gone. The magazines on the coffee table were straightened up and it was dark outside. I sat up quickly, looking around the room with the hope that, once again, I had dreamed it all. When I looked down I realized I was still wearing the same ratty pajamas. A hand catching in my knotted hair told me I was in desperate need of a shower. I wasn't even going to think about how long it had been since I showered last.

I pushed myself up off the couch and shuffled down the hall to the kitchen. Angie was peeling potatoes and my cast iron skillet was on the stove getting hot. A bag filled with white liquid was resting on the counter and the colander was filled with fresh green beans.

"Angie?" I asked quietly, not wanting to spook her.

She looked over her shoulder and smiled warmly at me, "It's about time you got up. I hope you don't mind I straightened things for you."

"You didn't have to do that," I shook my head.

"Nonsense. You're in mournin', darlin', and that's what friends do when someone we care about it hurtin'. Now, not to hurt your feelings, but you are a prime candidate for a hot shower," Angie said politely.

"Yeah, sorry about that," I was a little ashamed of myself. I really had gone off the deep end.

"No need for apologies, just go get yourself cleaned up. I think you'll feel a lot better if you do."

I nodded slowly and headed for my bedroom. I avoided looking in the mirror since I was sure I would be horrified by what I saw. Instead I headed straight for the bathroom and started the shower. I pulled off the clothes I had been wearing for far too long and tossed them out into my bedroom. I was sure if I should wash them or burn them.

When the room started to fill with steam I stepped into the shower stall. The water was a bit hotter than I usually liked but the sting of it against my skin felt good. I leaned against the cool tiles and closed my eyes. Memories of showers with Eric flooded me and it was reason enough for me to open my eyes again. I stepped under the spray and wet my hair to wash it. My scalp tingled under the hot water and then again when I massaged shampoo into my hair.

I washed up and shaved before getting out of the shower. Even though it was almost seven o'clock I got dressed in regular clothes instead of another pair of pajamas. Combing my hair was as difficult as you might expect for someone who had gone for days without combing their hair. It took nearly ten minutes but I finally got all the snarls and tangles out of it. I brushed my teeth and even spritzed on a little perfume before going out to the kitchen.

"Anything I can do to help?" I asked Angie.

"You could get on those beans for me," she jerked her head toward the green beans. The ends needed trimming.

"Sure thing," I went to the butcher block and grabbed a paring knife. "So, what's in the bag of white over here?"

"That is chicken soaking in buttermilk."

"That's the way my Gran did it too," I smiled over at her.

Angie nodded and said, "I can't tell you what spices I put in the dredging but I swear it's the best fried chicken you'll ever have."

I couldn't help but laugh quietly since just about everyone I knew thought their granny made the best fried chicken in the world. I'm sure Angie's granny made great friend chicken but I doubted it would surpass Gran's. All the same, I kept trimming the beans while Angie started dredging her chicken parts.

"Thank you, Angie, for doing all this. I really appreciate it," I told her once I was done with the beans.

"You'd do the same for me; I can just tell," Angie smiled at me before asking me to check and make sure the skillet was hot enough.

I watched as she started to drop the chicken into the pan and when I heard an old country favorite on the radio I ran across the room and turned the volume up. I knew it wouldn't last but thanks to Angie, at least for a little while, I could pretend my heart wasn't broken.

**o.O.o.O.o**

**EPOV**

I had to go cold turkey where Sookie was concerned. I knew if I saw her crying I would want to comfort her and I just couldn't do that. I had my own wounds to heal. Immediately after Sookie left I closed all the blinds and curtains. I wasn't worried about her watching me; I was worried I would spend all my time watching her and that just wasn't healthy.

I was angry—no, I was *furious* with her. I couldn't understand how she could so easily accept the things I said. I wanted her to fight back; to tell me I was wrong. Instead she had calmly nodded her head and *thanked me*for my honesty. Never in my life had I wanted to hit a woman until that moment.

I don't think she heard it but I did slam the door behind her after she left. I wanted to punch or break something. Instead I settled for raiding my liquor cabinet and got completely shitfaced on really good scotch. It was the first time I puked because I drank too much since I was sixteen and drank a dozen tequila shots on a dare from some idiot friend. It was Pam who found me passed out, face down on my bathroom floor.

"Rise and shine, porcupine," Pam said in an eerily cheerful tone of voice.

"Fuck off and die," I growled and instantly regretted it.

My head was thudding in time with my heartbeat and my stomach was about as calm as the Pacific during a tsunami. I pushed myself up off the floor just fast enough to get my face over the toilet before I heaved. Pam made a very undignified noise behind me and started ranting. I was too busy throwing up to pay attention to her exact words but the gist of it was, I needed to knock it off and quit being such a little bitch.

That Pam sure knew how to make a guy feel better. "Gee, Pam, it's a good thing you're a lesbian."

"Oh really? And why is that?" Pam folded her arms over her chest.

"Because no guy wants to date a woman with bigger balls than him," I pulled myself up off the floor, flushed the toilet and reached for my toothbrush.

"If this is the way it's going to be from now on, I'm either going to need a raise, or you're going to need to look for a new partner. You did yourself a favor by letting her go," Pam insisted while I brushed my teeth.

I could have asked how Pam knew I'd broken up with Sookie but I was willing to bet the bender I was on was proof enough for her. I'd shown up at the bar hungover before but what I was experiencing was only partially because of the scotch I drank the night before. Mostly, I was dealing with an emotional hangover and that wasn't going to go away with a shot shower and Spanish Prisoner skillet from the diner.

"Take a shower, get dressed and meet me downstairs. I'm getting you out of here," Pam ordered and then left me alone in the bathroom.

All I really wanted was to crawl into bed and stay there until I didn't feel like shit anymore. I realized, however, that could take years and I couldn't let the rest of my life go to shit because of a breakup. While I cleaned myself up I silently berated myself. Breakups were the reason I didn't usually do relationships. I had known before I even said anything to Sookie that if things didn't work out between us it was going to royally fuck me up.

Being royally fucked up would have been a nice vacation from where I was at. I pulled on a pair of jeans, a t-shirt and a hoodie before going downstairs to meet Pam. She was standing in my kitchen with a box on the table. I immediately recognized the items inside as things that belonged to Sookie. I stopped in my tracks and tried to ignore the ache in my chest when I saw her favorite sleep shirt in the box.

"You're going to put this on her porch and leave it there for her to deal with. You're going to ask for your house keys back and then you're going to throw away the sheets that are on your bed because I don't trust you to actually wash them. You're a fucking mess, Northman," Pam shook her head with disapproval.

"Do you even have a heart, Pam?"

"This isn't about heart, you douche. This is about common fucking sense. She's been making you miserable for weeks; months even. You've dwelled on it for long enough and I'm not going to let you lay here in your own filth for weeks, milking the whole thing. So if you insist on being a whiney bitch, I'm going to insist you do it elsewhere," Pam produced a plane ticket. "Your flight leaves in three hours."

"And where, exactly, am I going?" I took the ticket.

"Where any red blooded American man goes to heal a broken heart: Las Vegas," Pam shrugged as if I should know better.

**I'll post again either tomorrow or Monday. I promise you won't have to wait long for an update. Thanks for reading!**

**Chapter 33: Everything's Changed**

The reactions I have gotten to the last chapter are pretty epic. I could try to defend Sookie's actions here, but they're pretty indefensible. Instead I'll just say that she's a work in progress. The words "whiny" and "bitch" were pretty common in reviews for the last chapter. Hopefully, in the chapters ahead, you'll start to see a change in her. The Pam hate surprised me a little bit, but I can see your point. I'm not sure what Pam's motives were in doing what she did. Mostly, I think she thought she was doing the right thing by getting Eric away from all these places that were sort of haunted with memories of Sookie. I guess we'll have to wait and see if Pam's idea was a good one or not \*shrugs\*

Chapter 33: Everything's Changed

**EPOV**

For the third day in a row I woke up with my head throbbing and my memory hazy as to what had happened the night before. Pam's plan to help me get over Sookie wasn't really going the way I'd hoped. I thought maybe a change of scenery would do me good. I liked Las Vegas. I liked the energy and I liked the various atmospheres that could be found all in a single hotel.

Pam had booked me into the Luxor. I spent my days sleeping and my nights getting bombed out of my mind in the clubs all over the strip. My first night there I drank myself stupid and took a girl back to my room with me. I remembered kissing her once and hating myself when she didn't taste like Sookie. She was hot, I'll give her that, and other circumstances I'm sure I would have fucked her.

As it was, my body just wasn't cooperating with what my mind was telling me I needed. My mind said I needed to fuck Sookie out of my system. Unfortunately my heart was in collusion with my dick, and neither of them was ready to move on from Sookie just yet. I tried again the second night with about the same level of success I had the first night. I ended up in the shower with a bottle of champagne (I have no idea how I got it) and jerking off to the highlight reel of my sex life with Sookie.

I realized then there was a whole other level of pathetic that could be reached. I had surpassed it. By the time I was ready to fly home I wasn't sure if I felt any better about the breakup. In addition to missing her like crazy, I was pretty sure I had done significant damage to my liver. I changed my return flight so I landed in Chicago. Luke was waiting for me at the airport with Emma at his side, looking cheerful and sexy as ever.

How my brother had managed to land her, I wasn't sure. Emma broke away from Luke's side and wrapped her arms around me. She smelled of bananas, of all things, and I could sense her caring in the way she hugged me. In fact, Emma was the first person to do something like that in a very long time.

"Alright, that's enough," Luke stepped forward. "If you hold on too long he'll think he gets to keep you."

Emma gave me one more good squeeze before turning to face Luke. "Maybe I want to trade up."

"I like her," I put an arm around Emma.

"If you're looking to trade up, I doubt you want this ass fairy. He just spent four days in Vegas pouting and, I'm willing to bet, not getting laid," Luke smirked at me.

Emma fixed her gaze on Luke and asked, "If we broke up would it really only take just a few cheap fucks with random women in Las Vegas to get over me?"

I grinned at the corner my brother had backed himself into. Luke started to sputter an answer but Emma wasn't interested in hearing it. Instead, she linked her arm through mine and began to pull me toward the baggage area. Luke flanked her other side, shooting me glares over her head. I merely shrugged since it was his big mouth that had gotten him in hot water with the firecracker between us.

It took nearly an hour to get back to Luke's apartment thanks to the ridiculous traffic. My plan was to spend a night in the city before driving up north with him the next day. I figured if anyone could help me sort out my shit it was my brother. For all the bull busting Luke and I did, he really was my best friend a lot of the time. The rest of the time I wanted to noogy him to death.

"We missed you at Thanksgiving, Emma," I told her once we were situated in the car.

"Yeah, I'm sorry I couldn't make it. My Mom was really insistent I come home this year. I think she's concerned Luke and I are moving too fast," Emma said over her shoulder.

"Are you an only child?"

"No, I'm the youngest. I have two older sisters, both of whom are already married. I think Mom wants me to stay her little baby for just a little while longer," Emma explained.

"Even though you're in your twenties?"

"Dude, did you forget the freak out Mom had when I told her I wanted to live downtown instead of at home when I started college?" Luke rolled his eyes. "Imagine what she would have done if I told her I wanted to move to Utah, or something."

"True. Mom hates that I'm up in Michigan," I admitted.

"She worries about you," Luke said with a shrug and then glanced over at me. "And I can see why. Just how much did you drink while you were in Vegas?"

"Enough," I leaned my head back against the head rest.

Emma made small talk the rest of the way back to Luke's apartment. The three of us walked upstairs together and I was surprised when I saw a black cat sitting by the door waiting for us. Luke wasn't really a cat person. He tolerated them well enough but he'd been pissed off when we were kids and he begged and begged and begged for a dog, only for Mom to come home with a bright orange kitten.

"You have a cat?" I looked over my little brother.

"He's mine," Emma bent down and picked up the cat. "This is Costello."

I reached out and rubbed the cat's head between his ears. He nuzzled against my hand briefly before losing all interest and squirming to be put down. Emma bent and let the cat jump from her arms. I watched Costello promptly find a heat vent and plop down on it. Luke grabbed one of my two bags and carried it down the hall toward the living room. I knew I'd be surfing the couch later and was wondering if Emma intended to stay the entire night, or if she'd be going home at some point.

I was prepared to order a pizza but Emma had other ideas in mind. "Do you like Mexican food, Eric?" she asked while unpacking several bags of groceries.

"Are you kidding? We have a running competition between us to see who can eat the most tacos in a single sitting," I smirked at Luke. "Who owns the record right now?"

"Fuck you, Eric!" Luke glared at me while Emma stopped dead in her tracks.

"Luke!" she admonished him.

"Tell her the story, prick," Luke continued to stare at me.

"A while ago we went and had Mexican food when we were with Jake. Luke thought it would be funny to give Jake the wrong burrito so when he bit into it, he'd get a mouthful of steak," I started. Emma shot Luke a dirty look and my like for her only increased. "Jake, of course, was pissed off since he hasn't eaten meat since he was twelve and had to dissect a frog for science class."

"You should have seen his reaction when he found out he had to dissect a baby pig in biology his freshman year of high school," Luke snickered.

"Hey, I think it's great Jake has such strong beliefs. I may not agree with everything he says or does, but I applaud him for sticking to his guns," Emma said while starting to peel carrots.

Luke and I exchanged a look and then I continued to tell the story. "So Jake is all pissed off. You'd think a little tree hugger like him would just let it go but he's actually the most vindictive of the three of us and he has a memory like a steel trap. A few weeks later the three of us get together for a football game up in Michigan since Northwestern was playing in Ann Arbor. Usually we would tailgate but my grill crapped out at the last minute. Instead we end up at this little Mexican joint not far from the school.

"We order our food and just before it arrives, Luke heads to the bathroom. I'm sitting there putting green sauce and sour cream on my tacos when Jake dumps a laxative into Luke's drink. A few minutes later Luke comes back, ready to kick ass and take the taco title, but first he downs about half of his drink. Luke is just digging into his third taco when he starts to squirm a little." I smiled at Emma, who just shook her head.

"Oh no," she looked back and forth from Luke to me.

"I ask if anything is wrong and he just shakes it off. But by taco number five, it's obvious he's not feeling so hot. Half way through, he bolts from the table like his pants are on fire. Ten minute later both Jake and I get a text message from him that says something about he doesn't know which one of us did it, but he knows we fucked with his food in some capacity. So ever since then, we're all careful not to leave our food unattended when we eat together." I told Emma, who was laughing almost hysterically. The extreme pout on Luke's face wasn't helping matters.

"Yeah, yeah, laugh it up, asshole," Luke glared at me when I started laughing as well.

"Calm down, Skidmark," I smirked at him.

Luke launched himself at me and the next thing I knew we were wrestling in the dining room area like we were teenagers again. Emma paid us no mind whatsoever and went about her dinner prep. Eventually Luke and I exhausted ourselves and he helped me up off the floor. Emma was browning steak in a skillet and there were piles of onion, green peppers, red peppers and even a small mound of chopped garlic. Seriously, if Luke didn't marry her, I would.

"Need any help?" I offered after washing my hands.

"Not really. I did most of the work while you two were playing Friday Night Smackdown in the dining room," Emma flipped the steak pieces.

"It smells amazing in here, Em," Luke leaned over her shoulder and kissed her cheek.

"Thank you. Now you two go play and let me cook in peace," Emma nudged Luke with her hip.

He grabbed a couple of beers from the fridge and led me into the living room to watch whatever football game we could find until Emma called us for dinner. It was while we were eating some of the best steak fajitas I'd ever had, the first time I hadn't thought about Sookie in days.

**o.O.o.O.o**

A week later I was back in Michigan and trying my best to ignore the activity in the house next door. I spent as much time as I possibly could at the bar since I was sure I wouldn't be seeing Sookie there. I'd left explicit instructions with Rasul not to let her in. There was a big part of me that wanted to see her, to know that she was doing okay. At the same time, I knew I wasn't quite strong enough yet to do it.

I was a sucker for her tears and I knew if she cried, that'd be the end of it. I'd puss out and either tell her I wanted her back or I'd end up in bed with her. Either way it wasn't good. Her being my next door neighbor didn't make it any easy but there wasn't much I could do about that. I started using the front door and parking around the other side of the house. I kept the shades down on the side of my house that faced her place.

Out of sight, out of mind. I thought if I kept repeating that to myself I might start to believe it. Work definitely helped quite a bit. I was surprised to discover Jessica wasn't such a bad kid. She was smart and she had a plan for her future. She wanted to go away to school but wasn't sure she would able to afford it. She was getting good grades in school and she had done exceptionally well on every standardized test she was given. Unfortunately for her, her parents were under the impression she should make her own way in the world just like they had to do when they were her age.

Since her eighteenth birthday would come before she graduated from high school she would be allowed to stay until graduation. After that, she was on her own. It was absurd to me, what her parents were doing. Jessica caught on quickly and did her job well. She was mostly bussing tables, washing glasses and doing other menial busy work since she wasn't old enough to serve alcohol in the state of Michigan. But she was there on time everyday and she did everything that was asked of her.

Pam still thought I was crazy for taking Jessica on but it seemed like a good move. If she were older I would have had her behind the bar mixing drinks. Sam took off unexpectedly two days after I got back from my trip and didn't say when he would be coming back. His instability was wearing thin and while he was gone I came to the decision I'd had enough. Whenever he finally returned I would be informing him he no longer had a job at Loki's.

When I wasn't at work I was doing anything I could to keep myself busy. I made little repairs around the house and started planning for Christmas since it was only a few weeks away. Pam attended the baby shower for my baby sister, who would be arriving in the next month or so. Because of her age, my mother had been put on bed rest of the remainder of her pregnancy. I felt bad I couldn't get down to Illinois more often to check on her but Luke and Jake were alternating weeks visiting her.

In the quiet moments when I actually was home I spent a lot of my time reading. I would let myself get lost in other worlds where Sookie didn't exist. I could assume an entirely different identity through the works of Mark Twain, John Grisham or Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. I didn't let myself think about Sookie for too long and I never asked how she was doing, even though there was a part of me that wanted to be sure she was alright.

Finally the week before Christmas we had our first big snowfall of the season. It wasn't even officially winter yet and already we were buried until seven inches of lake effect snow. It was getting harder and harder to hear the breaking of waves on the beach, and even though I probably shouldn't have done it, I shoveled snow off of Sookie's steps for her while she was at work or in class. I wasn't an asshole, after all, and I didn't want her to get hurt because I was being spiteful. I would have done it for any other neighbor who needed the help. Although, knowing Sookie, she would just insist she was perfectly capable of taking care of herself without any of my help.

I took a night off from the bar to finish up my Christmas shopping. Wrapping my own gifts was going to be a bit of a problem since I definitely didn't have an inner Martha Stewart like Jake did, but I'd manage. Since it was getting late I decided to stop at a diner in town to pick up dinner to go. I parked in the lot behind the diner and carefully walked around to the front. I stopped in my tracks when I looked through the large front window.

There was Sookie, sitting at a table with Alcide, Angie and another guy. She was laughing so hard she was holding her stomach. She leaned toward the guy I didn't recognize and put her hand on his shoulder. He leaned over and whispered something in her ear that made her laugh again and I felt my heart plummet into my feet.

Just like that, all my weeks of moving on were erased. I went home without getting dinner.

**Anyone else want to give Eric a cuddle? And before you jump all over Sookie, it might not be what you think... Thanks for reading!**

**Chapter 34: Coming to Terms**

Chapter 34: Coming to Terms

**SPOV**

I felt differently after that night I spent with Angie. We talked about a lot of things over dinner and I learned she'd been in a pretty bad relationship in her past. Where Bill had bruised me mentally, she had been bruised physically. It took him flipping a car with her in it for her to realize he was going to kill her if he couldn't have her.

"I finally saw what everyone else had been telling me and I decided I was done being chained to a man who didn't deserve me. What he called love I now know was control. He was manipulating me, telling me all the things I needed to hear in order to justify the things he was doing to hurt me. But do you know that to this day, that asshole hasn't apologized for almost killing me? He never gave a tiny rat's ass about me, Sookie, and from what you're telling me I don't think Bill gave one about you either." Angie said with a gentle pat to the back of my hand.

I waited a few more days before calling Amelia and telling her that Eric and I broke up. It seemed Pam had beaten me to it and Amelia was giving me the space and time to reconcile it with myself. She was still dealing with the aftermath of her miscarriage and going through her own grieving. I missed her terribly and after talking to Angie a bit more I started thinking maybe going down to Louisiana for the holidays was the best idea.

So I booked tickets the day after I talked Amelia and gave notice at my job I was going to need some time off. I was in danger of being fired but I needed the break. I was doing my best to avoid Eric at all costs. Seeing him was just too painful. I would catch myself looking over at his house from time to time and remembering little things. It was the little things that killed me the most. Like there was the time I was standing out on the porch early in the morning and Eric came up behind me and wrapped his arms around my waist. We just stared out at the water without saying a word while we shared a cup of coffee. Or I'd think about the various foot massages I got from him while we swayed in the porch swing. Those were the things that really made a relationship, in my opinion.

It was only at night that I thought about the fights we had because there had been plenty of them. I thought of all the horrible things we would say to each other, even if we were just being honest. I thought about running away to the Dunes and how it was Jake who had come to get me. I dreamed we were back at the cabin in Wisconsin and I dove off the end of the pier. I came up for air and Eric was standing at the end of the dock, smiling and waving at me. I tried to swim toward him but the undertow started to suck me under. I waved frantically, screaming for help, but every time Eric threw me a life preserver it kept going over my head.

I didn't need a therapist to interpret that dream for me. The context of it was pretty clear. Through school I was able to get in to see a mental health professional. His name was Ethan Randall and he had gotten his degree over at Ann Arbor. I confessed to him I was worried people would think I was crazy for seeing a shrink, but he informed me more people sought counseling than I would ever guess.

"We all need a little help sometimes, Sookie. There's nothing to be ashamed of here. All we're doing is sorting through the knots in your mind so you can make sense of things. The only thing I ask is that you be completely honest with me at all times. Therapy isn't going to work if you don't tell the truth," Ethan—he insisted I call him that- told me in my first session. I gave him my word I would be truthful and I did my best to stick to it.

"Why don't we start by you telling me why you're here," Ethan sat in a very comfortable looking black leather chair with a legal pad balanced on his knee and a fancy fountain pen in his hand.

"Well this is probably going to sound sort of cliché but I recently went through a really bad breakup. I could have saved the relationship but I didn't. My brain was screaming at me to stop it from happening but I couldn't get the words to come out. I lost a really great guy, maybe even the best I'll ever have, because I froze up. He broke up with me but it was all my fault." I told Ethan.

He nodded and jotted down a few notes on his pad. "Why did he break up with you?"

"Because he got tired of dealing with me," I laughed nervously. "Before him I was in a really bad relationship. My ex cheated a lot and he was verbally abusive. I stayed with him because I was stupid and weak and I thought if I stuck around and loved him enough he would change. He promised me he was going to straighten up and then I caught him in bed with another woman. Finally, I had enough and I left him. By then the damage had been done and I don't think I ever fully got over what he did to me."

"What about the new boyfriend? Was he a cheater?" Ethan asked.

"Eric? No, Eric is definitely not a cheater. At least I know he wasn't with me. See, Eric and I… well, we started out strangely. We met last year when I came up to check out the property that was left to me. The house I inherited is next door to his. At first we hated each other. We fought all the time and drove each other crazy. But then it was like a switch was flipped and we slept together. Overnight we went from fighting to fucking- pardon my French- and we morphed into this casual, friends with benefits type thing.

"When summer ended I closed up my house and went back to Louisiana to finish school. We didn't talk at all while I was gone, even when my Gran died earlier this year. So I guess, on top of everything else, I'm still grieving for my Gran. The last couple of years have been hard. It seems like just when I find some sort of stable ground something else happens to completely throw me off balance. Eric tried to help me find my center but that's not up to him; it's up to me. That's why I'm here."

Ethan nodded and made more notes on his pad. "Well, Sookie, I think we need to start at the very beginning. Tell me about your childhood."

I took a deep breath and blew it out slowly. I could tell there was going to be a lot of hard work ahead and for once, I didn't feel the urge to run away. I felt like I was exactly where I was supposed to be. I cleared my mind, closed my eyes and started from the beginning.

**o.O.o.O.o**

"Are you absolutely sure you want to do this?" Angie asked when we walked into the salon.

"It's time for a change," I said with certainty. "I've been lugging all this around for too long as it is."

Angie played with my hair and said, "But it's so pretty! Do you have any idea how many women would kill to have hair this color? And so thick, on top of it."

"I need a change, Angie," I gave her a somewhat pointed stare and she sighed before letting go of my hair.

"Fine, fine, I understand. I just think it's a shame, is all. But if you think this is going to make you happy, I say go for it. At least you're not getting something pierced or your boobs done."

I snorted and said, "I don't need more boobs."

Angie laughed and said, "That's one more thing we have in common."

It was true; I had finally found a rival in the boob department. Angie had dragged me to the mall two days before to check out a sale at Victoria's Secret, even though it was damn near a waste of time. Apparently Victoria's secret is that she only designed bras for skinny bitches. Anywhere else I wore a 36 D, and I was a full D. Any DD bras I found at Victoria's Secret looked like they had been designed with my Gran in mind. I found that fascinating considering the number of women who had boob jobs every year.

"Sookie?" A girl the size of a toothpick called my name from behind the reception desk.

"That's me," I raised my hand.

"Follow me, please," the girl gestured for me to follow her to the back.

"Wish me luck," I flashed a nervous expression at Angie before following Toothpick Girl.

I paused for a moment when I thought I saw Pam sitting in one of the chairs toward the end of the long row. The salon I was at was huge and housed at least two dozen stylists. I was seeing Amy, the sister of one of the waitresses I worked with. I sat down in the chair Toothpick Girl led me to and craned my neck to see if it was really Pam at the end of the row. The woman was turned to the side and her hair was being foiled. I couldn't get a clear view of her face and decided to quit gawking before I caused a scene.

When Amy approached, I smiled into the mirror. I'd seen her at the diner before and she had told me to come by if I ever needed a change. When I decided I was ready to cut my hair, she was the first person I called. After we shook hands, hers were immediately in my hair getting a feel for it.

"So, what brings you here today, Sookie?" Amy asked while she finger combed my hair. It was a relaxing repetitive motion that was threatening to put me to sleep.

"Well, like I said on the phone, I'm ready for a change. I haven't done much more than trim my ends since I was about fifteen and it's time to do something different." I said with an excited smile.

"So just a cut? No color of highlights, right?" Amy asked while she scrutinized my hair.

"You got it. I like the color, I'm just sick of the length," I told her.

"Glad to hear it. I have clients who would *kill* for blonde like this," Amy winked at me, and then pulled a cape from a drawer. "Let's get started."

An hour later my hair was cut, washed and styled. For the first time in nearly a decade my hair wasn't just a few inches shy of my waist. Amy had cut layers into it and the longest one was past my shoulders, but above the band of my bra. I hadn't had hair that short since I was in junior high. I loved it.

When I walked back to the reception area after thanking Amy profusely and tipping her generously, Angie was reading a magazine with Reese Witherspoon on the cover. I cleared my throat to get her attention and when she looked up, Angie dropped the magazine along with her jaw. She got up out of her chair and staggered over to me with that adorably shocked look on her face.

"Oh my God!" she gushed with a grin on her face. "Sookie, you look fantastic."

"Why thank you," I curtsied a little and ran my fingers through my hair. Amy had easily cut off about eight inches of hair. My entire head felt lighter.

"She did a wonderful job. I'll admit I was worried when you said you wanted to cut it but this isn't so bad. I mean, it's obviously a change, but it's not as drastic as I thought you were going to be," Angie touched my hair as well as she talked.

"I love it. It just feels better, you know?" I smiled while digging into my purse for my wallet.

"That's good. I'm glad you're happy with it. Listen, since you're so big on change, I got to thinking. My brother's coming up for a visit next week. Alcide and I were going to take him to dinner while he's here. You should come along with us."

"What night? I have class on Thursday from four until seven," I reminded her.

"We were thinking we'd go on Tuesday since Alcide has his poker game Wednesday night."

"Okay," I nodded and signed the credit card slip Toothpick Girl slid over the counter to me. "Let me know what time and where to meet y'all."

"Of course," she nodded then looked to Toothpick Girl. "Y'all don't have a bathroom I can use, do you?"

"Sure, it's right over there," Toothpick Girl pointed to the left.

"I'll be right back," Angie winked and then hightailed it toward the bathroom.

"Excuse me," A familiar voice said behind me.

I didn't need to turn around to know it was Pam. I did anyway, and the quick change on her face from bored to smug to what can only be described as pure evil was a cross between amusing and terrifying. "Hello, Pam."

"Well, well, don't we look pretty this evening," Pam looked me up and down.

"Thanks," I said nervously. With Pam it was always best to be on guard, especially if there was a chance you were on her shit list.

"Got a date?" she asked while forking over her credit card. Her hair looked the same as always so I couldn't tell what she had done to it.

"No, I'm not seeing anyone." Under other circumstances I would have told her to mind her own business but I was pretty sure this meeting was going to get back to Eric.

I wanted to ask how he was doing but I didn't think Pam would tell me. Or, if she did, I wasn't sure I wanted to hear it. If he was miserable, I would just feel guilty for being so awful to him. If he was happy, I would feel like shit for letting him go. Either way, I figured I was screwed so it was better not to ask. On top of that, I didn't want to risk Pam's wrath.

"So how've you been?" Pam asked in a genuinely interested tone that shocked the hell out of me.

I expected her to go off on me for being a heartless bitch that broke her best friend's heart. Instead she looked like she was a second away from asking me to go have coffee with her. Maybe Pam had suffered a stroke since the last time I saw her. Or maybe she was high from all the hairspray. Whatever the reason, I chose my answer carefully.

"Depends on the day. The last couple of weeks have been rocky, as you can imagine."

Pam snorted and jammed her credit card back into the slot in her wallet. "Well, I guess rocky is better than miserable as fuck. His words, not mine. Nice seeing you, Sookie. Merry Christmas."

With that, Pam was gone and she took the wind in my sails with her.

**o.O.o.O.o**

The following Tuesday I found myself at a local diner having dinner with Alcide, Angie and her brother, Eli. Eli was a nice guy with the southern charm I recognized so easily. Once upon a time I had this huge Rhett Butler fantasy and wanted to end up with a guy just like him. As I grew up, however, I realized the chances of actually finding that were less and less.

Not to mention, Eric was about as far away from Rhett Butler as a man could get and I still managed to fall head over heels for him. I was making progress with therapy and had come to a very important conclusion while talking with Ethan. I realized part of the reason I was so attracted to Eric in the beginning was because he was unavailable to me. Getting into a friends with benefits relationship was easy because I wasn't ready to give my heart away and I didn't think a guy like Eric was capable of commitment anyway.

I thought back to all the times Eric had asked me when I was going to accept that he was telling the truth when he told me he loved me. I used to think he was just being insecure but I now knew he had a good reason to be. I hadn't really accepted he was telling the truth. There was a part of me that wasn't ready for it, nor did I think I deserved it. I started to understand I had pushed him away to keep myself safe from being hurt again like I had been with Bill, even though Eric hadn't done a damn thing to make me think he would ever hurt me the same way.

It was a pretty big break through on my part and once I connected the dots, I wondered why I hadn't seen it sooner. I started to wonder if being a counselor was the right thing for me. If I couldn't even spot my own issues, then what business did I have helping other people with theirs?

"Sookie, it's always easier to spot the flaws and patterns in others. It's very easy for us, as humans, to justify our behavior. We tend to look at the parts instead of the sum the way an outsider does. The important thing isn't fixating on the problem, but the solution *to* the problem. Don't second guess yourself to death," Ethan offered a soft smile

Talking to him was easy. I liked going to therapy. I was going to miss it for the week and a half I would be in Bon Temps for the holidays. Even though I was only on my fifth session, I had already come to look forward to the appointments. Ethan challenged me to connect the dots without ever pushing me or demanding I give him an answer. If I ever felt uncomfortable talking about something, we would switch topics for a while before coming back to it later. The hour always flew by and before I knew it, he was sending me on my way.

Having Angie to talk to was also nice. It got so I wasn't sure how I had made it as long as I had without her. She was a great listener and she had an even better sense of humor. We talked on the phone at least every other day and we had lunch together once a week. Alcide was a good guy and I liked spending time with him, too. He was happy with Angie, which I was grateful for.

Eli was five years older than Angie and had studied to be a minister. He'd gone through seminary school and got himself ordained. He'd preached at a Methodist church in a small town just south of Baton Rouge for two years before deciding the church wasn't for him. He still believed in God but he didn't want to force his opinions on others anymore. He came to believe everyone should find God for themselves, whether that was in a church on Sunday or in a sunset on a Thursday evening.

He was still spreading God's Word, but he was doing it from behind a drum set as a drummer for a Christian rock band called Trinity Effect. He had various religious themed tattoos on his arms but none of them were creepy. He also had the words 'faith' and 'hope' tattooed on his fingers so there was one word on each hand. It was obvious his religion meant a great deal to him but he wasn't trying to clobber anyone over the head with it.

"That's a beautiful tattoo," I pointed to a design on his right arm of one of those religious fishes.

"Thank you. I got that one about six months ago," Eli told me before diving into his cup of broccoli cheddar soup.

"You should tell her about your first tattoo," Angie suggested with a knowing smile.

Eli swallowed his soup and grinned. The look on his face suggested it was one hell of a story. I wiped my mouth on my napkin and turned toward him a little to listen to him tell the story of a botched tattoo, due to the artist not knowing how to spell 'Corinthians.'

"Tell her how it's spelled," Angie covered her mouth with her napkin.

"K-o-r-a-n-t-h-i-a-n-s."

"Oh no," I covered my mouth as well and leaned into Eli when I started laughing.

"The tattoo is on my shoulder," Eli looked down on the side I was sitting next to. I wanted to sneak a peek but the neckline of his shirt was too tight for me to be able to do that. "Finish all your veggies like a good girl and I'll show you later."

He was referencing my salad but the flirtatiousness in his voice made me laugh. I liked Eli, no doubt about it, but he wasn't my type. The flirting was nice though. There was something reassuring about it. Maybe I wasn't damaged beyond repair like I feared I was. After dinner we went bowling. I only stayed for one game before excusing myself and going home. I had work in the morning and classes in the afternoon, not to mention there was homework that needed to be done.

Eli kissed my cheek before I left and we exchanged email addresses. I promised to call Angie the next day and then I left. Fifteen minutes later I was pulling into the driveway. Eric's car was parked around the front side of his house like it had been for weeks. My good mood faltered for a minute since I knew he'd changed his habits because of me. I pulled around to where I normally parked and tears filled my eyes when I saw my steps. They were completely free of snow.

Without having to ask I knew Eric had done it. Even after all the things I'd done to hurt him he still did something small, but incredibly sweet. My eyes welled with tears I told myself I wasn't going to shed. I lost the battle and I ended up having a cry in my car before going inside. I looked at the stack of Christmas cards I had on the table by the door and decided there was one missing from the stack. If nothing else, I owed Eric a thank you.

**Okay, so after reading the reviews that have come in for the last couple of chapters I feel the need to say that I try to stay neutral in the blame game here. While it's true Sookie has some pretty serious issues that need to be worked out, Eric isn't blame-free in the demise of their relationship. It was pointed out by one reviewer that Eric has some serious jealousy/possessive issues and I believe another mentioned the fact that Eric nearly raped Sookie earlier in the story. While I think calling that shower scene an almost rape might be a little harsh, I definitely get your point and I think you're right to bring it up. I get a little sad when I see all the Sookie hate that comes in. I don't take it personally as an attack against me in any fashion, but it still makes me sad. The girl has been through a lot, and as someone who has been in her shoes (not quite as bad, but close enough), I understand how hard it is to change. When you're emotionally damaged the way she is, it's not something that just fixes itself overnight. It takes months, if not YEARS, and serious commitment, in order for the damage to be repaired. By going into therapy, Sookie has taken a step in the right direction. She's trying, baby birds, and that's all any of us can ask her to do.**

**On the flip side, it seems everyone has had mixed reactions to what Eric did (or more importantly, didn't do) while he was in Vegas. To me, this breakup has turned him inside out and has been a great reminder of why he's avoided relationships so much in the past. In his own way, he was guarding his heart and the first girl he thinks he can give it to smashes it. I think he's at the point where he feels like feelings are a waste, but he's still in love with Sookie and it's confusing (and frustrating) the hell out of him. Yes, he jumped to conclusions about the "date" she was on, but I can't really blame him for being upset by what he saw. Frankly, if I were in his shoes, I'd be pretty bummed out too if I saw someone I was still in love with on what appeared to be a date with someone else. I'm not saying that makes it right, but I understand it.**

**Anyway...I hope y'all are continuing to enjoy this story. I had the end of this all planned out but then the muses changed their minds and decided they wanted to end the story in a different place. Soooo...it looks like we'll be getting a few more chapters than I thought we would. Enjoy what's left of the ride! Thanks for reading \*smooches\***

**Chapter 35: Like We Never Loved At All**

It amazes me how strong the reactions have been to the last couple of chapters. Thank you all for your thoughtful reviews you've been leaving me. Reading your thoughts and opinions on this has been enlightening for me, and it's made me think about a lot of things as well. I just want to be clear that I don't consider that shower scene to be a rape by any sense of the word, and I apologize to anyone who was offended by the implication that it was. Sookie certainly doesn't consider that to be rape either. If I thought it was rape, there would have been a disclaimer at the start of the chapter alerting you to it because I realize that's a deal breaker for some people when reading fic.

This story has become much angstier than I ever intended it to be, so I want to thank you all for sticking with me and not kicking my ass in reviews. I definitely appreciate your honest thoughts and feelings. Mostly, I'm just glad I'm not Sookie, or I have a feeling y'all would've strangled me by now lol.

Chapter 35: Like We Never Loved At All

**EPOV**

I felt like one of those bad country songs Sookie had forced me to listen to when we drove up to Wisconsin. Was she really dating someone else already? And it appeared to be a double date, which made me wonder if it was a first date or if they were already a couple. I told myself it shouldn't matter.

I had broken up with her, and for good reason. She had every right to date someone else. So why did I feel my inner caveman rising up, ready to charge into that diner, throw Sookie over my shoulder and take her home with me? The idea of her with someone else made me sick to my stomach. I spent close to an hour pacing my house like a caged animal, debating what I was going to do next.

There was a small part of me that hated her right then. The caveman in my head was telling me if I couldn't drag Sookie out of that diner, I needed to get revenge somehow, even if she wouldn't know about it. She obviously hadn't meant for me to know she was seeing someone. I knew Pam had bumped into her the week before. She'd told Pam she wasn't seeing anyone. So maybe this *was* a first date?

*Or maybe she's a liar and she played you for a fool, you pansy*, that irritating voice in the back of my head told me. The part of me that hated her started to grow and take over and before I knew what I was doing I was in my car and headed for Loki's. More than likely, the bar wouldn't be too crowded on a Tuesday night even though school was out for winter break. My usual space was left open and I barely had the car turned off before I was getting out of it.

I walked by the stock room and Jessica was inside cleaning and reorganizing things. The new bartender was still learning the ropes and hadn't quite figured out where everything went yet. Jessica was crouched down, shifting boxes of stirrers and napkins. There was a pencil tucked in her hair and a dust rag over her shoulder. I must have been staring too hard at her because she gasped when she looked up.

"Geez, Eric, when did you become Casper the Ghost?" she laughed while standing up.

"Sorry, didn't mean to scare you," I apologized.

"What are you doing here anyway? I thought you were taking the night off."

"I am. I came for a drink. Good work in here," I nodded, and then headed into the serving area.

I grabbed the first bottle of top shelf tequila I could find and a shot glass to go with it. I got cozy in a corner booth and proceeded to drink myself silly. I lost count of the number of shots I drank somewhere around the two dozen mark. I vaguely remember talking to some pretty blond co-ed, who, in my drunken haze, could have passed for Sookie's cousin.

I remember kissing the girl and my drunk brain tricking me into thinking it was Sookie I was with. I pulled away mid-kiss and started yelling at the poor girl who was smart enough to run away from me without another word. I know I called her a coward and maybe even a slut before Rasul showed up with the intention of throwing me out. Apparently the girl I had verbally assaulted had no idea I was the owner.

The last thing I remember is being hauled out of the bar by Rasul and one of the other guys. When I woke up the next morning I was face down on the couch in my living room and the smell of coffee filled the house. I didn't drink coffee very often but that moment, it smelled insanely good. Unfortunately just the prospect of lifting my head from where it currently was wasn't at all appealing.

*Wait a minute…who made coffee?*, I thought to myself and then mentally patted myself on the back for being able to form an intelligent thought in spite of how awful I felt. I was getting too old for this shit. I heard light footsteps in the kitchen on the creaky old hardwood floor and started to berate myself. Drunk as hell *and* anonymous sex…yeah, I was living the life. I closed my eyes again and thought maybe if I concentrated hard enough the room would stop spinning. If that couldn't happen then maybe at least my stomach would stop doing flip-flops.

"Eric?" a female voice whispered.

It wasn't Pam, I knew that much. Pam would never be so considerate of a hungover me. She had proven as much after she found me on the bathroom floor after my first Sookie related bender. I really had to cut this shit out. In theory, this should have worked perfectly. Get stupid drunk, find a hot girl, bang the hell out of her (and maybe a few others) until I forgot the reason I was ever upset in the first place. Rebounds were supposed to make the transition from boyfriend to bachelor a little easier. My problem was the only thing I was rebounding with was my right hand while thinking about the ex I wasn't supposed to be thinking about anymore.

I heard a mug being set down on the coffee table and then the woman who had whispered my name knelt down next to me. I felt a warm hand on the back of my head and it was like having a cinderblock dropped on me. I grunted and tried to move away from the little bit of pressure that was being applied. Every single part of my body screamed in pain when I moved. How much did I drink the night before, anyway?

"Eric?" she whispered again.

"Ungh," was all I could get out.

"I made coffee," she whispered, which I was thankful for.

I summoned every ounce of strength I had and forced my head in the other direction so I could look at the woman I brought home with me. I was going kill Rasul for letting me do this. If I had to be carried out of the bar, how the hell did I even make it into the house? Better question: how was I going to get my eyes to focus?

Eventually my eyes found her face and when the focused, my stomach turned violently, leaving my first ever piece of abstract regurgitated food art on the floor. I'd done a lot of stupid things in my time, but sleeping with Jessica? She was seventeen, for starters, and I wasn't entirely convinced yet she wasn't a little crazy. I made a mental note that tequila was not my friend and if I ever ran into Jose Cuervo, I was going to kick his ass.

Jessica sprang into action, running to the kitchen to get a bucket or something for me to keep hurling into since I didn't seem to be stopping anytime soon. It was, by far, the most disgusting morning of my life.

**o.O.o.O.o**

Two hours later I was showered and had a cup of coffee in my system. My stomach was still a little on the iffy side but I was able to get down a piece of toast. Jessica sat at the kitchen table, watching me carefully while I ate. She didn't say much, which I was grateful for. I knew I owed her an apology. Anything we had done the night before didn't mean anything to me and I felt terrible for taking advantage of her. Or maybe she had taken advantage of me? The not knowing part was killing me.

"What happened last night?" I finally had to ask since I couldn't piece it all together no matter how hard I tried.

"Before or after Rasul and Eddie had to carry you out of the bar?" Jessica asked.

"Both. The last thing I remember is kissing a girl I thought was—never mind."

Jessica gave me a sad smile and said, "Her name is Jamie Spencer and she's the police chief's niece. She was more pissed off that you kept calling her Sookie than she was that you kissed her."

I groaned quietly and closed my eyes. I would have shaken my head if I wasn't sure it would make me want to puke all over again. I was definitely batting a thousand. My right hand was a little swollen which suggested to me that I'd either slammed it in the car door or I had punched something.

"And my hand, what happened there?" I held my hand up for her.

"You got that from punching some guy named Adam," Jessica looked a little confused but then she wouldn't know who Adam was.

"He was in the bar last night?" I arched an eyebrow which was a major accomplishment.

"No, he was out in the parking lot picking up a friend when Rasul and Eddie were carrying you outside. Apparently Adam brings out your inner Hulk and when he started talking crap about Sookie you went batshit and knocked out his front tooth." Jessica explained and then pursed her lips.

I knocked out Adam's front tooth? Dammit, why didn't I remember this? Figures I'd finally get a chance to slug the asshole and I wouldn't have any memory of it. Maybe I'd get lucky and find the whole encounter on the surveillance camera.

"So how did I get home? And why are you here?"

"I drove your car and Rasul followed behind me?" Jessica suggested sheepishly.

"*You* drove my car?" There were only two people I *ever* let drive my car and one of them I was related to by blood. The other was probably just finishing up her shift at a diner across town.

"Well, Rasul was going to bring you home but then he wouldn't have had a way back to the bar to get his own car and go home. So I said I would drive your car and help him bring you inside. When we got here you started dry heaving and I didn't want to leave you alone so I told Rasul I'd call my brother to come pick me up from here. When you calmed down from that you got it in your head to go over to Sookie's and yell at her for dating someone else but I stopped you from doing that before you made a fool of yourself." Jessica told me.

"And how did you do that?" I found it hard to believe a girl as tiny as her was physically strong enough to stop me, whether or not I was drunk.

Jessica blushed until her cheeks were the same shade of red as her hair. "Thank God you can't remember this," she muttered quietly before saying, "I flashed you."

My eyes went wide and Jessica looked away from me quickly. Alright, so maybe memory loss wasn't such a bad thing after all. Don't get me wrong, Jessica was a pretty girl and if she were five years older I'd definitely be interested in her. As it was, she was too young for me. Sookie was young enough. I didn't need high school drama being brought into my life. Nor did I need her nutter parents filing statutory rape charges against me.

"Interesting method," I smiled at her. "For what it's worth, I really don't remember."

"I only did it to get your attention. I know there's nothing between us," Jessica said quickly.

"Jessica, it's okay," I would have laughed if it didn't feel like there were elephants learning to Irish clog dance in my head.

"Good, because I don't want you to think that I was trying to pull any funny business."

"I get it, Jessica, and I appreciate you doing what you did. Going over to Sookie's would have been a mistake." That was the first time I said her name out loud—that I could recall- since we broke up.

"I know it's none of my business and you probably don't want my advice, but can I say something?" Jessica asked nervously.

"Sure," I shrugged, figuring I didn't have to take anything she said seriously but it couldn't hurt to hear it.

"It's okay if you miss her. Most people are probably telling you to move on and let her go but it's not that easy when you really love someone. Letting go is a hard thing and you have to make that decision over and over again everyday. There's no statute of limitations of grief, Eric. Take your time. You'll know when you're ready to move on," Jessica advised. It was a very astute observation for someone so young.

Emma had said something similar when I was in Chicago. Luke had passed out early, leaving Emma and I to play cards in the living room. We stayed up until the wee hours of morning talking about all sorts of things until finally she got the courage to mention Sookie. Being that she didn't know either of us very well it was nice to get an objective third party opinion on things. She remained neutral on the situation but had sympathized with me for having to make such a difficult decision.

Truthfully, I didn't want to break up with Sookie. I wanted her to break through whatever it was that was holding her back. I wanted the girl I knew she could be if she could just let go of her past. But I didn't want to date Bill's ghost and I didn't want her to constantly be waiting for me to become someone like him. I knew if I ever met the douche bag, I'd have no choice but to kill him. He had done some terrible things to Sookie and even if she didn't want to admit it, she was broken.

I didn't know if I should feel sorry for her new boyfriend or not. Sookie was pretty good at hiding her issues. But that wasn't my problem. What Sookie did with her life from now on wasn't my concern; except I wanted it to be my concern. Like it or not, I was still in love with her and I suspected I would be for a very long time.

"I think that's the worst part of a breakup," Jessica said and then sipped her coffee. "Everyone expects you to just get over it like it never happened. Especially if you're the one to do the breaking it's like people think you were already over the relationship before you even ended it and that's just not true."

"It's definitely not true," I agreed with her.

I debated internally over whether or not it was a good idea to discuss the details of my relationship with Jessica, given the things she had done in the past. I didn't want her to do something crazy like key Sookie's car or break one of her windows. Jessica had seemed normal enough lately but the fact that she had, at one point, been capable of acting out made me cautious about what I said to her.

"Even though I wasn't supposed to, I had a boyfriend when I was sixteen. He was everything to me and when things ended I was devastated. My friends told me if I gave it enough time it wouldn't hurt so much and eventually, he would just be this guy I loved once a long time ago. "

"How's that going?" I asked her, even though I was pretty sure I already knew the answer.

"I definitely haven't hit eventually yet. There's a part me that hopes I never do. First love is a powerful thing. I think it's meant to stay with you your whole life," Jessica shrugged and drained what was left in her coffee cup.

"I don't think that only applies to first loves. I think anyone who has a big impact on your life is someone you're going to have a hard time getting over when things end, whether it's a breakup, a death or simply because you drift apart. It's impossible to go through life without someone leaving their footprints on your heart."

Jessica put her coffee cup in the sink and brought back the pot to refill my mug for me. She had just opened her mouth to speak when a horn honked in the driveway. My eyes went to the window only to be reminded the shades were still down to keep me from looking at Sookie's house like some level 8 creeper.

"That would be my brother," Jessica put the coffee pot back on the burner. I watched her pull on her shoes and zip up her coat.

"Thank you, Jessica," I said genuinely as I stood up. "I appreciate you staying and making sure I didn't make a complete fool of myself."

"It's not a problem. I told my parents I had a project to work on that needed to be finished by the time we got back from winter break, so they think I spent the night at a friend's house. I'll see you at the office later," Jessica smiled as she pulled open the door.

I surprised myself by giving her a hug before sending her on her way. I was tempted to tell her to take the night off but I was pretty sure she wouldn't do it. Once I was sure she was safely in the brother's car I closed the door and leaned against it. My stomach was still unsettled and I was exhausted. A nap was definitely in order before work.

**Chapter 36: Sympathy for the Martyr**

Chapter 36: Sympathy for the Martyr

**SPOV**

Christmas in Louisiana never sounded so good to me after making the mistake of looking out my living room window in time to see Eric hugging Jessica goodbye. I didn't know if I should be heartbroken or irate at what I was seeing. Was he sleeping with her? I knew it was none of my business but she was still technically a child.

*No, there's no way*, I told myself while I paced the living room. Eric hadn't always made the best decisions where women were concerned but I knew he was smart enough not to get involved with a girl almost ten years younger than him. She was still in high school, for fuck's sake! If he had worried that *I* was too young for him there was no way he slept with Jessica.

But then what the hell was she doing leaving his house at one in the afternoon, with her uniform on and and hugging him on top of it? I couldn't spend too much time thinking about it, even if my gut was screaming at me to go over to his house and give him a piece of my mind. Instead I cranked up the country music I knew he hated and considered opening my windows just so he'd hear it. But that would be passive aggressive and I sincerely doubted he gave a shit what I was up to. He had been avoiding me just as much as I had been avoiding him.

Considering we lived right next door to each other, we'd done pretty well. My only contact with him had been a thank you note I'd left in his mailbox for shoveling my steps. He hadn't acknowledged my note but I wasn't expecting him to. If there was one thing I knew we had in common it was that we didn't like to share our grief with others. We preferred to deal with hard times in our own way and without the help of others. He might be putting on a face that said he didn't care but I doubted that was the truth.

I certainly wasn't fine. Even though dinner the night before with Alcide, Angie and Eli hadn't been a double date, the experience proved to me I wasn't ready to get back out there yet. I needed to focus on myself for a while and get my shit together. I needed to keep working, going to school and working things through in therapy. Those were the things that mattered at the moment, and all I had time for.

When I decided I had spent enough time pondering what Eric was up to, I threw in a load of laundry and hauled out my school books to get some homework done before class. I was leaving for Louisiana in three days. I needed to pack and clean my house before I left. Even though I wasn't going to be home for the holiday, I put up a Christmas tree. It would have felt too weird without one.

By the time I needed to leave for class I'd finished two loads of laundry and got half of a research paper written I'd been working on for weeks. It was a productive morning. I had one more session with Ethan before heading back to Louisiana for the holiday and I was looking forward to it. I debated over whether or not to mention what I had seen when I went for my session but decided if there was ever an appropriate place to bring it up, therapy was it.

**o.O.o.O.o**

Three days later I was in Louisiana, waiting at the curb outside the arrivals terminal for Amelia to pick me up. I was shocked when it wasn't Amelia's little sports car that pulled up, but my brother's shiny pickup truck. I sucked in a deep breath and held it for a minute, unsure of what the hell was happening.

The last time I saw Jason was when I sold the house to Amelia for a dollar and Jason had been none too thrilled to see me. He'd called me a few times since then but I always let the calls go to voicemail. Whatever Jason wanted, I wasn't interested in helping him. Lord knows he was never willing to lift a finger to help me when I needed it, unless he had some sort of self-serving ulterior motive, or was expecting a reward for his help.

"What are you doing here Jason?" I asked when he climbed down from his truck.

"I'm your ride," he said as if I should have known already.

"Uh, no, *Amelia* is picking me up. How the hell did you even know I was going to be in town?"

"Word travels and Amelia has a big mouth," Jason shrugged and reached for my suitcase but I jerked it back.

I would have chastised him for insulting my friend but he didn't say anything that wasn't true. All the same, I wasn't happy about him taking Amelia's place, or thinking I would just get in a car with him after the way he acted the last time we saw each other.

"I'd rather take a cab," I glared at him.

"Sookie, I called you at least a dozed times to apologize for the way I behaved last time I saw you. I had no right to act that way and I'm sorry I was an ass," Jason sounded like he was genuinely sorry but I knew him better than that. He was angling for something; I had no doubt about it.

"I appreciate the apology, Jason; I'm just not sure I believe you. I know I don't trust you and it's going to take a lot more than an apology for me to even think about forgiving you."

"I'm not asking you to forgive me. I just wanted you to know that I'm sorry. I was hoping we could talk on the drive back to Bon Temps," he reached for my bag again.

I sighed and thought about the fact that he was all the family I had left. Gran had always told us to turn the other cheek when someone did us wrong. I just never imagined I would have to do that with my brother so often. How many chances was I supposed to give someone who constantly let me down?

Eric's face flashed in my mind. He'd given me plenty of chances until he couldn't take anymore. But I knew I would do just about anything to get one more chance from him. Maybe the key to getting myself in order was attempting to patch things up with my brother. As reluctant as I was to agree, I handed over my suitcase to Jason.

"Don't drive too fast," I said as he put my suitcase in the back of his truck.

"Yes, Miss Daisy," he said in that charming way of his before opening the passenger's side door for me.

Jason was patiently waiting for a break in traffic so he could pull away from the curb. It was a nice change of pace from his usual style of just assuming everyone would get out of his way because of the size of his truck. He waited until we were on the highway to start talking which was a brilliant tactical move on his part. It wasn't as though I could hop out at a red light if I didn't like hearing what he had to say.

"I know I screwed up, Sook. And I know Gran would be ashamed of my behavior. It was Gran's choice to leave the house to you and I had no right to try and interfere in that. I'm sorry I hurt you and I'm sorry I wasn't a better brother. After everything that happened with Bill, I should have had your back better," Jason sounded genuine in his regret.

"What happened with Bill wasn't your fault, Jason."

"I could have done something, Sook. Instead I went about my own business and didn't really bother to challenge you when you said you was doin' okay. I knew you weren't okay but I…" he trailed off.

"Where's all this coming from, Jason?"

"It's a long story but I got to talking to Amelia and she told me you've been having a hard time lately. She said you and that guy you brought down here last summer broke up and it didn't end easy," Jason supplied with a sheepish glance in my direction.

"No, Jason, it didn't end easy. I dragged it out for longer than I should have," I was referring to my stubborn opinion that I didn't need help.

"You got Gran's stubborn streak, Sookie. It can be a good thing but it can be a real bad thing, too. I don't know what all reasons y'all had for splittin' up but I'm guessin' it had more to do with you bein' stubborn than anything else," Jason guessed.

"Something like that," I had no idea my brother knew anything about me, other than I had inherited Gran's house and I was younger than him.

"I'm not fool enough to think just an apology and a single conversation can fix a lifetime of bad behavior but I'm hopin' you'll give me a chance to be the brother I always shoulda been."

Well knock me over with a feather. Did Jason Stackhouse finally remove his head from his ass? I was guarded, of course, and wishing I could talk to Ethan because I knew he would guide me through the tangled web of thoughts I had where my brother was concerned. On one hand, I wanted to give him the chance because we were family. On the other, I felt like I was setting myself up for disaster.

"Jase, I'm gonna need some time to think it over. I appreciate you apologizing to me but anytime you ever did in the past it was because you wanted something from me, whether it was an alibi, money or someone to smooth things over with a girl you wanted to date," I looked over at him as I spoke.

'Date' was an acceptable term if you used it loosely. For Jason, 'dating' meant a beer, or six, at Merlotte's before taking the girl out to his pickup truck and praying to God the birth control didn't fail. I hated to think how many women he'd slept with already in his relatively short life. Even worse, I hated to think how many women he had conned me into talking him up to.

"That's fair. I think I earned your hesitation," Jason was clearly disappointed but he wasn't going to throw a fit like he usually would when I didn't give in right away.

"I really will think about it," I reassured him.

He nodded and said, "That's all I can ask for."

We rode on in silence for a few miles with each of us thinking our own thoughts. There was a part of me that felt awful for even needing to consider whether or not I could have a relationship with my brother. But like he said, there was an entire lifetime of bad blood between us. It was hard to imagine a relationship where Jason wasn't using me for one thing or another. My entire life he made me feel like I was a burden to him for one reason or another. When we were little it was because I wanted to be his friend and do the things he did. I didn't want to be shunned simply because I was a girl and younger than him.

He treated me like I was this barnacle that was attached to him against his will. As we got older and it became obvious just how different we were, I was labeled this goody-two-shoes who got all of Gran's praise while he was left to be berated and admonished. Of course, he deserved every single one of Gran's lectures but he put the blame on me for being *too* good. He often said that if I'd get into trouble once in a while the stunts he pulled wouldn't seem so bad. It was a ludicrous theory but one he stuck to vehemently.

Then when things didn't go his way after high school that was somehow my fault as well. How, I have no clue, but he made sure I knew he blamed me for his failures. It seemed to escape him that we had grown up in precisely the same circumstances. I had my own failures to contend with but I didn't blame anyone for my shortcomings.

Even my problems with Bill I learned I had to take responsibility for. Yes, Bill had treated me very badly but I had let him. I knew I was in a fucked up situation but I stayed. I was still trying to work out the reasons why I stayed for as long as I did. I was starting to think maybe it was because I had been trained by my brother to think that was the sort of treatment I deserved. I was so used to being treated badly by Jason that maybe I started to think that was the way all male/female relationships were. It was a theory I would have to run by Ethan when I got back to Michigan the following week.

By the time we arrived in Bon Temps it was close to supper time and I was anxious to see Amelia. As meddlesome as she could be sometimes, I knew I owed her an apology for not listening to her. She had been going through a hard time of her own the last time I saw her and still she had reached out to me. I'd known she was right with all the things she said but I didn't take her seriously. I had stupidly assumed things would just blow over, or work themselves out.

The truck hadn't even come to a complete stop when Amelia was running off the front porch to greet me. I jumped down from the truck, thankful it was a few degrees warmer in Louisiana than it was up in Michigan, and gave her the biggest hug I could remember. Without meaning to, I started crying and I knew by the time we pulled apart she had done the same. She tucked some of my hair back in her motherly way and smiled at me.

"You look better," she pulled me into another hug.

"I feel better, Ames," I squeezed her right back.

"I hope you're feelin' hungry, too, because I have enough food in the house to feed a small army," she warned.

"Tray certainly can eat," I nodded.

"Jason, are you coming in?" Amelia offered, which surprised me even though it probably shouldn't have.

"Nah, it's alright. I'll come by on Christmas Eve, if that's right?"

"Fine by me," Amelia looked in my direction.

"That'll be fine, Jason," I nodded.

"Good. Y'all have fun then," Jason handed me my bag and then got back in his truck.

"So, since when are you buddy-buddy with my brother?" I asked Amelia as we walked into the house.

"Sookie, my dearest friend, this is a story you're going to love," Amelia winked at me.

**o.O.o.O.o**

It turned out Jason had gotten himself tangled up in a drunk and disorderly fiasco after having a few beers too many at his favorite watering hole. He got into an argument with a few other rednecks from the next town over. The owner of the bar had to call for police assistance and since Jason was the instigator of the argument, he was the one that got hauled in.

The officer who processed him in was a pretty blonde girl by the name of Brooke Peterson. Jason must have fed her one hell of a line because he had a date with her by the time he was released from the drunk tank the next day. Maybe it was just a case of the planets aligning but it seemed Jason and Brooke had crossed paths at the exact right time.

In addition to being a rookie police office for Renard Parish, Brooke was also a former beauty queen from a town just north of Ruston. She was a church going gal my Gran would have approved of. Brooke was tough as nails and didn't take any of Jason's nonsense. Because of her, he quit drinking so much and she was the only woman he'd been seen with since the beginning of August.

I got to meet Brooke when she came by the day after Christmas to have lunch with Jason and me while Amelia and Tray were out doing whatever it was they were up to. I liked her a lot, but then I liked any woman that could put my brother in his place with little more than a glare. As far as I knew my Gran was the only woman who had been able to do it in the past. Brooke was smart, easy to talk to and wasn't completely enamored with my brother. She spoke of his flaws as easily as she did his strengths. I was glad to see she didn't have blinders on, or she'd be in for a rude awakening when the honeymoon ended.

Jason decided he wanted to go for a walk through the cemetery that adjoined the property to visit Gran and wish her a belated merry Christmas. I walked between the two of them, trying to ignore the bitter chill in the air. Brooke, it turned out, had a grandfather who was buried in the cemetery. So while I had a moment alone with Gran, they went off to visit her grandfather.

Don't get me wrong, cemeteries can be really creepy but I'd always liked them. Maybe it was because I'd grown up so close to one. I didn't see them as spooky or haunted. I liked to think Gran could hear me anywhere I tried to talk to her but it was nice to have somewhere to go when I wanted to feel close to her again. I was crouched down, just finishing up my prayers, when I heard a voice coming from behind me that I hadn't heard in a few years.

Bill. I froze for a moment, unsure of what to do next. Was it better to just stay low and hope he didn't notice me, or should I stand up straight and tall and confront him head on? The sassy side of me wanted to let him have it with both barrels for mindfucking me the way he did. On the other hand, there was still that weak girl inside me that he had battered down so badly she didn't know how to speak.

"Sookie," he said from behind me. "Is that you?"

*Please, dear Lord, give me the strength to deal with this fool*, I silently prayed before standing up and turning around. He looked about the same as the last time I saw him, only he wasn't balls deep in some cheap slut. Instead he was dressed in his usual khaki pants and layered Henley with a leather jacket over it. His sideburns had grown out a little more and given that he was almost thirty, they looked a little ridiculous.

"Bill," I nodded, not planning on saying much.

Really, what was there to say? He was never going to apologize to me for the damage he'd done or the way he hurt me. What would an apology really do for me anyway? It wasn't going to change what happened in the past; it wasn't going to make me feel better about any of it. And frankly, I wouldn't believe a word he said so it was best if he just moved on.

But since things never went the way I wanted them to, Bill started a conversation about his fiancé and how lovely she was. He told me how she came from a family with good breeding that was worthy of him. She had a good job and didn't rely on him for every little thing she needed. He threw in all these subtle barbs that would have made me angry if it wasn't so pathetic.

"Even after all these years, you still get off on putting me down," I shook my head with a smile. "Well, Bill, it sounds like you found yourself a winner. I wish you the best of luck in your upcoming nuptials."

Bill looked shocked, to put it nicely. He really was expecting me to get jealous! What a douchetard. In that moment I hated myself for ever seeing anything of value in him, but then I changed my course of thought. Hating myself was what got me into the mess I was in to begin with. I decided to focus on the positive and instead decided I was proud of myself for walking away when I did instead of letting Bill knock me up and put a ring on my finger.

"What about you, Sookie? Where've you run off to?" Bill glared at me.

I shrugged and said, "That's not really any of your business. The important thing is I'm happy where I'm at."

"Are you dating anyone?"

I arched an eyebrow. It wasn't any of his business but I was curious to see what his reaction would be. "Not at the moment. I was seeing someone for a few months but we're not together anymore."

Bill snorted and said, "Figures. I told you no one else would put up with you."

I wanted to punch him right in the balls, and maybe if I hadn't heard Jason and Brooke coming back, I might have done just that. Instead I took a deep breath, smiled faintly and said, "It was nice running into you again, Bill."

I started to walk away but he grabbed my arm. He'd done that a time or two when we argued back when we were dating. He'd never struck me, although, bruises were bruises. I tried to jerk my arm away but all that did was make him tighten his grip. Since I took that as a threat, I decided it was acceptable for me to defend myself.

One of the first things I'd done after Bill and I broke up was take a self-defense class with Amelia. With the angle I was at, I distracted his attention by stomping on his foot, which threw his weight forward. I used a quick hip roll to toss him onto his back and knock the wind out of him. He stared up at me with wide, shocked blue eyes. Clearly he wasn't expecting the new and improved Sookie Stackhouse who wouldn't be taking any of his shit.

"Sookie, what's going on?" Brooke called out as she and Jason came jogging toward us.

"Son of a bitch!" Jason snarled when he saw who I was standing over.

"Sookie and I were just having a conversation," Bill said as he got up off the ground and started brushing dead leaves, twigs and whatever else from his clothes and hair.

"Uh huh," Brooke looked him up and down, probably sizing him up.

"I don't really see how it's any of your business," Bill snapped at her.

Mr. Too Big for His Britches got the shock of a lifetime when Brooke produced her badge and opened her jacket to reveal she had her service revolver holstered at her shoulder. She probably wasn't supposed to be strapped when she was off duty but no one in the area was going to rat her out. More than that, most people probably wouldn't try to cross her.

"How about y'all tell me why I saw this one get flipped through the air like it was a human coin toss," Brooke suggested.

"Bill and I were talking. I tried to walk away and he grabbed me. When I tried to get free, his grip got harder and so I stomped his foot and flipped him on his back." I said simply.

"She attacked me!" Bill argued like the bitch he was.

"I have bruises on my arm, I'm sure," I began to remove my jacket.

"Don't worry about it, Sookie," Brooke pulled her cell from her pocket.

"Who you callin'?" Jason asked.

"Bud. I'm off duty but I'm sure he'd love to come on down here and sort this out," Brooke shrugged.

"Good! I want to press charges," Bill said smugly.

Jason started to charge at Bill but Brooke and I got in his way. "He's not worth it, Jason, believe me," I looked over my shoulder at Bill as I said it.

"Whore," Bill muttered under his breath.

"Sookie, why don't you go on back to the house while we wait here for the Sheriff?" Brooke suggested to me.

"I want her arrested for assaulting me!" Bill glared at Brooke.

"Oh please," Brooke rolled her eyes. "You're taller than her and outweigh her by what, fifty pounds? Besides, what I saw wasn't you being assaulted, it was her defending herself. I know the difference between an attack and self-defense. You're just lucky I don't turn the other way and let Jason kick your ass. So why don't you calm your tits and save your storytelling for your attorney because I'm not interested."

Did I mention I really, *really* like Brooke?

**Check out our lil Sookie here, kicking ass and standing up for herself. That's a pretty huge step for her, in my opinion. Slowly but surely she's getting her ducks in a row. In case I haven't mentioned it yet, this story is winding down. I'm thinking it'll be complete by chapter 50. I'm currently working on chapter 44. Thanks for reading!**

**Chapter 37: LoveGame**

Chapter 37: Love Game

*Five Months Later*

**SPOV**

My first semester of grad school was finally finished. It was harder than my undergrad work, but it would be worth it in the end. I was still going to therapy but I was able to cut back to just once a week somewhere around Valentine's Day. I was getting closer and closer to finding the right balance and putting my past behind me.

The confrontation with Bill in the cemetery at Christmas had been a big deal for me. The Sookie of a few years prior would never have been able to stand up for herself the way I did that day. Bill was the one who ended up getting arrested for assault. Between Brooke's account of what happened, my history with Bill and the fresh bruises on my arm, Bill didn't have a leg to stand on. He was only given probation but I was able to get an order of protection against him.

Not that I was worried he'd track me to Michigan but I figured it couldn't hurt to have that piece of paper. There was a part of me that wondered what Eric would do if Bill actually *did* show up in Michigan. Dating or not, I was sure Eric's reaction wouldn't be favorable. There was no way those two would ever go for a beer together, that's for sure; unless it was Eric breaking a bottle over Bill's head.

Being Eric's next door neighbor was a double edged sword. Seeing his house was a constant reminder of two things: one, therapy was worth it, and two, I had hurt someone I loved. I'd be lying of I said there weren't times when I watched his house, hoping to see him. He managed to stay pretty elusive to me, even though I knew there were plenty of times we were both home at the same time.

There were things I wanted to say to him but I wasn't sure how, and even more than that, I wasn't sure if he wasn't to hear it. Gran always said it was never too late to apologize for something you've done wrong. That was probably true, but I figure at some point it becomes more about one person's guilt than it does anything else. I felt like my guilt was my own problem and it wasn't fair to go hurling that at Eric.

I spent time with Angie and Alcide and made a few other friends as a result of it. I saw Pam once at the grocery story. She was checking out organic greens in the produce section. She looked the same as she always did and I kept my head down while picking my bananas. Running into Pam was awkward for me since there was the desire to ask how Eric was doing. I also felt like I owed Pam an apology for hurting her friend, although I was pretty sure she didn't want to hear it.

I made the trip down to Chicago at the beginning of April for Laura's bridal shower. I hadn't seen her since just after the New Year when I went to lunch with her, Emma and Angie. I'd spent some time talking to Emma and without me having to ask, she told me Eric was doing well. I was both relieved and a little sad. It's not that I wanted him to be miserable, but there was a part of me that wanted to know he wasn't quite over me yet.

Mostly, I wondered if he was dating someone else. I didn't know what to make of what I'd seen that morning he hugged Jessica goodbye. But then Jessica came into the diner I worked at the week before Laura's bachelorette party with some of her friends. It was just before lunchtime on a Saturday morning. Just my luck, she was seated in my section. She startled when she saw me, although I'm not sure why she was shocked to see me standing there waiting to take her order.

"Sookie, hi," she said nervously, her eyes darting around the restaurant.

"Jessica," I nodded, trying to keep my attitude in-check.

"I didn't think you'd be here," Jessica drummed her thin fingers against her menu.

"Yep, I'm here five mornings a week. What can I get y'all to drink?" I asked and then wrote down their drink orders. "The soup today is baked potato and chicken tortilla, in case y'all want lunch. I'll be right back with your drinks."

I went and retrieved their drinks. Conversation ceased when I got back to their table and put their drinks down. They said they needed a few more minutes so I went about checking on other tables to give them more time. I tried to ignore them as much as I could since I didn't really want to hear their conversation. They were seated at a table between two rows of booths and while I was taking an order at one of the booths, I overheard Jessica talking about working at Loki's.

"Your boss is so hot, Jess," one of the girls said and the other girls agreed quickly.

"Does he have a girlfriend?" another girl asked.

In my peripheral vision I saw Jessica turned her head toward me just a little bit and I *know* she looked right at me. But then she said, "No. He dumped a girl a few months ago."

If I were a bigger bitch I would have served her a freshly sneezed on stack of pancakes. Instead, I took comfort in knowing her immaturity was the one thing preventing her from ever being anything more than Eric's friend or employee. I decided right then and there that if Eric really did have sex with Jessica, I never wanted to know about it.

**EPOV**

I was doing inventory behind the bar when Jessica came in for her shift. In the months she'd been working for me, she had become a valuable asset to the business. With Pam doing more and more work to get her own club off the ground a few miles down the shore, I was relying on Jessica a little more every day to make sure things were getting done.

I taught her how to do inventory and some of the other necessary paperwork for the bar. I would have had her mixing drinks if it wasn't illegal. She was graduating from school in two weeks and I planned on changing her job title to an assistant manager. She had long since paid off the damage she had done to my car and I knew she was looking for a place to live. Last I heard she was going to be moving into a small house with a friend of hers.

"Hey boss," Jessica set her bag down on the bar.

I looked at my watch and said, "You're earlier than usual."

"I know. Aren't you supposed to be on the road to Chicago right about now?"

"I leave in two hours. I wanted to make sure this was done first."

"I know how to count, Eric," Jessica was sounding more and more like Pam every day, did I mention that? "Go have fun with your brothers."

"I will, don't worry," I smirked over my shoulder.

Because it was Jake's bachelor party there wouldn't be any strippers involved. First of all, Jake didn't think there was anything all that sexy about seeing a naked woman he wasn't involved with; which, quite frankly, I agreed with. After a while, boobs are just boobs. And really, boobs lose some of their appeal if you can't touch them. The wildest Jake ever got was playing poker for something more than pennies. He was a great instigator but he never wanted to be the center of attention. Interesting he would choose to become a lawyer, huh?

"I saw Sookie today," Jessica said casually.

I figured she had to have been spotted before and no one bothered to mention it, but Jessica was the first person to say something about it to me. I'd caught glimpses of Sookie now and then. It was unavoidable since we were neighbors. I'd see her taking out her garbage or sweeping her deck. I didn't talk to her though.

Frankly, I didn't know what to say, which was rare for me. Usually I always knew what to say. With Sookie, it was different. She wasn't just the girl next door and it wasn't like our friendship just faded away. I'd thought she was the one. When I thought about how excited I'd been to see her at the start of the previous summer, my chest started to ache a little.

Sure I'd been a horny bastard in need of a little TLC Sookie style, but it wasn't just about the sex; I really liked being around her. Just being her friend was pretty awesome. The sex was just the best signing bonus a guy could ask for. I'd put a lot of thought into what went wrong in our relationship. Blaming Sookie for its demise was the easy thing to do. It was easy to say it was all her fault for not being able to trust me, or tell me what was going on in her head when she got distant.

I wasn't opposed to giving her space to figure things out when she got jammed up. Everyone operated differently. Some people were better at jabbering on and on until they unfucked whatever was wrong in their brain. Then there were other people, like Sookie, who were better at figuring things out on their own. The problem was that Sookie just wanted to sweep it under the rug like it never happened.

It was the pressure she'd put on herself to try and be normal when she clearly needed help that had killed our relationship. I knew breaking up with her was the right thing to do. I didn't doubt she loved me, not one bit. The problem was that we were both miserable. Relationships aren't supposed to make you miserable. It was getting so I wasn't looking forward to being around her anymore. I was starting to get bitter, where she was concerned, and I wasn't okay with that.

I didn't know what she was up to or who she'd been spending time with, and I didn't ask. It was better not knowing what her life was like without me. I wanted her to be happy, of course, but I didn't want to know the details. Jessica, however, seemed intent on telling me about her encounter.

"She cut her hair," Jessica offered.

I kept moving like it was nothing, but I winced internally at hearing that. I loved her hair. She knew I loved her hair. I couldn't even count the number of hours we'd spent laying in bed together and I'd twirled those strands of golden silk around my fingers. I loved the way it felt, the way it smelled and the way it seemed to form a curtain when she was on top of me; it felt like a shield from the rest of the world.

"She seemed to be doing well though. I didn't really get to talk to her but-"

"Jess, you have to stop. What Sookie's doing in her life isn't my business anymore," I said without looking up from my count.

"I'm not suggesting you run over to her house and have coffee, or anything, but don't tell me you don't think about her."

"Yes, I think about her," I admitted.

"You know, it wouldn't the craziest thing in the world if you two became friends."

"I don't think that's a good idea," I sighed and wrote down my count.

"Maybe you wouldn't be such a grouch all the time," Jessica said while pouring herself a ginger ale.

I glared up at her which only made her smile. She had definitely been taking lessons from Pam when I wasn't looking on how to be a pain in my ass. I'd come to learn Jessica wasn't so bad, which was part of the reason I wanted to promote her. She was responsible, smart and sort of like the bratty little sister I never wanted.

My *actual* baby sister was adorable and just shy of her three month birthday. She had inherited the same blonde hair as her brothers, but we suspected her eyes would change before she reached her first birthday. The night before I'd gotten an email from my mother full of pictures of Samantha. Little Samantha was going to be spoiled rotten before she turned five. It would also be amazing if her big brothers didn't scare away every single date she ever had since any one of us was old enough to be her father.

"I'm not a grouch; I'm overworked and under rested," I grumbled quietly.

"This is why you should stop with the inventory and head down to Chicago. Pam and I can handle the bar for the weekend, Eric; we've done it before," she reminded me.

I had to remember to make sure not to have Jessica on Pam's shifts anymore. Pam preferred being on at night, though, and that was when the tips were better. Pam was also usually busy during the day overseeing the construction and whatnot for her club. So far, so good.

"Fine," I knew Jessica was going to keep harping on it. For being nearly ten years my junior, she had the ability to sound like a nervous mother when she wanted to. "It's all yours."

"Thank you," Jessica took the clipboard from me. "Have fun with your friends. You deserve a night off once in a while too, you know."

"Yeah, yeah," if I weren't such a perfectionist, taking time off would have been much easier.

**o.O.o.O.o**

Six hours later I was down in Chicago, drinking a beer on Luke's couch while he put together a playlist on his iPod. Jake and a few of his friends were coming over to Luke's to play poker until we could coax Jake into going to a bar. Emma was in the bathroom putting on her makeup and getting ready to go out with the girls for Mini's bachelorette party.

When she walked into the room wearing a snug black dress and heels high enough I wondered if she needed a permit in order to wear them in public, I had a hard time keeping my chin off the ground. Seriously, my brother was a lucky fucker. Emma had a way of always looking classy, no matter how sexed up her outfit was. I suspected it was more about the way she carried herself than the clothing she chose.

Much to my surprise, Jake called just after Emma left to tell us there had been a change of plans. He no longer wanted to sit around Luke's apartment playing poker. There was a bar he wanted to try out in a different part of the city. Luke and I couldn't have been more on board with that idea and had shots ready by the time all the guys showed up at the apartment.

After a couple of shots and a toast to the end of Jake's life as a single man, we headed out to a bar called Bull & Bear. When I saw that the bar had taps built right into the table, I was sold. The seven of us guys sat down together at a table and had a mini keg of our choice installed in under the table.

We were on our second mini keg and dancing like fools with random hot girls when everything seemed to stop. The crowd parted and there she was. Sookie was standing just a dozen feet away and it was obvious she was as shocked to see me as I was to see her.

*Well this just got interesting*, I thought to myself about three seconds before I started to panic.

**The plot thickens. Will they talk, or will they avoid each other? I know a lot of you are looking for a resolution to the angst and I promise you it's coming. It's just not logical to rush through the healing process here, at least in my opinion. So things WILL get better, it's just going to take a few more chapters before we really start to see some improvement. It's all about baby steps right now. Thanks for reading!**

**Chapter 38: Holding Onto You**

Chapter 38: Holding Onto You

**EPOV**

Five months had passed since I got a clear look at her in that diner, laughing with the tattooed guy. I felt the same rush in my chest I always felt when I saw her. I wasn't sure if that was a good thing or not. There was a sense of relief at seeing her and at the same time, I was nervous. Making eye contact meant I was going to have to talk to her or, at the very least, acknowledge her in some capacity.

For a minute I tried to convince myself I was just seeing things; it wasn't really Sookie I was seeing. Maybe it was just a mirage brought on by one too many beers. The problem with that theory was I'd only had two beers since arriving at the bar and it would take much more than that for me to hallucinate her presence. My mind raced while I tried to figure out what the appropriate course of action was.

Should I talk to her or should I wait for her to approach me? That question was answered when she started in my direction. I looked around, hoping there would be someone else nearby she wanted to talk to. No such luck. Would it be bad form to chug what was left of my third beer? What was it about her that turned me into an insecure teenage boy whenever she got close?

Why, after all the time that had passed and the things we had said to hurt each other, did she still have so much power over me? *Because you still love her, you asshole*, that evil little voice in my head told me and I knew it was true. Even with everything that happened, I still loved her. I probably always would. More than that, there was a part of me that would always wonder what might have been.

"Hi," she said shyly when we were just inches apart.

"Hi," I nodded and sipped my beer. Sipping was acceptable; chugging was not.

"You look good," she smiled at me.

"So do you," I smiled in return but it didn't feel genuine.

I took in the subtle changes she'd made in her appearance. She was missing at least six inches of hair but it wasn't as short as I feared it might be. Her tan had faded a little since the fall and she looked like she'd lost about ten pounds. I wondered if she'd lost the weight on purpose or if it was because of stress. I knew she tended to lose weight when she was stressed out. Even if I wasn't reaping the benefits of them, I enjoyed her curves and I knew she did, too.

Her smile faded and she leaned in to ask, "Do you think we could maybe find a quieter spot to talk?"

Being that we were in a crowded Chicago bar on a Saturday night, the likelihood of that happening was slim to none. The quietest place we were going to get was the table I'd occupied with the boys before Luke starting pouring shots down Jake's throat and Jake decided he wanted to become the dancing queen he was singing about. Seriously, my little brother is a fruity bastard. All the same, the night wasn't about my baggage with my ex; it was about Jake.

"I promise I won't take up too much of your time. Besides, the girls want to go to some dueling piano bar in a little while anyway. Laura just wanted to drop in and check on Jake," Sookie had to stand on her toes to speak in my ear so I could hear her.

Her breath on my neck was familiar and torturous. I felt all the same instincts I did in the past when she got close to me. I wanted to find a dark corner and do all sorts of dirty things to do her than an ex-boyfriend probably shouldn't want to do. The ache in my chest was starting to kill me and the tightening in my jeans wasn't much more fun. It was probably better if I just walked way from her but I couldn't do that.

"We've got a table over there," I pointed to where our table was.

"Great. Lead the way," she looped her arm through mine and the contact was agony.

We moved through the crowd together with my arm bumping and brushing against the swell of her breast. We sat across from each other in the booth. She was dressed spectacularly in a red dress I'd never seen before. She was stirring what I suspected was a gin and tonic, easy on the gin. Sookie looked well rested and less burdened than when we broke up. The Sookie I'd seen last was cold and pretty detached emotionally. The Sookie sitting in front of me seemed warm and open, a complete change from the woman I had broken up with months before.

"So, how's life?" I asked her once we were settled.

"It's good. There have been some rough days here and there. The first few weeks after we…I was a mess for a while," Sookie leaned down to take a drink from her straw. I had to force myself to look away when her lips wrapped around the plastic tube. Damn memories were majorly fucking with my head in a bad way.

"And now?"

"I miss you," Sookie confessed without being at all embarrassed or ashamed of her admission. "When we broke up the hardest part was losing my friend. I'm not proud of myself for the way I treated you, Eric. You did everything you could have done to help and I just…I wasn't ready to deal with things. It took losing you to realize what I had and I'm so sorry for everything I put you through. I wish I could go back and do things differently."

How was I supposed to react to that? Was I supposed to tell her it was okay; that we both had things we needed to work on and breaking up had been the right thing? Was it acceptable for me to tell her I'd hated for her for a while, that she had hurt me more than I thought any one person could ever hurt me? In the end, I decided being diplomatic was the best way to go. I was past wanting to see her hurting as much as I was.

I knew there had to be words to say but I couldn't think of what they were. I had questions, of course, but could I really ask any of them without being too intrusive? And did I really want to hear the answers anyway? Yes, I wanted her to be happy but I didn't really want to hear she was dating someone else. I wanted to know if she got professional help for the problems she had but I didn't want to make her feel bad if she wasn't doing that.

Ultimately, I felt awkward, which was something I wasn't used to feeling at all, and especially not around Sookie. But then our go-to for awkward moments was ripping each others clothes off and fucking our brains out. As much as I may have wanted that, and my cock was sure I did, it wasn't going to happen.

"I know there isn't really anything I can do to make the way I behaved okay. I just want you to know I regret it. It wasn't fair to you," Sookie said kindly.

"It wasn't fair to *us*," I corrected her. "The way you were…it didn't just affect me; it changed our entire relationship."

"I know, and I'm sorry I was so…inconsiderate and stubborn. It took a lot of therapy for me to make some connections in my head that I just wasn't getting before."

"You're in therapy?" I was both impressed and relieved to hear it.

"I started out going twice a week," Sookie nodded and finished her drink. "I only go once a week now, but it's been good for me. I figured out that it's nice to have someone to talk to that can be objective and doesn't gain anything from me getting better."

"You know I wanted you to get better for *you*, Sookie."

"You wanted me to get better for *us*," she gently corrected me.

"I did," I agreed.

"You don't have to answer this if you don't want to but I'm going to ask anyway just for my own peace of mind," Sookie tucked some of her hair behind her ear.

"Ask away."

"I freely admit that by asking this I am completely pathetic but it's something I've been wondering about since we broke up."

"Sookie, you're stalling," I smiled at her. It was actually kind of adorable how shy she was being about asking me whatever it was she wanted to know.

She took a deep breath, blew it out and then cursed herself for finishing her drink so quickly. "Do you ever miss me?"

"All the time." I didn't even have to think about it. "It's easier now than it was five months ago but there are still times when I feel an urge to call you, or something funny or awesome happens and my gut says you're the person I should be sharing it with."

I could have kicked my own ass for saying all that. I meant every word of it, but actually saying it to her probably wasn't smart. How could hearing something like that help her move on? I really needed to knock it off with the drinking; it wasn't helping me get my shit together.

You know what else wasn't helping? Sookie was tearing up and I knew she started crying I was in deep shit. It was always my undoing. Slowly her lips curved up into a smile that was both beautiful and heartbreaking with the shine of unshed tears in her eyes.

"So you don't hate me then?" she sounded genuinely concerned.

"No, Sookie, I don't hate you. It was never because I hated you," and that was the truth. After we broke up I'd had my moments when I thought I hated her, but hating her wasn't why we broke up. "We broke up because we were both miserable and nothing was changing."

"And we didn't really know how to talk to each other," she volunteered. I hadn't given it much thought but I knew she was right. "If we weren't fighting with each other we just pushed all of our problems away and had sex instead."

Hearing her mention sex wasn't at all helping me not think about it. Having her so close and memories of all the things we'd done together was a bad combination. I knew myself well enough to know I would be able to justify any moves I made on her if I wasn't careful. That evil voice in the back of my head told me I was entitled to 'goodbye sex,' or maybe 'closure sex,' but I knew that wouldn't solve anything. In fact, it would probably just make things worse. It would undo all the months of trying to get over her I had under my belt. I couldn't go through it all again.

Thankfully, Luke appeared and plopped down next to Sookie in the booth. I sat quietly while the two of them made small talk and got caught up. Over Valentine's Day Luke and Emma had gotten engaged. He had been reluctant to call me and tell me about it since I was still struggling with getting over Sookie. I was happy for him though. I liked Emma a lot and thought she was good for Luke. It was obvious he was happy, just as it was obvious Emma adored him.

"Dude, we're out of here in ten minutes, so wrap it up," Luke warned me and gave Sookie a kiss on the cheek before getting up. "And you," he pointed to Sookie. "Don't be a stranger. Just because this fool let you go doesn't mean we can't still be friends."

I wanted to junk punch my brother. I'd get him later when he was too wasted to know what the hell was going on. Sookie gave me a pained look before promising to keep in touch with my brother. I didn't mind if they were friends. At least that's what I told myself. I knew Sookie was still friends with Laura and thanks to the wedding; she'd spent plenty of time with Emma as well.

"I can't believe he'd engaged. Emma is *so* not like Dulcie," Sookie laughed quietly.

"No, she's definitely not. I like her though. I think she's good for Luke. It's like with Jake and Mini, you know? Emma makes Luke more normal," I smiled at her.

"Maybe that's why it's a good thing we aren't together anymore; I never made you normal, I just made you miserable," Sookie pursed her lips.

"That's not true," I argued quickly since it wasn't. "Our relationship wasn't all shit, Sookie. If it was I wouldn't have fought for you as hard as I did."

There were those damn tears again. She squeezed her eyes shut for a few seconds before getting up from her side of the booth. She leaned over me, looked me in the eyes and said, "I'm sorry I didn't fight harder for you. You deserved better than what I could give you. You still do."

Before she could say anything else Emma appeared to pull her away, "Hey, Eric!"

"Emma," I nodded and waved.

Sookie looked over her shoulder at me as Emma pulled her into the crowd. I didn't want her to go but I couldn't help feeling just a little bit better. We weren't there quite yet, but maybe, just maybe, we could somehow find a way to be friends in the future.

**SPOV**

I walked away from Eric, unsure how I felt about the conversation we just had. In some ways it felt like a weight had been lifted from my shoulders. Hearing that he missed me had an unexpected affect on me. Yes, I was happy to hear he missed me. I was glad to know it was a mutual thing. But then I realized he never asked if I missed him and my heart sank.

Either he didn't care how I felt or he was over me completely and had moved on better than I had been able to. I'd moved on in some ways, but not like I probably should have considering we'd been broken up for almost six months. That was a long time to be holding onto someone who didn't want you anymore. What was worse was that I knew I still loved him and probably always would.

The kind of love I felt for him had shifted some and more often than not when I thought of him, I did so with a heavy heart. I had major regrets were he was concerned and I was pretty sure if it weren't for my stupidity, we would still be together. It was gracious of him to suggest the breakup wasn't entirely my fault, but I didn't have any blinders on. I knew I was mostly to blame for the demise of our relationship.

But therapy had also taught me a valuable lesson in that dwelling on my past wasn't going to change it. Things that had happened had already happened. It was my history but it was up to me to make my future. I didn't have to be that girl anymore and I started to wonder if Eric was always going to see me as that bitch that broke his heart, or if maybe someday he would smile when he thought of me.

Maybe someday we would actually get to the point where we could be friends. It was a relationship we hadn't pursued in the past. We went from mutual nuisances to fuck buddies to a couple. Of course friendship was a part of being a couple but we had never been just friends. We'd never gone out to dinner where there wasn't a kiss at the end of the night. We never went to a movie without holding hands. And then, of course, there was the sex, which was had become an integral part of our relationship.

It seemed unfair that he looked as good as he did, even with that shocked look on his face when his eyes first registered that he was seeing me just a few feet away. I hadn't planned on seeing him that night. Laura told me the boys were doing their own thing, playing poker over at Luke's. But then at the last minute Laura and Jake ended up getting in some stupid fight and she decided she wanted to go make up with him before his brothers talked him into doing something stupid.

Eric looked pretty much the same as I remembered. He was dressed the same, probably wearing a pair of jeans I'd seen a hundred times. He paired it with a slightly see through charcoal gray v-neck and his hair had grown out just a little bit. As usual, it was his eyes that drew me in. I had yet to find that exact shade of blue anywhere else. When I got close to him the smell of his cologne sent my memory into overdrive.

I remembered how when we first broke up I could smell him on my sheets. Rather than snuggling in them until the smell went away, I'd considered burning them. I only washed them, but still…the smell hadn't provided me with any sort of comfort. I had never tried to fool myself into thinking Eric was going to change his mind. I knew him too well for that.

I knew he didn't let people into his life easily, and he forced them out even less often than he let them into it. It wasn't as though the breakup had come from out of nowhere. The problems had been piling up and there had been signs we weren't going to last. Sleeping in Eric scented sheets would only be torturing myself, like some sort of bizarre punishment for my sins. Stripping him from my life was the best thing for me.

"Sookie, are you okay?" Emma asked gently as we walked toward the door of the bar.

"I'm not really sure how to answer that," I sighed and tried to give a hopeful smile.

"Do you want to talk about it? I'm a pretty good listener," Emma offered.

It was sweet of her to offer and she was an objective third party to the situation but I didn't want to bring her down. We were supposed to be celebrating the fact that our friend was getting married, no rehashing my conversation with my ex-boyfriend.

"I appreciate the offer. If we weren't in the middle of Laura's bachelorette party I would definitely take you up on it," I assured her with a bigger smile.

When I looked over my shoulder one last time to see Eric still sitting in the same booth with his eyes trained on his beer, Emma leaned over and said, "I think he still loves you."

My head whipped around and I felt a small ache in my chest when I said, "Maybe he does, but it's not the same anymore."

"Of course not," Emma put a comforting hand on my shoulder. "But that's a good thing. You've both grown in the last six months."

I couldn't argue with that. Well, at least where I was concerned, I couldn't argue with that. I just smiled at Emma and followed her out of the bar. Laura was already out in the limo we'd hired. She was dressed in pink from head to toe—literally, since her Louboutin pumps were pink as well- and she'd even clipped pink extensions into her hair. She had a goofy bridal tiara with a veil on it on top of her head. She was wearing a bride-to-be sash and had a bachelorette button stuck to her chest. There was no doubt she was about to get married, as if the big diamond on her finger didn't already give it away.

"I saw you talking to Eric," Laura said once Emma and I were in the limo. "He never fucked Jessica."

My mouth dropped open since I didn't even know she knew I thought he did. I started to ask but she held up her hand to stop me from talking.

"I subtly brought it up to Luke when he and Emma were over for dinner one night after he mentioned something about Eric promoting Jessica at the bar. They're not fucking, Sookie. He hasn't slept with anyone since you broke up." Laura revealed with slightly slurred speech.

Emma winked at me, leaned over and patted my knee. "See? He still loves you. Don't give up, Sookie."

The encouragement was sweet, I guess, but nothing Eric had said led me to believe he wanted to get back together. Eric wasn't one to hide how he felt. Then again, we'd had a hell of a time getting our shit together the previous summer. Did he want to get back together and just didn't know how to tell me? Or was I right in thinking he had moved on?

The not knowing led me to drink way more Long Island Iced Tea than I intended to. When I woke up the next morning I felt like shit and there was a stinging pain on my right ankle. I rolled onto my side very carefully, trying to shield my eyes from the little bit of light that was filtering in through the big windows in the living room.

I sat up slowly and propped my foot up on the coffee table to look at my leg. On my right ankle there was a brand new tattoo of the Swedish flag. My mouth dropped open and I stifled the scream that was threatening to wake up the whole house.

Out of nowhere, Laura appeared with two steaming mugs in her hands. She handed one to me and pointed to my ankle before saying, "When you got that you said if you couldn't have a Swede *in* you, you wanted one *on*you."

*Oh. My. God.* "Fuck my life," I muttered covered my face with the hand that wasn't holding my salvation.

**Thanks to the shiny new way we're doing review responses, I can send teasers! So leave me a review, and I'll send you a teaser for the next chapter. Sound good? I am so not above bribing. Do we think there's progress here? I think there was. Even with that epic fail tattoo Sookie got. And the story behind that will be explained in the next chapter. Thanks for reading!**

**Chapter 39: The Hangover**

**Just for the record, most tattoo places won't tattoo you when you're intoxicated because you're more likely to bleed out while tattooing. For the sake of this story, we're saying Sookie was able to get it done. Also, my apologies to anyone who didn't get a teaser. I sent about 50 or 60 of them and then FFN started getting wonky on me. Swear to God, this site has more issues than LiLo.**

Chapter 39: The Hangover

**SPOV**

I was convinced the tattoo had to be someone else's idea, or maybe even a dare. It's not that I was opposed to tattoos or anything like that, but a *fucking Swedish flag*? I berated myself for that for the rest of the day, especially when I learned *I* had insisted on doing it.

"It should be illegal to tattoo someone when they're as drunk as I was last night," I cradled my head in my hands. "I don't even know how to take care of a tattoo," I winced when I touched it.

"Oh it's easy," Emma smiled at me. She was irritatingly *not* hungover.

"You have a tattoo?" Laura arched an eyebrow.

"Yep, I got it while I was on spring break my senior year of college. My mother nearly had a kitten when she saw it," Emma beamed, then stood up to pull down her drawstring pants just enough to show us the tattoo of a honey pot near her hip.

"A honey pot?" Laura couldn't help but snicker.

"Yes, ma'am. You're looking at a lifelong Winnie the Pooh fan," Emma winked, sending Laura into hysterics.

If Ricky Ricardo's band hadn't already been playing in my head, I would have laughed too. As it was, I felt miserable and the tattoo wasn't helping any. Emma told me all I needed to do was keep it clean and moisturized and it would be healed in a few weeks.

"It's going to scab and itch but *do not* scratch it, whatever you do," Emma advised.

"Shit, I'm having this bitch removed as soon as I can," I sighed and hunched over my coffee cup like there were answers to life's biggest questions in there.

"You were pretty gung ho on getting that done last night," Laura pointed to my foot.

"I was drunk," I argued.

Laura shrugged and said, "And we all know the truth has a way of coming out when we're drunk."

"Besides, the tattoo isn't the worst of what you did last night," Emma smirked.

"Oh, God, what else did I do?" I was horrified.

And what the fuck did I drink the night before to make me so reckless? I'd had my fair share of tequila shots in college and I'd never done anything crazy. I remembered splitting some mixed drink that came in a bucket at the bar. I knew I'd had a few gin and tonics, but what the fuck else did I drink?

"Well, after your fourth Long Island Iced Tea," Laura coughed to try and cover up her laugh. "We left Howl at the Moon and ended up running into the guys again."

"Oh no," I hung my head and wished the floor would open up and swallow me whole. "Please tell me you didn't let me throw myself at Eric," I pleaded without looking up at them.

A hand landed gently on my shoulder and my heart sank. Jesus Christ, what was wrong with me? The first conversation Eric and I had in months and I go and throw myself at him like some dumb, drunken whore? Any chance we had at being friends I was sure was gone now. Fuck my life.

"You threw up on him," Emma offered quietly.

"Oh God," I muttered.

"After you showed him your tattoo," Laura told me.

My head whipped up faster than I thought I was capable of given my condition. "*Eric saw my tattoo?"*

"Well, after we left Howl at the Moon you were pretty drunk and emotional over Eric. Then when we were in the limo you saw a tattoo parlor and insisted we stop. We tried to talk you out of it but you threatened to set the limo on fire if we didn't let you do it," Emma explained with a sympathetic smile.

Ugh. I'd hated myself a lot in the past but this was a whole new level of self-hatred. Seriously, what the hell was wrong with me? I could only imagine what Eric was thinking when I showed him the tattoo I got. Way to prove I wasn't a complete nutcase. Just when I thought I was making progress on that front, I went and inked myself for the rest of my life with a reminder of my ex-boyfriend.

"There's more," Laura said gently and I couldn't help but laugh.

"Of course there is," I shook my head gently.

"By the time we caught up with the guys, they were pretty drunk too," Emma looked to Laura, who picked up where she left off.

"We found you and Eric in a booth together," Laura pursed her lips.

"And?" I stared back and forth between Emma and Laura.

"Well, it's amazing we didn't need a surgeon to separate the two of you," Emma patted my shoulder.

"What does that mean?" I was going to throw up; I could feel it building.

"I'm pretty sure you were just making out," Emma said quietly.

"*Pretty sure?*" I could feel something rising in my throat.

"Well, you were straddling him…" Laura said and that was it.

Whatever had risen up in my throat was coming out. Now. I bolted from the couch to the nearest bathroom and emptied the contents of my stomach. Seriously, it was the worst hangover ever.

**o.O.o.O.o**

When I got back to Michigan later that day I was surprised to see Eric was already back. His car was parked around the other side of his house where he'd been parking since we broke up. I brought my bag into the house and then debated whether or not it was a good idea to go over to his house.

Awkward wouldn't even come close to describing what that conversation was going to be like. Regardless of that, I felt like I owed him an apology for what I'd done. Had I been sober, I wouldn't have done it. The fact that I couldn't remember it didn't help matters at all.

Before I could talk myself out of it I walked over to Eric's house. The sun was just starting to set and the colors in the sky over the lake were beautiful. I knocked at the kitchen door but didn't get an answer. I breathed a sigh of relief, but my relief was short lived. When I turned around I saw Eric walking up from the beach.

He stopped short when he saw me but at least he didn't bolt, or turn around and walk the other way. I stepped down off the porch and walked toward him. He stayed right there where he was in the grassy sand with his hands stuffed in the front pocket of the pullover sweatshirt he was swearing. I remembered that sweater well. I'd spent a great deal of time snuggling in it the previous summer when we'd taken that trip up to the cabin in Wisconsin.

I took a deep breath and said, "Emma and Laura tell me I have a lot to apologize for."

"Yeah, Jake and Luke told me the same thing. I don't remember anything." Eric shook his head.

"Me either," I smiled at him.

"Well, I remember that," he pointed to my foot. "It looks good on you."

I cringed and lifted the leg of my jeans just a little. "I don't know what I was thinking."

"From what I understand, we were both extremely drunk. I know I spent the better part of the morning with my head in the toilet, and at Luke's place that's a scary place to be."

I laughed quietly and said, "Well, it wasn't fun but at least it was cleaner at Jake's."

Eric smiled at me and said, "Look, Sookie, last night was…"

"A mistake?" I finished for him.

"Something like that. I'm not really sure what to call it."

"I just wanted to tell you I'm sorry and I know it doesn't mean anything. I meant what I said about us being friends someday and I don't want what happened last night to ruin that. I don't even know if you're dating someone-"

"I'm not," Eric said quickly, which relieved a little bit of the flopping my stomach was doing.

"Oh," I schooled my face before I beamed too much. "Yeah, me either, but still…"

"You're not?" Eric seemed surprised.

"Eric, even if I *wanted* to date someone right now, I've been too busy for it lately with work and school. I've been focusing on getting myself straightened out."

"So you haven't dated anyone since we…"

"No, not at all. I've gone out with friends, but that's it. I've spent a lot of time with Alcide and Angie. Her brother came up to visit a few months ago and we went out with him a few times, but I haven't been on a date since last fall."

Now it was Eric's turn to look relieved. Did he think I was dating someone else? I wondered where he got the idea, first of all, and second of all, did he not want me dating someone else? If I was really honest with myself, I didn't want him to date anyone else either. I knew I didn't have the right but I couldn't help feeling that way.

"Me either. I've been busy with the bar," Eric looked to the west and the setting sun made his skin glow a pretty golden color. "And I haven't met anyone worth it since you."

I sucked in a deep breath. What about Jessica? Did I have a right to ask about that? What could it hurt? I mean, I had a *fucking Swedish flag* tattooed to my ankle and Eric seemed more amused by it than he did creeped out. Still, wasn't asking about his sex life crossing a line I shouldn't cross?

*Fuck it*, I thought and said, "So then you're not involved with Jessica."

Eric's head whipped around and the way his features had contorted and his eyes had gotten darker told me I had definitely crossed a line. He just stared at me with this look of disbelief and disappointment on his face before those emotions morphed into anger.

"She just turned eighteen, Sookie. My standards may not have always been high, but I don't go after high schoolers."

"Eric, I-"

"Don't worry about it. I'll see you around," Eric said and then headed toward his house.

Just when my day couldn't get any fucking worse, it felt like we were right back where we started right after we broke up.

**EPOV**

I plopped down on the couch in my living room. My head was still spinning from the worst hangover I'd had in a long time, and that was saying a lot considering the amount of alcohol I'd consumed in the last few months. Earlier that morning I'd woken up because I had to throw up. I'd just barely made it to the bathroom before I started calling dinosaurs.

Jake was still out cold on the couch in the living room. I had slept in Luke's bed which made me wonder where Luke had slept, but that wasn't important. What was important was finding out that Sookie and I had crossed paths a second time the night before and apparently, on the second go round, we couldn't keep our hands off each other.

It wasn't really all that surprising, except it left me wondering what the fuck to do about it. We were drunk, so didn't that cancel it out somehow? Don't get me wrong, she looked insanely hot in the dress she was wearing the night before and being close to her was just a reminder of how fucktastic she was in bed, but I had been able to control myself the first time we saw each other.

And the tattoo on her ankle? What the fuck was that about? I wasn't pissed off about it. I mean, it wasn't on *my* body. I just wondered what made her do something like that. She hadn't had the tattoo earlier in the night but just a few ours later she was sporting fresh ink. And maybe more importantly, she was excited about it. At least that's what Luke told me once I was able to stop worshiping the porcelain goddess for more than two minutes.

Not knowing the exchange that lead up to the make out session in some skeevy booth in the back of a club was what was really bothering me. Luke had no idea what we'd said to each other to get to that point. All he knew was what he saw when he and Emma went looking for the two of us. We were caught grinding on each other in the booth and I knew Luke was telling the truth when I saw Sookie's lip gloss smeared all over the side of my neck.

But that wasn't even the worst part of my day. I had waited in my house for Sookie to get home for as long as I could stand it before restlessness completely took over and forced me out to the beach. I knew I needed to talk to her; I just wasn't sure what the right thing was to say. I didn't remember much of what happened the second time we met, aside from the tattoo and the fact that she was as drunk as I was by that point.

I had been hoping she would be able to fill in some of the blanks for me and I was surprised, but happy, to see her standing on my porch. It struck me how much I missed seeing her standing there. My house wasn't the same without her in it. Seeing her walk toward me for the second time in less than twenty-four hours also got me thinking about the way things used to be between us.

I sometimes wondered if maybe we never really had a chance because of the way we started out. I overheard people talking at the bar all the time and they all seemed to say the same thing; friends with benefits just doesn't work. Someone's feelings always get hurt because that no strings attached idea is perfect in theory but doesn't translate well into reality. I'd come to realize Sookie and I had fallen into that trap.

It was my feelings that had changed so drastically and I wasn't even sure when it happened. Hearing her ask me if I was involved with Jessica pissed me off for several reasons, but mostly it made me think she never really trusted me like she had once claimed to. If she believed me when I told her I wasn't interested in Jessica, then why would she think I'd date her after we broke up? It just didn't make any sense.

I knew the smart thing to do was just leave it alone, but I couldn't do that. Instead I marched myself over to her house and banged on the glass until she came to the sliding door in her living room. She had obviously been crying which took some of the wind out of my sails. I was a sucker for those tears, even though I should have been immune to them.

"Eric, I-"

"No, I'm talking now," I cut her off. "I don't know why I even care, but I do. I'm not interested in Jessica and I never have been. I don't owe you any explanations for what she was doing at my house, but believe me when I tell you we did *not* sleep together. It bothers me that even after all this time; you still think I wasn't being honest with you. Did you *ever* trust me, Sookie?"

She brushed at the few tears that had fallen while I rambled like a lovesick jackass. Maybe Sookie wasn't the only one who needed to be in therapy. I really shouldn't have given a flying fuck about what she thought of me. It shouldn't have mattered what she said, but it did. Her opinion still meant something to me. Even more than that, I still cared about her feelings.

*Because you're not over her*, that evil little voice in my head reminded me.

"I'm sorry, Eric. I had no right to ask you that question. And to answer yours, yes, I did trust you. The reason I thought you were seeing her is because one morning just before Christmas I saw you hugging her when she was leaving your house. She was still wearing her bar uniform and I thought she had spent the night with you. I got the wrong idea and I apologize. I didn't mean to offend you; I was just curious like you were curious about me," Sookie spoke as calmly as she could for how upset she was.

"Oh," was all I could muster just then. There was an awkward pause before I said, "Jessica *did* stay the night at my house but it was because I got really… she babysat me, basically. She wanted to make sure I was okay, but nothing happened."

Sookie nodded slowly. She didn't look relieved or anything. In fact, she looked pretty blank. "Who you date, or if you date, isn't my business anymore, Eric. It's hard for me to say that but it's the truth. You don't need my blessing for anything. I want you to be happy, even if it's not with me."

"Do you mean that, or are you just saying it because it's the noble, polite thing to say?" I arched an eyebrow at her.

"Both," Sookie admitted with a small smile.

"That's fair," I nodded.

We stood there staring at anything but each other for a minute. I kept telling my legs to move but they just wouldn't go. It almost felt like we were magnets sometimes, the way we were simultaneously attracted to, and repelling each other. *Where can I go when I want you around, but I can't stand to be around you?*

**A weekend with the Viking to anyone who can tell me what song I quoted in the last line of this chapter. Alright, sooo...here we see they can argue, but confront their issues in a more direct manner than they did in the past. That's a pretty big improvement, and we'll be seeing more of that ahead. Also, I think I'm going to have to write a more in depth outtake of what happened during the bachelorette party since it sounds like Sookie was having a hell of a time. I wanted to get this chapter written for progression's sake, and not so much for the comedy factor. Lots of ground to cover and little time to cover it, don't ya know? I think I'll be posting another chapter later on tonight, but I'm not sure yet. Reviews equal teasers because I'm just that awesome. Thanks for reading!**

**Chapter 40: This Love Will Be Your Downfall**

Congrats to **Cutiekins** who was the first to guess the song. It was "Moving Pictures" by Fall Out Boy. I'll spare you my rant where that band is concerned, but I'll just say I miss the FOB from before "Infinity On High." That said, on with the show...

Chapter 40: This Love Will Be Your Downfall

**SPOV**

I sat in Ethan's office spilling my guts about what happened at Laura's bachelorette party. Well, what I could remember of it anyway. The whole thing left me feeling rather confused. Mostly, I was tripped up over the random making out. The tattoo was obviously something I wouldn't have done if I was sober, but the kissing…that was another story.

"I shouldn't want to kiss him anymore, but I do," I admitted to Ethan.

"Who says you shouldn't want that?" Ethan asked in that nonjudgmental way of his.

"We broke up," I shrugged like that should explain everything.

"True, but does that mean the attraction goes away?"

"No, but it means I should stop acting on it, doesn't it? The difficult part is that I don't know exactly what happened. I don't know if I was the one who initiated it, or if it was Eric. All I know is that seeing him again brought back a whole mess of feelings I wasn't prepared for. As long as I don't see him, I feel as close to okay as I'm going to get. I don't know how to be his friend, and I want to be."

"Did you talk about that with Eric?" Ethan asked.

I nodded and said, "I did tell him I wanted us to be friends; I just don't think we're quite at that level of healed yet. At the same time, I feel sort of pathetic for holding onto him like he's still a boyfriend."

"What do you think is the statute of limitations on grieving?" Ethan asked me.

I sighed and said, "I know there isn't a time limit, but it just feels like it should be easier by now. It's frustrating."

Ethan didn't usually give me his opinion on things. He preferred to ask me a series of questions to let me figure out for myself how I felt, instead of telling me how *he* saw things. In this instance, however, he changed tactics and told me what he thought.

"Sookie, from everything you've told me in the last few months you've made it pretty clear you never wanted to break up with Eric. You had a disconnection between your head and heart somewhere, but it was never because you weren't in love with Eric. To me, it is very clear you love him deeply. The breakup wasn't a mutual decision; it was Eric that did the breaking. You aren't wrong to feel hurt, or maybe even a little betrayed by that. He hurt your feelings and until you deal with that, you're going to be stuck in this same loop.

"Being friends with Eric could be a step in the right direction, but only if you're absolutely sure it's what you want. If you think friendship is all you're capable of having with him, then I would encourage you to work toward that goal. But if what you want is to find a way to repair the relationship the two of you had before the breakup, then that's a conversation you need to have with Eric." Ethan advised while tapping his pen against his legal pad.

"I'm scared," I immediately confessed, but Ethan said nothing. He waited for me to explain. "I know I've made progress and that things could be different between us if we were to try again. I just worry he would always hold my mistakes over my head. I don't hold a grudge against him for all the jealousy and possessiveness he's expressed in the past."

"You and Eric could see a counselor together," Ethan suggested.

I smiled, but stifled the laugh that was building. I didn't think Eric would be willing to see a couples counselor. He was the kind of guy who would want to handle our problems ourselves. Unfortunately, we had proven in the past that we weren't particularly good at handling our own issues. I had studied psychology in college with the hope of helping others with their problems. Of course, that didn't mean I was any good at figuring out my own issues.

It's easy to be an objective third party, but I was biased about my own life. It was easy to make excuses for my behavior, or blame others for my shortcomings. I could blame Bill very easily for why I was so messed up. It was true he had played a significant role in why I had gotten the way I was, but I had ultimately come to understand I had a choice in things. I could let my entire life revolve around the damage he had done, or I could start to rebuild. Blaming Bill wasn't going to fix the problem.

Just like pushing blame onto Eric for our breakup wasn't going to make it any less of a reality. In the end, I had to take responsibility for my own choices. I had stayed with Bill for much longer than I should have. I gave him too many chances. I stayed with Eric because I loved him; I just didn't know how to make myself better. He hadn't broken up with me because he didn't love me, but because he *did*.

I didn't see the breakup as him giving up on me anymore. After getting a little space and perspective, I realized he let me go because the fuckery going on in my own head was leaking out onto him, and it wasn't fair. He was trying to help me but he didn't know how. And because I wasn't willing to make changes, our relationship suffered for it.

I had an epiphany while I sat there thinking over the events that led to my breakup with Eric and I said, "I think I pushed Eric away because I wanted to see if he would have the guts to hang in there with me the way I had hung in for Bill."

"You wanted to test him?" Ethan asked for clarification purposes.

"Something like that. With Bill, it seemed like the more I loved him, the worse he treated me. When I look at the way I was with Bill, I think of myself like an abused puppy. Since my relationship with Bill was the first I'd ever been in, I thought it was normal. When it's the way you're brought up, you don't always know better. I was conditioned to think the way he treated me was the right way.

"Eric was always so concerned about me. I got off on the fighting in the beginning, because it was what I was used to with Bill. The fighting was passionate and always led to really good sex, so it was almost like a Pavlovian response. But when I think about it now, I realize it was just a lot of passive-aggressive bullshit. We never really said the things we wanted to say to each other when we fought. We were always holding back."

I breathed a small sigh of relief, having put a few new pieces of the puzzle together. Communication was a weak point for Eric and me, and I realized trust was a part of that. When I was honest with Bill, I was ridiculed for it, or he would try to talk me out of my feelings. I learned to just shut up and accept things for what they were. So instead of telling Eric when I was angry at him or speaking up when I thought he was doing me wrong, I just let it go.

"And if you could do things differently with Eric in the future?" Ethan shifted slightly in his seat.

"I would trust that he was strong enough to take what I was saying. I would trust that honesty didn't mean he would run away, or make me feel bad for being honest about my feelings."

Ethan smiled at me and said, "Sounds easy, doesn't it?"

I nodded with a small laugh, "It sounds like common sense."

"Common sense, I'm afraid, isn't so common. The important thing is that you're recognizing your patterns of behavior and taking steps to improve your situation, Sookie. Relationships aren't perfect, even under the very best of circumstances."

Shortly after that time was up and I said by goodbyes to Ethan until the following week. Once I was out in the parking lot, I turned my cell phone on and dialed into my voicemail when I saw I had messages waiting. I had to listen to the first message twice, since I wanted to be sure I heard right.

"Hi, Sookie, this is Professor Fant calling. My grant finally came through for the clinic, and I was wondering if you would be interested in taking on a full-time position. Please call me back so we can further discuss this opportunity."

I saved the message to listen to again later, just in case I started thinking I had dreamed it up. Professor Octavia Fant had been one of my favorites. I had learned a lot from her, and I greatly admired her work. Of course, taking a position in her clinic meant moving back to Louisiana, since it wasn't like I could commute back and forth from Michigan.

It was a fantastic opportunity she was offering me. Much like I had no reason to stay in Louisiana the previous summer, I wasn't sure I had a reason to stay in Michigan now. If Eric and I were just going to be friends, I could phone it in. We didn't need to be in the same room together in order for a friendship to work. But could I really be away from him?

Like it or not, there seemed to be this gravitational pull toward him that I had a hard time denying. Every time I got close to him I could see bits and pieces of my future and I figured that had to mean something. At the same time, could I really center my entire life on the possibility that *maybe* someday Eric would be able to forgive me enough to see I had changed, and give me another chance?

Working with Octavia was a sure thing; Eric wasn't. It was a big decision to make, and one I was going to have to weigh carefully. As it was, I wouldn't be able to go back to Louisiana until after the wedding. Jake and Laura would seal the deal in eight days. The jealousy I once felt toward them for being able to get it right was long gone. I realized I had no one but myself to blame for my own misery, and that allowed me to be happy for them.

Eric was just coming back from a run on the beach when I arrived back at the house. He was sweaty and glistening in a very appealing way as he ran toward me, instead of his house. I stayed right where I was, thankful my sunglasses were hiding my very hungry eyes from him. I let myself smile, however, since there was nothing wrong with that.

"Good run?" I asked when he was close enough.

"Yep," he grinned while he stretched.

He had to have known what that was doing to me, yet he kept at it like it was no big deal. I wasn't sure if I hated him right then, or if I just wanted to jump him like no other. Maybe it was a little bit of both. I reveled in the idea that we were having friendly, casual conversation and debated over whether or not to mention the offer I'd gotten from Octavia.

"How was work?" Eric asked me.

I completely forgot I'd been at work before my appointment with Ethan until I looked down to see I was still in uniform. "Oh, uh, it was fine. Tips were good this morning."

"Good," Eric nodded, and then dropped down into the sand/grass to do push ups. Was he serious with this?

I hadn't had sex since I was with him. That was more than six months ago. My body was going a little stir crazy from all the pent up sexual tension and seeing someone I knew could give me what I needed, but wouldn't, was killing me slowly. My frustration level was reaching its peak. No wonder Eric and I had gone at it in the back of the club.

"I did get a phone call from one of my old professors this morning," I figured there was no time like the present to start with the honesty I'd been so skittish about sharing in the past. "She finally got her grant approval for a clinic she wanted to run. She asked me to come work for her."

Eric stopped mid-exercise and stared up at me. The expression on his face would have been entertaining if it didn't give me a relatively clear impression of what he thought of this offer. His face was definitely saying, "Don't go."

What his lips said, however, was, "Are you going to do it?"

"I don't know yet," I shrugged. "It would mean moving back to Louisiana, and I'm not sure if I want to. There's a part of me that misses it there, but I've come to like it here, too. I guess it just depends on where there's bigger opportunity for me."

Eric jumped to his feet, his tall frame towering over me. He stepped a little closer and even though he smelled like sweat and the lake, I couldn't get enough of it. I tried not to pay too much attention to the way beads of sweat were rolling down his bare chest, or how his hair was slightly matted to his neck. It wasn't fair that he looked as good as he did, considering how grimy he was at the moment.

"But you've got a job and grad school here," Eric pointed out.

"Yeah, I do, but I could transfer my credits to another school. I could just keep this place as a summer house," I shrugged again. It probably wasn't right, but there was a part of me that delighted in seeing Eric panic a little at the idea of me leaving. That meant good things, didn't it? At the same time, I didn't want to play games with him so I said, "I haven't made a decision yet, Eric. I haven't even heard Octavia's formal offer."

He nodded and then started stretching his arms out, pulling one, then the other, over his chest and twisting his torso just enough for me to see the clear definition of his abs. Have I mentioned he looked incredibly fuckable?

"If you *did* take the job, when would you leave?" he asked, trying to sound casual.

"I don't know yet; probably as soon as she needed me. It could be in a few weeks, or it could be in the fall," I kept on shrugging since I really had no idea what it was Octavia needed from me.

"So what would it take to get you to stay?"

The question caught me off guard for a few seconds. I thought it over for a minute before saying, "A better offer, I guess."

"Well, no matter what you decide, I hope it makes you happy," Eric said awkwardly before jogging off toward his house.

**Awkward moment is awkward. You'll have to wait until morning to get Eric's side of this conversation. Evil, I know. So, what do you guys think she's going to do? Only a few chapters left until you find out ;) Thanks for reading!**

**Chapter 41: Rolling In the Deep**

Chapter 41: Rolling in the Deep

**EPOV**

It never ceased to amaze me how easy it was for Sookie to make my heart stop. Just looking at her could cause it, but hearing her say there was a possibility she was leaving made it worse. I tried to look at it from her perspective, since it seemed she was being offered a great opportunity. While it was true she'd built a life for herself here, it wasn't like she really had much of a reason to stay.

Was that why she was telling me about this before she had all the details? Did she want me to talk her out of going? I didn't like that my brain automatically went to a manipulative place. She hadn't said anything to make me think she was waiting for me to stop her. In fact, I knew her well enough to know that once she'd made up her mind about something, she would go balls to the wall with it.

When Sookie set her will in any particular direction, trying to stop her was like trying to stop a speeding train. She was relentless in her pursuits when she wanted to be. It was a trait I admired, since it was a rare thing. She was the first person I ever met who matched my stubbornness when I became determined to do something. Even though that same stubbornness had backfired in my face a time or two, it was something I was thankful to have.

I left her standing there on the driveway between our two houses before I could say something I would regret later. I knew I didn't want her to go; I just didn't know why I wanted her to stay. Was it fair to ask her to stay just because I didn't want her to go? Since when was I so fucking diplomatic and noble anyway?

Being with her had changed me. Before her, I wasn't the jealous caveman type who was willing to club any guy who got near the woman I was with. I didn't have this possessive streak that threatened to smother her. I wasn't a lovesick jerk off who spent far too much time rehashing the past and the things I could have done differently to ensure the survival of the relationship I was in.

While there wasn't much to be gained from the previous "relationships" I'd been in—besides orgasms- at least I didn't spend hour after hour second guessing every fucking decision I made. With Sookie, I analyzed every decision, every fight and every single tear she had shed on account of me. Never before had I cared enough to want to make someone happy, much less want them to stay with me.

I wanted her around, even if it was just on the periphery. But even that wasn't the whole truth because the fact still remained that I loved her. The love hadn't gone away. But if she was leaving, was there a point in telling her I still loved her? She said she wanted to be friends, but she hadn't said anything about wanting to get back together.

"We were never really good at communicating," I heard her say in my mind as I started the shower.

When I stepped under the spray, I closed my eyes and thought of all the times I didn't say what I wanted to say. Was it too late to say those things now, or was now the perfect time to say them? Then again, did I want her to regret not taking an opportunity because she was banking on us working things out instead?

It was all one big mindfuck that left me craving two fingers of single malt scotch. I was still distracted when I got to work an hour later, despite my best efforts to get my mind on other things. Pam was in my office, sitting behind my desk and crunching numbers on the ancient adding machine she refused to get rid of. She was under the impression that since it was 'vintage,' it was too good to throw away.

"You look like shit," Pam said after barely glancing at me.

"Shouldn't you be of scaring the designers at your own club?" I retorted.

Pam had decided to name the club Raven, since she had chosen a darker theme for it, and it was also a play on her name. Pam had gone with a black and metallic décor. There were clean lines everywhere, which was about as far away from the interior of Loki's as a person could get. I hadn't put much into decorating the bar, since I figured I'd be having tourists coming in off the beach. Why bother with fancy floor treatments only for them to be scuffed and covered in sand?

Raven wasn't the kind of place you could walk into wearing just a bikini or a pair of swim trunks. For starters, it would only be open after 8 pm during the summer season, and there was definitely a dress code there. Pam was far more formal than I was when it came to things like that. While I preferred not being a tourist hotspot, I couldn't deny I had seen a significant increase in profits the previous summer with the addition of live music. The tourists ate up the local talent. Who was I to deny them what they wanted?

"Not today. Today the walls are being upholstered in the VIP room," Pam informed me.

"Which one?" I snorted, since Pam had three different VIP sections.

"Silver. Bronze was done last week and we're still waiting on gold for next week."

"No platinum?" I teased her.

"Fuck you," Pam sneered and went back to her work.

"Alright, Pammy, I'll bite," I sat in the chair across from my desk. "What's got you more pissed off than usual?"

"You're going to have to find another date for your brother's wedding next week. My parents have decided they want to come for a visit that weekend and they are demanding I be here for it," Pam informed me.

Ah ha, that explained a lot. Pam had as good a relationship with her parents as, say, the Menedez brothers did with theirs. Pam had done a great many things to defy them just from spite, and in turn, they had cracked down on their already very conservative views and restrictions. They didn't approve of Pam's lifestyle by any means, regardless of how successful she had become. All they saw was missed opportunity and disappointment when they looked at her.

"Why do you let them get to you so much, Pam?" It was probably a stupid question since the answer was slightly obvious, but I asked anyway since Pam was more robotic than she was emotional. Unless, of course, she was bossing everyone around; then she had all sorts of emotions she couldn't wait to lob at others.

"Because, numb nuts, they're my parents. Regardless of how much I despise their politics, or their narrow-minded view of the world, deep down there is a little girl that wants their approval." Pam said in a shockingly honest fashion. "Not all of us grew up in the After School Special you did."

"Pam, my family was hardly perfect," I shook my head.

"Comparatively speaking, your family may as well have been the Waltons, or something," Pam waved me off.

"You realize that show was set during the Great Depression and World War II, right?"

Pam narrowed her eyes at me in one of her death stares and said, "My point is, you always stick together. No matter how badly you fuck up, you've always got your brothers and your mother ready to jump in and help you out of your problems. I've always had to dig myself out my own shit storms until I met you. You're the closest thing I've ever had to family, Eric."

I would have been touched if Pam didn't sound so bitter over it. Frankly, I couldn't blame her. Pam was, in a lot of ways, the sister I never wanted. Since she was an only child, I didn't know how she felt about not having siblings. Being an only child, from all I could tell, made a person more susceptible to being selfish and self-centered. Having two brothers around who were always willing to burst my bubble and remind me my shit *did* stink was a good way to make sure my ego never got too big.

With Pam, however, her needs were the only ones her parents had to focus on. The sad thing was I think they were more concerned about what *they* wanted for Pam than what she wanted for herself. My father had told me after I graduated college that all he ever wanted for me and my brothers was for us to find out what we were passionate about, and build our lives around it.

"Whether it's collecting stamps, building bird houses, pruning trees, reading comic books, saving lives, music or a woman, make your life about that thing you love more than anything else. You'll know you've found what you're looking for when it's the first thing you think of when you wake up in the morning, and the last thing you think of before you go to sleep at night," Dad had once advised me.

If that was really true, then the thing I was most passionate about was currently considering relocating to her home state. All she needed was a better offer than the one she was being given. *The time to hesitate is through*, I told myself. If I wanted Sookie back, I needed to make a move before it was too late.

**o.O.o.O.o**

Later that night Jessica and I were cleaning up after we closed the place down. The bartender I hired to replace Sam after his last sojourn to wherever the hell it was he disappeared to was working out well. He was reliable and he got along well with the customers. Usually it was his responsibility to tidy up the bar but he'd asked to leave early because he had a christening to go to in a few hours.

"I think I found an apartment," Jessica revealed while she wiped down the bar.

"Oh yeah?" I said as I put away glasses.

"Yeah, it's just off the highway. It's small, but it's enough room for me since I'll be by myself," Jessica tossed her rag into the dirty pile at the end of the bar.

"You've given up on the roommate search?"

She shrugged and said, "I think living by myself is the right thing for me right now. I want to go to school and keep working here. I don't need a bunch of loud, messy roommates trampling in and out of the house at all hours of the day. Besides, I get more than enough noise here. I want my house to be quiet."

I couldn't agree with her more on that front. I hadn't talked about it with my brothers yet, but I assumed they wouldn't be coming up for the summer the way they had in previous years. With Jake and Mini tying the knot in just a few days and Luke and Emma planning their own wedding, it just didn't seem like I was going to have a full house like I did the summer before.

I was used to an empty house, and yet, the idea of it staying that way made me a little sad. Just a year before I had thrived in the silence my house provided. Now I dreaded going home, knowing I was going be there by myself. What's worse was Sookie was just across the way, alone in her house as well. I liked to think she was just as lonely as I was, but I knew she had friends. I knew she went out and she had a life that didn't revolve around replaying our past together.

"Be careful what you wish for," I warned Jessica, who just gave me a grim smile. "What? Why are you smiling at me like that?"

Jessica just kept smiling but didn't say anything. She shook her head and went around the bar to get her purse. "You're both going to be at your brother's wedding. Why not just ask her to be your date?"

"I don't think that's a good idea," I sighed and started washing glasses that didn't need washing.

"You still love her; don't even try to tell me you don't. It's obvious the way your face changes anytime someone mentions her around the bar. Why not try and work things out with her?" Jessica asked.

"Because she has things she needs to work out without me getting in the way. Besides, she might be going back to Louisiana," I shrugged while I kept washing.

"So you're throwing in the towel then?" Jessica leaned against the counter next to the sink.

"No, I'm not throwing in the towel," I said bitterly.

"That's what it sounds like. Look, Eric, it's really simple. If you love her, then that's all that matters. You'll figure out a way to make things work. But if you don't love her and you're just holding on because you're afraid to let go, then you're just making yourself miserable. Personally, I think you still love her. And what makes you think she's going back to Louisiana anyway?"

"She told me earlier she got a job offer to work with one of her professors. Apparently, it's a great opportunity to do something she's always wanted to do. Who am I to stand in the way of that?"

"You're a chump if you just let her go," Jessica argued. "Look, the way I see it, I would rather make a decision with all the facts presented to me. If I was still in love with someone and there was a chance we could work things out, I would take that chance in a heartbeat. At the very least, I would want to know I had that option available to me. Don't go making decisions for her because *you* think it's what's best. Sookie has her issues, but she's not a moron. Let her decide for herself what she wants," Jessica advised and then slung her purse over her shoulder.

"Hey Jess," I said as she was walking toward the door. She turned just a little to look back at me. "You want to be my date to Jake's wedding?"

Jessica smiled at me and said, "That sounds like a terrible idea. I don't think Sookie likes me very much."

"She doesn't have to. You've been a good friend. I don't need her permission. Besides, we're just going as friends. I think we'd have fun."

Jessica thought it over for a minute before she asked, "Are you using me to make her jealous?"

My brows furrowed and I said, "No, that's not why I asked you."

"Are you sure about that? If I was Sookie, that's what I'd think."

"Yes or no, Jessica? Pam was supposed to go with me but she had to cancel. If you don't want to go, I'll find someone else."

Again, she thought for a moment before she nodded. "Fine, but I'll only go under one condition."

"What's that?"

"You tell Sookie how you feel before she makes her decision. It's not fair to her to let her think she doesn't have a chance with you when she does. Don't be a martyr, Eric, be a man." Jessica said bluntly.

I nodded and then went back to washing dishes while Jessica went home. It was time to man up or shut up.

**Alright, I can hear you screaming at me from here. But before you decide that Jessica being at the wedding is the worst idea since someone asked Kate Bosworth to sing in a Cotton commercial (SERIOUSLY, WHY?), just have faith that Mama Bird has a plan. And the new and improved Sookie might just take it better than you think she will. Just breathe with me, baby birds. On that note, I wrote the beginning of the end last night \*tears up\* I think y'all will enjoy it very much. I'm debating over whether or not to post a second chapter today. I also posted a one shot last night called "He Didn't Have to Be," so if you're in need of some super cute flufftasticness after reading all this angst, go check it out. There's a link in mah profile. Thanks for reading!**

**Chapter 42: You Wanted More**

Chapter 42: You Wanted More

**SPOV**

"I can't believe the grant came through," Octavia said with excitement when I called her back the next day. "This is what I've been waiting for since before you even started college."

"I'm very excited for you, Octavia, and I'm honored you thought of me," I smiled at the kitchen wall. I had waited a full twenty-four hours before calling her. I needed time to think.

"Of course I thought of you! Sookie, you were one of my most promising students. You were such an immense help with getting all the grant paperwork and proposals in order, and I know this is a cause that is just as dear to your heart as it is mine," Octavia's voice was thick with emotion.

She was telling the truth. She wanted to open a clinic to help women who were recovering from abusive relationships. She wanted to counsel them not just to heal the emotional wounds left behind, but to help them figure out how they had fallen into the relationship in the first place. Octavia was aware of my past and I knew that was part of the reason she wanted me to work for her. She knew that my firsthand experience with such a relationship could mean the difference between saving a life and a battered woman going back to her abuser.

What most people didn't realize is that physical abuse wasn't just about black eyes, broken bones or the occasional slap across the face. Part of what made the physical abuse so damaging was the mental and emotional abuse that accompanied it. It was the abuser telling a woman she was worth nothing; that no one would ever love her like her abuser did; that without her abuser she would be alone in the world. Most often by the time an abused woman left a relationship, she had been isolated from her family and friends. She would leave feeling like she had nowhere to go and no one to turn to.

There was shame attached with people judging her; all of them wondering why she didn't leave sooner. What most people didn't understand is that it's just not that easy to walk away. If it were that simple, I would have left Bill a long time before I actually did. It wasn't necessarily that I didn't want to leave him so much as I didn't think my life would improve much by leaving.

My self-esteem had been so thoroughly dismantled that I wasn't sure who I was without Bill there to tell me. And while it's true he never raised a hand to me, I still had plenty of scars from the abuse I'd suffered. The worst part of it all was the ripple effect. I wasn't the only person who suffered because of his abuse. I hurt my friends and family by turning my back on them. I hadn't listened to anyone who tried to tell me Bill was bad for me because he had me convinced it was the two of us against the world.

I believed all of his lies and promises. I trusted him with my heart, my body and my life and it was all for nothing. Actually, that wasn't entirely true. I knew there was a silver lining to that very dark cloud because I came out of it understanding I was much stronger than I ever thought I was. I was recovering, but it was a slow process; one that might continue for the rest of my life.

"How soon would you need me in Louisiana?" I asked Octavia.

"I've already got an office space rented and I'm meeting with a designer to decorate in the next few weeks. I was hoping you'd be able to come down for the summer to help me get organized and interview some other counselors. Basically, Sookie, I'd like you to be my right hand here," Octavia told me.

"Professor-"

"Please call me Octavia," she requested.

"Octavia, this is a huge opportunity for me and I want to thank you for it," I said, even though I hadn't decided one way or the other what I was going to do yet.

"Sookie, I'm emailing you a formal proposal. It will include a salary, which is open to negotiations, as well as a general prospectus of what I expect the first year to be like. Please take a few days to think it over and let me know what you've decided sometime next week," Octavia requested.

"I will," I promised her.

We talked for a while about life outside of academia. I learned she was dating a man named Louie. He was a trumpet player in a jazz band. Octavia herself was a survivor of an abusive relationship. Her wakeup call had come when she was seven months pregnant with her third child and her ex-husband locked her in a small closet in the shotgun shack they lived in just outside of New Orleans. He'd kept her in there for three whole days before letting her out.

By that time she was severely dehydrated and starting to have contractions. A week later he kicked her while she was on the porch and she fell down the front steps. She landed on her stomach and went into labor. She gave birth to a baby girl the next day, but the baby's lungs weren't fully developed yet and she'd sucked in some meconium. The baby developed a severe respiratory infection and died three days after she was born.

After that Octavia filed for divorce and reported what her husband had done. Being that he had friends in the police department, not much had happened in regards to her report, but a pro bono attorney had taken on Octavia's divorce case. Two years after Octavia's divorce was finalized, her ex-husband got in a bar brawl that resulted in him being thrown through a plate glass window. One shard of glass was lodged in his spine and the other cut his jugular. He bled out before an ambulance could arrive.

She raised her two children on her own but never remarried. In fact, she was notoriously single, in spite of the number of men who asked her out. She went through counseling and put herself through school. She was hired as a professor just before her fortieth birthday. Both of her sons grew up to be big, healthy young men. Her oldest son was a New Orleans police officer and the younger one was an associate in a law firm that specialized in family matters.

Octavia was a bit of a hero to me for having overcome all she had to get where she ended up. She fought hard to make a better life for herself and her kids. It hadn't been easy by any sense of the word, but hearing Octavia's story gave me hope that someday I would find the thing I was meant to do with my life. She'd been nervous about accepting Louie's invitation when he first asked her out, but it was her sons who had talked her into giving Louie a chance.

I told her about Eric and all we'd been through since I moved up to Michigan the previous summer. I knew if anyone would understand where I was coming from, it would be Octavia. As expected, however, she didn't coddle me when I confessed that I had behaved less than admirably.

"Sookie, we both know it's not easy to put yourself back out there after going through the sorts of things we've both been through, but it sounds to me like you forgot Eric isn't Bill," Octavia said in that motherly tone of hers she sometimes used with me. "Did you ever tell him the jealousy triggers bad things for you?"

"No," I admitted.

"Well honey…" she trailed off with an exasperated sigh. "Just what *did* you tell him about Bill?"

"I was pretty honest. We went away together last summer to try and get a fresh start and I told him a lot of things. It's just…I don't want him to think that *I* think he's like Bill."

"I know what you mean, but don't you think it's confusing to Eric not knowing the whole story? If he can understand why you think the way you think, don't you think that'll make it easier for him to take things in stride when you get upset?" Octavia pointed out.

"Yes," I admitted quietly.

"Sookie, name five of the biggest relationship killers," Octavia asked me like she was drilling me for a final exam.

"Dishonesty, adultery, lack of trust, the past and poor communication," I recited, knowing there were many more than that.

"And how many of those things infected your relationship with Eric?" Octavia asked me.

I thought about it for a minute before saying, "The past and poor communication."

"What about trust?"

"I trusted him."

"Then why didn't you tell him the whole story where Bill is concerned?" Octavia demanded. Damn, she was tougher than Ethan.

"It's not because I didn't trust him," I felt a ball of emotion rise in my throat.

"Then why?"

My voice shook when I said, "Because it's embarrassing, that's why! Because it makes me angry that I ever let anyone treat me that badly, and I knew it was happening and I didn't have the guts to walk away. I wasn't strong enough to tell Bill to fuck off and never talk to me again. I knew what he was doing to me and I just let him keep on doing and it's humiliating."

My anger boiled over and I hurled the phone across the room. I didn't care if it was broken or if my call was disconnected. Throwing the phone wasn't enough and I punched a cabinet harder than I thought I was capable of. Where the sudden rage came from, I wasn't sure. I started thinking about how all of this repressed emotion had cost me someone I loved so much, and I just exploded. I sobbed, screamed and had what my Gran would have called a hissy fit to end all hissy fits.

When I finally remembered the phone, I went across the room to pick up. The call was still connected, amazingly enough. "Hello?"

"Feel better now?" Octavia asked gently. I nodded, not that she could see it. Yet, she somehow knew. "Honey, what you've been through…we both know there's a certain level of responsibility you have to take for it. On the other hand, don't ever let yourself get stuck in the train of thought that you asked for what he did to you. You loved him because you saw something in him worth loving. Your mistake was ignoring all the bad things. You have to forgive yourself for making that mistake. That doesn't mean you forgive Bill."

I knew she was right and I felt a little relief in hearing it from someone else. Until I forgave myself for my roll in what happened to me, I was going to remain in an emotional stalemate. I took a deep breath and said, "Thank you, Octavia."

**o.O.o.O.o**

I was folding laundry and packing for my trip down to Chicago for the wedding when there was a knock on the sliding glass door in the living room. Laundry littered my kitchen table so I quickly swept it into a basket and tossed it into my bedroom before running to the living room to see who was there. I wasn't expecting anyone. Usually the only person who ever showed up out of the blue was Angie, and I knew she was down in Louisiana visiting her family.

I slapped on my emergency smile when I saw Eric standing on my porch. I knew my hair was a mess and I definitely wasn't dressed for company. When I got home from work I'd thrown on a pair of sweats after my shower. I hated smelling like the diner all damn day, so I always showered when I got home from work. Even with the smell of the soap I used, I could almost always still smell the grease from bacon and hash browns, and I was pretty sure my hands would smell like maple syrup for years after I quit waitressing.

I forced myself not to fidget and smooth back my hair like I wanted to. I pulled the patio door open and stepped back to let Eric inside. Having him in my house was something I had missed quite a bit in the last six months and it felt good to know he still felt like he belonged there.

"Sorry I'm a mess," I apologized quickly and immediately wanted to slap myself for calling attention to my appearance.

"Mess looks good on you," Eric smiled easily and my heart did one of those flip-flops it almost always did whenever I saw him. Just how long would it take for that to go away, anyway?

"You caught me while I was doing laundry and packing," I said uncomfortably while stepping backward into the house.

"Oh, sorry. Should I come back later?" Eric offered.

"No, it's okay, as long as you don't mind me folding clothes while we talk? I mean, assuming you were planning on staying a while…" I trailed off, feeling stupider by the second.

"I don't want to take up too much of your time, but there *is* something I wanted to talk to you about," Eric followed behind me to the kitchen.

I retrieved my laundry from my bedroom and set the basket on the table. "Can I get you something to drink?" I asked before I could forget my manners. Honestly, it was also part of a stalling tactic.

"No, thanks, I'm good," Eric braced his hands on the back of a chair.

"Okay," I smiled and reached for a t-shirt. "So, what's up?"

"I was just wondering if you've made a decision about that position you were offered?" Eric asked as casually as he could for someone who looked incredibly nervous.

"Oh, I uh…no, I'm still thinking about it. Octavia made me a really great offer and it wouldn't be just a job to me the way waitressing is, but I'm not sure if I want to take it or not."

"What's holding you back?" Eric asked me, which I was surprised by.

"I guess it feels like I'd be taking a step back in some ways?" I wondered aloud. "I love Louisiana, but it just feels like maybe that part of my life is over. I think if I went back I would feel like I have something to prove and the only person I have to prove anything to is myself."

"But you haven't turned down the offer?"

I shook my head and said, "It's a difficult decision for me, Eric. There's a part of me that says I'd be passing up a once in a lifetime opportunity if I turned Octavia down. At the same time, I sort of wonder if maybe there isn't something bigger and better waiting for me. I'm worried if I take the step back I'll miss it."

We were quiet, each of us lost in our own thoughts for a few moments before I asked, "What would you do if you were me?"

"I'd ask myself if the reward was worth the risk, and whether or not I had all of the facts present and accounted for when making my decision."

"And what facts do you think I'm not considering in all this?" I figured there had to be something I was missing if he mentioned that.

Eric took a deep breath and said, "I've been thinking about you a lot lately. Fuck, no, actually, I never *stopped* thinking about you. I tried and I failed miserably. When you told me you were thinking about leaving it made me realize that I would be really miserable if you weren't here anymore. I thought I needed to get away from you and start a life that you weren't a part of, but I know I'd be really unhappy if that ever happened. I don't know what the future holds for me, or for us, but I do know I want you to be in my future."

I knocked the laundry basket out of the way and sat down in the nearest chair. I didn't know if I was going to hyperventilate, cry or just completely pass out from his revelation. He didn't say he wanted us to get back together, but he did say he didn't want me to go. I was taking fast, deep breaths and listening to the pounding of my heart in my chest. What did this mean, exactly?

"What does that mean, exactly?" I asked him since I wanted to be sure I had all the facts present and accounted for, just like he suggested I should.

"It means I miss you and you're only across the driveway. I can't imagine how hard it would be if you were hundreds of miles away all the time." Eric moved around the table and sat in the chair next to mine. "I know it's a little selfish of me to ask you to consider staying after everything we've been through, but I'm doing it anyway because I know I'll regret it more if I don't."

"Eric, I-"

"Don't. Don't say anything now. Think it over. There's one other thing I wanted to tell you because I don't want you to think I'm trying to be sneaky or mean."

"Okay?" I looked at him quizzically.

"Pam was supposed to go with me to the wedding but she had to cancel because her parents are visiting. I asked Jessica to go in her place," Eric revealed.

I sucked in a deep breath and stopped myself from commenting so I wouldn't say something stupid. Again. "Jessica is your date for your brother's wedding?"

Eric nodded and said, "I swear to you that we're just friends. She's been a big help at the bar and she's grown up a lot. She's worked really hard and she's trying to save up money for her own place. Her family life is…well, her parents are out of their fucking minds, most of the time. She's just a kid and I'm trying to help her get on her feet, that's all. She knows we aren't going to the wedding as a couple. In fact, she told me she would only go with me on the condition that I told you how I feel about you."

"You talked to Jessica about me?" I wasn't sure how I felt about that.

"I talk to Jessica about a lot of things," Eric admitted. "Besides, I'm sure you've talked to Alcide about me."

"Well, yes, but he's got a girlfriend and she's usually present when I talk to him about you," I pointed out.

Eric shrugged and said, "I'm asking you to trust me when I tell you we're just friends. If Pam hadn't canceled, she wouldn't be coming. I just wanted to warn you."

I sighed and said, "I trust you. Besides, it's not really any of my business one way or the other."

"No, it's not, but I want it to be," Eric confessed.

"Eric, do you want us to get back together?" My breath caught in my throat. I'm pretty sure my heart stopped just then because the answer to that question had the power to completely to destroy me if he said no.

He had just opened his mouth to answer when the phone rang. Whoever it was, I was going to kill them.

**Please, please, please don't kill me! I'll do teasers this time since I'm leaving you with a cliffhanger. Just remember if you don't have your PMs enabled, I can't respond to your review. I'll post the next chapter in the morning. Thanks for reading.**

**Chapter 43: Need You Now**

Chapter 43: Need You Now

**EPOV**

Sookie and I both stared at the ringing phone on the counter. Then, almost as if there was an electric current running through her chair, she jumped up and grabbed the phone. She growled in exasperation and pushed a button to ignore the call.

"Sorry," she apologized before throwing the phone into her bedroom and closing the door. "It was my brother."

"I can only imagine what he wants," I shook my head.

"Actually, things are better now," Sookie told me as she took her seat again. "When I went down there for Christmas we talked about a lot of things. He apologized for the way he treated me and he's really tried to stay involved in my life since then. We talk at least once a week and he stopped drinking, which helps a lot."

"Oh, well, that's great. I'm glad he's removed his head from his ass," I smiled at Sookie, whose smile faded a little.

"I guess you could say both of us did that," Sookie looked away from me with a sad expression in her eyes.

"Sookie, I didn't mean to imply I thought the same thing about you," I said sincerely. I really didn't mean to imply anything.

"I know you didn't, but it's still true," she offered me a small smile. "And you don't have to answer that question I asked before we were so spontaneously interrupted."

"Sookie, all I want right this second is to know that I didn't say too much. I know we both agree that communication was a problem before, and I don't know if we'll ever be pros at it, but I'm trying here. I guess I'd rather say too much instead of not enough."

"It's fine, Eric, really. The truth is I miss you, too. And I know if I left, you would be at the top of the list of things I would miss most. In fact, you would be at the top of my list of reasons to stay," Sookie confessed, her eyes cast down at the table like she was afraid to look at me.

I felt the impulse to kiss her, but I kept myself in check. We needed to have a conversation, not a make out session, even though I was sure I'd enjoy the latter much more than the former. At the same time, I wanted to know where I stood with her. If there was even the remotest of possibilities we could somehow put the past behind us and really start over, I came to the conclusion I wanted to take the risk.

The fact that we'd been apart for six months and I still couldn't get her out of my system told me she wasn't just another girl. Hell, I'd known that since before we ever became just a couple. I didn't invite just anyone into my life, but Sookie had somehow just slid right in like she belonged there. Not having her around was a form of torture. It was one thing if I didn't know what I was missing, but I did.

"I really think the best thing is for us to just try and be friends right now, Eric. I still have a lot of issues I need to work out with myself and until I know I can handle it, I don't want to rush into a relationship. Even if there is a part of me that's dying to jump on you right now," Sookie admitted with a flushed smile.

I felt a small victory cheer go on inside of me. But I calmed myself quickly. Jumping on each other had never been a problem in the past. In fact, it was the nearly fatal attraction we felt toward one another that had been a double edged sword. Yes, the sex was amazing, but we had started to use it as a band-aid in our relationship to fix what was wrong. Why have a conversation when we could just fuck each other stupid?

"I understand," I said calmly. "Sookie, I don't want to put more pressure on you. I want you to make a well informed decision."

"I appreciate that, Eric," Sookie smiled at me, but then her smile faltered. "I need to ask you something."

"Ask away," I shifted in my chair so I was turned toward her. "If we're going to get everything out on the table, we might as well get it all out."

She breathed a small sigh of relief and it seemed like a weight lifted from her when I said that. "I believe you when you say there's nothing romantic between you and Jessica, but has there been anyone else since we broke up?"

I grinned at that question, which surprised her. "Honestly? Not for lack of trying, but no. Pam found me passed out on my bathroom floor after I went a pretty heavy round with a bottle of scotch, and she sent me to Las Vegas for a few days. I've kissed a few girls, but I haven't dated anyone, nor have I had sex with anyone."

"Oh," Sookie looked disappointed.

"What?" I wanted to know why she looked so hurt.

"It's just that I never really understood the logic of fucking someone else to get the person you say you care about out of your head. When we broke up, the last thing I wanted was to be with someone else. I know I had a shitty way of showing it, but I really did love you, Eric. I didn't want anyone but you, and knowing that you went off to Vegas with the intention of… it just hurts to hear that." Sookie wiped at a tear that rolled down her cheek.

I felt like an asshole just then. I didn't want to hurt her. I *never* wanted to hurt her. And those damn tears were like my own personal kryptonite. I turned her face toward mine but she was reluctant to look at me. I brushed my thumb over a second tear and cursed myself for making her cry.

"I didn't do it to hurt you, Sookie. I went because I needed some time away from here. Being so close to you, and yet so far at the same time, it wasn't easy. Every now and then I'd see you coming home, or leaving for work and I'd want to run outside and ask how your day was or tell you I was an idiot for breaking up with you in the first place. I wanted to take it all back but I couldn't do that. Blame it on pride or cowardice, but I just couldn't do it."

"Eric, if I'm completely honest, it's a good thing we broke up. Not because I didn't love you, but because I don't think I ever would have gotten the help I needed. I know it's what you wanted for me and maybe I should have been able to lean on you more than I did, but I'm not good at leaning on other people. I'm good at doing things alone; it's just the way I've always been. Even with therapy, I don't see that changing. But it doesn't mean I don't appreciate knowing you have my back."

"I'll *always* have your back," I promised her and then recalled the fight I'd gotten into with Adam. "I guess there's one more confession I should make."

"Uh oh?" Sookie chuckled quietly.

"The night that Jessica spent at my house, I told you it was because I had way too much to drink."

"Right?" Sookie looked a little concerned.

"Well, while Rasul and Eddie were dragging me out of the bar, I saw Adam out in the parking lot," I paused and Sookie shook her head.

"Tell me you didn't do something stupid," she pleaded.

"From what I could see on the security tapes, Adam approached me and started yelling about something. He made the first move, but I clocked him once and knocked out his tooth," I confessed.

"You didn't!" Sookie covered her open mouth.

I shrugged and said, "Rasul wouldn't repeat exactly what Adam said, but he was talking about you."

"Me?" Sookie's eyes flashed with fury. "Eric, I haven't talked to him since last summer!"

"I know that. I think he's still pissed that Pam had him blacklisted from just about every legit place in the area. No bar will book Renegade 74."

Sookie's head dropped into her hands. "Why did she do that?"

"Because Pam likes to make other people's lives miserable?"

"Not because you told her to, right?" Sookie looked at me sideways.

"It wasn't a direct order, but I didn't discourage her," I admitted, which made Sookie go from disappointed to downright pissed off.

"What were you thinking?" she practically screeched at me. "Eric, I don't give a shit about Adam, so please don't start thinking that, but why sink to his level? Who cares what bar he plays at as long as it isn't yours? And I think it's just a little hypocritical of you to blacklist a guy who had a crush on me, but the girl who was *obsessed* with you gets a job at your bar! It just doesn't make any sense."

I got defensive then and I could feel the argument brewing between us. We were about to have the knockdown, bare knuckle fight we should have had six months ago. Maybe if we did, we would still be together. As weird as it sounds, I was actually a little excited about this fight because for once, Sookie was fighting back. She was letting me have it with both barrels and it felt good to know she felt comfortable enough to unleash it all on me like she was.

"Maybe it doesn't, but I never let Jessica think she had a chance with me," I reminded her.

She scoffed and said, "That is a low blow, and you fucking know it! I told you Adam never meant anything to me! I thought we could be friends. I liked his music. I didn't hang around him to make you jealous or because I thought I needed a Plan B, like you seem to think. I can have guy friends without fucking them, Eric. Don't get pissed off at me because you aren't capable of keeping it in your pants around women," she accused.

"I never, I repeat *never* cheated on you. I never even *thought* about cheating on you. And I definitely never had a bunch of girls lined up in the wings in case things between us went to shit," I stared at her. I softened my tone and said, "Sookie, for the millionth time, *I'm not Bill*."

She stood up and walked around the table. Her hands were shaking and her breathing was ragged. "I know you're not, Eric. You've made it very clear to me just how *not* Bill you are, believe me. And I'm trying really, really hard to put it all behind me, I am; it's just not something I can change overnight. My whole way of thinking is fucked up and I'm slowly starting to untangle things, but it's going to take time for me to get it all straightened out. And I know you've already been really patient with me, so I understand if you're out of patience, but that's why I think we need to just be friends right now. It's why I think maybe…" she trailed off, her tears starting again.

"It's why you think maybe what?" I wanted to hear the rest of what she had to say.

"It's why I think maybe, even if it's going to hurt like hell to do it, maybe going back to Louisiana might be the right thing after all," Sookie looked at me with sad eyes.

Whoa, whoa, whoa…just a few minutes ago she was telling me how it would be a step backward and now she was thinking maybe it was a step in the right direction? I didn't understand how she could go from one line of thinking to the other and I told her as much.

"I just think maybe it would be best to put a little distance between us for a while. It'll give me a chance to stand on my own and really get my head on straight. You deserve someone who doesn't need time like this. You should be with someone who can give you the things you want and I'm just not sure that person is me. Maybe in the future it will be, but right now…" Sookie trailed off again and turned around to cry into her hands.

I felt like I'd been hit by a truck. Being with her was never going to be easy; I knew it then. There was always going to be this push and pull between us that would drive us both crazy, but at the end of the day, I knew I was always going to want her around. I couldn't understand it anymore than I could explain it.

I got up and went around the table; having decided now was the time to be a little more physical. I pulled her into a hug and refused to let her go, even when she fought me on it. "I'm not going anywhere, Sookie. The sooner you accept that, the easier it's going to be for both of us."

And I meant it.

I lost track of how long we stood there holding onto each other. It didn't escape me how good it felt to be hugging her, or that she'd changed brands of shampoo. When she finally let me go her face was streaked with tears and there was a wet spot on my shirt. All the same, she seemed happier and truthfully, I was, too.

"I should get back to packing. I told Emma I'd meet her and Laura for brunch tomorrow and after that we have manicure appointments," Sookie wiped at her face, even though her tears had dried up long ago.

"Yeah, of course. The guys want to go golfing tomorrow," I smiled at her.

"Ugh, it is so *not* fair how little prep time it takes you guys to get ready," Sookie bent down to pick up her laundry basket and I'm not at all ashamed to admit I stared at her ass the whole time.

"I think you're underestimating how long it takes Jake to do his hair," I smirked.

"Yeah, watch it, mister. I've seen you spend more than your fair share of time in front of a mirror," Sookie teased.

My brain went to a bad place and I recalled a time when we'd attacked each other after a fight and ended up fucking in the bathroom right by the full-length mirror that was attached to the back of the door. It was both strange and extremely hot to watch what was happening from a different perspective. Almost as if she knew what I was thinking, she started pulling her panties from the laundry basket to fold them.

"Are you staying with Luke?" Sookie asked while she folded her clothes.

"No, I got a hotel room instead," I told her, which earned me a quirked eyebrow.

"Are you and Jessica sharing a room?" she tried to sound casual, but I knew better.

Fuck, if the shoe was on the other foot and she was bringing Adam as her date, I'd probably be livid. It dawned on me then that Jessica was probably right about it being a bad idea I bring her along. I could have kicked myself just then for even suggesting it. It seemed like a good idea at the time, but now I wasn't so sure it was all that smart.

"Uh, no, that's part of the reason I got a hotel room. I didn't want her to be stuck in the city alone and she would have been if I stayed with one of my brothers. Or we'd have to share a bed," I shrugged, which got me another hairy eyeball from Sookie.

"Look, Eric, who you sleep with isn't my business," she said with an attempt to not sound bitter or disappointed.

"It isn't, but I want it to be…" I said sincerely, catching her eyes. "Someday."

I just stood there watching her for a few minutes while she kept on folding her clothes. Neither of us said anything, but we didn't need to. For the first time in a long time, I had a feeling that everything was going to be okay. I wasn't expecting any overnight changes, but I got the sense we were on the right track.

"So, I guess I'll see you at the rehearsal tomorrow?' I asked her when she walked me to the door.

"Yep, I'll be there. Save me a dance on Saturday?" she asked.

"You bet," I smiled at her and pulled the patio door open.

"Hey Eric," she called out when I was already down on the gravel. I stopped and turned around to face her. "Thanks for stopping by. It was good to have a real conversation with you."

"Yeah, same here," I waved at her and then headed home, feeling better than I'd felt in months.

**Alright, so they got some things off their chest here in this chapter. I know you're all dying for them to have their moments of clarity and say everything that's on their minds but they're just not ready for it yet. I promise you, however, that they will have those moments. Just hang in there and you'll get your pay off. Would Mama Bird lie to you? Thanks for reading!**

**Chapter 44: There You Are**

First of all, I have to once again thank **scribeninja** and **chanel addict** for allowing me to somewhat put them into character form here, as well as for not getting pissed at me for putting bits of gchat conversations into my stories. If you've never been in a group chat with those two before when they get on a roll, you're missing out big time.

Second of all, I'm glad to see I didn't piss off too many people with my chapter A/N this morning. It really wasn't meant to offend, but to explain a few things to people who just didn't seem to be getting the point. I assume if you're still reading this, you're in it for the long haul and I congratulate you for making it this far without sporking yourself in the neck or tearing your hair out. I know I've come close to it myself a time or two.

That said, on with the show...

Chapter 44: There You Are

**SPOV**

I was pretty sure I was going to look like a cotton candy nightmare when I got into my dress for the wedding. As far as bridesmaids dresses go, the one Laura had picked wasn't that bad. To me the biggest problem was that it was a pink dress, and I wasn't a big fan of pink. But then it wasn't my wedding, and Laura adored pink. Someday, if I ever got married, I wasn't going to be so formal about it.

I just considered myself lucky that Laura didn't have a huge team of bridesmaids. I used the quiet time on the drive down to Chicago to think about all the options I had available to me. I had spent the better part of the night before rehashing my conversation/argument with Eric. It felt good to say some of the things I said. While I was more than willing to take my lumps for the way our relationship ended, Eric wasn't just a victim.

He'd done some things to piss me off in the past, but I was just too big of a chicken to speak up and tell him I was upset. The things that really mattered were the things I'd held back. I'd picked fights over the little things and I made myself a promise I wouldn't do that anymore. I also started wondering just how much Eric was drinking.

If getting hammered was his way of coping with stressful situations, that was a problem. He, of all people, should have known that was the exact wrong way to handle his problems. Alcohol never fixed anything any more than shooting heroin or snorting cocaine. I wasn't going to judge him or jump to conclusions, but I was definitely concerned about his coping method.

By the time I arrived in Chicago, I was running only ten minutes late and it was due to an accident on Lake Shore Drive. I managed to find a parking space two blocks away from Ann Sather's, where we had agreed to have brunch before getting our nails done. Laura was glowing, although whether it was from excitement or the thin layer of sweat, I wasn't sure.

"Sorry I'm late," I apologized as I slid into the booth beside Emma.

"Don't worry, we haven't ordered yet. I'm trying to convince Laura to get something other than fruit to eat since we're going to be running around all day," Emma stared pointedly at Laura.

"I can't gain so much as a thousandth of an ounce or my dress isn't going to fit," Laura argued.

"Why would you have it fitted that tightly?" I furrowed my brows. "Don't you want to be able to take a deep breath?"

"I'll take a deep breath when this is all over. As it is, I'm hosting a party for nearly 300 people tomorrow, so please, just let me have my fruit," Laura pleaded and pulled a sports bottle from her designer purse that was big enough to be a small suitcase.

"What's that?" I asked her as she chugged.

"Pineapple juice," Emma winked at me.

"Pineapple juice?" I looked back and forth from Emma to Laura.

Emma nodded enthusiastically. "You don't know what that does?"

"Other than it tastes good?" I shrugged.

"Yes, it tastes good, it also makes other things taste good," Emma looked down at her crotch and Laura burst out laughing at my expression, nearly spraying us both with pineapple juice.

"Oh. My. God." I was sure I was bright red. The things I learned when I spent time with Emma and Laura were priceless.

"Try it sometime," Laura advised.

"Yeah, I don't have anyone to try it with," I said while looking over the menu and started debating between a sausage, egg and cheese wrap or the Mexican omelet.

"Bullshit," both women said at the same time.

"Honey, it's not a secret that Eric is still in love with you," Emma told me.

"And it's clear as day you still love him," Laura chimed in without looking away from the Blackberry she was tapping at ferociously.

The waitress appeared and we gave our breakfast orders to her before Laura and Emma proceeded to give me a whole list of reasons why it would be perfectly acceptable to just pick up where Eric and I left off six months before.

"Just don't fuck him in the middle of my reception," Laura stared me down.

"I don't think you need to worry about that," I smiled at her and then drank my coffee.

**o.O.o.O.o**

I should have known Laura would be a bit of a bridezilla. Because she was such a little person it was easy to think she was just as sweet as a pecan pie all the time. She always had her hair and makeup done perfectly, and more often than not, she was smiling and wearing pastels. In short, she looked like a high end kindergarten teacher, or maybe a tween trying to pass for someone older than she really was. Either way, she looked relatively harmless.

However, by the time we gathered at the hotel for the rehearsal the evening before her wedding, all traces of the sweet, comical and easygoing Laura I had come to know were gone. In her place was this snarling, tense and exceptionally bossy little pit bull in five inch Louboutin pumps. I was scared. I also felt horrible for Jake, who seemed to be taking the brunt of her frustration. Poor guy.

The guys stumbled into the atrium of the hotel where the ceremony was going to be taking place close to twenty minutes late and *all three of them* were sunburned. I stood completely frozen while Laura planted her feet on the ground, her hands on her hips and stared up into each of their handsome faces. Jake was already on the verge of groveling. I figured out pretty quickly either he hadn't warned his brothers about Laura's temper, or they simply hadn't taken him seriously. Emma and I stood by with smug, satisfied grins while Laura let them have it.

"What the hell were you thinking, Jakob," oh, that was a bad sign. "We're being professionally photographed tomorrow! Now the pictures are going to look all wrong because you and the Stooges decided to forgo sunscreen! Have you never heard of skin cancer?" Laura stared at each of the boys, who all looked rather uncomfortable. "I can't believe you! And you're late on top of it? What the actual fuck?"

When no one had an answer for her, she proclaimed them all fucktards and stormed off. Thank God she wasn't being married by a minister. Jake bravely took off after Laura in attempts to calm her down, while Luke tried to make nice with Emma. That left me standing awkwardly, debating what to say to Eric.

"She needs to get laid," Eric leaned down to whisper to me.

I slapped a hand over my mouth to keep from laughing since his assessment, while very accurate, was a dangerous one to make out loud. I merely nodded my head slightly in agreement. Jake and Laura weren't gone for very long before they returned with Jake looking slightly emasculated and Laura looking like she would gladly devour the soul of anyone who dared to cross her. I was pretty sure I'd be elated by the time the wedding was over with.

The rehearsal went smoothly from that point on, which I was grateful for since I didn't want to witness yet another Laura tantrum. Eric's mother had come for the rehearsal, along with the baby. She was the cutest little thing with bright blue eyes, thick blonde hair and chubby little cheeks. She looked so much like her big brothers; it was amazing, considering they didn't share the exact same DNA.

"Hello, Sookie," Patricia actually spoke to me first, which I was surprised by. Even though I knew I deserved some of the not so nice glares I got from her, she and I had gotten off on the wrong foot and stayed there.

"Hello, Patricia," I nodded and then smiled at the baby. "She's a beauty."

"Thank you," Patricia's face lit up as she shifted the little girl in her arms. "She'll be four months next week."

"What's her name?" I wanted to reach out and touch the little hand that was extended in my direction but decided not to.

"Samantha," Patricia said and then leaned down to kiss her daughter's head.

"I love that name," I kept right on smiling since I didn't know what else to say to my ex-boyfriend's mother.

"Eric tells me you're pursuing a graduate degree?" Patricia said it like it was a question, so I just nodded that I was.

"Yes, I am," I nodded, but offered nothing more than that. The less ammunition I could give her to use against me, the better.

I had known I was going to see Patricia but I hadn't really bothered to spend much time thinking about what I would say when I saw her. I figured she would mostly just ignore me the way she always had. I couldn't let her get to me. She didn't know me well enough to understand where I was coming from and since things with Eric and me were once again somewhat up in the air, I saw no reason to try and explain myself to her. I was a grown woman, after all, and I didn't feel like I needed to justify myself to her.

"I'm not going to have to separate you two, am I?" Eric appeared as if he could hear my silent prayers for a distraction of some kind.

I was surprised he hadn't brought Jessica along for the rehearsal, even though there was nothing for her to do but sit back and watch since she wasn't part of the ceremony. I was even more surprised when he draped an arm over me protectively. While it felt good having it there, I wasn't sure what it meant. Was it just a macho display to get his mom to back off, or was I just looking for a something to read into it when it was just nothing more than a friendly gesture?

"That depends on if she plans on causing you to go on another bender after the weekend is over?" Patricia didn't bother to cover up the contempt she felt for me.

I didn't know if I wanted to lash out at her or cry. In the end, my tears won, even if I did try not to shed them. I turned away to try and compose myself a little but I could still feel the tension in Eric.

"Was that necessary?" Eric asked his mother.

"No, Eric, it's okay," I turned back and sort of positioned myself between him and his mother. "Patricia, I realize I've behaved horribly in the past. I'm not proud of it and it's not something I want to do anymore. I've been trying really hard to work out some things and it kills me to know that I hurt Eric as badly as I did. We're trying to be friends and I hope you can respect that."

I was surprisingly civil, considering in my mind, I was completely going off on her for being a bitch. I knew on some level she was just being a mama lion and looking out for one of her cubs, but Eric was a grown man and didn't need his mama fighting his battles for him. Eric was a perfectly good fighter all on his own. And since Patricia didn't have all the facts—at least I didn't think she did- I figured it was best if she just stayed the hell out of it.

Thankfully Emma pulled me away under the guise of going over directions to where we were having dinner so I didn't have to be in the firing line anymore. I glanced over to see Eric looking rather red in the face, and not just because of his sunburn, while he talked to his mother. There was some wild gesturing and it was obvious they were having a small argument.

"God, she really hates me," I muttered to Emma.

"She's just protective," Emma tried to downplay it, but I could tell by the expression on her face that she wasn't so sure it was that simple.

"I just don't know how to fix it, or if it's even worth trying," I sighed and rubbed my temples.

"Fix things with Eric first. Worry about Mama Northman later," Emma advised, which was probably the right thing.

Eric gave his mother one last glare before approaching Emma and me. "Do you know where you're going, or do you want to go together?"

When I hesitated to answer Emma said, "He's talking to you."

I narrowed my eyes at her, which got me a little mischievous laugh before she scampered off to find Luke. "I think I should go by myself. I appreciate the offer, but you've got Jessica with you and I don't want to be a third wheel."

"You won't be a third wheel," Eric insisted with a comforting smile.

"It's awkward," I said in tone more biting than I intended it to be. "We're in relationship limbo and you're technically here with another woman even if you're just friends. Go have fun with Jessica. I'll see you at dinner."

"Sookie!" Eric called out after me but I kept walking.

I felt overwhelmed at the moment. When I got out of the hotel I finally felt like I could breathe again, but I hadn't sucked up nearly enough oxygen before Eric caught up to me. His big hands landed on my shoulders and spun me around so we were face to face.

"Dammit, will you stop running away from me?" his frustration was written all over his face.

"I'm not running away!" I insisted but I knew that wasn't true. I was running. I was panicking.

"Yes, you are. That's all you've ever done is run away," Eric snarled at me.

"Oh fuck you, Eric!" I shouted at him and he let me go like my skin was suddenly made of red hot coals. "I gave up everything to stay here with you! I gave up my house, my friends, my life…maybe it wasn't much, but it was mine and I gave it up to be here with you! I ran toward you, you asshole, so don't you dare give me a lecture about running away from things. I stayed here because there was something worth staying for. And, God, I love you, I really love you, but I don't know if that's enough anymore."

What else was there to say after that? Apparently Eric had nothing to say, and since I was all talked out, I went back to my car. I sat behind the wheel and sobbed, feeling like I had no fight left in me. I was done. So done.

But then my car door opened and the smell of Eric's cologne filled my lungs. I felt my heart twist as his hands turned my face toward his. I opened my mouth to tell him I was sorry for exploding like I did, but I didn't get a chance to say it. Instead, he kissed me.

**\*runs away giggling\***

**Chapter 45: Crash Into Me**

So...there may or may not be some zest going on in this chapter. \*whistles innocently\*

Chapter 45: Crash Into Me

**EPOV**

I stood outside the hotel in stunned silence as she ran off toward her car. I had never really given much thought to the things she had given up to stay with me. She always made it sound like it was no big deal; like she had nothing worth sticking around for in Louisiana. The idea of having her so close all the time had been the only thing that mattered to me when she made the decision to stay.

I didn't think about the friends she was leaving behind, or the fact that she had a house of her own down there. I was selfish in my line of thinking, and it seemed I still was. I realized then that I spent a lot of time thinking about what I needed instead of what was best for her. While it was true that her getting the help she needed to move on from her past was about her, she had been right when she said it was about me, too. Did I want her to get healthy purely for her own sake, or because I wanted to have all of her to myself?

I took off after her because for once, I felt like I was chasing her for her, and not for me. If nothing else, she was upset and needed a friend. When I found her crying in her car I felt like an asshole all over again. She'd taken so much heat for the way things were between us in the past. Hell, my own mother had crossed a few lines where Sookie was concerned and I was intent to put a stop to it.

Back in the hotel I'd told her to step off and mind her own business, which was the last thing my mother expected to hear me say. "She's trying, Mom. She's doing everything I wanted her to do six months ago and you don't know the whole story, so just back off."

"I only want what's best for you," she'd said to me.

"Well, this isn't about you, Mom, so just cut her some slack," I said before walking away to talk to Sookie.

Now here she was, crying in her car and I didn't know what the hell to do. I opened the door and knelt down beside her. Her hands covered her face while she sobbed and she fought me on it when I tried to turn her face toward mine. I was so fucking tired of seeing her cry. What's worse was that I was tired of being the reason she was crying.

She opened her mouth to speak but I was tired of talking. It was my general belief we'd said more than enough already. My lips met hers a little rougher than I planned, but that ceased to be a concern when she started kissing me back. The connection was immediate and intense. My mouth clearly remembered the way she kissed and was delighted to have her back. My hands slipped into her shorter, yet still silky, hair and tilted her head from one side to the other.

The kiss was deep and hungry, and yet it didn't feel like I was trying to devour her. Slowly her limbs and body twisted in her seat until her feet were on the ground. It occurred to me then that this was precisely how Luke and Emma ended up finding us grinding on each other in that booth in the club. It probably started with just a kiss and the next thing either of us knew, Sookie was climbing me.

Her little hands fisted my shirt in an almost brutal way to keep me close to her and she scooted closer to the edge of her seat, although I'm not sure how she managed it. I got my shirt free of her hands and instead put her arms around my neck. Her fingers teasingly scratched at the back of my head while I stood up and lifted her out of the car. Thankfully the skirt of her dress wasn't very fitted and she was able to wrap her legs around me without flashing her ass to anyone who was watching.

Her car door slammed and after that I completely forgot we were technically in a public place. By the time I put her down, we were both breathless. I grabbed her hand and pulled her toward my car further up the row of spaces. "What are you doing?" she asked while we walked.

"Do you trust me?" I asked her and she nodded. "Then just follow me."

She did as I asked and didn't question me when I motioned for her to get in the car. I climbed in behind her and I barely had the door closed when she was pulling me on top of her. Our eyes met for a few seconds before our lips reconnected. My hand found its way up her skirt and I growled when I felt the wetness in her panties. She squirmed and moaned when my fingers pushed the fabric out of the way.

"Eric," she breathed in my ear while my lips went to work on a spot on her neck I knew drove her crazy. "Eric, we can't have sex in your car."

"We won't," I promised her, which I immediately realized was a bit of a pie crust promise considering how badly I wanted to tear her clothes off and fuck her into unconsciousness just then.

Instead I settled for letting a finger slide inside her. Jesus, she was wet and tight. Six months of not having sex had definitely changed the playing field a little, not that she had been loose or sloppy before. Her hips tried to move to get more friction where she needed it while my hand was yanking down the elastic top of her sundress. I briefly cursed her bra for being in the way but that was easily fixed with another yank of my hand. My lips fastened around her dusky pink nipple while a second finger slid inside her.

"Oh, fuck," she moaned, her fingers tangling in my hair.

My thumb found her clit and it didn't take long before she was panting and crying out as she got closer and closer to coming. Her hands guided my head back to hers and I swallowed her scream when she came, hard and fast, her muscles clamping down on my fingers inside her. Tight as a vice she was, and my cock wanted desperately to be where my fingers were. This was the longest I'd gone without sex since I started having it back when I was a teenager.

She lay there underneath me, quivering and gasping for air while trying to get the button undone on my pants. I was back to worshiping the breast that had been left out earlier when her hand managed to make its way into my pants. She stroked in earnest, but giving a handjob to a guy in jeans was tricky.

"Sit up," Sookie demanded, still slightly breathless.

I didn't even bother to argue with her, and she moved with me without letting go of what she had been searching for. Never to be one outdone sexually speaking, Sookie positioned herself on her hands and knees on the bench seat of the car and then her head was in my lap. I very clearly remembered the last time she'd given me head in my car, and I almost came then. We were on the road to Wisconsin and she had managed to give me one of the best blowjobs of my life while I was going about eighty miles an hour.

Even though the car was parked, I felt like we were speeding along that highway all over again. Her mouth was so warm and she knew all the right things to do with her tongue. This was so much better than jerking off in the shower to our highlight reel. My mind went completely blank and I just concentrated on the things I was feeling. I had needed this contact with her for so long and as macho pig as it might sound, it was one of the many things I missed when we broke up.

Regardless of how big of an emotional clusterfuck our relationship might have been, the sex had always been nothing short of stellar. The temptation to pull her mouth off of me and reposition her so she was straddling me, all warm, wet and ready to go was almost too hard to resist. But then there was the issue of birth control and the last thing either of us needed at that point was to end up pregnant.

Her hand continued to stroke while her tongue teased the head of my cock. Her other hand went to my balls, and with one last deep plunge of her head, taking me down her throat, I was done for. My hips shot forward in a reflex action I couldn't control and I came hard. She swallowed and continued to stroke me with her hands while I came down from the most intense orgasm I'd had in months, if not my entire life.

My head dropped back against the seat of the car and my eyes closed. I wanted to snuggle her into a nap, but knew that wasn't possible in the front seat of the Lime Green Monster. I must have dropped off anyway because when my eyes opened, Sookie was gone.

**o.O.o.O.o**

I found her again at the rehearsal dinner at a pizza place a few blocks from the hotel. Her clothes were back the way they belonged but she looked notably relaxed. God knows I felt better. I waited until Jessica was lost in conversation with Emma before excusing myself to corner Sookie away from everyone else.

"Where did you go earlier?" I asked her once I had her as alone as we were going to get.

"I didn't want to risk Laura's wrath by being late. I did try to wake you before I left, but you were out cold," Sookie smirked into her drink.

"Well, the activity was definitely unexpected," I pointed out and gave myself a small pat on the back for making sure she had gotten hers first, or I would have felt like a real asshole for passing out like I did.

"Yes, it was," Sookie agreed and took a sip of her drink before looking at me. "I don't know if we should let that happen again."

"Really?" I moved in a little closer to her. "Because I was thinking it should definitely happen again; preferably without any clothes at all."

Color crept up her neck and as she said, "I thought we agreed to be just friends. And not the kind of friends who have sex once in a while. We both know how that'll end up."

"I thought we were friends with potential?" I corrected her.

Sookie turned toward me and said, "Eric, let's not rush anything, okay? Let's just take it slow and see what happens."

Her eyes were pleading with me for understanding and given the fact that she had the power to not only cut me off for good, but leave the state never to be seen again made me take her seriously. I didn't want to alienate her or force her into something she didn't want. I wanted her to want me because it was what she wanted, not because there was a metaphorical gun to her head.

"Okay," I agreed while leaning down to get right next to her ear. "I'll wait for you."

I heard her gasp slightly and then her head turned toward mine. There was a flirtatious smile on her face as she said, "Keep talking like that and you won't have to wait long."

With that, she sauntered off to get lost in conversation with Laura and Jake. I stayed right where I was and it wasn't long before Luke found his way over to me with a fresh beer in his hand. "You two look awfully chummy," he observed when Sookie glanced over in our direction.

"I think we finally came to an understanding," I smirked.

Luke scrutinized me closely and shook his head. "Yeah, you came to something alright, but I don't think it was an understanding."

"Ass," I elbowed him.

"I'm not judging you, man," Luke said casually. "I like Sookie. I think she's good for you, to be honest. She's given you something you actually give a shit about. I know you've had your problems but I've seen you be really happy together and you can't fake that."

"It's scary how good things are when they're good, but it's just as scary how bad things can get when they're bad," I sighed and drank more of my beer.

"That's relationships, my brother. One day your flying high and fucking like rabbits and the next you think you want to kill each other in horrible, bloody, violent ways. Love makes us all do crazy things we don't think we'd ever be willing to do for another person," Luke was staring at Emma.

"How'd you know you wanted to marry her?" I asked him since I was curious.

"It sounds crazy, but the thought was just there one day. We were sick as hell before Christmas and even though she was feeling just as shitty as I was, she took care of me. When I realized she was just as bad off as I was but didn't leave me to fend for myself, I knew I'd found the right person for me. I don't really know how to explain it. It just feels like she's the one," Luke explained with a shrug; he never stopped looking at Emma.

Sookie and I weren't there yet, at that phase where you just knew you had found 'the one,' but I knew she was special. I knew I wanted more time to explore where our relationship could go and if that meant waiting a week, six months or even a year, I was willing to do it because I knew what I would be missing if I didn't. I heard her laughing across the room with Jake, Laura and some of their friends. There was just the slightest discoloration on her neck from where my lips had been hard at work a few hours before and it made me smile.

"You know, if you want me to make myself scarce, I can do that," Jessica offered, having appeared at my side without me even seeing her heading toward me. "Emma told me you and Sookie are trying to work things out."

"She told me she still loves me earlier," I confessed to Jessica.

She punched my arm rather hard and said, "Then what are you doing over here talking to me, you idiot? Did you tell her you love her back?"

The expression on my face gave me away. Jessica took the beer from my hand and shoved me toward Sookie. "Go tell her you love her. Go on. You'll regret it if you don't and I think you've got enough regrets were Sookie is concerned."

Fuck if Jessica wasn't right, but that didn't make it any easier to close the distance between Sookie and me. I tried to figure out how to phrase it in my mind since just blurting it out was out of the question. I knew telling her was the right thing to do. Maybe it was the missing piece of the puzzle that would finally put us back together. Or maybe it would freak her out and send her running away again.

Either way, I missed my chance since Mom appeared at Sookie's side and led her from the private party room. I could only imagine what my mother was going to say to her.

**Alright, so I'm guessing some of you have serious WTF on account of the little lemon action we have in this chapter. Let me just say that wasn't planned but it's what happened when I started writing. Who am I to stop it? Personally, I don't necessarily think it's a bad thing. I think there was the need for that kind of connection to one another and of course, the release it provided them both. Any guesses as to what Mama Northman is up to? \*taps chin\* I'll update again soon, I promise. Thanks for reading!**

**Chapter 46: I'd Love to be Your Last**

Just so we're clear, **Chanel Addict** is aware that I've made Laura a pint size terror for the duration of the wedding, and she is perfectly okay with it. We've had a few laughs over this whole thing on gchat, so rest assured, it's all good. I would never write her character this way without making sure she was fine with it first.

Chapter 46: I'd Love to Be Your Last

**SPOV**

Yep, cotton candy nightmare wasn't too far from the way I looked. My hair was elaborately curled, pinned and sprayed so it would take a tsunami to knock it out of place. I hadn't gotten much sleep the night before and it showed when the makeup artist came to paint our faces. I didn't hate makeup, necessarily, but I didn't usually wear much of it either. Still, since it was a special occasion and I was going to be professionally photographed until my face felt like it was going to crack in half, I figured I might as well go with it.

Besides, it was better than fighting Laura, since it was guaranteed to be a losing battle. Laura had been the first to comment on how shitty I looked and had instructed the makeup artist to make sure my under eye bags were sufficiently covered. Laura was becoming a little too Monica Gellar for my taste and if she wasn't careful, I was going to resign my post. My head was already screwed up enough without taking abuse from her, too.

"So where did you and Patricia disappear to?" Emma asked me while Laura was in another room getting her hair done.

"She just wanted to talk. She apologized for giving me a hard time and I apologized—again- for being such a bitch to her son. I don't know if we'll ever be close, but at least we've agreed to put the past behind us," I shrugged while the makeup artist was mixing foundation to cover the hickey Eric had left behind the day before.

"And that mark on your neck?" Emma giggled.

"That would be the work of the eldest Northman," I said with a smile as my eyes closed.

"I figured as much. What happened there?"

"You've never had a hickey?" I teased her, which got me a friendly slap on the arm.

"You know what I mean, now spill it!" Emma ordered.

I told her what happened in the car and she was practically dancing in her seat, she was so excited. "I knew it!"

"You knew what?"

"That you're still in love with each other," she said in a sing-song tone.

I could have argued but there wasn't much point. After Patricia removed her fangs from my neck, I went back into the private party room to get a drink. Of course Eric was on me within seconds and I was forced to go sans alcohol when he dragged me right back out to where his mother had cornered me only minutes before.

Without warning he'd leaned down, kissed me for all he was worth and then told me he was still in love with me. The confession left me happily dazed. It was a lot to take in. It also made me think about whether or not that changed my game plan of going back to Louisiana. All my reasons for going were still valid. I still wanted the job and I still needed some space to figure out where my own head was at.

I told Eric I was afraid that if I stayed in Michigan, I would just fall right back into the same old patterns and I didn't want to do that. On top of all that, I might resent him for giving up something I wanted, and I didn't want that to happen. I told him I needed time to make up my mind or come up with some sort of compromise that was going to make us both happy. While obviously disappointed I hadn't just swooned into his arms so he could carry me off into the sunset for a happily ever after, he seemed to understand what I was saying.

"Then I'll keep waiting," he promised before kissing my forehead and leaving me to think on my own.

I spent the better part of the night tossing and turning, contemplating calling him to come sleep in my bed with me. Even if we just snuggled, I knew it would make me feel better. But I said I wanted to take it slow and I knew if he got into bed with me, it wouldn't last. I knew I would rationalize everything *but* slow and the truth was, I wasn't ready for sex yet. I wanted it, but that didn't mean I was ready for it. So instead I spent the night tossing and turning, trying to make sense of everything.

I finally fell asleep just before four in the morning. When my wake up call came at 8:30, I felt anything but rested. It was my second wake up call that came at 9:00 in the form of a really good looking Swede carrying coffee that woke me up. Eric didn't stick around; he just brought me coffee, a smile and a kiss before heading off to do whatever it was the guys had planned while we ladies hustled around to get ourselves ready to go by two in the afternoon. We were supposed to be at the hotel, ready for pictures by 3:00.

I relayed all this to Emma who listened patiently without interrupting me. When I was finished explaining myself she gently said, "It seems to me if you're always looking for a reason to hold back, you're going to find it. Part of loving someone is having faith. There comes a point where you have to just close your eyes and jump."

I let her words sink in. I took stock of everything I knew about Eric and my relationship with him. I knew I was generally happy with him, maybe the happiest I'd ever been. I knew he loved me and maybe more importantly, I knew I loved him back. There was a part of me that said love should be enough, but I wasn't a silly teenager anymore. I knew there was more to a successful relationship than loving the person I was with. If love was all it took, we never would have broken up in the first place.

I thought about the problems that led us to breaking up and I realized we were already handling things differently this time around. We were confronting things head on instead of letting them pile up until we exploded. We were *communicating* in ways that didn't just involve tearing each others clothes off and seeing how many orgasms it took to forget why we were mad in the first place. I was being honest with him and telling him the way I really felt, even when it was hard for me to say it. And he wasn't running away.

He wasn't trying to talk me out of my feelings or telling me I was wrong for feeling the way I did. Eric was taking it all in stride right along with me and he was willing to wait. Some might say it was desperation, but I thought it was commitment that allowed him to say he would wait for as long as it took for me to be ready.

And just like that, when I added it all up, I realized something important: I needed him. I needed him as a friend and I needed him as something more. I knew, in that moment, he was the one person I could share everything with and not be ashamed of myself. I could show him all the parts of me and I wouldn't run away. I forced myself not to cry because it would have ruined the makeup artist's hard work and there wasn't time to start over.

Taking it slow meant wasting more time and we'd done enough of that. I decided then and there it was time to go big, or go home.

**o.O.o.O.o**

It seemed the fates had other ideas when it came time for me to tell Eric I was wrong and that I didn't want to wait around for some moment that was probably never going to come. Every time I'd try to get to Eric, something would come up to keep it from happening. Whether it was having pictures taken, meeting some friend or family member of Jake or Laura's, or helping Laura in the bathroom, I was just too busy to get him to myself. It didn't help that when it came time to walk down the aisle, I did so on Luke's arm since Eric was the best man.

The ceremony was beautiful. The atrium in the hotel had been completely transformed and it was obvious all of Laura's planning had come to a stunning fruition. The atrium was filled with sunshine and the pathway to where the ceremony was taking place was littered with pale pink and white rose pedals. Twinkle lights were strung up, even though they were hard to see in the daytime. Pearly white slipcovers had been draped over the chairs and were tied at the back with pink bows.

There was a beautiful archway where the Justice of the Peace was standing and there were candles lit on tall candlesticks, lining the way up the aisle. When I reached my place at the front I was able to watch Emma and Eric walk toward me and I couldn't help but pay attention to the way my heart fluttered. Eric looked damn sexy in the tux he was wearing, but what really got me going was the smile on his face. The way he smiled at me, it was like he was smiling at his future and I could only hope he read my smile the same way.

The bouquet of pink roses and peonies I was holding felt incredibly heavy all of a sudden but I concentrated on that instead of giving in to my inclination of running over to Eric and throwing myself at him. Emma winked at me when she took her place to my left and we watched for Laura to make her entrance when the music changed. Laura held her father's arm while walking down the aisle to Ave Maria, which was an unexpected choice.

She looked beautiful, though, in the gown she'd chosen. There was a lot of intricate detail on the bodice of the dress that included hand sewn lace and mini pearls. The skirt was ruffled and draped in such a way that it appeared to make her look taller than she really was, even without the assistance of the gianormous Louboutin pumps she was wearing. Her makeup was flawless and the hairdresser had somehow managed to curl and tease Laura's hair in such a way that it looked a little like a halo as she walked in the sunlight. She planned to have her hair pinned up between the ceremony and the reception, which was a good thing since I knew she planned on dancing the night away.

Jake looked every bit as dashing as his brothers; although it was strange to see Luke in a tuxedo. He looked good, but not very comfortable. I mean, the guy prefers Bermuda shorts and Hawaiian shirts, which is about as far away from a tuxedo as a guy can get. Laura's father kissed her cheek, and then handed her off to Jake. Emma and I turned toward the archway while the other guests took their seats and the wedding started.

I breathed a small sigh of relief, knowing this was it. I was happy for my friends and I was excited to get a minute alone with Eric. I noticed throughout the ceremony that Jake was fidgeting every couple of minutes, which was unusual for him. Of all the Northman brothers, he was the one who had the easiest time staying focused on whatever task he was doing. I figured it was just nerves, which was sweet, and decided to ignore it.

I watched and listened while Jake and Laura exchanged vows—during which Laura made it clear Jake had better obey her, or else- and then their rings. The ceremony didn't take more than fifteen minutes and before I knew it, I was applauding and dabbing my eyes for the new Mr. and Mrs. Jakob Northman. I knew Jake was going to pay for it later when he grabbed Laura around her waist and nearly kissed the life out of her instead of the chaste little peck she had said she wanted. Not even married a whole minute and already he was in for a fight.

We walked up the aisle again and got into our places in the receiving line which still kept me away from Eric since I was at the far end of the line and he was standing right between Laura and Emma. I tried to keep focused on shaking hands, learning names and exchanging small stories before the guests moved on to the lobby area outside the reception hall for cocktail hour. Once the guests were all out of the atrium, the bridal party lined up for pictures at in front of the archway.

I even got to hold baby Samantha while Patricia had her picture taken with Jake and Laura. I caught Eric's eye briefly while I was holding his baby sister, and there was this sparkle there that made my heart flutter. When I looked down at the little girl, I realized it appeared as though I was holding my own child. Eric and me having a baby… that'd be something, wouldn't it? I smiled at the thought of being pregnant and Eric staying up late at night to read stories to my belly.

I had to give Samantha to someone else before I went baby crazy and started getting way ahead of myself. It was one thing to tell Eric I was being foolish by wanting to take things slow, but it was something else entirely to start talking about us having babies together. *One step at a time, Sook*, I told myself before handing Samantha back to her mother.

I finally got next to Eric when pictures were taken of us with Laura and Jake, but it wasn't the right time to say the things I wanted to say. Laura insisted on getting pictures of Eric and me alone, but it still wasn't the right time. Although, the photographer managed to get a nice shot of Eric kissing the back of my hand as I was walking away from him.

After we'd spent close to an hour taking pictures in various set ups and locations in the atrium, Emma and I headed upstairs to Laura's room for touch ups and to bustle her dress while the hairstylist pinned up Laura's hair for the reception. We popped open a bottle of champagne and Laura toasted Emma and me for all of our help and hard work with getting the wedding together.

"Mmm!" I quickly swallowed my champagne and asked, "What was with Jake? It was like he had ants in his pants all through the ceremony."

Emma burst out laughing while Laura looked less than amused. "Luke stole all of Jake's underwear and left him just this tuxedo thong," Laura explained.

My mouth dropped open and I looked from one woman to the other. Emma was just about in tears, she was laughing so hard, whereas Laura looked like she was plotting some serious revenge. If I were Luke, I'd be changing my name and leaving town pronto.

"That's awful," I said, even though I was laughing on the inside. Those Northman boys were a handful.

A half hour later we were lined up outside the reception hall, waiting to be announced by the DJ friend of Luke's that Laura had hired to play reception. When I heard the opening notes of "I'm Shipping Up to Boston" by Dropkick Murphys, I couldn't help but laugh. It was a nice nod to Laura's Irish roots, as well as the rather aggressive pair Laura and Jake made at times. I stood with Luke, as I had for most of the day, and asked him about the prank he pulled on Jake.

"He had it coming, trust me. Have you ever heard the taco story?" Luke winked at me.

Emma whipped her head around and said, "Oh my God that story is disgusting!"

"That story is hilarious, and it defines our relationship as brothers," Eric bumped his fist against Luke's, and then mine and Luke's names were called so we had to go.

Luke and I walked into the reception together where his mother and Laura's parents were already standing. The choice of Irish punk rock brought an interesting energy into the room. I was stunned by the number of people who were seated at the tables. Even more amazing was that Laura had managed to find a different pink flower for the centerpiece of each table. There were pink light bulbs tinting the walls to give them a rosy glow. The tables had a pearly white and gold brocade table cloth draped over them and the chairs were also gold.

Laura had even worked with a mixologist to come up with a special cocktail just for her wedding and it was some sort of grapefruit/champagne thing with just a splash of grenadine for sweetness and color. It wasn't bad, but one was enough for me. I'd be sticking to water and my gin and tonics for the rest of the night. But I had to give Laura credit because the room looked very elegant and feminine. She'd done a fantastic job with all of her planning.

I finally got a little time with Eric when we were seated at the head table next to one another. Unfortunately, that wasn't really the right place to tell him how I felt either. It wasn't as if I could say, "So, I came to the conclusion this morning while the stylist was covering that hickey you left on my neck that I'm still in love with you and I don't want to take it slow anymore. Please pass the dressing."

Well, okay, I could, but I didn't want to be blasé about it. Telling him how I felt was a big deal and I wanted to take it seriously because I knew he would. Telling him I wanted to get back together meant everything was going to shift in our lives and I didn't want to do it in an off-the-cuff manner. So I waited patiently and bided my time.

We made small talk and laughed with our friends through dinner. We smiled for pictures and I listened closely while Eric gave his toast toward the end of dinner. He was a good public speaker, which I certainly wasn't. I was good one on one, or with a few people I was close to, but I couldn't speak in front of a crowd to save my life. It was a good thing I had no desire to be a motivational speaker.

After dinner Eric excused himself to go check on Jessica while Laura and Jake prepared for their first dance. Laura was finally starting to look relaxed, but I suspect that had something to do with her having had nearly a bottle of Cristal all to herself. If she didn't puke by the end of the night, it would be a miracle. I hadn't seen her eat a thing until appetizers were being served, and even then she was nibbling on account of her dress. Although, I was pretty sure if anything was going to pop out, it would be her cleavage. The girls were certainly sitting high and proud, ready to greet the guests if her hands were too busy.

I was standing at the bar getting a fresh drink when "My Best Friend" by Tim McGraw started to play for Laura and Jake's first dance started to play. I knew the song well and Eric's face flashed behind my eyes. I smiled into the gin and tonic the bartender had just handed over with a wink and a smile. Whether he was flirting or angling for better tips, I didn't know.

But then I smelled Eric's cologne again and the bartender ceased to matter. His hand settled on my shoulder and he leaned down to say, "I don't suppose you want to dance, do you?"

My smile grew and I looked over my shoulder at him, "I would love to, but we should probably sit this one out. Besides, shouldn't the first dance go to the girl you're here with?"

"She insisted you have it," Eric kissed my temple and I felt a chill go through me.

"Alright, then," I nodded and set my drink down at my place at the head table.

Eric got pulled away to talk to some friend of his mothers, leaving me alone at the table. I wasn't there for long when Jessica appeared. She looked pretty in the pale pink lace dress she was wearing. Her peaches 'n cream skin looked a little rosier than usual, and her pretty red hair was pulled back in a simple barrette. If she weren't ten years too young for him, Jessica and Eric would have made one hell of a couple.

"That's a pretty dress, Jessica," I smiled up at her.

"Do you mind if I sit?" she pointed to Eric's empty chair.

"No, not at all," I figured the least I could do was hear her out.

Jessica slid into Eric's chair and stared out at the dance floor where Jake and Laura were laughing and whispering to one another quietly as they danced. They looked sublimely happy, as they should. My eyes briefly caught Eric's, and he smiled at me before returning his attention to the guy he was talking to. I noticed baby Samantha gurgling away in her pretty pink dress while she chewed on her chubby little hand.

Jessica cleared her throat to get my attention and I looked her way. She offered a soft smile before she said, "I just wanted you to know that while Eric will always have a special place in my heart, I know he's not the one for me. If anyone can understand seeing something extraordinary in him, it'd be you. He's been a friend to me, but I know that's all there is to it. He's crazy about you, you know."

I smiled back at her and asked, "You think so?"

"Are you kidding me?" Jessica snorted and shook her head. "Someday I want someone to look at me the way he looks at you. I'm only here today to make sure he doesn't chicken out."

I laughed and leaned forward a little in my chair. "He told me you've been a good friend to him, too. I want to thank you for that."

"Me?" Jessica looked surprised. "Nah, I've just been a good listener."

"You've given him a few pushes, too, I've heard. We all need a little push sometimes. I'm sorry if I ever said anything to hurt your feelings." I apologized to her because it was the right thing to do, and because I could tell the woman I was talking to wasn't the girl who slashed Eric's tires in a jealous fit of rage the previous summer.

"You had a right. If I were in your shoes, I would have said some nasty things too. But that's all behind us now."

"Yes, it is," I agreed with her, and then clapped with everyone else when the song came to an end.

"And I'm sorry for the way I acted that day at the diner. I was catty because I knew how badly Eric was hurting and I was blaming you for all of it and that wasn't right. It wasn't really my place to say anything," Jessica looked a little ashamed of herself.

"You're forgiven," I figured it was the best thing I could say to her. She smiled at me and then went back to watching Jake and Laura dance.

I spied Eric talking to the DJ while Jessica and I chatted. All things considered, we actually had a decent conversation. By the time Eric came over to ask me to dance with him, again, I had changed my opinion of Jessica. She really wasn't a bad person. Like Eric had said so many months before she had just made a really bad error in judgment and had done something stupid she wasn't proud of. I could certainly relate to all that.

"Care to dance, Miss Stackhouse?" Eric extended a hand to me.

I looked over my shoulder at Jessica, who just shrugged and said, "Go on before I take your place."

"Well then, I guess you've got yourself a dance partner, Mr. Northman," I said as I stood up.

We walked hand in hand onto the dance floor as another slow country song started to play. Eric hated country music, and yet he was smiling at hearing this song. I didn't know what it was, which was rare for me. How was it possible Eric knew a country song I didn't? That was a head scratcher.

"What are you smiling about?" I asked, just in case I was wrong.

"You look stumped," Eric said as we started to move around the dance floor.

"Did you pick the music?" I arched an eyebrow at him and he nodded. "But you hate country music."

"Usually, but I heard this the other day and it made me think of you," Eric pulled me a little closer.

"You were listening to country music?" I asked skeptically.

"I was tuning my radio and I got little bit of this in the static. Just listen to the words," he instructed as we moved.

*If I could do it over; I'd have waited for this moment  
So I could give my heart to you unbroken  
But if our mistakes brought us together  
Does it really matter whether  
We were saints or sinners in the past?  
I don't care if I'm your first love,  
But I'd love to be your last*

My eyes filled with tears and I stopped moving on the dance floor. Eric looked at me curiously and asked, "Did I do something wrong?"

I shook my head and tugged on his hand, "Come with me," I urged and pulled him out of the reception. If I was ever going to tell him what I'd been thinking, now was the time to do it.

**Right, so, you probably want to kill me right now for ending the chapter here but it needed to be done. Sorry. Well, not really. If you think *this* cliffhanger is bad just wait. When Scribeninja got the cliffhanger in the next chapter, she was ready to shoot me. So I guess I'll ask if you want another update today or do you want two back to back tomorrow? We'll put it to a vote. Thanks for reading!**

**Chapter 47: I'll Be**

I need to take a quick second to thank Edwin McCain for fueling a great portion of this story. I found an amazing acoustic version of "I'll Be" and listened to it for most of the time I was writing this chapter. I got the swoons while writing, so hopefully that translates when you read it. Get your tissues…

Oh, and most importantly: **YOU BROUGHT THIS ON YOURSELVES.**

Chapter 47: I'll Be

**EPOV**

I thought for sure I had done the right thing by asking the DJ to play the song I'd picked. I wasn't kidding when I said I heard it on the radio. I'd heard it on the drive down from Michigan when the rock station started to fade out and bled into the country station instead. I had spent close to an hour searching around on the internet, trying to locate the song since I had only grasped a little of the lyrics before the song ended.

When I finally tracked down the lyrics, I immediately thought of Sookie and hoped it was the way she felt about me. While it was true I generally hated country music, I would tolerate it for her because she loved it. That was part of loving someone, right? So when she pulled me off the dance floor with a look of fierce determination on her face, I was worried I'd fucked up somehow.

Once we were around the corner and away from the reception area, Sookie let go of my hand and spun around to face me. She looked beautiful and I suddenly felt like a tool for not having told her that already. Her skin was still golden from the summer before but I knew in just a few weeks it would be darker. Her hair was surprisingly soft, considering the way it had been styled and even though she was standing a few feet away from me, I could still smell her perfume.

"I've been looking for the right time to tell you this all day so I really need you to just shut up and let me talk before I lose my nerve and chicken out," Sookie told me.

"Okay," I said cautiously, since I had no idea what she was going to say.

"I know I said I wanted to take things slowly but I slept like shit last night. I spent hours just tossing and turning, thinking about everything between us from the beginning right up until you told me you still love me last night. No matter what I did, I couldn't sleep. I thought about calling you because no matter what happens between us, or how bad things are, just the idea of you makes me feel better. I knew if I called you, you would come and I would sleep better than I have in months.

"But I didn't call because I thought taking it slow was the right thing to do. I thought maybe we just needed to take a step back and get a little more perspective on things, but then I realized we can analyze our relationship to death and it's not going to change the most important thing: I love you, and you love me back. And I know love isn't enough of a reason to stay together, but there's more to us than just that. Emma told me that I need to just close my eyes and jump; that I need to have faith that things are going to be okay.

"I think she's right, but I also think there is one key piece of the puzzle I was missing, and it's that I need you. I need you as my friend and I need you as more than that. I need you in my future and maybe even better than that, I *want you* in all those ways and probably a few I haven't even occurred to me yet. I realized I want those things. I want to be your friend and I want to be more than your friend. I want all those silly things you see in movies, you know?

"I want to go for a walk in the rain and I want to kiss you in the middle of the street and I want to share everything with you because I realized you're the only person I feel comfortable sharing everything with. Something like that is so rare and I would be an idiot to walk away from it because I'm scared. And I'm scared. I'm terrified, actually, and I really want you to say you want the same things. Mostly, I want you to stop me from rambling before I make a complete fool of myself, if I haven't already," Sookie looked up at me through those beautiful eyelashes of hers.

Her chest heaved heavy breaths and I was just about to lean in and kiss her when Luke interrupted. I was going to kill him later. "Hey, sorry to interrupt guys, but Emma's missing and we were supposed to decorate the honeymoon suite. Would you mind?" Luke handed me the passkey.

I glared at him, ready to kill. Seriously, that was the big emergency? The reception wasn't anywhere near over and already he was putting this on me. Sookie took the key when I didn't and said, "Sure, we'd be happy to."

"Great. The decorations are in our room," Luke handed me that key.

I stood there, completely stunned and unable to process a complete thought. I didn't know if I wanted to kill my brother, or maul Sookie. Both options held their own appeal. But it was Sookie tugging my hand that brought me back to reality. She pulled me toward the elevators and pushed the button to go up. I had no idea what room Luke and Emma were staying in, so I sincerely hoped Sookie had that information. If I had to call Luke, I was going to bitch him out before asking for the information I needed.

"Eric, are you in there?" Sookie squeezed my hand.

"Sorry," I apologized and shook my head to clear it. "My brother has excellent timing."

"Yes, he certainly does," Sookie agreed and stepped into the elevator. "You coming?"

"Oh, right," I stepped in after her. I needed to unfuck myself, and fast. "Do you know where we're going?"

"Yep. Their room is right down the hall from mine," Sookie smiled at me as she pushed the button for the seventh floor. "What sort of things do you think they have planned for decoration?"

"Your guess is as good as mine," I smirked at Sookie, figuring it was probably an array of condoms, sex toys and other oddly named marital aids.

It dawned on me I should have already said something to Sookie in response to what she had told me downstairs but I didn't want to tell her in a hotel elevator. The location probably didn't matter, but it did to me. When the doors opened on the seventh floor, I followed her down the hall to what I guessed was Luke and Emma's room. She got the door open, no problem, and stepped inside.

There were two paper shopping bags sitting on the small table near the window and Sookie grabbed them up quickly. I took them from her, even though she insisted she had them. I figured I had about three minutes to figure out exactly what I wanted to say in response to her adorable rambling seven stories below us. My heart was pounding in my chest, which I wasn't really used to. I was nervous as fuck, which I also wasn't used to. Even though she had just said she loved me and she wanted to give things another shot, there was a part of me that was just as scared as she was.

What if it failed? Could I really go through all this again? I couldn't even get over her the first time. What would I do if ten years from now she decided staying in Michigan was a huge mistake? Then again, she hadn't said anything about staying in Michigan. Did she still plan on leaving for Louisiana? Was this her way of trying to get me to ask her to stay? But then I'd already told her I wanted her to stay. I was over thinking and it was obvious Sookie knew it, based on the way she was smiling at me.

"What?" I asked anyway.

"It's like I can see the wheels turning in your head, Northman," she bumped me with her hip. "I don't need an elaborate speech. I just need to know where you stand."

She was so casual about it, even though I knew she knew it was a big deal. When her hand reached for mine, I felt myself get a little calmer. Her head rested against my shoulder like it belonged there and I took a deep breath. *This is the way it's supposed to be*, I thought to myself as the elevator went higher and higher. If it weren't for the bags in my hand, I would have put my arm around her. Maybe it was better that I couldn't since she would have felt my heart racing like a jack rabbit's.

I followed Sookie off the elevator to the door of the honeymoon suite at the end of the hall. There were embossed hearts on the door and just like at Luke's room, Sookie got the door open no problem. I always ended up fighting with the stupid electronic keys. She held the door open for me so I could walk ahead of her. The room looked like it belonged in a French palace and not a downtown Chicago hotel.

"Wow," Sookie's jaw dropped as she looked around the room. "This is amazing."

"It's a little girlie for my taste," I said as I set the shopping bags down on one of the two velour sofas in the living room area.

Sookie shot me a look of disapproval before moving over to one of the many large windows in the room. "The view," she gasped and pointed out the window.

The lake was visible, and lights were just starting to come on in the city as the sun set. It might have been a little too frou-frou for my tastes, but it was beautiful. I watched the way Sookie's face changed as the sun continued to sink and more and more lights came on. I wanted to remind her we had a job to do, but I couldn't do it. All I could do was sit on one of the couches that clearly weren't built for men over five feet tall.

I walked up behind her and put my arms around her waist. She leaned back against me, leaving us in a comfortable pose. "I meant what I said about not wanting you to go to Louisiana," I whispered to her.

She stiffened just a little, but I didn't let that deter me from saying everything else I wanted to say.

"I don't want you to go, but I understand if you feel like it's something you have to do. You've given up a lot for me, even if you made it sound like it was no big deal. I know it wasn't easy to walk away from your home, your friends and everything else to be with me. I never properly thanked you for that, and I'm sorry. I fully admit it's selfish of me to ask you to stay when you've already given up so much, but it's what I want."

She turned to face me with a tearful smile on her face. She opened her mouth to speak, but I laid a finger on her lips to keep her quiet. I needed to say the rest of it.

"I want the same things you said, Sookie. I want to wake up next to you every day, and I want to make breakfast together and go for walks on the beach while the sun sets like it is right now. I want to hold your hand in the grocery store and watch you tuck your hair behind your ear like you do when you're reading. It's those little things about you I miss the most. And I know that even if I managed to find someone else who did the same things, it wouldn't mean the same thing to me because it's not you doing them.

"We've been apart for six months and you're still the first thing I think about when I wake up and the last thing I think about before I go to sleep. And it drives me crazy when I see you laughing with someone else because I want to be the one who makes you laugh, and I want to be there to wipe away your tears when you cry, even though I hate it when you cry. I don't ever want to be the reason you cry, ever again." I told her just as a tear rolled down her cheek. "I want to love you for the rest of my life."

She nodded as more tears fell. She didn't need to say she felt the same way; I could see it in her eyes. She pushed up on her toes as I leaned down to her so we could meet half way, and when our lips met, it was like sealing a promise. Kissing her always felt right, no matter what the situation. I ignored the voice in my head that told me to slow down and take it one step at a time. Maybe that was the right thing to do, but I needed to feel closer to her. And the way she pressed herself against me, I was sure she felt the same thing.

I pulled back to look at her. Her lips were still parted and her eyes closed. "Sookie, I-"

She put her hand over my mouth without opening her eyes and said, "Don't say whatever it is you're going to say. Just kiss me."

**SPOV**

I loved him and he loved me back. We were giving things another chance. At least, that's what it sounded like to me, and it definitely felt that way when he kissed me. When he tried to talk, I wasn't having any of it. For the moment, we had said enough. There was plenty of time to talk later. Right then all I wanted was to kiss him some more.

Only kissing him was never enough and once my mind turned itself off, I didn't immediately notice he was taking off his clothes one piece at a time. I was so lost in him and the things I was feeling that it wasn't until his hands went for the zipper on my dress that I realized what he was up to. His lips were busy at my neck and I had a split second of hesitation before I got on board with whatever he had planned.

There was just the faintest hint of stubble on his face and the tickle of it against my neck made me giggle quietly. It struck me how much I missed that feeling. I had missed him in so many ways, for so many reasons. My fingers were shaky as I unbuttoned his crisp white shirt but he was patient with me. His eyes were intensely blue. They almost felt like lasers burning into me. When my hands dropped, he pushed the straps of my dress off my shoulders, leaving my dress to fall in a quiet *whoosh* and land at my feet in a cotton candy pink cloud.

"You're beautiful," Eric whispered in my ear before claiming my mouth again.

I held onto him while I kicked off the silver slippers I'd been wearing since we sat down at the head table in the reception hall. His hands went for the clasp on the strapless bra I was wearing while I tugged his undershirt out of his pants. I was just barely able to get the shirt over his head before he got himself reacquainted with two of his long lost friends. Swear to Jesus, my body melted. Six months was a long time, and it was that much longer when you knew exactly what you were missing was just a few dozen yards away.

Eric was sure to give the girls a fond welcoming after all their time apart, not that I minded one bit. That is, until the rest of me started feeling ignored. Gently, I pulled his face away from my chest and the cool air in the room made me shiver. I planned to kiss every inch of his skin I could get my lips on, but instead I was swept up and carried toward the bed. He set me down on it gently, which was different from the usual roughness of our couplings.

Usually we were clawing at each other, tearing clothes off and just going at it like the world was going to end. This time it was different. I could feel his emotions and there was a sense of purpose to every move he made. When his eyes settled on the tattoo on my ankle that was still healing, I squirmed a little in discomfort.

"Don't look at it," I urged him and tried to pull my foot away.

"I like it," he crawled up the bed and settled himself on top of me.

The weight was welcome, but the opinion left me reeling a little. "It's embarrassing," I knew I was blushing.

"No," he shook his head, scratching me lightly with that scruff that seemed to be getting thicker by the minute. "I think it looks good on you."

His choice of words made me blush even more, which he immediately caught on to. When I tried to get out from under him, he wasn't having any of it and pressed himself more firmly against me. It was a lovely distraction, but it wasn't working as well as he wanted it to. That tattoo was still healing and under other circumstances, I could probably laugh it off. Instead, every time I looked at it, I was reminded of how pathetic and reckless I could be.

"What's wrong?" he asked me while placing light kisses along my collarbone.

"I hate the tattoo," I admitted to him.

He pulled back with a curious look on his face. "Why?"

"Because all it does is remind me of a bad time in my life," I blinked back the tears that were threatening to escape me.

Eric turned my face toward his when I turned away from him and looked me dead in the eyes. "That's behind us now. We're moving forward. When I look at that tattoo I don't see it as a drunken mistake. I see a piece of me in your skin, always with you. I think it's beautiful."

His words were sweet and I could tell he meant what he was saying. It was all in my own head and a matter of perspective, I knew that much, but I couldn't just flip a switch and change the way I felt. It would take time to see it differently. Thankfully, Eric was a master at distracting me and before I knew it all I could concentrate on was being with him. Piece by piece, what was left of our clothes disappeared.

There was no rushing, no frenzy to get to the next level. We kissed for a long time, naked as we were, before Eric's lips started drifting down my body. He even went so far as to kiss around the area of my tattoo (kissing the actual tattoo would have been gross since it wasn't healed yet), but he got his point across. The feeling of his breath between my thighs had my hips rocketing up off the bed. I knew all too well what that mouth of his could do to me and I knew there was no way I could really prepare myself for it.

But Eric didn't try to devour me the way he did in the past. He was gentle and teasing, but not in that evil, mischievous way I was used to. He was doing his damnedest to draw out the pleasure, and it was working. It was a good thing he was taking his time because my body wasn't ready to just get back to our regularly scheduled programming. It had been too long since I had sex, and Eric was too big to just dive right in, even if I wanted him to.

By the time he was done with me, I felt boneless and I knew we were nowhere near finished. I thanked my lucky stars I hadn't discontinued the birth control I'd been taking for the last two years. I'd considered it after we broke up since I had no plans to sleep with anyone else, but decided I didn't have to be on birth control just because I was sleeping with someone. Now I was thankful I'd made the choice I had.

His lips drifted up my body, stopping at strategic points, until he reached my mouth. His lips brushed against mine briefly, and the taste of myself on him gave me an unexpected burst of energy. He weight settled between my legs and the friction it caused perked me up even more. He rolled us over so I was straddling him and my hands braced on his chest. Our eyes met and his hands picked up mine.

It seemed like one of us should say something but I didn't know what the words were so I occupied my mouth in a different way and roughly kissed his neck. He let go of my hands and put his on my hips. My heart leapt up into my throat as my lower half started to rise up. This was it. This was the moment I had been waiting for—hoping for- for months.

My eyes found Eric's again as he positioned himself underneath me and with one of the sweetest kisses I'd ever gotten from him, I started to sink down.

**This might just be the most evil cliffhanger I've ever written. I warned you. I'm just going by the vote and it was an overwhelming push for me to post again. Most of you probably won't get this until morning so you won't have to wait for the conclusion. Chapter 50 is, for sure, the final chapter. I finished writing it tonight. Thanks for reading! \*goes into hiding\***

**Chapter 48: Sophomore Slump or Comeback of the Year**

Sorry I didn't do review responses for the last two chapters, but especially with the last one I figured you'd rather just read an A/N and have me post the citrusy conclusion. A LOT of you made me LOL and there was one review in particular from **Millarca666** that had not only me, but **Slacker Dee**, in stitches as well. Seriously, we think you deserve a trophy of some kind. Okay, enough of this. Let's get back to the story, shall we? \*slinks out of the room\*

Chapter 48: Sophomore Slump or Comeback of the Year

**EPOV**

In those moments in that ridiculously fancy hotel room, Sookie was perfect. The way she smelled, the way she tasted and the way she moved perfectly with me. I spent more time preparing her than I ever had in the past because I didn't want a single second of this experience to be painful for her, either in reality or in her memory. As she lowered herself down onto me, she paused to let her body adjust.

I rubbed her clit slowly to ease the process and the moan that filled my ears was thank you enough. Truthfully, I would have been content to spend the rest of the night just kissing her, but this was okay, too. My thumb kept making its rounds, while my lips found that spot on her neck. I was careful not to suck too hard since there was already a small bruise there from the day before.

I looked down and caught the slightest glimpse of her tattoo and it made me growl. I didn't feel comfortable saying it to her just yet; but there was something really sexy about the idea that even if she hadn't intended it to be this way, she was sort of branded as mine. While it was true her blonde hair and blue eyes could be reason enough for anyone to think she was Swedish herself, I liked the idea of knowing I knew what the tattoo was really about.

When Sookie sat up, her head fell back and I was momentarily disappointed I wasn't able to run my fingers through her hair. There was too much hairspray for that to be a possibility. I consoled myself by watching the bounce of her breasts and the sway of her hips as she moved up and down on top of me. She changed up her rhythm, just rocking her hips every now and then, or swirling them a little as she came down.

We rolled again and after moving her knees where I wanted them, I was able to see her tattoo when I turned my head to the left. She gasped and then gave me one of those evil stares of hers when she realized what I'd done. One way or another, I was going to make sure she didn't regret that tattoo anymore, even if it meant me going out and getting something equally as 'silly' as what she had. Changing to the position we were in allowed me to get deeper inside her, which had her moaning louder than before.

I wanted to go harder and faster, but I resisted the urge. There was plenty of time for that later. At the moment, I wanted to stay connected to her for as long as I could. It dawned on me she hadn't said she was going to stay in Michigan, only that she wanted to be with me. If there was one thing I was sure of, it's that we weren't cut out for a long distance relationship. We had enough problems when we were in the same room and if we really wanted to be together, then her living more than a thousand miles away wasn't going to work.

"Don't leave," I heard myself whispering in her ear and I ended up repeating it over and over until she distracted me with a kiss.

Her nails dug into my shoulders when she came, and the little cry that escaped her filled my ears. It was amazing, being inside her when she exploded, but I was determined to keep going for as long as I could. I would have stayed there all night with her if it was possible, listening to the little (and sometimes not so little) noises she made. We rolled, turned and tried different positions until I couldn't hold back anymore.

"Let go, Eric," she whispered to me and nibbled on my ear. "I love you. Let go."

Hearing her say she loved me pushed me over the edge and I crushed her against me when I came. Even though I was the one inside of her, it felt like she was inside of *me*. I couldn't recall ever feeling that with her in the past. I rolled onto my back and pulled her on top of me. We were both slick with sweat and her makeup would probably be ruined as a result, but she rested her head on my chest. The weight of her head over my heart was reassuring and I started to understand what she meant when she told me she liked my weight on her after we made love.

Even if it wasn't going to last, I could hold onto her for just a little while longer. When she climbed off of me, very carefully, might I add, she settled on her stomach beside me. Her chin remained on my chest and her eyes fixed on mine. She smiled at me in the dim light since all we had was the fading sunlight. A few strands of her hair had come loose and I tucked them behind her ear. She nuzzled against my hand with a smile on her face and I swear I heard her purr quietly.

"What about Louisiana?" I had to know what she was going to do.

"I want to be with you, wherever you are," Sookie kissed the palm of my hand.

"So you're going to pass on the job?" I asked her while stroking her cheek.

"I kind of have to, don't I? I mean, it's not like you're going to pack up and move to Louisiana," Sookie gave me a knowing smile.

I was quiet for a second. All of her sacrifices came rushing back at me. She had given up enough. She shouldn't have to spend the rest of her life waiting tables in some crappy diner because of me when she could be doing something really loved. There had to be a way to make this work so we both got what we wanted.

"What if I did?" I turned on my side, as did she.

"What do you mean?" she looked at me curiously.

"What if I figured out a way to keep the bar up and running and moved to Louisiana with you?" I suggested to her.

Her eyebrows shot up toward her hairline in disbelief. "Eric, I can't let you do that. I know how much you love your bar and-"

"And I love you more," I leaned in and kissed her. "Sookie, I can open a bar anywhere, whether it's in Michigan or down in Louisiana. The location isn't important; it's being together that matters and we both know we would fail at long distance. I can't let you give up something else for me; I just can't."

Her eyes filled with tears yet again and she asked, "You would really do that for me? You would give up everything?"

"I wouldn't be giving up everything," I kissed her forehead. "I'd have you."

She attacked me with kisses then and for a minute I thought we'd get to a second round, but then she pulled away and jumped off the bed. "We just had sex in the honeymoon suite!"

"Isn't that what the honeymoon suite is for?" I smirked at her.

"But your brother and Laura and…oh my God! Eric, how could we do that?" Sookie ran around the room, picking up one article of clothing after another. "That's just so…I mean…ugh!"

I couldn't help but laugh at her reaction. "Sookie, I hate to be the one to break it to you, but I'm sure plenty of other people have-"

"Stop!" she held up a hand that was clutching at a bunch of our clothes. "Just stop. Call housekeeping and get them up here to change the sheets."

"Calm down, Sookie," I got off the bed and moved closer to her but she backed away.

"Nuh uh, you go get dressed in the bathroom," she thrust my tux at me.

"What? Why?" I laughed while taking my clothes.

"Because I don't think well when you're naked and we need to get this room fixed up and we need to get back to the reception before someone comes looking for us. Your date is waiting and Laura is going to start asking questions if we're gone for too long, so please, just go get dressed," Sookie half yelled, half pleaded with me.

I went to the bathroom, washed up a little and got dressed. By the time I got back to the living room area of the suite, Sookie was getting off the phone with housekeeping to have the bedding changed. Okay, so it was sleazy to have sex in someone else's bed but it wasn't like the bed belonged to Jake and Mini. Besides, it was already a done deal. There was no taking it back now.

"Here," Sookie thrust one of the shopping bags at me.

I looked inside to see a collection of multi-colored, and flavored, condoms along with a few toys. I cringed at the idea of my brother strolling casually through a sex shop picking things out. But leave it to Luke to pick up his and hers dildos. Luke was going to pay for that later. His wedding wasn't so far away and as we'd all learned, Mini was a force to be reckoned with.

"A Kama Sutra kit?" Sookie held up the brightly colored box.

I shrugged and said, "Maybe they need the help."

"I don't really want to think about it," Sookie said while she put the box down on one of the tables.

We were scattering the condoms like they were rose pedals when housekeeping arrived to change the bedding. Sookie went to the bathroom to fix her hair as best she could. Her makeup was definitely smudged but it wasn't entirely ruined. All the same, I was pretty sure people would figure out we hadn't just ducked out to decorate the honeymoon suite. I put out candles while Sookie arranged condoms in a heart-shaped pattern on the bed.

Sookie reached into her bag and pulled out what could only be described as the most disturbing sex toy I'd ever seen. "Oh my God, what *is* this?" she held up a bright blue gum drop shaped piece of plastic with a remote control attached to it.

I leaned over to take a closer look and laughed while saying, "I think that's a butt plug."

Sookie shrieked and dropped it on the floor. "Okay, you know I'm adventurous, but promise me you'll never buy hardware without asking me first?"

"Deal," I leaned over and kissed her head.

She picked up the offending sex toy and put it on the dresser. Luke and Emma had definitely run the gamut where sexy toys were concerned. Just about anything Jake and Mini might have been into was represented in the collection of loot. Like Sookie, I tried not to put too much thought into how the toys might be employed, although I will admit there were a few that gave me some ideas. Sookie wasn't kidding when she said she was adventurous, but there were just some things that required a discussion before springing it on your partner. Getting kicked out of bed was no good.

"I think that about covers it," I said once both bags were empty.

Sookie straightened up a collection of lubricants she'd arranged on the nightstand. When she turned around she reached for my hand so we could walk out together. "Oh! The room keys!"

Fuck. I had no idea where those were. We spent a few minutes frantically searching the room to find them. One was under the sofa and the other was under the bed. Sookie handed them over to me and when we left the room, we tested the door to see which key went where. I put the suite key in my pocket and she tucked Luke's room key into the bodice of her dress. We walked to the elevators hand in hand and after she pushed the call button for the elevator, I pulled her into my arms and kissed her.

"Are you serious about moving to Louisiana?" Sookie asked me with her eyes closed and a smile on her face.

My forehead was pressed to hers and she hugged me a little tighter around my waist. I nodded and said, "I'm serious."

"I love you," she whispered and then tilted her face up a little more.

"I love you, too," I closed the few inches between us and kissed her until the elevator dinged with its arrival.

**o.O.o.O.o**

Sookie and I were sitting at the head table between dances, catching our breath and replenishing some liquids. Between the dancing and sex, we were both probably a little dehydrated. Our hands were joined under the table and I wanted to pull her into my lap. She kissed the side of my neck and whispered something in my ear.

"There you are," Mom said from behind us.

Both Sookie and I turned to see her standing there with a suspicious look on her face. "Hey, Mom," I smiled up at her, too happy with the turn of events where Sookie was concerned to be worried about the look on my mother's face.

"I was hoping you'd be willing to dance with your old Mom," she looked down at me.

"Sure," I kissed Sookie's temple and stood up.

I walked to the dance floor with Mom and moved around the floor with her. "You look awfully happy," she said as we danced.

"I am happy. Sookie and I are giving it another chance," I smiled over in Sookie's direction and she smiled back.

Mom stopped moving and stared up at me like I had two heads. "What are you doing, Eric?"

"Please don't make a scene in the middle of the reception," I whispered and tried to get her dancing again.

"You two aren't good for each other," Mom shook her head and sighed with disappointment. "She's a pretty girl, Eric, but there are tons of pretty girls out there. You should be with someone who isn't going to jerk you around all the time."

"You think I'm with her because she's pretty?" I gave up on dancing. "How shallow do you think I am, Mom?"

She walked off the dance floor and I followed her. "I didn't mean to imply that you're shallow."

"That's sure as hell what it sounded like to me. Look, Mom, you may not understand the reasons why we're together, but you don't have to. All you need to know is that I love her and she loves me back. We have our problems but you always said relationships are never easy. It's going to be hard work but *I* know she's worth it. And I hope you can get over whatever it is you have against her because I want her in my life for a very long time." I told my mother, who looked like I was taking a sledge hammer to her heart.

"She's not good enough for you," Mom shook her head.

"No, Mom, she's not good enough for *you*. But this isn't about you," I ran my fingers through my hair. "I'm moving to Louisiana, Mom."

"What?" she couldn't have been more shocked if I told her the Pope had just married Justin Bieber.

"Sookie was offered a job with a professor of hers and she wants to take it. We want to be together and she's already sacrificed a lot for me, regardless of what you think. I want to be with her and I want her to have what she wants, so I'm moving to Louisiana to be with her."

"Eric, you're being foolish! You're not a child anymore. You have responsibilities you can't just walk away from." Mom glared at me in a way she hadn't since I was still in high school and came in way past curfew.

"Pam can handle Loki's all on her own, Mom, and it's not like I can't come up here when I need to. We're talking Louisiana, not London. And Jessica's learned a lot of the business-"

"The girl who slashed your tires?" Mom snorted.

"What the hell happened to you?" I demanded, my frustration level reaching its peak. "Ever since Dad died, you've become this bitter old woman who doesn't seem to want anyone to be happy. I miss Dad, too, but don't put your shit on me, Mom. I would really like it if you gave Sookie a chance to show you that she's changed. She's trying really hard to be a better version of herself. Whether or not you want to accept it is up to you, but I do ask that you respect my decision."

Mom shook her head vehemently, her face flushed red in her own anger. Her arms were folded over her chest and the tears in her eyes told me she wasn't quite ready to get on board with what I was doing. I looked over at Sookie, who looked almost as upset as my mother. I loved them both, but if Mom was going to force me to choose, she was going to be disappointed.

"You're going to choose her over me, aren't you?" Mom wiped at her eyes.

"Only if you make it that way," I sighed with disappointment. "I really wish you'd just talk to her, Mom. She's a good person."

"I need some air," Mom pushed past me and stormed out of the reception.

"What was that about?" Jake appeared at my side.

"Sookie and I are back together and I'm moving to Louisiana," I said rather absently.

"Oh," Jake handed me his beer. "I think you might need that."

I took the beer, stared at the bottle and said, "No, I need to do this sober."

**Mama Northman strikes again! And before you go, "But Meg, she talked to Sookie before and apologized for her fuckery. What gives?" I tend to think it's a situation where Mama Northman didn't think Sookie and Eric were going to get very far in fixing their relationship and on top of that, it's one thing for them to be friends but it's something else entirely for Eric to pack up and move to Louisiana on what seems like a whim. Why she thinks her son is so incapable of making an intelligent decision is beyond me. Methinks, perhaps, she's jealous of Sookie in some way. Anyway...how proud of Eric are we for handling this sitch sober? It's a nice change from the way he would deal just a few months ago. Next chapter is pretty much all E/S and it airs a lot of the dirty laundry that still remains between them. It's also the last regular chapter of this story. Thanks for reading!**

**Chapter 49: Everything You Want**

Chapter 49: Everything You Want

**SPOV**

After the reception let out, Eric and I retreated up to our rooms to change clothes and shower up. I was still a little sticky from the sex a few hours before. The quick clean up job I'd done in the bathroom hadn't been thorough enough. I slid on a nightgown and then called Eric's room. He was two floors above me but offered to come down when I was ready. We had a lot of things to talk about and I didn't want to waste any more time.

When he got down to my room, he greeted me with a kiss but I wouldn't let it go any farther than that until we did some talking. It was too easy to get swept up in sex and we couldn't keep letting our hormones get the better of us. While I enjoyed pillow talk, we really couldn't define our relationship with it. Eric kicked off his shoes and flopped back onto one of the two full size beds. When I didn't sit down next to him, he patted the mattress.

"I think I better stay over here," I said as I sat down at the little table on the other side of the room.

"Why? You aren't having second thoughts about us, are you?" he sat up with a concerned look on his face.

"No, of course not! I just know how we are and when we get close to each other, anything we plan on saying has a tendency to go out the window and there's a lot of stuff we need to talk about," I explained and pulled my knees up to my chest.

"Fair enough," he nodded and sat back against the headboard. "Do you want to start, or should I?"

"Well, I was thinking that even though we're making progress in handling things differently than we used to, it might not be a bad idea to sit down with my counselor a few times." I suggested.

"Couples counseling?" Eric arched an eyebrow.

"I know it's not really your style but I think it could help us a lot. We're doing okay, but we could be doing great."

"This is something I take it you've already discussed with your therapist?"

"It came up once. The day I first got the call from Octavia, actually, but I didn't think you'd be willing to do it. You like handling things in your own way," I shrugged.

"Sookie, if it's going to help us as a couple, and if it'll make you happy, I'll at least give it a chance," he promised me.

"Really?" I grinned at him.

He nodded and said, "I want this to work. So if we have to go see a therapist to make that happen, I'll try."

My touching embargo lifted and I ended up jumping on him. My hands settled on the sides of his neck and I kissed him hard. "Thank you."

"You're welcome," he smiled at me. "What else is on the agenda?"

"Your mother," my smile faded. "She hates me, doesn't she?"

"She doesn't hate you; she just doesn't know you. She got the wrong idea way back when we first started dating and because things went the way they did, she's always thought this relationship was a lost cause."

"Did you set her straight?" I asked him gently.

"I tried to. I told her that you're a part of my life and I intend to keep it that way so if she's going to force me to choose, she's not going to like the result."

I sighed with disgust. "I don't want it to be like that, Eric. I don't want you to have to split your time between me and your mother. You shouldn't have to cut her out in order to be with me."

"I don't want it to be that way either but I'm not going to have her around if she's just going to be negative and second guessing my decisions. I'm an adult; I don't need her permission or blessing for anything anymore."

I smiled at him and said, "I think I see where you get your protective streak from."

"Protective or possessive?" Eric smirked at me.

I squirmed a little and said, "Maybe both?"

"I'm sorry about that, by the way. It's something I need to work on. There's no reason why you can't have male friends. I have Jessica and Pam and believe me, there's nothing sexual about either relationship. I think I freaked out because I was afraid of losing you."

I brushed some his hair back and said, "I'm not going anywhere, Eric. I'm not the cheating kind and I promise you, if a time ever comes when I'm not happy in our relationship, I will tell you that. Cheating makes no sense to me whatsoever. It's cowardly and pathetic."

Eric nodded his agreement and said, "I won't cheat. Once I'm with you, I'm with *you*."

"I know you are," I leaned in and kissed him again. "Listen, there's something else I need you to know."

"I'm all ears," he wiggled his eyebrows at me while rubbing my hips.

"Don't distract me; this is important," I pulled back a little and waited for him to settle down some.

"Okay, I'm listening," Eric promised me with a serious expression on his face.

I proceeded to explain to him why the jealousy thing was such a problem for me. I went into more detail about my relationship with Bill, which I knew was hard for him to hear. I felt him tense under me as I told him the kinds of things Bill used to say to me to keep me under his control. I explained how Bill systematically separated me from everyone in my life to keep me isolated and dependent on him.

"I wish I knew why I stayed with him for as long as I did. That's something I'm still working on figuring out. What I do know is that when you try to pull me away from other people, I start feeling like you don't trust me to make my own decisions. It feels like you want to control me and I don't like feeling like I'm out of control. I've felt like that enough in my life," I explained to him.

"Why didn't you tell me this before?" Eric asked gently, his hands calmly kneading my hips.

"Because there were a lot of things about me I didn't want to face," I admitted grimly. "It's not easy to look at yourself in the mirror when you're not sure you're going to like what you see staring back at you."

"I'm sorry I made things harder for you. I didn't know I was doing it," Eric said honestly. "I thought I was helping you."

"By being jealous?" I arched an eyebrow.

"Okay, well, not with that. I mean by trying to get you to work things out. I thought I was helping," Eric explained.

"I wasn't ready. You're familiar with the phrase don't it always seem to go that you don't know what you got 'til it's gone, right?" I asked and he nodded. "I knew I loved you and I knew I wanted to be with you, but I didn't understand why it was so important I fix myself. Honestly, I'm not sure I ever would have gotten the help I needed if you wouldn't have broken up with me."

"It was a pretty steep price to pay, wasn't it?" Eric's hands moved up my sides a little.

"It was," I agreed and climbed off his lap. "Okay, now this next part is something you're probably not going to like, but I am fully prepared to fight it out as long as we have to."

"Uh oh," Eric turned toward me.

"Jessica," I sighed and sat on my knees. "I don't care if you're friends with her. I believe you when you say you're not interested in her. However, if you're really her friend, then you're being a really shitty one right now. Regardless of what you said about not wanting to make me jealous, I think that's exactly what you wanted to do. I think you wanted to get a rise out of me and I don't think that's right. If this is payback for flaunting other guys in front of you, message received, but I really thought we were past that by now."

Eric sighed and got up off the bed. I watched as he paced the room while the wheels in his head turned. "I asked Jessica to come with me because I didn't know if you were coming alone and I knew if you were here with someone else, I wasn't going to take it well."

"So you brought a babysitter?" I couldn't believe what I was hearing. "Eric, honey, I think you need to make your *own* appointment with Ethan. Do you realize how…well, crazy that sounds? And on top of that, you've pretty much ignored her the whole time you've been here! I talked to her earlier and she seemed okay with it, but even if you're just friends, that's not cool. You don't just ditch someone because something better came along. You owe her an apology," I insisted.

"I probably shouldn't have asked her to come with me," Eric conceded.

"You think?" I stared at him, shaking my head. "You used her, plain and simple. I talked to her earlier and she didn't come here thinking you were anything other than friends but that doesn't make it okay, Eric."

"I know," he nodded and sat at the edge of the bed. I moved so I was sitting beside him.

"If she's really that good of a friend to you, how could you treat her this way? I don't understand it," I told him and rested my chin on his shoulder.

He took a deep breath, held it for a few seconds and then blew it out slowly. "Maybe you're right. Maybe I did want to make you jealous."

"And why Jessica? There dozens of beautiful girls that would shoot a kitten to go out with you. Why her? Did you want to hurt me on top of it?" I asked him. When he hesitated to answer I said, "Eric, this is when we need to get everything out on the table. I need to hear the truth."

"I didn't want to be alone, Sookie; I'm tired of being alone. I was tired of missing you and I was tired of the conversations where you only said half of what you wanted to say. You hinted that you were leaving but looking for a reason to stay. I told you I wanted you to stay and you still weren't sure. I figured if I wasn't enough of a reason then why bother fighting? But then I figured out I would be even more miserable if you left and…fuck this is complicated." Eric shook his head.

I patted his shoulder and said, "Couples counseling. We're going."

He nodded and said, "That's probably a really good idea."

"What are you going to do about the bar?" I asked him.

"I'm going to have to talk to Pam about it," he sighed and leaned into me when I leaned on him. "She's going to be opening her own place so I don't know how much time she's going to have. If Jessica was a few years older and had more experience, I'd promote her and let her manage the place but she's not ready for that. I could talk to Rasul and see if maybe he'd be interested in doing more than security."

"This isn't very well planned, Eric," I kissed the side of his head.

"I'll figure something out. If I have to, I close down during the off season," he shrugged.

"Can you afford to do that? Besides, even if you were only open for the summer, that's still three months out of the year you would have to be here to oversee things," I pointed out.

He pulled me into his lap and said, "I'll talk to Pam and we'll go from there."

"What are we going to do about your Mom?" I asked him.

He sighed and said, "It's up to her to make up her mind, Sookie."

"I think I should talk to her. It bothers me that it's this all or nothing thing and it shouldn't be. You have a new baby sister, who is too adorable for words, by the way, and you shouldn't have to miss out on that because your mom and I can't get along. If we talked, maybe we could come to an understanding," I suggested to him but he didn't say anything. "I'm sorry, am I talking too much or moving too fast?"

"No, no, I'm just…I'm a little surprised you've thought about all this stuff," Eric admitted, which earned him a huff. "Don't get upset. I just meant I…okay, that came out wrong."

"You think?" I furrowed my brows.

"I'm used to having to pull teeth in order to get anything from you, Sookie," he said as gently as he could. It hurt to hear it, but I knew he was telling me the truth.

"And now you're the one that's shut down," I pulled away from him.

"Loving you scares the shit out of me, Stackhouse," he admitted and reached for my hand. "You have the ability to completely turn my world inside out and I'm not used to giving that much of myself to someone else."

"So when I pull away from you, that's a problem," I said quietly.

"I get that we're going to need our own space sometimes. It would be weird if we didn't. But when I feel like I'm always chasing you down, it starts to feel like you don't want to be caught. Then I start wondering what the point is and it's just this vicious cycle."

"So we'll do things differently this time," I moved closer to him. "We'll find new ways of dealing with things. And we'll talk about the things that bother us."

"Do you really think it's that easy?" Eric snickered.

"I think it's going to be hard work and I think we're going to fight like cats and dogs sometimes," I wrapped my arms around his neck and kissed his shoulder. "But I think the fight is worth it because I love you."

He turned his head toward me and smiled in my direction. I loved that smile. There was so much confidence in it. When he looked at me like that, it was hard to believe anything could go wrong. I leaned in a little more and kissed him on the lips and it wasn't long before I was straddling him again. I felt like I was exactly where I belonged and for the first time in a long time, I really did feel like everything was going to be okay.

**o.O.o.O.o**

The next morning Eric and I met Jessica in the restaurant hotel for breakfast. She smiled when she saw us approaching hand in hand. "About time you two worked things out," she said as Eric pulled out my chair for me.

"Sometimes you have to lose everything before you realize what you had," I smiled up at him while I sat.

We decided to just go through the breakfast buffet instead of ordering meals. I left Eric alone so he could apologize to Jessica, claiming I had forgotten to get cottage cheese to go with my fruit. I was looking at the array of pastries when Patricia fell into place beside me.

"Hello, Sookie," she said a little stiffly.

"Patricia," I nodded respectfully.

Truth was she scared the daylights out of me. I didn't even know where to start with all the things we needed to talk about. I thought maybe the best thing to do was pick a place and jump in.

"I hear you were offered a job in Louisiana," Patricia kept her eyes on the pastries, just like I was.

"Yes, I was. One of my old professors received a grant to open a clinic for women who are recovering from abusive relationships. It's a cause that's important to both of us since we've both been through it. I want to help someone else the way I've been helped," I explained to her.

"I uh, I didn't know you were recovering," Patricia softened a little.

"With all due respect, Patricia, there are a lot of things you don't know about me," I smiled at her in attempts to soften the blow.

"I go by what I see, and what I've seen is a lot of my son hurting because of you," Patricia told me.

"I know," I agreed. "I've done a lot of things I'm not proud of. I'm not pleased with myself for the way I treated him in the past. He's a good man and he didn't deserve it. If I could take it all back, I would, but I can't. It is what it is. He's giving me another chance and I don't intend to blow it. Whether or not you can see it, I *do* love your son. I love him more than I could ever possibly explain to you. And I love him even more for being willing to make the sacrifices he is to be with me. But I don't want my relationship with him to interfere with yours. You're his mother, and regardless of what we think of one another, it's important you be in his life.

"You have my word I'm not trying to steal him away from you. My own mother died when I was young. I can barely remember her anymore. And my Gran, who raised me after my parents died, passed away last spring. My brother is all the family I have left. It's not easy to watch your family dwindle when it should be increasing. I wouldn't wish the sorts of losses I've suffered on anyone, and especially not on someone I love. So if there's a way for us to work out whatever problems there are between us, I would really like that to happen. If it's important to Eric, it's important to me." I told Patricia. I figured laying it all out like that was the best way to go since I didn't really have anything to lose.

"Whose idea was it for him to move to Louisiana?" Patricia eyed me suspiciously.

"His," I smiled over in Eric's direction. "He told me he wanted me to have what I want. He wants me to be happy."

Patricia looked over in Eric's direction as well. He was still talking to Jessica but both of them were smiling. When Patricia turned back to look at me, her expression was softer. I held my breath since I didn't know her well enough to know what that meant. Maybe she was just gearing up to really let me have it?

"I want him to be happy too," Patricia said quietly. She took a deep breath and let it out slowly. In those moments, I could see a lot of Eric in her. Or maybe it was the other way around. Either way, it was obvious to me Eric had taken on a lot of her personality.

"You know, he's a lot like you," I smiled at her.

Patricia snorted and said, "Actually, he's a lot like his father."

"I'm sorry I'll never get to meet him. Eric doesn't talk about him much," I told her.

"No, he wouldn't. Losing his father was hard on him. I'm not sure he ever really dealt with the loss like he should have," Patricia informed me, which explained a lot about Eric's issues with abandonment. It seemed to me maybe Patricia hadn't either, but I kept that to myself.

"I can't promise you things will be perfect between us, Patricia. We have a lot of things to sort out. I don't know where things will end up between us, but I'd like to think this is it. My Gran used to tell me her marriage came in a kit and she had to build it herself. I think that applies to relationships in general. Whatever is between Eric and me, we have to build it ourselves," I shrugged.

"Everything okay over here?" Eric asked as he approached us.

"It will be," Patricia winked at me, and for once, she didn't cringe when Eric wrapped an arm around me.

I could only hope that this time, Patricia was telling the truth.

**So I want to start out by saying that the quote Sookie mentions there from her Gran about marriage coming in a kit is something my own Gram once told me when we talked about marriage once upon a time. It's a good piece of advice I will take with me through the rest of my life. Beyond that, this is the last regular chapter of the monster that is LTS. I'll save you the epic closing A/N, but be prepared for one tomorrow. The epiclogue (totes invented that word in chat with Scribeninja last night) is over 7k words. I've been asked about sequels but I can't even really think about that right now. I can see writing the occasional one shot for it from time to time (starting with that bachelorette party outtake I promised), but I don't know about a sequel. My brain needs to recover from the angst and I don't want the story to morph into something like "Couples Therapy" since Evenflo78 has already covered Eric & Sookie going through all that.**

**Thank you to everyone who reviewed, encouraged, made me laugh and stuck with this story through all the angst. I'd like to think it was all worth it in the end. And, as always, thanks for reading baby birds! \*smooches\***

**Chapter 50: Take Me There**

This morning while reading through reviews from the last chapter a quote popped into my head. I collect them and it never really occurred to me that this quote fit with this story until now, and I'm happy that it does because I always wanted to write a fic that centered on this quote. Turns out I was and I just had no idea I was doing it.

*"Whatever our souls are made of, his and mine are the same."- Emily Bronte in Wuthering Heights*

**Junglequeen73** called this Eric & Sookie beautifully broken, and I have to agree. Thank you all for sticking with them through all this insanity. And before I get mushy, I'mma walk away and let you read this last chapter...

Chapter 50: Take Me There

**EPOV**

The farmhouse looked different as we pulled up the long driveway. Octavia had advanced Sookie a portion of her salary so she could have the outside of the house repainted, since it had only been whitewashed for the last century or so. I didn't know all the details of what financial settlement Sookie and Octavia had reached but that wasn't important. What mattered was that a deal had been reached that would allow Sookie to have the summer months off so we could spend them up in Michigan, running Loki's together.

Jessica was too young to run the bar on her own and I learned that even if I had offered her the job, she wouldn't have taken it. She wanted to focus on school and was even considering studying business. At the age of eighteen, she wasn't entirely sure what she wanted to do with her life, but she had plenty of time to figure that out. She was taking steps in the right direction, which was the most important thing.

Pam was going to be my eyes and ears but Rasul had agreed to step up and run the day to day operations. He would still be the head of security, but he was also overseeing the other managerial duties with Jessica's help. I was confident in the team I had in place to keep Loki's running while I was away. And, if there was ever a problem they couldn't handle, I could always hop a flight up to Michigan and be there in a few hours.

With the bar taken care of, I felt confident in leaving. If things didn't work out with the bar, I could always sell it. As it was, I was contemplating opening a second one down in Louisiana, but it would be a while before I really got started on it. Living in Louisiana was going to be a bit of a culture shock for me and I wanted to take time to adjust to it. For starters, the Lime Green Monster stuck out like a sore thumb in a community full of pickup trucks and minivans. I also quickly realized I was missing the proper quotient of flannel shirts and Bon Temps football t-shirts.

I wasn't used to the customs or the slower way of living. Having grown up in the suburbs of Chicago was a far cry from northwestern Louisiana. All the same, the farmhouse had its own charm to it. After we were sure we were moving down to Louisiana, Sookie had a long talk with Amelia. It turned out she and Tray had been house hunting anyway since they were serious about wanting a baby and that meant being closer to an elementary school. They found a place two towns over that they fell in love with almost immediately.

With the housing market being in the shitter along with the rest of the economy, their offer was immediately accepted. They would be closing on the house a week after we arrived in Bon Temps. All they would be taking with them was Amelia's bedroom furniture, their clothes and a large flat screen Tray had installed in the living room. It was a good thing, since Sookie and I were disoriented enough without having to deal with stacks and stacks of boxes cluttering the house.

Amelia and Tray weren't there when we arrived, which I was thankful for. I liked them both, and Amelia in particular, after learning all of the ways she had tried to encourage Sookie to get help. I had been through the house with Sookie before, back when we came down to "sell" it to Amelia. The house would be sold back to Sookie for a staggering $1.50.

"We need to do some renovating in here," Sookie looked around the first floor of the house.

"I'm not much of a carpenter," I wrapped my arms around her waist.

"Then it's a good thing I can have a crew of good ole boys here lickity split," Sookie wiggled against me.

"Lickity split, huh?" I nibbled her ear.

"Slow down there, cowboy, we have bags to bring in," Sookie tried to pull away but I wasn't ready to let her go just yet.

"They can wait," I scooped her up and headed down the hallway toward the bedrooms. "Which one is yours?"

"That one," Sookie pointed to the right.

The room was a little on the musty side and hot as hell thanks to its southern exposure. The humidity in Louisiana was a whole other ball of wax from what I was used to up north. At least we got a cool breeze from the lake once in a while. Bon Temps was in the middle of nowhere. If there was a body of water at all, it was just a swamp or a bayou, and there was definitely nothing remotely close to 'lake effect' coming off of them.

"You don't have an air conditioner?" I stared at her like she had three heads.

"Ceiling fans," she smiled and pointed up.

"We're getting an air conditioner," I told her. No way would I make it for more than a few nights without one.

"Aren't you high maintenance?" she teased while unbuttoning her sundress.

"I like sleeping comfortably," I moved closer to her, watching her undress. "And I also like to know that the only reason you're sweating is because of me."

She rolled her eyes and let the dress fall around her feet. "I feel dirty. I'm taking a shower," she said and sauntered into the bathroom.

I didn't wait for a verbal invitation. I knew she expected me to follow her and who was I to disappoint? We both stripped down and stepped into the ancient tub. The pipes were exposed for the shower and I knew then the job of renovating her house could damn well be a full-time gig for me if I was inclined to learn how to do it. The cool water felt good on our hot and salty skin. The drive down from Louisiana had been a long one, but more fun than I ever could have imagined.

Sookie had suggested we make a rule that for each state line we crossed, we tell each other something about ourselves we never had before, and we had learned quite a bit with all the states we passed through. We had pulled off the road when we got to Tennessee and couldn't keep our hands off each other anymore. The backseat of the Lime Green Monster was seeing more action now than it had in its entire life, not that I was complaining. If that was what I had to look forward to, I couldn't wait to get lost on more back country roads with her. For the moment, I was completely content to have her alone, naked and in the shower with me. We mostly kept our hands to ourselves, which wasn't always the easiest thing to do.

Climbing on each other and reverting to old sexual habits would have been easy, but we were taking things as slowly as we could, considering we were going to be living together. Octavia had referred us to a friend of hers who was willing to see Sookie and me, and the idea of seeing a therapist made me both nervous and excited. Confronting my own demons wasn't easy and I was starting to understand why Sookie had dragged her feet on it. Knowing she was going through something similar made it easier and I also knew she wouldn't judge me.

We changed into fresh clothes when we got out of the shower and started to take stock of all the things we needed to do to get the house where we wanted it. Just about everything needed work. Gutting the place and starting from scratch would probably be easiest, but there were several pieces of furniture Sookie insisted we save. When I suggested we chop up the kitchen table and use it for kindling, she glared at me with one of those death stares of hers.

"This table is as old as this house!" Sookie argued.

"Exactly my point," I said smugly.

"It's an antique, Eric! My great great great grandfather built this!"

"And I'm sure back in the day, it was a beautiful piece of furniture. Now it's all uneven and distressed in a bad way. Face it, Sookie, we need a new table," I argued with her.

"Or maybe you need a new attitude," she huffed and crossed her arms. "This is history, Eric, and it means a lot to me."

"It's a shame the water tables are too high for basements here. I'm sure that table would look perfect in one," I realized a second too late I had probably taken it too far.

"Be careful when you talk about old things that are past their prime. I would hate for anyone to say anything derogatory about that Lime Green *Monstrosity* sitting in my driveway," Sookie returned my smug look, leaving me feeling like I'd been punched in the gut.

"That car is a classic! If sold it, I'd get thousands for it. That table would be lucky to make splinters," I retorted.

"You're a real jerk, you know that?" Sookie shook her head and stomped into the living room.

"Sookie, it's just a table!" I said as she walked away from me.

"Fuck you!" she shouted in response and then a door slammed.

Well, that certainly wasn't the way I envisioned things going on our first night in Louisiana. I took a closer look at the table and cringed at all the dings, nicks, scratches and scrapes on it. The legs were gnawed and in need of some serious work. Quite frankly it was amazing the thing was still standing. Maybe if I refinished it, it wouldn't be so bad. I sighed, ready to wave the white flag of surrender. It wasn't worth it to fight over a table. If she was so set on keeping it, what the hell difference did it make?

I attributed her freak out to my insensitivity combined with the extreme humidity in the air and the stress of all the change at once. I took a few deep breaths and gave her some time to cool off before going to her-*-our*- bedroom to try and smooth things over. I found her lying on the bed, facing away from the door. I would have snuggled in behind her but it was too hot and I wasn't sure touching her when she was so pissed off was a good idea. I liked my balls fully functioning and right where they were.

"I'm sorry I was a jerk. We can keep the table if it means that much to you," I settled a hand on her shoulder.

Sookie rolled onto her back and looked up at me with a tear streaked face. Fuck. Stupid tears and their ability to reduce me to a sniveling tool. I really needed to figure out how to defend myself against them. Every time I saw her cry, I immediately wanted to make it stop, no matter what I had to give in to in order for it to happen. I wasn't sure if Sookie knew that or not, but I didn't think she did.

"I'm sorry a flipped out like that. I just figured you would understand why I love this house, and the things in it, because of your Dad's car," Sookie explained to me, leaving me to feel more like a dick than I already did. "If you really hate the table, I can put it up in the attic."

"How about a compromise?" I suggested which got Sookie to smile just a little.

"What's your offer?"

"We can keep the table right where it is if I can pick the couch for the living room," I suggested.

"No leather," Sookie said immediately.

"In this weather? Are you crazy? I don't want my ass sticking to the sofa," I smiled at her.

"It's a good ass," Sookie nodded, getting a small laugh from me.

"So you've said before," I leaned down and kissed her. I shifted easily and ended up on top of her. "We really need an air conditioner, or we're going to be in and out of the shower every hour or so. The water bill will be sky high and it's bad for the environment."

"Since when are you Mr. Environmentally Conscious?" Sookie giggled when I nipped at her neck. "Oh my God! You've been spending too much time with Jake. You aren't turning into a fruity bastard on me, are you?"

"If you ever see me shopping for tofu and wearing hemp pants, you have my permission to run me over with the Lime Green Monster," I grinded against her, making her moan.

"Deal," she whispered and then pulled my face to hers to kiss me.

**SPOV**

The office space Octavia had picked out was in a small house just outside of Monroe. There were lots of big windows and she made sure to put plants and flowers everywhere she could. The decorator had used mostly ocean tones and there was a decidedly Eastern theme to the office with all the fountains, rocks and symbols that adorned the walls. I knew Octavia embraced nature in a big way and even practiced Wicca, although she didn't make that public knowledge.

After all she'd been through; her faith in a Christian God was pretty much destroyed. Nature she could believe in because she could see it. While I understood her rationale, my faith was part of what got me through dealing with Bill. I leaned on that faith and trusted in it when I felt like I didn't have anything else. My faith was the one thing Bill couldn't take away from me and I never let him.

"This is your office," Octavia said when we stepped into a decent size room off the main corridor.

My office had a big bay window with an off-white marble desk and bookshelves built in. The shelves and walls were painted a dark shade of gray and the suede chairs were the same color. Bright yellow and orange roses were fragrant and bunched together on the corner of my desk. An ivory lamp offered soft light to compensate for the northern exposure of the window. The drapes hung heavy and were a metallic gray color that wasn't quite silver, but wasn't really gold either. It was a nice contrast to most of the darkness in the room.

"It's kind of dark in here," I smiled at Octavia.

"It is. I wanted to leave it up to you whether or not we repainted in here. I changed the carpeting and the furniture but I kind of liked the walls. But if you want something different, we can arrange for it," Octavia offered.

"We'll see," I shrugged, figuring we could always discuss it later. I had enough home improvement stuff going on in my actual home to worry about.

My official title was Senior Patient Coordinator. Basically, Octavia wanted me to act as the liaison between the patients we treated and the various other organizations we would be working with to help them get back on their feet. I would deal with charities, coordinate medical care, more intensive therapy, job search information, housing availability and childcare. I would also have a small caseload of patients I would be meeting with as needed. Octavia planned on assigning me teenagers with the feeling that they might be more willing to open up to me because I was closer to their age and maybe had a better understanding to their way of thinking.

The clinic would function year round but we suspected we would be busier during the school year than we would during the summer months. I had negotiated it with her so I would be able to spend time up in Michigan during the summer months. Eric was going to need to fly up north a few times a year to check in on the bar and deal with quarterly taxes or some such business. I planned on only going up for the holidays or during the summer. In the summer I would have the ability to work remotely from the beach house in Michigan and my caseload would be transferred to another counselor while I was out of the office.

I was given a Blackberry that was paid for by the clinic, as well as a shiny new laptop with more bells and whistles than I knew what to do with. Considering I'd been raised to work with computers, I really didn't know a whole lot more than the basics of browsing the internet, sending emails and operating a word processor. It seemed I was going to have a lot to learn. The next step was for me to sit in on interviews with Octavia to bring in other help. We needed other trained therapists, a few nurses and then all of the office support staff.

When Amelia got wind of the job opening up at the clinic she pushed hard for me to recommend her to Octavia. I didn't know how to tell her, but Amelia just wasn't the right fit for what we needed. Amelia wasn't very good at keeping things confidential and she had a tendency to beat people over the head with her opinions. It was crucial to be firm, but not judgmental with the people we were trying to help.

I was also aware that Amelia would try to use her friendship with me to garner her extra time on her lunch breaks, or as a viable alibi when she called in sick once too often because she simply wanted a longer weekend. Like it or not, it was my reputation on the line and I wasn't willing to screw that up to help Amelia out. Not to mention, she already had a job at the local insurance agency that she liked just fine. She was just angling for more money and better benefits. I couldn't blame her, per se, but I didn't have to stick my neck out either.

When I got home from the office after my third week there, I found Eric out back staining the new cabinets we'd picked out from a home improvement store over in Ruston. They were solid white oak and heavy as all get out. He was shirtless and a deep shade of bronze from all the time he was spending out in the sun. Did I mention he was sweating? Because he was, and it looked ridiculously good on him.

"How was your day, dear?" he smiled at me as I got closer to him.

"Pretty good. I think we found the right specialist to work with kids," I smiled in return and accepted the kiss he offered me. "How are things here?"

"Going pretty well, I think. I finally got the quote from the gravel company for the driveway," he looked slightly pained.

"That bad, huh?" I sucked in air.

"It's about what I expected it would be for that interlocking gravel, but I think it'll be worth the expense," he set down the brush he'd been working with and went over to grab the hose.

I was too busy staring at the job he'd done on the cabinets to pay attention to what he was doing with the hose. That is, until I looked up in time to see him shaking water from himself like he was a puppy caught in the rain. Damn if my lady business didn't flood at the sight of all that water dripping all over him. It really wasn't fair there wasn't time to fool around. We had our first appointment with the couples counselor in a little more than an hour and Eric needed to go get changed.

"Did you forget what today is?" I asked him once he dropped the hose.

"Counseling," he smiled at me. "I was just heading inside to shower up. I'll be ready to go in ten minutes."

He was serious, too. It never ceased to amaze me how he could be ready to walk out the door in ten minutes or less, even when he was just rolling out of bed. Then again, I had to style my hair, put on makeup and fight with my closet over what I was going to wear. For Eric, it was much simpler since he wore a variation of the same thing everyday. Lucky bastard.

While Eric showered I freshened myself up a little and by the time I was finishing brushing my teeth, Eric was ready to go. While I was still up in Michigan I'd sold my car for what I could and put the money into a down payment on a new one. As much as Eric was loathe to have it, I had insisted on getting something bigger than a regular little sedan. With all the home improvement projects we were doing, being able to take things ourselves would save us a small fortune in delivery fees. Not to mention, there was a part of me that was planning for the future.

We were a long way from it, but we had very briefly talked about where we wanted the relationship to go. We were both in it for the long haul, and we agreed that someday, when we were ready, we wanted kids. So I ended up getting a Jeep Patriot since it was somewhere between a truck and a minivan. It was black and shiny and the seat went far enough back for Eric to drive, which was a consideration when picking out the car. Usually he stuck to driving that Lime Green Monster of his, but every now and then he needed to take the Jeep.

I punched the address into the GPS while Eric pulled out of the driveway. It drove him slightly insane that there was next to nothing on the radio he wanted to listen to. The radio stations in Bon Temps picked up country, gospel and then this fire and brimstone station that was nothing but non-stop preaching that even my Gran had found ridiculous. Those Baptists sure were a fiery bunch.

"How can anyone listen to this all day long?' Eric asked as he bypassed the preaching station for the hundredth time.

"I have no idea," I shrugged and counted down the exact three seconds it would take for him to switch over to the MP3 player instead. Like clockwork, Green Day began to filter through the speakers.

Twenty minutes later we arrived at the office Dr. Claudine Crane. The office was decorated like it was Easter all year long. There were pastels as far as the eye could see and there were pictures of bunnies everywhere. It was cute, but for a minute I thought we were in the office of a child psychologist instead of a couples counselor. I checked us in with her receptionist; a little redheaded woman was sitting behind the desk. She smiled when she saw me and it was obvious she was attracted to Eric.

Damn cougars were the master of the eyefuck.

"Hi, I'm Sookie Stackhouse and this is Eric Northman. We have a 5:30 appointment with Dr. Cane," I told the woman.

"Nice to meet you, Miss Stackhouse, Mr. Northman," the receptionist nodded to us. "If you'll just have a seat, the doctor will be with you shortly."

Eric put his arm around me and led me to the sitting area. What sounded like Irish folk music was playing. I closed my eyes and let myself get lost in the penny whistles and fiddles. I was dangerously close to falling asleep when our names were called. I opened my eyes to see a beautiful brunette that was darn close to Eric's height standing in the doorway of her personal office. She was dressed head to toe in very fashionable clothes that could have given Pam a run for her money. She had a dazzling smile and kind eyes. I felt drawn to her immediately, which was weird.

Eric and I stood together and walked toward Dr. Crane with our hands linked. She motioned for us to enter her office space. I was surprised to see it was a stark contrast to the country cottage feeling I got in the waiting area. Her personal office was a lot of clean lines and angles and the colors were all neutral. Two black leather cube shaped chairs were parked in front of her enormous desk with cast iron legs and a thick glass table top. There were no diplomas on the wall, only black and white photography that made me think we were going to my carefully psychoanalyzed before the session actually began.

Eric motioned for me to sit first, which I did, and he quickly took the seat next to me. Dr. Crane sat down behind her desk with that same inviting smile pasted to her face and folded her hands neatly on top of the completely smudge free glass. She studied each of us quickly with a look before launching into an explanation of her credentials and how she knew Octavia. Her speech didn't last long, but it still felt a little rehearsed.

"So, tell me about yourselves. What brings you here to see me?" Dr. Crane sat back in a more relaxed pose.

Eric and I looked at each other and I said, "You go first."

He nodded, cleared his throat and started talking.

**EPOV**

Counseling wasn't really as bad as I thought it was going to be. In our first session we were able to lay out what we thought were our weaknesses both as individuals and as a couple. After having given a short background on ourselves and then the history of your relationship, we were pretty much out of time for the week. We agreed to come back for another session the following week at the same time before bidding goodnight to the doctor and her receptionist.

"Looks like you have a fan," Sookie whispered to me as we walked out of the office.

"I think you definitely have some competition," I teased right back.

"I always knew you had a secret passion for redheads," Sookie squeezed my hand as we walked to the car.

Mentally I froze; wondering if that was a barb about Jessica, who was definitely a redhead. I stopped in my tracks which meant I ended up unintentionally yanking Sookie back toward me.

"What gives, Northman?" she looked at me curiously.

"Was that about Jessica just now?" I asked her.

"What? No!" Sookie said in an honest way. "Geez, Eric, for the millionth time, I'm over that."

I guess that was my way of announcing I wasn't. It helped, however, that Jessica had started seeing a guy named Tommy shortly after we got back from the wedding. Her having a boyfriend she was crazy about went a long way to set Sookie's mind at ease, and if I'm completely honest, it made me breathe a sigh of relief too. I opened Sookie's door for her and then closed it once she was inside.

"Let's stop somewhere and grab something to eat. I don't feel like cooking tonight," Sookie said once I was buckled into the driver's seat beside her.

"Fine by me. Got a taste for anything in particular?" I asked as I started the car and cranked up the air conditioning.

"You pick," Sookie smiled over at me and turned off the iPod in favor of her beloved country music instead.

I was trying really hard not to bitch about it. In fact, there were a few songs I didn't mind quite so much. I mostly put up a fight because it was what Sookie expected me to do, but I figured if I stopped fighting her gradually, she'd think she just beat me down. Little white lies like that couldn't hurt, could they? Besides, it was cute to watch her get all riled over something so harmless. I just worried one day she'd catch me when I least expected it. She could be sneaky as a ninja when she wanted to be.

We ended up at this outdoor burger joint that could have been Sonic's grandfather. While we ate, we talked about therapy and the impressions we'd each gotten of Dr. Claudine Crane. Sookie confessed there was something about Dr. Crane that set her on edge between sips on her strawberry lemonade.

"I don't know how to explain it. I guess it just feels like there's something twitchy about her," Sookie shrugged and then popped a fried pickle chip in her mouth.

"Twitchy?" I arched an eyebrow at her.

"Yeah, twitchy," Sookie smiled at me. "I don't know how to describe it. Maybe I was just nervous. Ask me again next week."

I laughed and then took another bite of my burger. Living in the south meant making sure I kept up on my cardio. Just about everything was deep fried and even though it was delicious, it wasn't very healthy. I had never been a health nut but I tried to take care of myself. Part of that was laying off the booze as well. It wasn't until I told Sookie about the benders I'd been on while we were broken up that I gave much thought to how much I'd been drinking.

Sookie expressed some serious concern over it and made me promise her I would find a healthier way to express my frustration or disappointment in the future. It was a promise I was able to easily make to her since I really didn't have much of a desire to drink. I'd been there, done that. While I might have been able to forget about my problems for a short period of time, it wasn't really worth it when I woke up the next day. Then I still had the same problems as before, plus a hangover. It just wasn't worth it.

"I'm getting ice cream," I announced shortly after we were done eating.

Sookie groaned and said, "I don't know where you're fixin' to put it."

I noticed that since she'd returned to her home state, her southern roots were showing more and more. I liked it, though, and felt like I was finally getting to see the real Sookie come out to play. I liked that she didn't just roll over when we fought and she wasn't afraid to speak her mind anymore. Trust was building between us and all signs pointed to us being able to work things out. It was a good feeling.

"I can think of a few places," I wiggled my eyebrows at her.

She squinted and shook her head at me, "Dream on, Northman. You aren't gettin' me all sticky." How she managed to say it with a straight face, I have no idea.

"We'll see about that," I smirked at her.

Together we gathered up the garbage and got out of the car to deposit it into the trash can. Afterward we walked over to the service window so I could order my ice cream. In spite of her protests about being full, Sookie still got a small vanilla milkshake she claimed she was going to put in the freezer for later. I was willing to bet everything I had in the bank it would be long gone before we got home but I kept my thoughts to myself.

She was leaning against me and I had my arm around her while we were waiting for our ice cream when we were approached by a wiry man about a half a foot shorter than me. He had dark hair and the stupidest sideburns I'd ever seen. His skin was pasty white and almost translucent, suggesting he didn't spend much time outside. There was something almost evil in his eyes and I didn't like the way he was looking at Sookie.

All those protective caveman instincts roared inside me and the friend or foe response was screaming this was *not* a friendly that was approaching us. I tightened my grip on Sookie and looked down to see if she recognized the guy who was approaching. Mostly she looked annoyed, which was a switch from how calm she'd been just a few moments before. A slight breeze kicked up and blew some of her hair in her face.

"Sookeh," he said with what Sookie would have called a 'level 5 creeper' grin on his face.

"I have a restraining order against you. Go away," Sookie tried to shoo him off.

"Who's the ape?" the guy with a death wish stared right at me.

Everything in me said I should step in front of Sookie since I didn't trust the guy standing in front of us. I had no idea who he was, or what he wanted with her but if she had a restraining order against him, he clearly wasn't wanted in her presence. It dawned on me then that I was probably face to face with Bill Compton. I felt my anger rise, not just at him for having the balls to try and talk to her, but at Sookie for not telling me about the restraining order. When the hell did she get one of those? Was this since we first moved back, or did she have it the whole time and just forget to mention it?

"None of your business now go away before I call the cops," Sookie warned him.

"She's all bark and no bite, just like every other bitch," Bill shook his head with what was probably supposed to be a smirk.

"The only bitch I see around here is you. So unless you want another taste of what you got the last time our paths crossed, I suggest you git," Sookie's tone became almost dangerous.

Hearing her talk like that both intrigued me and turned me on a little. I knew she had the potential to be a bad ass when she wanted to; I just didn't get to see it firsthand very often.

"You mean attack a defenseless man," Bill feigned shock and I had to laugh.

"You're Bill Compton aren't you?" I asked when he looked at me with annoyed confusion.

"Maybe. Who the hell are you?" he stared me up and down in attempts to intimidate me. Maybe that shit worked on Sookie, but he was bigger than her. I had no doubt, whatsoever, that if he wanted to throw down, he was going to lose. Miserably.

"Is he serious?" I asked Sookie, who just shrugged.

"I think he's still upset because I kicked his ass," Sookie said and it wasn't hard to look surprised. I was definitely missing something.

"She did not," Bill tried to sound tough, but ended up sounding like a spoiled four-year-old who wasn't getting his way.

"It was self-defense, actually," Sookie looked over at me and the look on my face must have told her my anger wasn't just aimed at Bill.

"Self-defense?" Oh, we were *definitely* going to talk about this later.

"He grabbed me and wouldn't let go," Sookie said sheepishly, looking away from me.

"What else?" I wanted to hit the fucker. Hard. And repeatedly. Maybe until he lost consciousness. I took deep breaths to keep myself from doing just that.

"I tried to get free and he held on tighter so I stomped his foot and hip tossed him," Sookie admitted quietly, which had Bill scrambling immediately to change the story.

I turned toward Bill and put a hand up. I wanted to hit him. I felt like I had every reason in the world to do just that after knowing all the things I knew about him. Sookie had told me Bill was never physically violent with her but now I was starting to wonder if that was true. Two steps forward, five steps back. At least we'd have something to discuss with the therapist next week.

"Listen up and listen good. I don't give a fuck what your history is with Sookie. From now on, she doesn't exist to you. You stay away from her, or you're going to have to deal with me. You got that?" I glared at Bill, who didn't look the least bit fazed by what I was saying.

"Keep the whore. Sooner or later you'll throw her away just like I did," Bill looked at Sookie like she was completely vile and said, "Trash."

*Don't hit him. Don't hit him. Don't hit him*, I told myself over and over again. I didn't care if I got arrested, necessarily, but I wouldn't be doing Sookie any favors. Then again, if there weren't any witnesses, it would have been game on. As if to reinforce the fact that hitting Bill wasn't worth it, Sookie wrapped her arms around my waist and clung to my side.

"Now you're just rewritin' history, Bill, but you always were good at that. You can't stand that I stood up for myself and finally walked away from you. I feel bad for that fiancé of yours. I hope someone warned her about what she's gettin' herself into. But you know what? You did me a favor because Eric a thousand times the man you'll ever be." Sookie said calmly.

While I appreciated her compliment, I was still pissed at her for not telling me about her run-in with Bill a little sooner. I doubted he would have the balls to track her all the way to Michigan, but if there was anything I learned in the last year it's that people are capable of all kinds of crazy when given the proper motivation. Bill Compton certainly looked a few steak knives short of a set.

"Here y'all are," a plucky teenage girl appeared at the service window with Sookie's shake and my banana split.

"Why don't you take these to the car," I handed them over to Sookie, who looked at me apprehensively. "Go on, I'll be right there."

"Behave," Sookie sighed and then went off to the car.

"You don't really believe she-" Bill started, but didn't get to finish because being pushed up against the wall knocked the breath right out of him.

"I don't know what the fuck is wrong with you but maybe you need to get slapped around a little by someone who is bigger than you in order to get the message. Stay the fuck away from Sookie. If you were damaged by her stepping on your toes and bumping you with her hip, just think what I could do to you. And it's not just me. I'm sure you know how the men are around these parts and they don't take too kindly to their sisters and friends being bullied by arrogant little pricks like you. You understand me?" I shook him just a little when he didn't answer.

"Everything okay over here?" the restaurant manager appeared with a cordless phone in his hand, presumably so he could call the cops.

"Fine," I let go and backed away from Bill. "I was just thanking Mr. Compton for being generous enough to part with a priceless treasure."

The manager didn't look like he was buying it but seeing Bill look like he was ready to piss his pants was all the reward I needed. I walked back to the car where Sookie was sipping anxiously at her shake. I slid into the car beside her and buckled my seat belt.

"What happened?" Sookie asked nervously.

"I think we came to an understanding. He won't be bothering you anymore," I told her as I backed out the parking space.

"What did you?" she asked with an accusing edge to her voice.

"I merely suggested that messing with you would be hazardous to his health," I said casually.

"So you threatened him?" Sookie sighed.

"If that's what it takes to make sure you're safe, yes. And the fact that I didn't clock the motherfucker like he deserved, please tell me that counts for something," I stared at her while I waited to make my turn onto the main road.

"It does," Sookie ran her fingers through her hair. "I guess I owe you an explanation, huh?"

"For starters," I said and then made my turn.

**SPOV**

Frankly, I wouldn't have cared one bit if Eric kicked Bill's ass. In fact, there was a big part of me that would have enjoyed it maybe a little too much. It had completely skipped my mind to mention my last encounter with Bill. I hadn't given it much thought in a long time. Bill wasn't living in Bon Temps anymore so I wasn't all that concerned about him coming around.

I sat in the car nervously waiting to see if Eric was going to come back on his own, or if he was going to toss me the car keys before getting himself arrested for assault. Figures we were parked on the opposite side of the building from where I'd left him. My foot tapped nervously and even though I wasn't really hungry, I started sipping on my milkshake. I kept the music off and the banana split on the little console between the front seats.

I felt like I could finally breathe again when I saw Eric walking toward the car. My heart was pounding and it leapt up into my throat when he slid into the car beside me. When Eric told me he threatened Bill, I didn't mind. For once, his possessive/jealous/protective streak would come in quite handy. Bill was a real bad ass when it came to picking on people who were smaller than him but I knew he would never in a million years attempt to get into a physical altercation with Eric.

"I didn't tell you about what happened the last time I saw Bill because I didn't think it was important," I told Eric, who looked at me like I belonged on the special bus. "We weren't together at the time and I just… I didn't think I was in any danger up in Michigan. Bill had no idea where I was, only that I'd moved out of Louisiana. I made it very clear I didn't want him to know where I was. If anyone asked where I went, Amelia just told them I moved up north and left it at that. Anyone who knew me that I wanted to know where I was, I told myself. I only told people I knew I could trust with my life and not even my brother was on that list."

"What happened the last time you saw him, Sookie? I want to know everything," he told me as he drove. I noticed he was gripping the steering wheel much tighter than he usually would and his jaw was set.

I told him everything that happened, sparing no detail I could remember. "I didn't bait him or egg him on. I tried to be as polite as I could and just get myself out of the situation, but you saw for yourself how Bill is."

"He responds the same to honey as he does vinegar," Eric glanced over at me.

"Yes," I nodded and put my cup into the holder between the seats. "I'm sorry I didn't tell you, Eric. I didn't leave it out on purpose, I swear."

"Is this it, Sookie, or are you going to have another big secret to tell me in a few weeks?" Eric asked me in a hurt tone.

"This is it," I told him and hoped there was nothing else I was leaving out.

We rode the rest of the way home in silence. I felt terrible for not telling Eric sooner about the encounter I had with Bill. I shot a quick text to Brooke to let her know we'd run into Bill and promised I'd call her in the morning with the details. Eric parked the Jeep around back next to the Lime Green Monster. My milkshake was long gone but I sat on the back steps with him while he ate his rather soupy banana split.

"Want some?" he offered me a bite and I shook my head.

"No, thanks, I'm beyond stuffed," I drummed my fingers against the empty Styrofoam cup in my hands.

"Do you remember what you said to me at the wedding?" Eric asked, breaking the silence that settled over us.

"Which part?" I giggled quietly at the long bout of verbal vomit I'd forced on him.

"The part where you said you weren't afraid to show me all the parts of yourself because you knew I wouldn't judge you," Eric reminded me and then took the last bite of his sundae.

"I remember," I nodded.

"Part of the reason why I wanted to come here was because I realized there are a lot of things we don't know about each other and I don't think I would ever fully understand who you are without seeing where you come from. Even in the few weeks we've been here, I've seen a different side of you and I know there's a lot more I'm missing. I want to know everything about you, Sookie, and I want you to know everything about me."

It was such a simple request he was making but no one else had ever taken that kind of an interest in me before. Bill sure as hell didn't care about the little things that made me who I was. It was a little overwhelming to hear someone be so genuinely curious and fascinated with me. Maybe even better than that, I knew I wanted to know everything about Eric, too.

I took the little plastic tray his sundae had been in and set it on the porch before grabbing his hand and standing up. "Come with me," I tugged on his hand.

"Where are we going?" he asked as he stood up.

"For a walk. I want you to meet my parents," I smiled and pulled him across the lawn toward the cemetery. Yeah, maybe it was morbid to take him there, but he said he wanted to know everything; that's where we would start.

**-The End-**