



A chance encounter, a broken heel, and a red umbrella. Karma's way of tossing Eric on his ass.

And *my* way of having a legit excuse to put his ass in a fireman's uniform.

Rated M, AH, AU

More than likely all EPOV

1 – Welcome to the Jungle

The crowd went wild – with both cheers and taunts – the moment our skates touched the ice. Their reactions weren't all that surprising, considering the rivalry between us ran deep.

As deep as the sea of red along one side of the stadium and blue on the other.

The Fire Department versus the Police Department – Red versus Blue – the Battle of the Badges charity fundraisers were always spirited events.

Spirited, as in the majority of the crowd had started tying one on well before game time, so they were already feeling pretty loosened up.

And their liquor loosened lips were spewing hatred for the opposing team and love for their own, on either side of the rink.

This time a year ago I had positively reveled in it. The rivalry between our two departments was as real as the hockey sticks in our hands and the testosterone fueled environment we lived and worked in, only fed the heated arguments that popped up between us both on and off duty.

At times, I had both instigated it and borne the brunt of it.

So the only explanation I could come up with, for the change that had occurred between now and then, was karma had decided it'd had enough and stepped in to repay me in kind.

A chance encounter, a broken heel, and a red umbrella were all involved.

Each one on its own was benign enough, but the combination of the three...

Yeah.

Karma had knocked me on my ass.

But before I ended up on my ass on the ice, I forced myself to focus on the present instead of the past. While we loosened up our legs, getting used to being on the ice, as the team captain for the red team it was my duty to get our fans all riled up.

So keeping that in mind, I skated over to our side – the red side – and lifted my hockey stick over my head, growling at them like a caveman cornered by a T-Rex, but my crazed sneer morphed into a grin watching their arms and faces automatically mimicking my actions.

Ah...my people.

Alright.

So maybe I still reveled in it *a little bit*.

In the next moment I saw someone in the crowd on our side toss something out onto the ice, but it wasn't until it landed that I could make out what it was.

The severed head from a stuffed toy pig.

Not to be outdone, the other side of the rink was soon covered by the rainfall of red poppy flowers thrown out onto the ice.

'Poppies' was one of the nicer things the cops referred to us as.

Because we all wore red hats and came together in bunches.

More stuffed pigs – both with and without their bodies attached – flew out onto the ice in return and the decibel level only ratcheted up another ten notches, with both sides of the stadium going crazy.

Cheers and boos.

They could probably be heard two towns over.

I could feel it vibrating through the ice underneath my feet and the vibration only grew once the ice was cleaned up and the lights dimmed, with the sound of Guns N' Roses *Welcome to the Jungle* now blaring through the sound system.

It was a mainstay of the Battle of the Badges events thanks to the nickname they'd spawned.

Guns N' Hoses.

It took another twenty minutes for the introductions to be given and the causes named that would be benefiting from the night's proceeds before the game actually started. But

skating over to the center ice, I had to hide my dread seeing the opposing player I would be facing off against.

Jason Stackhouse.

I took it as karma's way of letting me know it wasn't done with me yet.

Even if I'd been standing in front of him barefoot on the ice, I still would've had five inches on him in height, and yet I still felt apprehensive.

But it had nothing to do with his size.

"Glad to see ya could make it," he grinned evilly. "Figured all you poppy pussies woulda been hard pressed to leave your beds, since ya get *paid to sleep*."

It was a tried and literally true taunt the men in blue often used, seemingly sticking in their craw that we could sleep at work, if there wasn't anything else going on. And had he been anyone else – *anyone else* to include Father O'Malley, our house priest – I wouldn't have hesitated to make a quip about waking up with my dick in his mom's mouth.

But he *wasn't* anyone else.

Not that *he* had any clue he had any kind of hold on me.

He may have been trained to detect crime, but he hadn't clued into that yet.

But knowing he might begin to suspect *something* was up if I didn't say anything snide in return, I let my actual sincerity shine through when I offered, "You know, we're not all that different."

A true statement of fact.

The truth of which I had to keep to myself, so at his raised brow, I showed him the asshole he expected to see by following up with a smirked, "We both wanted to be a fireman when we grew up."

The official calling a start to the game stopped any retort he could have made, but the heated glare he aimed my way told me he would be looking to get payback at some point in the night.

That point occurred in the third period.

We were down by a score of three to two and while there had been a few minor brush-ups, nothing major had gone down between our two teams.

The harmony lasted all the way up until I was blindsided from behind by a cross-check to the head.

I was only vaguely aware my attacker had been Stackhouse, hearing his shouted, "Timber!" on my way down, before I slammed face first into the ice.

That was when the brawl broke out.

Gloves and sticks fell to the ice, with both benches clearing, and once the stars cleared from behind my eyes, I joined in the ensuing fight.

Everyone was red by the time it was over.

Blood red.

But there hadn't been much the refs could do other than wait for us to tire out.

Who were they gonna call?

911?

The delay in game, both from the fight and the resulting first aid, lasted about thirty minutes. Stackhouse was ejected for game misconduct, as were a few other players as a result of the fight, but we got the last laugh by scoring the game winning goal, just as the buzzer sounded.

The guys – of course – wanted to celebrate our win, but all I wanted to do was climb into bed. So I begged off – blaming the headache I didn't really have – and headed out, stopping by my place for a quick shower before leaving again.

I'd been sitting on her stoop for more than an hour by the time she showed up, feeling my black eye and split lip growing in size with each passing minute. I knew I should have grabbed an ice pack before I left, but I'd had enough ice for one night.

"They weren't exaggerating," she chuckled softly through pouting lips, when she was close enough to see my face.

I winced slightly when my lips automatically turned up in the corners seeing her and I sounded a little pouty myself when I asked, "What took you so long? You should've been home an hour ago."

"Choir practice ran long," she frowned, either from being held up at work or from getting a better look at my injuries, now that she'd taken a seat on my lap.

But it was finally having her in my arms that made the sigh escape through my lips and not out of any resentment she'd been forced to work late.

Working in her father's bar – a cop bar, owned and run by her retired cop father, with her being a descendant of a long line of men in blue – I knew Sookie couldn't claim *injured-fireman-boyfriend* and just up and leave.

Especially since we'd won the game.

Choir practice – the telling of war stories between fellow men in uniform – would have been the only way for them to soothe their bruised egos.

The liquor would soothe their bruised bodies.

But our year long relationship was a secret from everyone but us.

Ever since the night a chance encounter, a broken heel, and a red umbrella turned my life upside down.

As much as I wanted us to move forward – I’d proposed to her countless times already – I understood her reticence. Her brother’s attitude was the same one held by all of her family.

She’d grown up with the rivalry between our two sides existing as though it had a corporeal form.

And while I admired her loyalty to some extent and understood her fear at telling her family about us, that didn’t mean I’d given up hope.

I knew she was already mine.

It was the rest of the world that just didn’t know it yet.

Gently cupping my face in her hands, she leaned forward and peppered tiny kisses over every injury she could see.

The amount of kisses I received told me I probably looked a lot worse off than I knew, so I didn’t argue when she stood up from my lap and took my hand, saying, “Let’s go inside and get some ice for your face.”

Following behind her, my eyes appreciated the curve of her ass in the jeans she was wearing, while I told her, “Your brother had the same idea tonight, but I prefer your method of delivery.”

“He’s such an ass,” she huffed, making me smile hearing her taking my side. And my smile only grew wider – and hurt my face more – when she came at me with an ice pack now in her hand and said, “And *his ass* is probably exploding right now. I slipped a heaping dose of castor oil into his beer when I heard him bragging about what he did to you.”

Taking the ice pack from her hand, I wrapped my arms around her and pulled her body closer to mine before pressing a soft kiss against her lips and said, “You really do love me.”

“To the moon and back,” she smiled.

Figuring now was as good a time as any, my words sounded more rhetorical than questioning, when I said for the umpteenth time, “When are you going to marry me.”

I knew she loved me.

I knew she wanted to marry me.

I knew I was wearing her down by not giving up on asking her to.

I just didn’t know when she would finally agree.

Back when this thing between us first started, I’d had no idea we would come this far. I knew she hadn’t either, with both of us thinking it would be a one night stand.

Which then morphed into a late night booty call/friends with benefits type of relationship.

I only figured out it was more than that for me when – three months in – it dawned on me I hadn’t even looked at another woman since the night we’d first hooked up.

I’d known who she was that first night. I’d seen her at her family’s side at various Guns N’ Hoses events. And maybe – initially – a part of my attraction stemmed from the fact a part of me viewed her as forbidden fruit.

She was a Blue Blood.

My blood was red.

Being with her was akin to committing adultery, without the horrible reality of being married to other people.

Now, being with her, was the only time I felt whole.

We were right together.

But I could already tell from the sadness behind her eyes that tonight wouldn’t be the night she would accept my proposal.

That was okay though.

I'd inevitably ask again.

The ring I'd taken to carrying around in my pocket wasn't going anywhere until it ended up on her left hand.

But I had to give her an 'A' for effort when she tried to soften the blow by teasing, "Well, I started a rumor around the bar that I was a lesbian to keep the guys away, so if we got married now, you'd have to dress up in drag."

"Okay," I smiled, calling her bluff.

I'd do it in a heartbeat if I thought she would actually follow through with marrying me.

But feeling the need to act like she didn't have my balls on a leash – even though we both knew she did – I stipulated, "But I draw the line at shaving my pits. It itches like hell growing back."

A fact I learned the hard way, during my time on my high school's swim team.

"That's a line I *won't* draw," she laughed. "But I *will* draw the line at you looking prettier than me in a dress."

An impossible feat in my eyes.

In my eyes, no one was more beautiful than her.

"But we'll have to come up with something better than *Erica* to call you," she grinned.

"My family will see right through that."

"We can use my stage name," I smiled, playing along. And seeing the same raised brow her brother had shown me a few hours earlier, I tossed my imaginary long locks over my shoulder and added effeminately, "Lady Libido Lushbody."

Her face lit up, with her laughter lighting up every part of me.

God, I loved her laugh.

I loved to be the cause of her laughter.

I loved her.

It was the only thing that made the secrecy shrouding our relationship bearable.

We did what we could to have a normal relationship, as much as keeping it hidden from everyone we knew could be described as *normal*. But we went on dates. We'd even taken a few stolen weekends together, but any relationship we maintained outside the confines of our apartments took place out of town.

Way out of town.

At first I hadn't been too keen on anyone in the firehouse finding out I was fucking Sookie on a pretty regular basis. I didn't want to be subjected to the disapproving looks I knew I would get for being viewed as a traitor of sorts.

Even worse, I didn't want to hear any of them making any kind of remarks – disparaging, speculative, or appreciative – about what she was like in the sack.

That was for me to know.

And for them to *never* find out what she looked or sounded like, lost in the throes of ecstasy.

Even when we *'came out'* that would still be *my secret*.

“Well then, *Lady Libido Lushbody*,” she purred, rubbing her lush body against mine, which informed me her *lady libido* was in high gear. “What do you say we hit the sack and we'll see if you live up to your name, while we scratch each other's itches?”

Keeping her body pressed against mine, I slowly shuffled us back to her bedroom and teasingly smiled, “This is why I love you. You accept *all* of me.”

“Just wait until I get your pants off,” she grinned, with a promise in her voice and a waggle of her brows. “Then you’ll see just how much of you I can accept.”

I already knew the answer to that of course.

And despite the ache in my abused body, I was still more than willing to find out all over again.

Just like I was more than willing to wait until she was ready to take on her family’s scorn and disapproval by telling them about us.

Sookie was worth the wait.

2 – Patience

“What the *hell*, man?” Jake groused at my side. “We got jailbait at our six and cougars at our ten.”

Then turning to face me, he sounded like we’d entered the Twilight Zone when he said, “The Saturday morning grocery run just ain’t what it used to be.”

So maybe that was why we had jailbait trailing after us.

They were confused too, only over a different kind of Twilight.

I would be a kickass vampire though.

None of that sparkly shit for me.

But rather than say that – because then I would have to admit to learning all about the different kinds of vampires from Sookie, who I couldn’t admit to knowing so well, even though it was her who’d made me binge watch old episodes of Buffy with her one weekend, while she expounded on their individual virtues and flaws – I only teasingly mocked, “Aww...poor Goldicocks. *This pussy’s too young. This pussy’s too old.* Maybe you’ll luck out and we’ll get called out to a modeling agency because someone passed out

from not eating anything more than a celery stick in the last month and then you can find pussy that's *just right*."

"*Are there* modeling agencies in town?" he asked, with wide hopeful eyes. And then, without waiting for an answer, he accused, "Why didn't I know this? I ain't no fuckin' probie anymore. I should *know* if there's some place around here where hot women gather. *Hot* is my *business*."

My laughter at his outburst quickly turned into a choking cough, when he ended his rant by asking, "Is *that* why you ain't been horndoggin' it with the rest of us lately?"

There you are karma...

Did you miss me?

I knew the guys were becoming suspicious when my excuses to not go trolling for women were getting flimsier and flimsier.

Telling them I had to go home and sort my socks – rather than going out with them to our local bar on Ladies Night – hadn't been one of my finer moments.

But it wasn't my fault.

Sookie had just texted me a picture of an all too familiar pink pinstripe shopping bag sitting on her bed, with nothing more than a question mark.

I didn't need to know what was inside of it to know that I wanted it.

On her.

So I could then take it off of her.

With my teeth.

But with my luck, the guys would just start to suspect I was gay, which – when I thought about it – was preferable to them finding out the truth. The only reason I continued to

keep up the charade, by keeping my relationship with Sookie a secret from the guys in the firehouse now, was to keep the news from bleeding across the red and blue lines.

Gossip – especially *salacious* gossip – would spread like a wildfire, with fraternal loyalty becoming nonexistent.

We were like a bunch of old women sometimes, sitting around in a hair salon and playing, ‘Did you hear?’

So I was thankful when fate stepped in – in the form of a decent looking brunette – and kept me from stepping into a self-made pile of bullshit I would have had to keep shoveling to keep Jake from suspecting something more was up.

Looks aside, I couldn’t tell if I was automatically turned off because no one could hold a candle to Sookie in my eyes anymore or if it was from the way she didn’t even try to hide her blatant eye fucking.

At least *act* like some effort was needed to get into your pants.

But from the way Jake automatically pulled out his ‘*Humble Hero*’ routine, I figured he’d found his *just right for now* pussy and left him to it, while I finished getting everything on our shopping list.

He still hadn’t shown up by the time I checked out twenty minutes later, so I took everything out to the rig myself. Spring had barely begun and it was already hotter than Satan’s ball sack outside, but it wasn’t until I was pushing the now empty shopping cart towards one of the corrals in the parking lot that I forgot all about my own discomfort.

Because all of my attention was drawn to the sound of a screaming kid coming from the car parked next to the corral.

She couldn’t have been more than two years old and her hair was plastered with sweat to her reddened face, but it was no wonder considering how hot it was outside.

The temperature inside of the car would feel like an oven.

There wasn't anyone else around – much less anyone in the car with her – and my first reaction was to pull on the door handles, but they were all locked.

Rather than wasting time by looking around for something to break the window, I sprinted back to the rig where I knew I could find the right tool and made it back to the car in record time.

Breaking the front driver's side window with the blunt end of the ratchet in my hands, I dropped it to the ground and unlocked the doors, before pulling her from the car seat she'd been strapped into.

A few other now horrified shoppers had stopped and took notice, with a woman coming over and offering me a bottle of water that I used to pour over her head and shoulders to cool her off.

But knowing she would need to be checked out at the hospital, I asked the same woman to call 911, while I carried the girl back towards the rig.

I'd started the engine already to get the air conditioner going inside, but before I get her into the cabin, Jake came running over asking, "What's going on?"

But it was what I heard coming from that same brunette he'd been talking to inside – and who had followed him out of the store, with her shopping bags in hand – that stopped me in my tracks and made me see red.

"That's my daughter! What happened?"

"What happened?" I yelled, feeling slightly bad for making the baby cry even louder by shouting. So I held her to my chest and rubbed her back, while I growled at her mother, "You left her in the fucking car! Never mind the fact someone could've taken her and done god knows what to her. It's close to ninety degrees out! She was baking in there!"

"She was asleep!" she yelled back. "I was only inside for a few minutes!"

"Bullshit!" I yelled back and turned my back on her to climb into the cabin with the baby still tucked against my chest.

Getting her cooled off was more important than me lighting off on her mother and I had no patience for assholes.

But the asshole in me felt a huge sense of satisfaction when Jake shut the door behind me, staying on the other side and – by the looks of it – giving the woman hell.

Flipping the air on high, I turned every vent to face us as I held her in my lap and used more water to wet a towel that I then wrapped around the back of her head and shoulders. Her crying had slowed down to hitched breaths, so I slowly tipped the water bottle into her lips to help her regain a little of the fluids she'd lost.

All of us were trained first responders for a medical emergency, but hearing the telltale sirens I knew by sound were coming from both an ambulance and the cops, I knew they would be arriving any second and decided to let the paramedics handle everything else.

Instead I dug out one of the small stuffed toy Dalmatians that we carried around to hand out to kids we usually encountered when their homes were on fire and held it out to her, getting her to laugh when I made it dance in front of her and made goofy barking noises.

But looking down at her tiny body, I couldn't help but remember the conversation I'd had with Sookie, when I'd been getting ready to leave her place that morning.

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It had been a week since the brawl, but I was still feeling the aches and pains, so I'd been rooting through her medicine cabinet in search of Tylenol or the like, when I stumbled across her birth control pills.

I don't know why they held my attention. I'd known all along she was on the pill and had taken advantage of that fact for months.

If I never had to wear a condom again, it would be too soon.

But flipping it open I studied the rows of pills and could see that she had taken them all the way up until the day before. Considering it was five o'clock in the morning, and she

was still sound asleep in the adjoining bedroom, I didn't think anything about her not having taken today's pill.

However I found myself thinking it wouldn't be a bad thing if she *didn't* take it.

Or any of the others left in the pack.

If I got her pregnant, then she would *have* to tell her family about us.

But knowing her, she would probably want to wait until she was in labor.

And even then, she might want to wait until the birth announcements were sent out.

Was it selfish of me to even consider forcing her hand like that?

Yeah.

Would I replace her birth control pills with placebos if I had them at the ready?

Absolutely.

But her sixth sense must have kicked in because she appeared behind me seconds later, wrapping her arms around my waist and leaning the side of her face against my bare back, still sounding half asleep when she asked, "What are you doing?"

Still holding her birth control pills in one hand and an open bottle of Tylenol in the other, I decided to get a read on her thoughts on the idea.

Tipping the Tylenol bottle into the sink, with the pills making a soft racket as they hit the porcelain, I replied, "Dumping your birth control pills down the drain."

No longer half asleep, I could tell my answer had jerked her awake by the way her body stiffened against my back and her head darted around my side to look down in the sink, while she stammered, "Wha...? Why would you do that?"

Well...at least I had my answer.

Making babies was a no go for now too.

At least I still had practicing making them with her to look forward to.

“I’m kidding,” I said out loud.

‘Not really,’ I said to myself.

But seeing the Tylenol pills in the sink and not being an actual mind reader, she just playfully slapped my side and said, “I thought you were trained to *help* people who had a heart attack, not *cause* them to have one.”

“Would it really be such a *bad* thing?” I heard myself softly ask.

Knowing I wasn’t talking about her having a heart attack, she went back to her previous position by pressing the side of her face against my back and squeezing me tight in her arms before softly sighing out, “No, but we’d have to break the news to my dad in the cardiac care unit, so they could go right to work on him when *he* had a heart attack.”

I outwardly chuckled, but inwardly I cringed, hearing the certainty in her voice. She was absolutely positive her family would all but disown her if and when they found out about us. And knowing how close she was to all of them was the only thing that kept me from pushing her too hard or giving her any kind of ultimatum.

Not because I was afraid she wouldn’t choose me, but because I didn’t want to put her in that position.

It was already tearing her up inside that her family had put her in that position and they had no idea they’d even done it.

So instead I tried to lighten the mood by joking, “Just think...our baby would be a whole new breed. Half red and half blue, our kid would be purple. That’s the color of royalty.”

But I could tell she didn’t really relax until I added, “We could even name him Barney and tell your dad it’s a nod to Barney Fife.”

“And if it’s a girl?” she asked, with her smile pressed against my back.

“Then you’ll need to give birth in the cardiac care unit,” I answered solemnly.

“Because *I’ll* be the one having a heart attack.”

Hearing her snort at my very true statement, I knew she was feeling better.

And her helping me clean up in the shower – only to dirty me up and do it all over again – made *me* feel better, so watching her take her birth control pill after she brushed her teeth that morning wasn’t too disappointing.

All I needed was a little patience.

It would be worth it in the end.

~o~O~o~

The rig door opening pulled me from my thoughts and seeing Jason Stackhouse standing there, still sporting the reminders of our last meeting on his face, reminded me patience wasn’t a virtue either one of us could maintain on a regular basis.

But it was how he chose to respond to our current situation that put me at ease.

Pulling himself up to stand on the running board alongside the door, he looked down at the baby in my lap and asked, “How is she?”

“Better, I think,” I replied, smiling down at her watching her hug the stuffed toy dog to her chest.

But hearing her mother still yelling close by, I added with an evil glare aimed her way, “No thanks to *her*.”

“Yeah, I got that,” he answered with his own evil glint in his eye and jumped back down onto the asphalt, so I followed him out of the truck and handed the baby over to the paramedic waiting to take her.

As soon as she saw her kid, she started screaming again – which only made the kid start screaming again – while she yelled, “I want him arrested for kidnapping! And for what he did to my car! He had no right!”

“Those are some serious charges,” Stackhouse responded wide-eyed and I started to wonder if he was really considering arresting me on some trumped up charge as payback for the hockey game, when he looked at her and calmly said, “Why don’t you show me what he did to your car, while the paramedics check out your daughter.”

Looking completely vindicated – while I looked completely flabbergasted – I followed behind them when she began leading him over to where her car was still parked and pointed at the hatchet still lying on the ground where I’d dropped it, haughtily saying, “You should fingerprint that. I’m sure it’ll prove he was the one who used it to break my window.”

“Is that true,” he asked, now looking at me.

Not that I would’ve denied it anyway, but our station number was written on the handle.

It was obviously one of ours.

And any patience I had for his sister didn’t extend to him in that moment because I growled, “You’re goddamn right it’s true. You can’t seriously be...”

But he cut me off by simply raising his hand and turning to her to ask, “Can you please take a look inside and tell me if there’s anything missing from your vehicle, ma’am?”

Craning her neck, she stared into the car before turning to him and saying, “Not that I can tell.”

“So why do you think he would break your window like that?” he asked, sounding confused.

Having been in his presence on more than a few occasions, it seemed like confusion was a familiar state for him.

But I could tell by the look in his eyes there was something more at play here and kept quiet, while she said, “Well...to *kidnap* my daughter.”

“Oh,” he huffed out with a low whistle and then added, “Were *you* hurt at all? Did you get cut from the glass raining down on you or did he knock you down when you tried to stop him?”

Then he turned to face me, so that she couldn't see him when he smirked, “I know he can throw a hard punch.”

I tried to keep my expression from revealing my amusement, now understanding what he was doing.

He'd just given her the shovel to dig her own grave with.

And she did by admitting, “Well...*no*. I mean, I was inside of the store when it happened, but only for a minute.”

“You were able to get enough groceries to fill three bags *and* go through the checkout on a *Saturday* in only a minute?” he asked, eyeing the plastic sacks still in her hands.

Shifting where she stood, seemingly catching on to what he was getting at, she argued, “Maybe I was inside for *more* than a minute, but it wasn't more than *five* minutes.”

“It was at least *twenty* minutes,” Jake interjected, having followed us over to the car. Then looking at Stackhouse, he explained, “I glanced at my watch when she walked up to us because I knew he would only give me thirty minutes to get her number before he would leave my ass here.”

He knew that from experience.

It was why I always asked him if he had cab fare whenever he tagged along with me to the grocery store.

“Twenty minutes,” Stackhouse repeated and looked over at her, showing every ounce of disgust he felt. And the menace in his voice was unmistakable when he said, “The

temperature inside of a parked car raises an average of nineteen degrees in the first *ten* minutes. *Your daughter was cooking* inside of that car and *he*,” he pointed at me, “saved her life. You should be *thanking* him.”

Then taking the shopping bags from her hands, he dropped them on the ground and spun her around, pulling the handcuffs from his back and securing them to her wrists, while he said, “Maybe you can think of a way to do that, while you’re in your holding cell. You’re under arrest for child endangerment because it’s not against the law for being a twat.”

She put up a fight, both verbal and physical, as he all but dragged her back to his patrol car.

Then shoving her inside the backseat, before he slammed the door, he added, “Now we can tack on resisting arrest.”

Seeing her still yelling from the patrol car, when he made his way back towards me, I offered, “Turn your car off and I’ll treat you to a long lunch at the pizza place.”

The grocery store was a part of a strip mall, with assorted smaller businesses attached to it, to include a pizzeria.

He chuckled, running his hands through his hair, and said, “Tempting, but her stroking out in my backseat will mean I’ll have to do even *more* paperwork.”

Then shaking his head, he glanced back at her and said, “I don’t know what’s wrong with people anymore. It’s bad enough to *forget* you left your kid in the car, but to do it *on purpose*. It boggles the mind.”

“It does,” I agreed, knowing we’d both been forced to face that kind of tragedy in our line of work.

It left a mark that never truly left you.

And suspecting his thoughts had strayed to the same place as mine, he visibly shook it off and changed the subject, by adding with a smirk, “Just ‘cause I’m not arresting you

today, doesn't mean I'll be taking it easy on you and the rest of the water fairies at the next Guns N' Hoses event."

The charity softball tournament was only a few of weeks away, so I smirked in return and said, "Well I'll be sure to tell *my* guys to take it easy on *your* guys the next time we respond to a call."

Barbs were always thrown on both sides, no matter if it was a fire or a rescue, and seeing his incredulous look, I quipped, "We'll be busy being heroes, so we'll need *someone* to direct traffic."

Smiling with an eye roll, he turned to make his way back towards his patrol car, calling out over his shoulder, "Asshole."

"I *told* you we're not so different," I called out in return and smiled seeing him flip me off once he was inside of the car.

And we weren't so different.

We both loved his sister.

He just didn't know it yet.

But with a little more patience on my end, he would find out eventually.

3 – Sympathy for the Devil

"How are you feeling now, Maxine?" I asked, watching her down another bottle of water, like she'd been trekking through the Sahara for the last month.

The town fair was in full swing now that it was mid-afternoon, with kids and their already weary parents slogging along from ride to ride, booth to booth.

We were set up in the First Aid tent because inevitably someone would need some sort of medical assistance, be it from dehydration or any other number of ailments that always happened whenever the carnival came to town.

The police were there for the inevitable fights that would break out amongst the teenagers or the assholes who'd made one too many treks to the beer tent.

And not enough visits to the laundromat, considering some of them were walking around with their beer guts out on display.

Feeling my own abs over my shirt, I eyed the beer tent myself, wondering just how bad of an idea it would be for me to go in there once my shift was over.

Not because a beer – or even ten – would make me look like a week old floater, just found in the lake, but because of who I knew was working inside of the beer tent.

I'd been catching glimpses of her ass every time she crossed from one side to the other.

And I hadn't been the only one.

I'd seen more than one asshole taking a good long look at that ass.

My ass.

It didn't matter that I hadn't *'put a ring on it'* yet.

It was mine regardless. So they'd better keep their dickbeaters to themselves while they were in *her* tent or else they would end up in *my* tent, after I kicked the shit out of them.

Sookie had been teasing me from afar all afternoon. It wasn't the first time we had to pretend we weren't fucking each other's brains out on the sly.

Hell, it wasn't even the tenth time.

But she knew I could see her from where I was and seemed to find every excuse possible to have to bend over and flaunt what she knew I couldn't touch, given where we were.

She was going to pay for that later on.

And we would both enjoy it when she did.

“Better, I think,” Maxine huffed out, pulling my attention back to her, which did wonders for pulling me out of my porntastic thoughts. “I don’t know what came over me.”

Focusing on the woman in front of me – instead of the woman I would be bending over in front of me later on that night – I had a pretty good clue what the answer would be before I even asked, “Are you on any kinds of medication?”

Waving her hand at me, she dismissively replied, “Oh you know *doctors*. They’re in cahoots with the pharmaceutical companies and mine’s no different.”

Uh huh.

So she was likely being treated for denial in addition to Type 2 diabetes and god knows what else.

Her color was looking better and she seemed in good spirits, so I didn’t think we would need to get her on a gurney and into the back of the bus – *today* – but still, I asked, “And what are you being treated for?”

“For a thirty-five dollar co-pay,” she grouched without missing a beat.

But before I could laugh, shake my head, or walk away one of the patrolmen walking the fairgrounds came rushing over and crouched down next to her, both looking and sounding horrified when he exclaimed, “Mama! Are you okay? What happened?”

We both recognized him, but I only now realized Maxine was the mother of Jason Stackhouse’s best friend, Hoyt Fortenberry.

Her eyes lit up and she reached out, gently patting his arm and saying, “I’m fine, darlin’. Just a little lightheaded, that’s all.”

Looking back at her, he studied her appearance for a moment – and I ended up really hoping he never looked as closely at Sookie and me the next time we were all in the same proximity to one another – when he shook his head and put the clues together in a verbal admonishing of, “*What* did the doctor say? You have Type 2 diabetes, so that means *nosweets* and *no salt*. But I can see the sugar on your blouse and the ketchup in the corners of your mouth, so don’t tell me you didn’t have any.”

“It was just some fries and a little funnel cake, Hoyt,” she grumbled.

“And *that doctor* just wants *my money*, so he’ll say whatever he *needs* to, to make sure I keep making appointments.”

“Mrs. Fortenberry! Is everything alright?”

Recognizing *that* voice, I closed my eyes for a brief second and took a deep breath to center myself before opening them again.

Only to see her smirking back at me.

Ass.

Luckily for her I loved her ass enough to put up with her teasing.

“Sookie, dear!” Maxine greeted her warmly. “I’m just fine.”

Then using a stage whisper, she juttred her thumb my way and added, “I just faked an ailment to get closer to the cutie pies.”

“Mama!” her son exclaimed, while Sookie threw her head back and laughed long and hard.

Having her standing so close to me, her laugh wasn’t the only thing that was long and hard.

I wasn’t laughing about it though.

“What?” Maxine asked innocently. “I don’t remember the doctor saying *cutie pies* are a no-no too.”

Then she cured me of my own ailments – with the uncomfortable tightening in my pants disappearing immediately – by eying me in a way that made me want to shower in bleach, when she added, “He seems *sweet as sugar*, but I can’t say for sure that he *tastes* that way.”

“He’s a *drip stand*,” Sookie grinned evilly my way. “He probably tastes like *soot*.”

Funny.

She didn’t seem to mind the way I tasted when I came down her throat a few days earlier.

Not that I could remind her of that fact.

What with witnesses and all.

But I’d be sure to remind her of it again later on.

With a demonstration.

When there were no witnesses.

However, with Maxine there, I wasn’t about to get crass and tell Sookie she was more than welcome to do a taste test for herself.

Besides, with Hoyt being Jason’s best friend, he would more than likely feel the need to stick up for her and I would hate to have to kick his ass, with his mother being a witness to it all.

“Now sweetheart, there ain’t nothin’ wrong with gettin’ a little dirty, when you’re gettin’ *down and dirty*,” Maxine snickered to Sookie, while Hoyt just gaped at his mom.

From her talking so openly about sex or from her insinuating the lines between red and blue didn't matter to her, I had no clue.

But it gave me a better appreciation for Maxine, so I gave her what Sookie had called my Molotov cocktail smirk – one look and her panties would be set ablaze – and gave Sookie an early payback for her *drip stand* taunt by telling Maxine, “I think you're barking up the wrong tree by trying to convince that one. From what I've heard, she likes girls.”

I heard it straight from Sookie.

It was why she would one day become Mrs. Lady Libido Lushbody.

Glancing back at Sookie, I saw that her eyes were the size of saucers and she flamed even redder when Maxine snickered, “That's alright, sugarplum. The heart wants what the heart wants. Besides, that means there's more for the rest of us.”

I could see the gears turning behind Sookie's eyes, no doubt working to churn out a little gem that had to do with the size of *my hose* being more in line for a poppy garden than a five alarm inferno.

I'd already heard that one from her brother.

But it seemed I wasn't karma's only bitch because at that very moment a group of girls walked into the tent.

Ones I knew were at least old enough to drink because I'd seen them in the beer tent – they'd blocked my view of Sookie for long enough to piss me off – with the skimpiest dressed one in the group walking right up to me.

Sticking her bare leg out, she made sure to rub the outside of my calf with it and pouted, “I got cut.”

Glancing back at Sookie and seeing the daggers shooting out of her eyes, I knew the girl was close to getting cut again.

Not that she could say anything.

What with witnesses and all.

Looking the girl over, I could see a small cut on the outside of her knee that hardly required a napkin, much less medical attention. But if there was one thing I'd come to learn on the job was the fact the job always earned us the attention of the ladies.

You didn't see calendars of oiled up shirtless plumbers on the market.

A few of the other guys in the tent – the same bastards who'd all but shoved me in Maxine's direction the moment she walked in – all came forward, ready and willing to play nursemaid, but she waved them off and looked directly at me, saying, "I want *him*."

And at my raised brow, she giggled, "To take care of my boo-boo."

Looking back at Sookie, I almost felt bad.

Almost.

I knew guys flirted with her all of the time. She knew women flirted with me.

But that didn't mean I wanted to see it happen, so I knew she likely felt the same.

That – and a murderous rage, if I was reading her expression right.

"Come on Mama," Hoyt said, cutting in to the tension that suddenly filled the area surrounding us all. And Sookie was then forced to reel in her green-eyed monster when he looked back at her and asked, "Do you mind runnin' her home? I'll follow you in the patrol car and give you a ride back."

What could she do, but say, "Sure."

And feeling the foreign leg brushing up against my own, what could I do, but say, "Let's take care of that cut."

The sooner I put a band-aid on it, the sooner she would be gone.

But I knew Sookie would need something bigger than a band-aid to soothe her green-eyed monster, so when my shift ended at eight that night, I stayed at the fairground instead of going home.

I'd known from stalking her from afar that Hoyt had brought her back within an hour of them leaving with his mom. But I'd also known from her stomping feet and the dirty looks she would shoot my way that she wasn't too happy.

I might have had more sympathy for her if it wasn't for the fact *she* was the one that kept us from being able to tell anyone we were together.

But I wasn't stupid enough to remind her of that fact.

Instead I chose to remind her of the fact that we *were* together.

That – and the fact that *her ass was mine*.

I'd been lurking close enough to the beer tent to know she'd been breaking down boxes and carrying them over to the recycling bin.

As far as she knew, I'd already left for the night. We had plans to meet up at my place, but I didn't want to wait the ten minutes it would have taken her to get there.

Besides, knowing her mood I was sure if I'd kept to those plans, her greeting would be far bitchier than I wanted her to feel.

So when I heard her telling her father she was heading out for the night, after carrying out the last batch of cardboard, I was determined to make her feel something else.

Me.

It was dark enough by then that she couldn't see me lying in wait, hidden by the cover of the trees, as she walked towards her car now parked off by itself in the field that had been filled to capacity only a little while earlier.

So I made a mental note to yell at her later on for walking to her car all by herself, even though it was the exact scenario I needed in order to pull off my plan.

Hypocrite, thy name is Northman.

I'd kept an eye on not only her, but also to make sure no one else was paying attention to her.

The last thing I needed was for her brother or any of his friends to see what I was about to do.

As soon as she was close enough, I reached out and grabbed ahold of her around her waist with one arm, pulling her back against the front of my body, and held the hand of the other over her mouth before she could scream.

And I felt both pleased and a fair amount of pain when she managed to elbow me in the ribs before I could let her know it was me by saying into her ear, "So...I taste like *soot*?"

She immediately stopped struggling and I let go of her mouth to put that hand to other uses – like sliding up the front of her shirt – but she still reached around and slapped my leg, whisper yelling, "Asshole! You scared the shit out of me!"

"I hope not," I chuckled. "That won't work with what I have planned right now."

Arching her chest into my liberty-taking hands, she pushed her ass against my crotch, even as she snarked, "Don't you have *boo-boo bitches* to pacify?"

Her bitchiness told me she was still sporting a green-eyed boo-boo of her own.

But I wasn't dumb enough to say that.

However, I was brave enough to allude to it by saying, "*Someone* sounds *jealous*."

"Who's jealous?" she denied, just as she planted her hands on the tree in front of her and used it for leverage to push her ass more forcefully against my crotch.

Thereby letting me know she wasn't *that* mad.

But knowing I couldn't strip her naked at the moment, instead I ran my hands back down her sides and gripped her hips with them, so I could rub the length of my cock against her ass, while answering, "The liar liar in front of me."

"Are you saying my pants are on fire?" she breathed out and in the next second added, "I better get them off of me then."

Batting her hands away from the button at her waist, I growled into her ear, "Better leave that to the professionals, Miss."

Unclasping the button, the zipper slid down just as easily as her shorts slid down her legs and I wasted no time dipping my hand into the front of her panties to trail my fingers through her folds.

She was already drenched.

"Too wet for a fire to start *here*," I teased, punctuating the word by sliding a finger inside of her and feeling her inner muscles clench around it.

I felt it all the way to my toes.

I definitely felt it from the base to the tip of my cock.

"Speak for yourself," she growled, when I pulled it back out of her and she shoved her ass back into my crotch, seething out, "It feels like it's on fire to me."

Pulling her panties down her legs, I pulled on her hips and pushed on her back until she was at the perfect angle, before setting my dick free from the confines of my pants and warned, "Luckily for you, I have just the right equipment to put it out."

A part of me cheered – the caveman part of me – when she shouted out my name, when I slammed into her from behind.

The rest of me took a second to look around and make sure no one had heard her.

We were hidden in the darkness of the trees, but that also seemed to make everything we were doing twice as loud.

I still had her ring in my pocket.

If we were caught by her brother, I was putting it on her damn hand.

After all, he would more than likely have a gun in his – trained on me.

Survival instincts trumped keeping our relationship a secret.

But hearing Sookie growl and feeling her wiggle her ass against me brought my focus back to the here and now.

And here and now I hadn't been doing much more than using my dick to measure the distance to her cervix, so I leaned forward, warning her yet again in a harsh whisper, "Hold on and keep quiet."

Pulling almost all the way out of her, I held onto her hips and slammed back into her, quickly setting a punishing pace. We were out where we could be spotted by anyone, so I knew we needed to make it quick.

But the danger of being caught only added to the excitement and it didn't mean it would be any less fun racing towards the end.

She was staying the night with me, so I knew we'd have time for finessed fucking later on. For now though, a quick and dirty fuck was just what we both needed to take the edge off.

I hadn't seen her in a few days thanks to our shifts not meshing and our earlier encounter that day only poured gasoline on the flame that was always lit when we were around one another.

It didn't take very long before I knew she was close to falling over the edge. But knowing I was closer than she was to that same edge, I reached around and used my fingers to work over her clit.

It worked wonders.

Bringing my other hand up to cover her mouth in just enough time for it to muffle the sound of her yelling out my name when she came, I'd had no choice but to muffle the sound of her name leaving my own, by biting down onto her shoulder when her orgasm triggered mine.

"Fuck," I whispered out, making a pitiful attempt to soothe the sting of my bite by rubbing my lips against her shoulder.

I was sure I looked more like a cat, rubbing up against its owner in adoration.

But considering how much I felt like purring at the moment, it was probably a fitting analogy.

Letting out a small noise of disapproval when I slipped out of her, she giggled when I pulled a few tissues out of my pocket and used them to clean her up before sliding her panties and shorts back into place.

Once I was set to rights too, Sookie stretched up to wrap her arms around my neck and she gave me a slow and sensual kiss.

Which was a direct contradiction to the smack she leveled against my ass, just as she playfully warned, "You better not be putting out anyone else's fires that way."

She didn't need to specify who *anyone else* was.

The *boo-boo bitch* was left unspoken and yet I heard it loud and clear.

"You're cute when you're jealous," I grinned.

"And you'll fit into my trunk," she grinned in return. "No one will think to look for your body in the woods behind my gran's house."

"That's why I love you," I smiled. "It's like playing with fire."

Then rubbing my body against hers, I added, “So it’s a good thing I know how to douse your flames.”

“Yeah, you do,” she smirked.

But she winced in the next second and brought her hands down in between us palms up, so we could both see the red marks on her skin.

Running the pads of my thumbs over them, she grimaced and said, “Splinters from the tree.”

“Better they be in your hands than in your forehead,” I chuckled.

But seeing the lift of her brow, I headed her off at the pass – before my idea for our quick and dirty fuck could work against me – by lifting her hands and kissing each mark, promising, “I’ll make your boo-boos all better.”

Even the ones she inflicted on herself by keeping us a secret.

4 – Shotgun Blues

This was *such* a *bad* idea. And not even for the obvious reasons.

It was the unobvious ones that had my stomach tied in knots.

Standing next to Tray, a quick look in his direction told me he was as nervous as I was.

Albeit, for very different reasons.

~o~O~o~

Three weeks earlier...

“Amelia’s pregnant.”

“What?” I asked, feeling my eyebrows hit my hairline and turning towards the sound of Tray’s voice.

I’d known he’d been seeing – and by ‘*seeing*’, I meant *fucking* – Amelia the-Broad-talks-Way-too-fucking-much for the last few months.

And by ‘*few*’, I meant *four*.

At most.

Which I guess made me an idiot for being as surprised as I was to hear him tell me she was pregnant.

“That’s what *I* said when she told me,” he chuckled.

“Umm...*congratulations?*” I hesitantly offered, before following it up with a chuckled, “*I’m sorry?* I’m not sure what the proper response is here.”

“Well you’ve got a few weeks to figure it out,” he smiled. “And while you’re at it, whether or not you want the beef, chicken, or the vegetarian tofu nightmare that I’m sure will be on the menu.”

“You’re getting *married?*” I heard myself ask, wondering if my face would be permanently frozen in a state of shock.

A part of me thought he was fucking nuts to marry her so soon.

The other part of me was jealous as hell that it wasn’t me.

I wonder if Sookie would notice if I switched her birth control out with Tic Tacs...

With how often I was putting my ‘X’ in the center of her box, it wouldn’t take long before I would win in the game of Tic-Tac-Toe.

“I am,” he confirmed with a nod. “I’d been thinking about it, but we made it official as of last night, not long after the plus sign appeared on the piss stick.”

Then turning towards me, he patted me on the shoulder and grinned, “And you’re gonna stand up there with me in case I pass the fuck out. You’re the only one I trust around here that’ll take care of me, without stopping to take pictures of your dick next to my open mouth.”

I’d call him paranoid, but...yeah...

Probies learned the hard way what happened when they passed out drunk around any of their fellow firemen.

“Sure, man,” I smiled in return. “I’d be honored, but...are *you sure* getting married is the right thing to do here? I mean, you two haven’t been together for very long.”

“I know I could still be a father to the baby without it,” he shrugged. “But I can see her bustin’ my balls twenty years from now. Besides, I want my kid to have both parents around, but with what we do on a regular basis, there’s a good chance I might not be here twenty years from now, much less tomorrow. If something happens to me, I want them to be protected and if we’re married, then Amelia will get all of the survivor benefits and none of the hassle if we were just shacking up instead.”

“Shut the fuck up, man,” I glared. Everything he’d said was absolutely true, but that didn’t stop me from adding, “*Everybody* is coming home.”

It was our mantra – our promise to one another – every time we got called out to a fire.

We hadn’t lost one of our own in my time on the squad and I would do everything in my power to keep that record going until the day I retired.

“From your lips to God’s ears,” he smiled, but the sound of the alarm blaring through the firehouse, alerting us we had a call to go out on made us both take notice.

Standing up, he slapped me on the back and said, “In the meantime, your only concern should be beef or chicken. Ames is bound and determined to get hitched before she starts to show, but with her dad’s money and connections and her uh...*fuck it* –

with *her mouth*, I'll be surprised if she doesn't have this thing thrown together by next week. Any idea on who you're going to bring as your plus one?"

"Nope," I answered a little too quickly, but I already knew I'd be going stag.

There was no way Sookie would be willing to go with *me*, even though I knew *she* would be going too.

Amelia the-Broad-talks-Way-too-fucking-much was her best friend.

As if the thought of being around Sookie in that environment with just the guys from the firehouse wasn't bad enough, Tray himself was a rare breed.

He was what could be called a two-natured.

He'd spent ten years on the police force before crossing the line over to our side. It hadn't been an easy transition for him to make – not that he couldn't handle the physical or mental aspect of the training, but the other firefighters had made it harder on him due to his background – and he'd had to work twice as hard as any other probie to earn his place. But once I'd gotten to know him, he'd become one of my closest friends and it was because of him that I had a better appreciation for our arch enemies in blue.

When I'd asked him one night what made him switch sides, he explained, "When you're a cop, you're a cop twenty-four hours a day seven days a week. When your shift ends you take it home with you whether you mean to or not. You're always armed. You're always on alert. Your brain can't really turn it off. When we're fighting fire, we're fighting against a force of nature. It's an unknown quantity – an unknown level of danger – and arguably a more dangerous line of work because firing a bullet into the flames isn't going to stop it. But when I leave here and go home, I'm just me. I can count the number of times I've had to don my fireman's hat off duty on *no hands* because it hasn't happened. Cops deal with human nature – both good and bad – but as a general rule, the people you deal with aren't happy to see you and public perception is that cops are only out there to harass them. Case in point: we drive the rig that gets two miles to the gallon to the grocery store and we get thanked for the job that we do by the people we

come across. When I was still out on patrol, I sat in a parking lot writing up a report and got a complaint called in to the station claiming I was idling.”

His explanation had certainly put the differences between our two sides into perspective for me, but Tray getting married to *anyone* was going to put *me* in a precarious position.

Because Me + Sookie + closet relationship + red *and* blue in attendance + open bar = Trouble.

Wondering how in the hell we wouldn't end up giving ourselves away in front of everyone we knew, Tray inadvertently added to the combustible mix, when he turned to me with a smile and said, “Don't worry if you can't come up with a plus one. Ames has a lot of hot sorority sisters. I'm sure you'll be able to find one who will suit your needs.”

I doubted it.

Sookie wasn't one of her sorority sisters and she would cut a boo-boo bitch if any one of them came near me – much less came on to me.

But that thought gave me an entirely new perspective on his upcoming wedding, so Tray took my smile to mean something wholly different – just like he had no clue the true meaning of my words – when I said, “I look forward to it.”

Because if her green-eyed monster ended up giving us away, I was more than okay with it.

~o~O~o~

My eyes inadvertently scanned the crowd in the church and spotting the Stackhouse clan all in attendance had me wiping my sweaty palms on my pants, with my fingers automatically tracing the ring I was carrying in each pocket.

The one in my right pocket was for Amelia.

The one in my left pocket was for Sookie.

But only one of them was guaranteed to get slipped onto a finger today.

Seeing the other faces I recognized to be on the police force, sitting in the pews, I couldn't help but notice even here – in the sanctuary of a church – the lines were still visible by the way they all sat together.

Rows of red and rows of blue.

And seeing the physical reminders of our last meet still showing in the bruises, cuts, and scowls being worn on their faces, I hoped for today – at least – there would be an unspoken truce.

~o~O~o~

Nine days earlier...

“How is it the glory hunters are already here?” Jake complained loud enough for the cop standing on the sidewalk to hear.

The cop being none other than Hoyt Fortenberry.

His eyes narrowed and his spine straightened, while he adjusted the belt that held his gun to his waist, and he only looked more peeved hearing Chow chime in with, “There's a Krispy Kreme right around the corner, so he didn't have to travel as far.”

We'd been called out in the early morning hours for a rescue. From what I had gathered, some guy had called 911 saying he was stuck in an air vent at one of the local liquor stores – which was only unusual in that it was barely six o'clock in the morning – but it wasn't unusual for the cops to respond to rescue calls too.

Although the four patrol cars lining the street seemed a bit much.

We didn't call them glory hunters for nothing.

As we approached with some of our gear, Fortenberry looked like he was trying to block our entrance with nothing more than sticking his chest out, which only made Jake move to step around him as he said, “Step aside and let the real heroes do their job.”

Putting his hand out, from the angle I was standing at, I couldn't tell if he'd shoved Jake or if Jake had run into him, while he barked, “You can't go in yet. This is a crime scene.”

Now that we were directly in front of the store, we could see a few cops through the window all standing around inside – Jason Stackhouse among them – looking up at the ceiling and laughing.

But it was what we could hear through the open door that grabbed our attention.

“HELP ME! I...I CAN'T...BREATHE!”

The biggest cop in the bunch – both in size and, I knew from experience, asshole personality – John Quinn laughingly shouted back, “You're in an air vent! Just inhale!”

“Hey man,” I began, about to tell Fortenberry to just let us get the guy out and check him over and then they could do whatever the hell they wanted with him.

Because death seemed like a harsh punishment for breaking and entering, if that was how the guy ended up getting stuck in the air vent sometime in the night.

He sounded like he was close to having a panic attack and, if he was large enough to get stuck in an industrial sized air vent, then he could end up giving himself a heart attack.

The street was crowded enough already.

There wouldn't be anywhere close by for the coroner's van to park.

I'd forgotten all about the fact his hand was still on Jake's chest to stop him from going in, but Jake hadn't.

And I was quickly reminded of it when Jake used it to shove him backwards and growled, “You can call it whatever the fuck you want, but *we* were called out for a *rescue* and we’re going in!”

It was enough for the others inside to finally notice our appearance and Fortenberry coming back at Jake was enough for both sides to start swinging punches in defense of their own.

And that was how I came to be arrested by Sookie’s brother.

The charges were eventually dropped, but still...

It was a story we could one day tell our future grandchildren.

But first, their *future grandmother* would have to tell her *present family* about us.

~o~O~o~

Hearing the processional music begin to play, I swallowed hard, with my eyes automatically going to the other end of the aisle.

Bridesmaid.

Bridesmaid.

Bridesmaid.

Jesus fucking Christ...

How many *were* there?

I hadn’t taken any notice at the rehearsal dinner because I didn’t have eyes for anyone but Sookie.

It had been a feat in and of itself, considering I’d done what I could to not look at her at all.

Bridesmaid.

Bridesmaid.

Pay dirt!

As the maid of honor, Sookie was the last one to walk down the aisle before the bride and my mouth went dry, with my throat tightening up seeing her. I couldn't help but imagine seeing her in the exact same scenario, only with her being the bride and me as the groom, while my hand automatically traced over the ring in my left pocket.

One day...

The ceremony itself was a blur because I couldn't stop myself from staring at Sookie, which was how I knew she was in the same boat as me.

At this rate we were going to give ourselves away before the bride and groom could even say their 'I do's'.

We were so caught up in our own silent conversation that both of us were fumbling when it came time to hand over the wedding rings, but luckily I reached into the right pocket.

Right, both in location and correctness.

Had I reached into the left one, we would've been toast before there could even be a toast to the new couple.

But tackling Amelia to get Sookie's ring back would've made for an epic wedding tale.

Once the priest pronounced them husband and wife, I had to lock my knees to keep my feet from moving towards her, but it wasn't until Sookie slipped her arm through mine so I could escort her back down the aisle behind the bride and groom, that I felt like I could breathe again.

“This could be us, you know,” I whispered, so only she could hear. “You only have to say yes.”

“We can’t get engaged at someone else’s wedding,” she whispered back, with a smile in her eyes that said otherwise. “That’s as tacky as this dress I’m wearing.”

“Say the word and I’ll alleviate you of that problem,” I smiled in return, with my head pulling back slightly. “Just one tug on that zipper and you’ll be mine, right?”

“You pull down that zipper in *this* crowd and my father will *own* your ass,” she laughed.

“Worth it.”

It would be.

Taking pictures after the ceremony was its own special kind of hell. Not only did we have to pose a thousand fucking times, half of the time I wasn’t standing next to Sookie.

Yes, that meant for the other half I *was* standing next to her, but I was in a glass-half-empty kind of mood.

Everything about the day only served as a reminder of what I *didn’t* have with Sookie.

What I *wanted* with Sookie.

With any luck, Bridesmaid Number Four – it was easier to remember their numbers than their names I couldn’t care less about – would be bold enough to do more than the simple eye-fucking she’d been aiming my way all afternoon.

Because Sookie was most definitely keeping her eyes on *her*.

But I knew better than to fan the flames by giving Number Four any reason to think I was interested. Not only because I didn’t want to have to deal with putting her off all night long, but because I knew Sookie would see right through it and pay me back in kind.

My green-eyed monster was on a much weaker chain than hers, so if I saw her flirting with anyone, it would snap in an instant.

I trusted her more than I trusted anyone and I didn't think for one second she would ever stray, but not being able to tell the world we were together had put a chink into my normally otherwise pristine armor.

It made my normal asshole-self turn into an über asshole.

Arriving at the reception we were once again paired up and announced to the guests as we made our way into the ballroom, with the catcalls from the crowd at our appearance making my hackles rise up.

The entire room was filled with an overabundance of red and blue testosterone, so I knew I'd be fighting them off of Sookie all night long.

And I only felt marginally better hearing Jake's voice yelling out about the catcalls, "Looking hot Northman!"

Asshat.

"You really do," Sookie purred at my side once we reached the dance floor to wait for the bride and groom to be announced. "I hope you weren't kidding earlier because if I can't control myself, we're going to end up with the Tacky Hat Trick of the night – getting engaged at a wedding because we were caught fucking at the reception, with this tacky dress up around my waist."

Tacky or not, I would be the happiest asshole on the planet if she agreed to marry me at someone else's wedding and her teasing smile became more heartfelt, when I looked down at her and earnestly replied, "I love you, Sookie and I've never been kidding about wanting to marry you. Say the word and I'll drop down to one knee right now."

The first time I'd asked her had been a spur of the moment thing, so I wouldn't have had a ring to give her if she had said yes.

Having rectified that in the days that followed, she had yet to see it – much less know that I'd bought one – even though I carried it around in my pocket all of the time.

Her lower lip wobbled a bit and her eyes glassed over with unshed tears, but hearing the DJ announcing the bride and groom at that moment reminded us both we weren't the only people in the room.

So she reined in her emotions and only shook her head, leaning towards me and whispering, "Like the sight of you in a tux isn't enough, you had to go and add sweet to your sexy."

"I hope you're not waiting for me to apologize," I smirked in return, knowing she needed me lighten things up before she ended up bawling.

This definitely wasn't the time or place for that, never mind the fact I couldn't stand to see her cry.

If our screwing around ended up giving us a daughter one day, I was so screwed.

And being karma's bitch, we would likely have nothing *but* daughters.

I was okay with that though.

It wasn't until Tray and Amelia were halfway through their first dance that we were able to talk again, when the bridal party was asked to join them on the dance floor.

And even then I couldn't form a single coherent thought, hearing Sookie say, "I'm not waiting for you to apologize, Eric. But *I'm sorry* for making *you* wait for me. You deserve so much better than that. I certainly don't deserve you, but..."

The music was still playing, but neither one of us were moving anymore. If anyone had asked, I would've sworn on a stack of bibles the entire world was standing still at that very moment – God knows my heart and lungs had stopped moving – when I managed to ask, "But?"

"Mind if I cut in?"

The voice I couldn't place right away sounded vaguely familiar, but right as I turned to tell them fuck off – I was almost positive I was in the middle of getting engaged – I bit it back, seeing Sookie's dad at our side.

So...I was *still* karma's bitch.

"Of course," I managed to smile.

The last thing I wanted to do was piss off my future father-in-law.

He was going to be pissed enough finding out I was going to be his future son-in-law.

Handing Sookie off to her dad, I noticed Number Four's eyes grow hopeful as she began pulling away from her dance partner, so I made a beeline for the bar.

This called for a drink.

Hopefully I would find out sooner rather than later whether or not it would be in celebration.

The scent of an unfamiliar perfume hit me right before Number Four sidled up next to me and asked, "Can I buy you a drink?"

Even though I was sure she was just teasing – it was an open bar, so the drinks were on Amelia's dad – I was still caught up in my interrupted engagement, so I knew I sounded like a complete dick when I stared back at her and snapped, "No."

"Aww," she smiled, not put off in the least by my dickishness. "Lighten up. It's a wedding. You should be having a good time."

Then giving me a look that was as explicit as her next words, she let me know her thoughts were dickish as well – in a different sort of way – when she added, "*We can have a good time together all night long.*"

"I'm spoken for," I glared at her.

Glaring more so over the fact I didn't know for sure whether or not Sookie was telling her dad about us at that very moment, but Number Four was right there, so she bore the brunt of my glare.

But whether or not Sookie was ready to tell her family about us, I was positive had she been standing there she definitely would have spoken up.

After all, I'd added sweet to my sexy ass and gift wrapped it for her in a tux.

There was no way Sookie would've stayed quiet.

"Oh," she replied, looking genuinely surprised. "Amelia said you were single."

"Well, *Amelia* doesn't know *everything*."

But that broad really did talk way too fucking much.

And maybe *I* was talking way too much too – counting daughters before they hatched, so to speak – by admitting I was seeing anyone in a room full of our friends.

So I would blame the scotch if it all blew up in my face later on.

As much as I would rather Sookie just stood up to her family and told them about us, I understood her hesitation.

I wouldn't out us on purpose.

But I ordered another scotch just the same, so I would have a quasi-legitimate excuse in case I inadvertently just did.

And a quick look in Sookie's direction, still on the dance floor with her dad, I had a feeling she would end up cutting her own throat by cutting Number Four's throat for hitting on me.

If looks could kill, she would already be dead.

"You're with Sookie?"

Uh oh.

I guessed I wasn't the only one who'd noticed Sookie's staring and glaring, but Number Four's question had the potential to put me hip deep in a pile of Number Two, so I did what I did best.

I was an asshole.

"It's none of your fucking business who I'm with. All *you* need to know is that I wouldn't touch you with *his* dick," I snarled out, gesturing towards Jake who had just come up to the bar.

"What about my dick?" he asked with a grin and then rubbed up against me, adding, "It's because I told you, you look *hot* tonight, isn't it? *Hot* is what I *do*, lover boy."

"Oh," she gasped out again and then nodded, with her apology of, "I'm sorry. I had no idea."

And then seeming to recall my assholery, she added, "But you didn't have to be a dick about it."

Storming off, I only shook my head and ended up laughing when Jake asked, "Was it something I said?"

"No," I chuckled. "It was something *I* said."

Straightening up, he smoothed out the front of his suit and said, "She's kinda hot. Maybe all she needs is a *little Jake* for the night."

"I don't know if *little Jake* will be able to get anywhere near her," I laughed. And then I laughed even harder, seeing the look of horror dawning on his face, when I'd answered his questioning expression with, "She thinks we're gay."

For the rest of the night, karma seemed to be having a grand old time at my expense because I couldn't seem to get Sookie alone to finish the rest of our conversation.

My entire future rested on 'but'.

I know she loved my ass, but this was really taking it too far.

Something I gathered she'd known by the looks she would aim my way.

One look in particular made me grateful my tux came with a pocket square.

It could be repurposed into a gag to keep everyone from hearing her when we ended up fucking in the coat closet.

Since we were in the bridal party, we sat at the head table, with Tray and Amelia sitting in between us. I'd been to plenty of weddings, but I never realized just how long they were until I was stuck – with Tray and Amelia sitting in between us – for-fucking-ever.

Toasts were given to the bride and groom by Sookie and I.

Dinner was served to several hundred guests.

The cake was cut, with Tray proving just how whipped he was when he didn't smash it into Amelia's face.

Assholes tapped the rims of their glasses, so the bride and groom would stop and kiss.

Kissing – among other things – is what got them here in the first place.

Did everyone want to see them fucking too?

But all of it only served to prolong the night and all I wanted to do was get Sookie alone, so we could finish our conversation.

Among other things...

In fact, at the moment *other things* were gaining ground over finishing our conversation.

Sookie's eyes had been stroking my dick all night long, but she should've known better.

It was all fun and games until I put somebody's eye out, just making my way to the bar.

She was slowly but surely killing me and yet I could guarantee there wasn't a cop in the room who gave a damn.

I hadn't made enough trips to the bar that I was drunk – per se – but I was definitely feeling it, more so from the shots I got roped into doing with whoever happened to be standing there. I'd booked a room at the hotel the reception was being held at, more for the time difference in getting Sookie naked than because I knew I would be drinking, so I hadn't been keeping track of my alcohol intake.

The same couldn't be said of my bladder.

When I'd left for the restroom, I'd seen Sookie on the dance floor with Amelia and a bunch of other girls, so that was where I expected to find her when I came out.

I sure as hell didn't expect to find her in the deserted hallway, cornered against a wall by John Quinn.

"Come on, babe," he slurred. "Let's take this party up to my room."

"*Move*, Quinn. You're *drunk*," she snapped out, pushing against his chest, but he wasn't budging.

"You're hot," he purred. And under any other circumstance I probably would've found his next words funny, but I only saw red when he said, "I know you said you only like girls, but I've been called a tiger in the sack..."

Unable to silently watch for another second, I stepped forward and shoved him away from her, growling, "Just because you *admit* you're a *pussy*, doesn't mean she's interested."

There could have been any number of ways how he might have heard the lesbian rumors Sookie had started about herself, but the only one I could imagine was that she'd started it because of *him* hitting on her at her dad's bar.

I wanted to kill him, chop him up into little pieces, and feed those pieces to a real tiger.

And then burn the shit he came out as.

Quinn might have been bigger than me and on any other day I could admit he would probably be able to take me in a one on one fight. But size had nothing on the blind rage of a man defending his woman.

Even if he was the only one to know she was his woman.

The amount of alcohol he'd consumed didn't help him any when he tried to regain his balance, so it took him a moment to get his footing before he bowed up and snidely snarled, "Me and her go way back and you don't even *know* her, but I can tell you she sure as hell isn't interested in *you*, so..."

I didn't hear much of anything after his claim they went *way back*, thanks to the blood rushing through my ears. All I know is one minute I was standing in front of Sookie and her hands were pressed against my back and the next I was flying at Quinn.

With my fists pressed against his face.

Repeatedly.

I don't know how long I was pummeling his face before I was pulled off of him. Nor do I know how many people had been a witness to it all.

But the once deserted hallway was filled to the brim when we were finally separated.

"What the fuck is going on?"

The question snarled into my ear let me know it was none other than Jason Stackhouse who had my arms twisted up behind my back.

And a quick glance at the crowd told me Sookie's dad was a spectator to it all too.

Fucking karma had fucked me in the ass again.

“I was on my way to the bathroom when Quinn cornered me against the wall,” Sookie spoke up from somewhere behind me. “He wouldn’t let me go and Eric was just defending me.”

His grip on my arms disappeared as soon as he’d heard his sister’s version of events. But I knew Quinn must have gotten a hit or two of his own in when my mouth hurt with my smile, seeing Stackhouse appear at my side right before he stepped forward and punched Quinn in the face himself, growling out at the same time, “I told you to leave my sister alone.”

I would probably end up getting the same punch to the face at some point, when he learned I hadn’t – in fact – been leaving his sister alone, but I didn’t care.

It would be worth it.

Quinn was hauled off by a few of his fellow men in blue – and getting his ass ripped by them while they did it – but I’d had enough celebration for one night and went up to my room, rather than return to the reception when all was said and done.

It was nearly an hour later when Sookie knocked on my door, with a sad smile on her face when she got a good look at my face.

Quinn had gotten in more than one or two punches.

“My hero,” she softly smiled, wrapping her arms around me and laying her head against my chest.

But I’d had an hour to not only decompress, but to stew too, so there was no smile on my face as I asked, “How many times has he done something like that to you before?”

While I knew she got hit on and she knew I got hit on, it wasn’t something we usually discussed in detail.

Pouring salt onto wounds.

Fueling a fire.

Pick your metaphor, it was all the same.

Painful.

“Enough that I had to switch teams,” she sighed and then turned to look up at me to add, “So it’s a good thing you love me enough to dress in drag.”

“Sookie,” I stared down at her warningly.

I knew she was just trying to lighten the mood, but before tonight I just thought Quinn was an asshole.

Now I viewed him as a threat to her safety.

For all I knew, even if we were out with our relationship, he wouldn’t give up his pursuit of her.

Hopefully, they wouldn’t think to look for his body in the woods behind her Gran’s house.

“So,” she began in a way that told me she was about to change the subject. “My dad was looking to buy you a drink after the hullabaloo.”

Fuck.

Fucking Sookie and her effective subject changing skills.

“Hullabaloo?” I heard myself ask with a teasing grin.

With her arms still wrapped around me, she didn’t need to move much to pinch my ass in warning, but only said, “Yep. He said you weren’t so bad...for a drip stand.”

“I guess that’s *progress*,” I chuckled.

“It is,” she agreed and then turned to look up at me again. “So I’m going to give it a few days and then tell them about us.”

“What?”

My ears were deceiving me.

I was sure of it.

“I would have done it tonight,” she smiled. “But on the off-chance it’s not well received, I figured one fight at the Dawson wedding was enough. You’re all over Instagram. There’s a hashtag and everything.”

“What?” I repeated, ignoring everything after she said she was going to tell her family about us.

“I’m tired of hiding,” she pouted. “I’m tired of waiting. I want us to be able to move forward.”

Then her eyes narrowed as she ended with, “And I want to be able to slap a bitch when I see them trying to pick you up at a bar and say *‘That’s MY man!’*”

“Saw that, did you?” I chuckled and then added, “Don’t worry. She thinks I’m with Jake.”

“I’ll slap him too,” she threatened, without missing a beat.

And it was only a beat later when she seemed to disappear.

The tug on my pants was what alerted me to the fact she’d dropped down to her knees.

“What are you doing?” I heard myself ask in an unrecognizable voice.

She’d managed to free my dick from my pants at the same time and it sprang out, christening her forehead when it did, and her laughed out words only solidified in my mind the fact she was – in fact – perfect for me.

“It’s all fun and games until someone loses an eye.”

That’s all I wanted.

A lifetime of fun and games with her.

I hadn't doubted we would get there eventually, but hearing her say she would be telling her family about us sooner rather than later made it feel like it was Christmas morning.

But, as soon as she wrapped her lips around me, Christmas morning wasn't the only thing I was feeling.

A lifetime with Sookie wouldn't be long enough.

But I would take it.

5 – The Garden

Twisting the top off of my beer, I took a deep pull from the bottle and stared out into the backyard, saying, "This place is nice."

Then turning to face where Tray was standing by the grill on the patio, I twisted my expression into an overly exaggerated sad face and fake sobbed, "My little boy is all grown up."

At nearly a decade older than me, we both knew how ridiculous I sounded right now, but he only rolled his eyes and tried to fight off his grin, as he huffed out, "Suck my dick."

"If you'd said that to the little woman, you might not be standing here right now," I laughed.

Opening his own beer, he flicked the cap at me and grinned, "Nah...that's what got me here in the first place."

Then taking a good look around himself, he sounded genuinely happy when he ended with, "But *here* is an okay place to be."

I knew he wasn't talking about their new house, which had been a wedding present from Amelia's dad and where we'd spent the day moving them into, but being married and with a kid on the way.

I was envious.

"You?" he asked, confusing me for a second. But I quickly figured out I'd spoken my thought out loud when he added, "*You are jealous of me?*"

Thankfully he didn't wait for an answer I didn't have the mental capacity to form and instead laughed out, "Well, just forget how to work a condom and you – my friend – can be standing here with me. We can take turns helping each other figure out how to put the damn cribs together."

I would be glad to, but first Sookie would have to forget to take her birth control pills.

"What are we laughing about?"

Glancing up, I already recognized the voice as belonging to Amelia's cousin Ty, but I stared passed him and in through the patio door where I could see Sookie helping Amelia put things away in the kitchen.

Like at the wedding a week earlier, we'd been studiously avoiding one another and only talking to each other when necessary. And oddly enough, with a smaller audience, we had to be twice as careful with how we interacted around everyone else.

I never would've thought I'd rather have a few hundred people between us than just a handful.

It made it ten times as hard staying away from her.

"Faulty birth control," Tray answered.

They hadn't advertised the wedding was a shotgun one, but they hadn't kept it a secret from those closest to them and being Amelia's cousin, he was in the loop.

He was also on my shit list for the way he kept staring at Sookie when she wasn't watching.

But *I* was watching.

And if he kept it up, *Ty* was going to get a *Columbian necktie* when I went Scarface on his ass.

What the fuck kind of name was *Ty* anyway?

He wasn't as cool as someone like *Ty Cobb*.

Hell, he wasn't even as cool as *Ty Pennington*.

Ty.

I'd quickly come to the conclusion it could only be short for Asshole.

Sookie still hadn't told her family about us, but I wasn't upset about it. We'd both forgotten the fact her parents were leaving the day after the wedding to go to their timeshare in Cabo for their annual two week vacation.

Our yearlong secret relationship wasn't news she wanted to share with them over the phone.

And I happened to agree with her when she said while she was sure heart surgeons in Mexico knew their shit, why risk it?

Grabbing a beer from the cooler, my eyes rolled seeing Asshole grimace when he took a dainty fucking sip, but I had a hard time keeping my expression neutral when he leaned forward in the chair he'd set his delicate ass into and asked, "So, do either one of you guys know if Sookie is seeing anyone? I know she didn't bring a date to the wedding, but I wanted to make sure before I asked her out."

Tray's reply of, "I don't think so," was drowned out by my barked out, "She's a lesbian."

“You know that’s not true, right?” Tray laughed and then explained to Asshole, “That’s just a rumor she started to keep the guys at her dad’s bar from hitting on her.”

Great.

Now I was surrounded by *two* assholes.

“Really?” he asked, looking way more excited than I was comfortable with.

And if he kept it up, I would make sure *he* was feeling uncomfortable by the time he left.

My foot up his ass wouldn’t feel all that great.

I’d been in a relationship or two in my time, but I’d never been so possessive about a woman before.

Then again, I’d never been in a secret relationship before.

And none of those women had been Sookie.

I hadn’t been in love with any of the others either, so I was sure that played into my green streaked hand. But I wasn’t sure I could passively stand there and watch some other guy asking her out, even already knowing she would tell him no.

And I couldn’t leave knowing he *would* be asking her out.

Since when did a catch-22 become one of the nine circles of Hell?

Catching movement in my peripheral, I glanced in through the patio door and saw Number Four making her way into the kitchen. She’d shown up not too long ago – *after* the majority of the work had been done – so I jutted my chin in her general direction and said, “Why don’t you ask *her* out? With the way she hit on me at the wedding, I can almost guarantee she’ll spread her legs for just about anyone.”

Tray dropped his head and I could tell he was trying to fight off his grin. But I didn't understand why until Asshole turned to look into the kitchen before whipping his head back to face me, with his glared declaration of, "*She is my sister.*"

"Huh," I shrugged, warring over wanting to laugh at his *intimidating stare* and at the same time wanting to Dirty Harry him.

Do you feel lucky, punk?

I was pretty sure he worked with Amelia's dad, so he was a white collar worker and probably hadn't broken a sweat since his last calculus final. But even if his manicured hands hadn't been enough of a clue that we led completely different lives, I had no doubt I could kick Ty Pennington's ass.

I certainly wouldn't break a sweat – or even a nail – kicking Asshole's ass.

But there were already enough pictures of me floating around on Instagram with #WED(which apparently stood for *What Eric Did*) @ #DawsonWedding, so I just gave him a '*What are you going to do about it?*' look before turning to Tray and asking, "How's Amelia been feeling?"

Apparently morning sickness wasn't confined to the morning hours, so they were putting off their honeymoon until after the baby wasn't making her miserable.

And according to Sookie, Amelia wasn't all that happy to hear Sookie's mom laughingly tell her if she waited that long, she wouldn't be going on her honeymoon until after the kid moved out of the house.

No one knew, of course, but Sookie and I were leaving the next day to spend a couple of days together where no one knew us and – more importantly – where no one would bother us.

She said it was our duty as the best man and maid of honor to ensure *someone* was fucking in celebration of their wedding.

It was yet another thing we happened to agree on.

“Depends on the minute,” Tray shrugged. “She can go from *happy* to *hurl* at the drop of a dime, but she’s just happy she didn’t throw up at the altar.”

“We’re *all* happy she didn’t throw up at the altar,” I chuckled.

A grin broke out onto his face, when he said, “She was wearing seasickness bands around her wrists under her dress. It was her *something blue*.”

Ty must have been *tired* of being ignored because he stood up and silently headed into the house, with my eyes staring daggers into his back the entire time.

“Something on your mind?”

The sound of Tray’s voice – amused, no less – pulled me from my murderous thoughts, watching that smarmy asshole slide up alongside Sookie, so I forced myself to look away and over at Tray, asking, “What?”

Pointedly looking at my hand, he then turned his knowing eyes onto me and said, “If you’re not careful, you’re gonna crush that beer bottle in your hand, so I’m telling you now. I won’t be held accountable when Amelia throws up all over you. She couldn’t stand the sight of blood *before* she got pregnant, so she’ll probably erupt like Mount Vesuvius.”

“Think the weather will hold out for the ballgame next weekend?” I asked after a long pause – and after I loosened my grip on the bottle – hoping to change the subject.

It was no *‘hullabaloo’*, but one could hope.

We’d been careful enough that I hadn’t yet been put into a situation where I had to dodge any questions about me and Sookie. And the last thing I wanted to do was lie outright to one of my best friends, especially when we were so close to being able to come out.

The change in topic had to do with the Guns N’ Hoses charity softball game that had been cancelled twice before. Once due to a torrential downpour and once again due to a five alarm fire.

If locusts swarmed the ball field next, I would take it as a sign from God that I should just grab Sookie and run, whether her family knew about us or not.

Tray waited until I met his eyes again – probably to scrutinize the relief behind them I knew I couldn't hide – when he allowed the subject change and only said, "Hopefully."

Hopefully my luck would hold out for the rest of the night and he wouldn't be such an observant mother fucker.

I only needed to keep it together for one more week because Sookie's parents would be flying back on Saturday morning, so they could be there in time for the game and she planned on telling them about us when it was over.

But, *silly me...*

I'd forgotten how much enjoyment karma got at my expense, until the patio door slid open in the next moment and Sookie walked through it.

With an asshole trailing her ass.

My ass.

Putting her profession to good use, she was carrying a bottle of tequila and a handful of shot glasses, as she made her way to the patio table where she set them down and said, "Sorry to intrude, but there's a little too much estrogen floating around in there and I needed some testosterone to even it out."

I couldn't have hidden the smirk on my face if I'd tried – *which I didn't* – seeing Asshole's lips pucker to one side, as though he was trying to decide whether or not he should be offended that his presence hadn't qualified as *enough* testosterone.

So I vaguely mused over getting a side gig as a mind reader when he turned to her and semi-teased, "I don't know if I should be offended."

“Where did you get your manicure done?” I asked, looking right at him. And when he turned his no longer semi-teasing eyes onto mine, I added, “*My mom* is looking for a new nail salon.”

Sookie bit her lower lip to keep from laughing, but it was too late for Tray to do anything more than try to disguise his with a cough before doing a little subject changing himself by telling Sookie, “After the wedding last weekend, I don’t know if tequila is a good idea.”

His eyes had darted my way, likely recalling what happened the last time tequila and I had gotten together, and we’d taken it out on Quinn’s face when Sookie was added to the mixture.

Observant mother fucker.

Undeterred, she proved carrying a bottle of tequila and shot glasses weren’t the only things she’d picked up working at her dad’s bar, sounding just like her brother when she stared back at him and taunted, “Pussy.”

“What the hell is *that* for?” he laughed.

Nodding, she then shook her head in mock dismay and replied, “That’s what Amelia *said* you always say. I gotta tell ya, Tray. I’m all for a little *fun and games*, but I gotta draw the line now that she’s married. I can’t keep her happy like I used to, so you gotta *step up* and *go down* or else this marriage just isn’t going to work.”

He silently stared back at her like he was trying to figure out whether or not she was kidding.

I knew, about whether or not Amelia and Sookie had ever fooled around like that.

I knew because I was sure I was wearing the same exact expression.

It seemed like even the crickets had stopped chirping to contemplate her words, but Sookie only reached over and grabbed one of the cigars from the box one of the other

guys had brought along for the move. We'd had nearly the whole crew here until about an hour ago, which was why it hadn't taken long to move them into the house.

Sitting back in her chair, she didn't seem to mind the dead quiet that now surrounded us all and paid us no mind, while she cut the tip off the cigar before bringing it to her lips and lighting it.

Simultaneously lighting up parts of me, when her eyes flicked my way as she wrapped her lips around the end of it, knowing exactly what I would picture in its place.

She was going to pay for that.

Physically shaking off his stupor, his jaw had yet to close as he stormed back into the house and playfully yelled, "What the hell kinda rumors are you spreadin' about me, woman?"

Sookie's eyes locked onto mine as she giggled, with my responding smile being completely her fault.

All I wanted to do was dive across the table that separated us and grab onto her, but Asshole reminded us of his presence by saying, "So you work at your father's bar?"

His question was clearly meant to draw her into a one on one conversation, so god only knows what he was thinking when she just glanced back at me and sounded around the cigar still in between her lips, "Mmhmm."

I know what *I* was thinking.

The sound reminded me of how she sounded when she hummed around my dick in her mouth.

She would pay for that too.

But short of beating Polo Prissy Pants to death, I didn't know how else to make him pay for putting his pitiful moves on her by quasi-asking, "So I guess being asked out for drinks one night wouldn't be something you'd be interested in."

You know what she was interested in?

Me.

That's what she was interested in.

Asshole.

But instead of diving across the table and grabbing onto *him*, like I now wanted to, I shifted in my seat feeling her foot coming into contact with my leg under the table, sliding up and down my calf.

She was petting me into being docile.

It was working.

And her responding words worked even more when she turned to him and said, "I'm not opposed to going out for drinks with anyone, but my boyfriend would be opposed to me going out on a *date* with anyone other than him."

Goddamn right he would.

I didn't even care that I was thinking of myself in the third person.

I could admit it was a little crazy, but that's what Sookie made me.

A little crazy.

In a good way though.

"I didn't realize you were seeing anyone," he replied in a way that sounded somewhat accusatory.

Considering he looked at me when he'd said it, I guessed he considered it my fault he wasn't fully informed of her relationship status.

Which, in a way, it was my fault.

Both keeping him in the dark and being the reason why she wasn't single.

But fuck him and his faulty belief that he had any right to know.

Her foot was still midway up my calf, but it stopped moving and merely pressed against me, when she turned to him and said, "I didn't realize I should be walking around with a scarlet letter 'F' on my shirt to inform others I was in a monogamous relationship."

He seemed gobsmacked to be on the receiving end of her verbal smackdown, but I was only too amused to be a witness to it all, so I teased, "How did you pass the second grade, thinking 'F' stands for 'monogamy'?"

"Oh, I didn't learn that until high school," she grinned. "'F' stands for 'fucking'."

Fucking JB DuRone.

Dumb as a box of rocks.

But we both had a past and I certainly didn't fault her for hers. He and everyone else she'd ever been with were history.

I was her present and her future, so that was all that mattered to me.

Standing up in a huff, Asshole started striding for the door, while snapping out, "I also didn't realize how crass you could be."

"This is nothing," she laughed out loud and at the same time tried to hold me in my seat with nothing more than her foot pushing down onto my own. "Stick around I'll tell you all about how I stuck it to your mom last night."

Seeing him gently sliding the patio door shut didn't have nearly the same effect as slamming a door shut would, which only made her call out, "Pussy!"

And she only grinned wider, when she looked back at me and heard me say, "And I was *so sure* I couldn't possibly love you more. You had to go and prove me wrong."

“Please,” she scoffed. “Ever since Cinder-spread-her-legs showed up, all I’ve heard about is how hot you are and how lucky I was you stepped in when I was cornered by Quinn. And let me be clear. Not lucky, as in, he could’ve assaulted me and you saved me from that special kind of hell. But lucky, as in, *you* were my knight in shining armor. I had to come out here before I beat her to death with a meat tenderizer.”

Shrugging, I smirked, “I’ll help you hide the body.”

“This is how I know our red and blue marriage will work,” she nodded, sounding as certain as her words declared her to be. “We have a mutual appetite for destruction.”

Shaking my head, I looked up at her through my lashes and asked, “Did you just make a Guns N’ Roses pun?”

“You love my punny ass and you know it,” she laughed in a way that always warmed me from the inside out.

I did love her, punny ass or not.

She knew it.

I knew it.

And a week from now *everyone else* would know it too.

Locust plagues notwithstanding, it couldn’t happen soon enough.

6 – Paradise City

“Babe?”

Turning my now incredulous eyes towards Sookie, she answered my questioning expression with, “I’m gonna run to the ladies to go tinkle, while you find me a decent cup of coffee so I’ll have to go tinkle all over again, kay?”

“Hold up,” I argued, not letting go of the hand I’d been holding.

She would either answer my next question or dance in a puddle of her own making.

But knowing which cocksucker we *both* associated the word with, I thought maybe I was hearing things and asked, “Did you just *babe* me?”

“Just seeing if you were paying attention,” she grinned. “It’s early and I have two left turn signals when it comes to navigation, as it is. I needed to make sure you were *game ready*, if we’re gonna make it to the right gate. I’d hate to end up in Timbuktu when I only packed bikinis and flirty little dresses.”

She’d successfully distracted me from cocksuckers by making me imagine just how flirty those dresses were.

We won’t even begin to discuss what I was imagining at the thought of Sookie in a bikini.

Having seen her in them before, I knew I could easily get lost in the land of triangles and string ties forever.

But while the airport we were in was big enough, it wasn’t *big enough* to get lost in.

Although, Sookie really did have a bad sense of direction.

She always had to hold her hands up in front of her and straighten her fingers out, turning her thumbs and pointer fingers into ninety degree angles to figure out which way was left, by the ‘L’ the left one would make.

I thought it was cute.

Just like the rest of her.

And one day soon, she could just look at the ring on her hand – the one still residing in my left pocket – to know which way was left.

We only had six days left before her parents would be back and then we could stop hiding.

And since I was still holding onto her left hand, I ran my thumb over her bare ring finger before using my grip to pull her closer, so I could lean down and press a kiss to her lips, as I asked, “Have I ever steered you wrong before?”

“No,” she sighed, melting into me for a moment before her own game face made an appearance.

Her *sex games* face.

But knowing we had a few hours before we would reach our destination and the sex games could begin, I released my hold on her and used my now freed hand to palm her ass, while I asked, “Grown up or kid coffee?”

She normally doctored her coffee with just *a splash* of cream at home, but whenever we were out, she sometimes wanted one of those flavored sugar concoctions that marketed itself as coffee.

It was really just chocolate syrup and whipped cream with *a splash* of coffee.

“Kid coffee,” she grinned, perking up at the thought.

But before she could run away from me – the dance she was doing let me know she was going to bolt any second though – I pointed down the long stretch in front of us and said, “We’re boarding at Gate 12. Hang a left out of the bathroom and go straight. If you hit the glass window, you’ve gone too far. If you hit the parking lot, you’ve made a wrong turn, so turn around and go back the other way.”

“Very funny,” she playfully glared, but then seemed to think about it and added, “Keep your ears peeled for the intercom though. I might end up in lost and found.”

“I’ll find you,” I smiled.

I would always find her.

There was no way I could be without her now.

She still hadn't returned by the time I had her kid coffee in hand, but she was likely browsing through one of the shops I'd passed along the way.

Hopefully, she wasn't in the parking lot, doing a one-eighty.

But we still had a few minutes before our flight was due to board, so I wandered down towards the gate and figured I would pass the time by checking my phone. I'd turned it off the night before and had yet to turn it back on, but as soon as I did it blew up with text messages.

I'd barely opened the first one when I heard, "Daddy! You made it!"

No...

This *could not* be happening.

But feeling an extra buck seventy-five being added to the weight of the two carry-ons I had strapped to my back, I knew that it was – in fact – happening.

Sookie's coffee didn't survive the ambush by Jake and flew out of my hand, with the cup doing a pirouette on its way to the floor before coming to a stop – ironically enough – in a puddle of its own making.

But I ignored it in favor of shucking Jake off of my back and turned to see his boyish grin aimed my way, along with half a dozen other guys from the station smiling back at me.

I didn't return their smiles.

My lips were impersonating my asshole at the moment.

Both were puckered.

But not being the observant mother fucker Tray was, Jake didn't seem to notice and clapped me on the back, announcing to everyone within a thirty foot radius of us, "Have *nofear*, the anchor is *here*. Our circle jerk is now complete."

Then turning to grin up at me, he clued me in to what in the hell he was talking about by adding, “Vegas just wouldn’t have been the same without you, man!”

Vegas?

They were going to Vegas?

Sookie and I were going to Vegas.

No. Not for *that*.

But I hadn’t ruled out *that* possibility.

Either way, I was good with it.

But it didn’t matter anymore because either way, karma really did own my ass.

The guys had been talking about doing a weekend in Vegas for months now, but it had been just that.

Talk.

Talk that usually only flared up whenever one of The Hangover movies had been on TV.

“Which Hangover was on TV last night?” I asked, looking for confirmation.

“The first one,” Jake answered and then guffawed, “That monkey cracks my shit up!”

My Sookie senses started tingling a moment later. I had the uncanny ability to sense whenever she was getting closer to me.

I took it as God’s way of making up for my perpetual karmic asskicking and didn’t question it.

At the same time, the announcement our flight would be boarding in five minutes came over the loud speaker and seeing one of the airport employees headed our way with a mop and bucket to clean up the coffee I dropped, I used it as my out.

Looking over at the guys, I said, “I’m just going to go get another coffee. I’ll meet you on the plane.”

“Don’t miss the flight!” Jake called out behind me, putting into words *exactly* what I planned on doing. “We can’t have an anchorless circle jerk!”

Asshat.

At least being tall had its advantages.

And being the moth to Sookie’s flame worked in my favor too because I spotted the top of her blond head about twenty feet ahead of me.

Holding up the pile of magazines she must have stopped to buy, she said, “I got you the Sports Illustrated Swimsuit edition because I’m gonna need your good mood to bring my sexy back after reading about Ben Affleck and Jennifer Garner breaking up.”

“Uh huh...so sad,” I huffed, more from the adrenaline coursing through me than anything else.

But before she could light off on just *how sad* she *was* over the divorce of a couple she *didn’t know* and would likely *never know*, I pulled us into a small alcove to hide us from karmic eyes, interjecting, “You know what *else* is so sad? Jake and six other guys from the firehouse are boarding our plane to Vegas right now.”

“Oh,” she frowned and then tilted her head, asking with a sad smile, “The Hangover was on last night, wasn’t it?”

“The first one,” I nodded, too ate up to even smile at the fact she’d known them well enough – through me – to guess correctly.

“Well, I’ll just help Ames get her house in order, “ she shrugged and then added, “And I’m sure Jason will fuck up doing the receipts at the bar, so I can go in at night and give him a hand.”

With their parents away on vacation, I'd known her brother would be covering for her for the next few nights at the bar. But that had nothing to do with my '*What the fuck?*' look and it only hardened when she incorrectly guessed at the cause by quasi-asking, "Have fun?"

"What?" I asked, with every rant going through my mind boiling down to that one word.

But even knowing me, as well as she did – and even if at times I suspected she could read my mind, although I couldn't *prove* it – she clarified her crazy response by answering, "You said they've been talking about it for a while and you *never* get to have a guys' weekend. Go. Have fun."

And while her words were telling me to go, her actions contradicted them when she twisted the front of my shirt in her fist and pulled me down for a kiss before adding, "But not *too much* fun. I'll kick your ass, mister."

Releasing me from her grasp in the next second, she stood there staring at me and I could tell that she really meant it.

She was perfectly willing to forego our own weekend getaway, so that I could go hang out with the guys.

She was also insane, of course.

Grabbing onto her hand, I jerked her along behind me as I walked further away from the gate and said, "You're batshit. I love you, but you're fucking certifiable if you think I'm going to ditch you to go spend a weekend with them."

"But," she argued, running alongside of me to make up for my longer strides.

"But *nothing*," I argued back as I came to a stop in front of the electronic flight schedules and turned to her adding, "*Every* shift I work is the equivalent of a *guys' weekend*. Only it's occasionally interrupted by a fire, so we stay sober through them."

I could tell that she was gearing up to argue with me some more, so I silenced her with a kiss and said, “I love that you’d be okay with me leaving you behind, so I could end up potentially getting a tattoo on my face and waking up next to a transvestite.”

“*I just said not too much fun,*” she argued back and playfully punched my ribs. “*I’m the only one who’s allowed to wake up next to a transvestite.*”

“Now that *that’s* cleared up,” I chuckled with an eye roll and then turned them back towards the screen.

Scrolling down the list of upcoming departures to pick out a new destination, my eyes came to a stop on the one I knew would be perfect for us.

What with Sookie being a punny ass and all.

And also batshit crazy.

It wasn’t Paradise *City*, but Paradise Coast was close enough.

Marco Island, to be more specific.

I’d gone on a trip with some of the guys to the Everglades a few years earlier – pre-Sookie – so I was familiar with the area enough to know it was located on the Gulf side of Florida.

White sand beaches and a sand covered Sookie in her white bikini sounded *exactly* like paradise to me.

Arriving at our new gate, while I headed to the counter to change our tickets over, Sookie was able to book us a room for the weekend at one of the resorts and cancel our reservation at the Vegas hotel.

I waited until our original flight took off to send Jake a message to tell him I missed it and was looking to catch another one.

I just left out the part where I’d be catching a flight to Florida instead of Nevada.

And I decided to wait until later to send him the excuse that I ran into a hot chick and was spending the weekend with her instead.

I would just leave out the part that her name was Sookie Stackhouse.

Lying without lying.

It was becoming my specialty.

But my ass didn't fully unpucker until we were strapped into our seats and leaving the tarmac.

Hopefully karma would be fooled into looking for me in Vegas and leave us the hell alone.

~o~O~o~

Waking up in the early morning hours the next day, the sun filtered in through the window and cast the room into a bluish hue. After checking in, we'd spent the remainder of the day at one of the beaches and the night strolling down the main thoroughfare, filling up on the local cuisine and topping it off with drinks that came with tiny paper umbrellas.

Sookie's umbrella had been red.

Just like on that fateful night.

I took it as a sign.

I teased her about marrying me all the time, but I hadn't *proposed* to her in a while.

Maybe because I'd known she wasn't ready to say yes.

Or maybe it was because I wasn't ready to hear her say no again.

Maybe it was a combination of the two.

But I'd slipped the tiny red umbrella into my pocket alongside her ring when she wasn't looking. I didn't know why or what I might do with it, but I'd wanted it just the same.

Just in case.

The destination had certainly lived up to its name. Paradise Coast was truly a beautiful place.

But looking over at Sookie, still sound asleep and with her hair a wild mess surrounding her head, it didn't come close to how beautiful she was to me.

I'd woken up wrapped around her from behind, but now that I had pulled away to get a better look at her, the white sheet draped across her bare back had slid down to the top of her ass, with the stark color contrasting against her tanned skin.

Still close, I still wasn't close enough, so my finger automatically reached out to gently trace over the line left behind from the bikini she'd worn the day before. I hadn't been trying to wake her, but she stirred anyway, unconsciously moving towards my touch with a soft sigh escaping her lips.

I knew I loved her – had known for months that I was *in* love with her – but it wasn't until that moment that I realized something else.

It was the little moments, like this one – one she wasn't even awake for – that made me love her all the more.

We lived separately in a way that had nothing to do with our addresses, but when we were together we existed within our own little bubble. Our entire relationship – kept a secret out of necessity – was filled with nothing but little moments because we couldn't share *us* with anyone else. It kept us from having to listen to anyone else's opinions about our relationship.

It kept us from having to share *us* with everyone we knew.

We never took our time together for granted, knowing every second was a stolen moment, and it only made me appreciate her all the more.

Maybe if we'd been able to be open about our relationship from the start, I wouldn't have had the clarity that I did now about what she meant to me.

I would never know.

Only now did I realize I wouldn't trade it for doing it any other way.

As much as it bothered me to have to have to sneak around, I had her.

Sookie was mine just as much as I was hers.

I wouldn't have it any other way.

"Quit thinking," she sleepily mumbled, while she blindly reached for me, closing the few inches between us by sliding her body over and turning to rest her head against my shoulder, using her free arm to drape over my side.

"You're not the boss of me," I teasingly whispered and let my fingers trail more firmly against her back before using them to work the tangles out of her hair.

"It's cute that you think that," she teased in return. And her eyes were still closed, when she said, "But we both know you're my bitch."

It was true.

And we both knew it.

So I didn't bother to deny it and I felt her smile form against my chest seconds later at her silent victory.

Then pressing those same lips against my skin, she sighed out, "So what were you thinking so loud about?"

See?

Mind reader...

But instead of saying that, I asked more than stated, “Everything? Nothing?”

Both were equally as true.

“Now that *that’s* cleared up,” she laughed softly.

With her hair now tangle free, I used that same hand to trace down her spine and over the curve of her ass, still hidden by the sheet, and ran my fingertips along the familiar dips and swells of her body, recommitting them to memory while I explained, “Really. A little bit of everything and a whole lot of nothing, but mostly just how much it still catches me off-guard sometimes.”

“What does?” she asked, tilting her chin up to look at me.

“How lucky I am to have you.”

Things could have gone so very differently. At the start I hadn’t known what we were doing, other than each other. But I certainly hadn’t imagined ending up where we were now.

She was like a dream come true I hadn’t even known I’d wanted until I had her.

Her lower lip pouted out, as it often did whenever I *‘loved her out loud’* without using the word ‘love’ at all.

And I was smart enough to never point out the fact that whenever I did, *she was my* bitch.

So when she was eventually able to rein in her lower lip, she used it to smile instead and slid on top of my body, as she playfully scoffed, “You? *I’m* the lucky one.”

My hands automatically moved to hold onto her waist and she sat up in all of her naked glory, straddling more than just my hips.

One part of me in particular was doing its damndest to give her an early morning salute.

Eying me knowingly, she let me know she knew exactly what she was doing when her lips turned up on one side and she slid her hips over mine, coating me in the moisture already pooling in between her legs.

Then she threw a curveball at me by purposefully sliding her hands from my wrists to my elbows and saying, “I mean, just *look* at these forearms.”

“My *forearms*?” I smirked, with an arched brow.

Out of all of the body parts she’d worshipped – both verbally and physically – my forearms had never been included.

“I’m a fan,” she smiled and pitched her hips forward again, with my eyes involuntarily rolling into the back of my head and her own actions made her gasp out her next breath of words.

“*Huge fan.*”

If I had less self-control, I would already be inside of her. The fact we’d christened the room four times the night before was the only thing helping me remain in control now.

But I could only take so much.

She should know this.

I’d proven it time and again.

But stubborn as the day was long, she continued to tease us both with the way she was moving on top of me. However, she didn’t let that deter her from sliding her hands further up my arms, while she said, “And then there are these *biceps*.”

“What about them?” I asked, opening my eyes and immediately zeroing in on hers.

“Sonnets should be written about them,” she smiled and then wagging her brows, she added, “Or dirty limericks.”

“Don’t let me stop you,” I chuckled, with a challengingly tone. “By all means, have at it.”

Still moving her hips, she was killing me one slow stroke at a time, but after a moment she began, “There once was a man named Eric, whose demeanor could be quite barbaric. But flexing his arms only showed some of his charms because it was his cock that was truly Homeric.”

I would have laughed – and maybe taken a moment to reassure myself *Homeric* was indeed a *compliment* – but at the word ‘cock’, mine disappeared into her warm wet depths.

There was absolutely nothing funny about that.

“Fuck,” I heard myself grunt out through clenched teeth, enjoying the feel of her stretching and contracting around me, with my grip likely leaving bruises on her hips.

Good.

Then every asshole on the beach – the ones who couldn’t seem to tear their eyes away from her – would know that she was taken.

And that *I* had taken her.

But she only had herself to blame.

If she wore my ring, then...

Nah...

I would still want to mark her in this way too.

“We are,” she agreed to my involuntary verbal declaration and slowly began moving, building up her rhythm with purpose.

I loved seeing her like this. She'd been confident – rightfully so – from the start, so being able to just watch her move with abandon and unapologetically seek out her own pleasure, only added to my own.

I also loved having the time to just enjoy being with her, without the burden of a clock hanging over our heads.

Time could be both our enemy and our friend.

Her breathing picked up pace in time with her thrusts and she leaned back, bracing her hands on my legs, while my eyes trailed over the faint pink blush blooming across her skin. Sliding one hand over, I used my thumb to work over her clit, while the other skimmed up her torso to her breasts.

Her skin was always so soft under my rough calloused hands, but with the way she was looking at me, she didn't seem to mind.

At all.

Rocking and circling her hips, she pushed her body against each of my hands and I could tell by the sporadic fluttering around the length of me inside of her becoming more pronounced that she was getting close.

Thanks to our mini-sex-athon the day before, I knew I could last for a little while longer, so I waited until she was nearly there before grabbing onto her hips and angling my next thrust in a way that I knew would throw her over the edge.

It did.

And she let me know it.

Me – and everyone else on our floor.

“That's my girl,” I smiled, flipping her over underneath me and slowly stroking her through her orgasm, while I claimed her lips in a slow sensual kiss.

Our relationship may have gone from zero to fucking like rabbits at the beginning, but I quickly learned the joy that was just making out with Sookie Stackhouse.

I could – and *had* – kiss her for hours.

Her hands trailed languid patterns across my back, with her fingers eventually moving through the hair at the back of my head, gently holding it in place while she kissed me in return.

But our kiss was broken by my smile when those same hands trailed down my neck and over my shoulders to settle on my biceps, feeling her firm squeeze.

“You really do like those,” I teased, skimming my lips across her jaw to nuzzle the spot behind her ear and smiling again at the goosebumps that rose up on her flesh.

“Did you not pay attention to my limerick?” she giggled, which instantly turned into a moan when I chose that moment to thrust back into her a little more forcefully.

“I did,” I admitted before my ego took over and made me admit to something else, when I leered down at her and said, “But I think it was *another* part of me you likened to *epic proportions*.”

“Cocky,” she weakly mocked, with her hands sliding back down to my ass to pull me to her.

“Exactly,” I agreed.

Those were the last words spoken by either one of us, instead needing any oxygen we managed to get into our lungs to chase after the orgasms building back up in each of us.

Hitching her thighs up over the forearms she was such a fan of, spread her open wide enough that I was able to sink down even deeper inside of her and her hands spread out over my chest, with her fingernails digging into my skin.

Her hair was a tangled mess again, fanning out over the pillow beneath her head, and the multitude of feelings – both emotion and sensation – flowing through me was quickly tunneling down into an all-encompassing want.

As much as my body was ready to give in, my mind wasn't.

I wanted more.

I *always* wanted more when it came to her.

Dropping down from my hands to my elbows, our sweat slicked skin made it easy for her legs to slide down to my hips, with her feet pressing against my ass and her lips moving across every part of me she could reach, both taking and adding moisture along the way.

It was too much and yet not enough.

But hearing the tiny whimpers escaping through her lips and feeling the breath of them fanning across my skin made me lose what little control I had left and my hips began moving in a blur against her, with my panted breaths against her neck making the stray hairs tickle against our skin.

Knowing I was close, I leaned on my right arm and slid my left hand down in between us to work over her clit, wanting her to cum with me.

But feeling her teeth sink down into the skin where my neck met my shoulder in the next second, I was done for.

Now gripping her hip with my left hand, I pulled her up right as I thrust down into her in, having lost all pretense of maintaining any kind of rhythm now that I'd been reduced down to nothing more than blind need.

In stuttering movements, I pumped wildly inside of her, with the coil inside of me unfurling and my vision going black as I was lost in a consuming flood of pleasure.

She may have cum with me.

I couldn't be sure.

Of anything, really.

But if not, I would make it up to her.

Just as soon as I could come out of the cum coma she'd just put me in.

My awareness slowly returned to me in bits and pieces, as did my vision, and I found myself lying in a boneless heap on top of her.

"Can you reach your phone?" I mumbled against her neck.

But having no idea if she could even pull enough air into her lungs to respond, I didn't wait for an answer and explained, "You're going to have to call 911 for help if you can't push me off of you by yourself."

Her responding laughter was music to my ears in more ways than one, but she only managed to get through one line of her newest masterpiece before she dissolved into a fit of giggles.

"There once was a *badass* named *Sookie*, whose superpower was *incapacitation bynookie*."

~o~O~o~

"Can we do this again tomorrow?"

Smiling down at her little shadow, Sookie turned her lips into full-on pout mode when she answered, "I'm afraid not, little man. We have to go home tomorrow."

She'd been suckered in by puppy dog eyes into helping her newest admirer – a four year old named Hunter – build an elaborate sandcastle, as soon as we'd arrived on the beach.

His grandparents – I only knew from his shouted 'Nana' and 'Pop-Pop' in their direction – seemed relieved he'd found himself an accidental playmate.

Even if she looked more like a *Playboy Playmate* in her bikini.

But I didn't mind getting bumped for the attention of a four year old and if anything, it only reiterated in my mind what a great mom she would be.

One day.

Between watching them, the surf, and – from the looks of it – a wedding being set up that would be taking place a little further down the beach, I'd had plenty to keep me occupied.

“Is he your husband?”

Hearing the distaste in his voice, I looked over at Hunter and couldn't help but smirk seeing the frown on his face.

“Not yet,” Sookie giggled.

Not for a lack of trying.

And he sounded just as hopeful as I knew I'd sounded in the past, when he turned back towards her and said, “So you can marry *me*.”

It was cute.

All the way up until she teasingly replied, “If you were twenty years older, little man, *I'd do it in a heartbeat*.”

Yeah.

Both me and the little man were scowling at that.

The sun was beginning to set and hearing his name being called by his grandparents a moment later, he gave her a huge hug – and me a dirty look – before he ran off, with Sookie turning back to give me her patented ‘*What?*’ innocent look.

We both knew she wasn't all that innocent.

But as cute as he was, I didn't care for being upstaged by a four year old. And maybe it was the setting or maybe it was seeing the wedding getting under way further down the beach that gave me ideas.

And thinking back to my thoughts that morning – how Sookie and I had spent our entire relationship in a bubble built for two – made me want to ask her to marry me again while it was *still* just me and her.

With no outside influence or opinions on the matter, I wanted her to choose me.

Subconsciously, I think a part of me had been waiting for her to tell her family about us before I proposed again. But knowing that would be happening in just a few short days, I suddenly – and perhaps *selfishly* – wanted her to agree to it now, while neither one of us knew what we would be facing when we came out.

So with that thought in mind, while she dug out the sundress she'd brought along to cover up her bikini with, I waited until she was pulling it on to slip the ring out of my pocket and put it on the highest point of the sandcastle, hiding it with the red paper umbrella I'd kept from the night before.

I didn't want her to feel obligated to say yes, if she saw the ring beforehand, and by the time she was done pulling the dress over her head I was standing up and partially blocking it all to keep her from noticing anything was amiss.

Holding out my hand, I smiled and said, "Dance with me."

"There's no music," she smiled in return, but took my hand anyway and let me pull her closer to my body.

Wrapping one arm around her waist, I held our entwined hands against my chest and kept us in place, while we merely swayed back and forth, as I said, "We make our own music."

She settled her head against my chest, facing out towards the ocean and sighed, "I don't want to leave tomorrow. We should move here."

“Okay.”

I would do it in a heartbeat, but I knew she wouldn’t want to leave her family behind. They were tightknit.

It was why we existed in a bubble.

“Wow,” she smiled, pulling back just enough to look up at me and tease, “I say jump and you say how high. I could get used to it.”

“You should.”

I’d stopped moving, so there was nothing to distract her from my next words when I truthfully conceded, “I will *always* jump. For you. With you. To you.”

Then sliding my hands up her arms, I cupped her face and stared down into her eyes, as I said, “Wherever *you are* is home to me. I love you, more than I can possibly put into words and I can’t see my future without you in it. So I will do whatever I have to – move mountains, move across the planet, or just move to Florida – to see that future come to light because that’s what you are to me – my light. I would walk through fire for you.”

Dropping down to one knee, I kissed the top of her left hand and then looked back up into her tearful eyes to ask, “Will you marry me?”

Despite the balmy night, she seemed frozen where she stood.

I know *my heart* had stopped beating.

So it felt like both eons and a fraction of a second, when she suddenly got a lot closer by dropping down onto her knees in front of me and said the one word I’d waited – both eons and a fraction of a second – to hear.

“Yes.”

7 – Civil War

Hearing the familiar tune blaring out over the loud speakers, once again welcoming the crowd to the jungle, they went wild.

Just as wild as my heartbeat, with my eyes wildly skittering across the stands, looking for the familiar blond hair of my fiancé who had yet to make an appearance.

Fiancé.

Her new title still hadn't really sunk in to my psyche.

It seemed too good to be true and yet I knew it was.

True.

Sookie had actually said yes.

Our hotel room had barely survived the celebration.

We'd *celebrated* all over it.

Walls. Sofas. Coffee table and credenzas.

Nothing had been spared from our celebratory sex-a-thon.

The only dampener on the celebration had come when our plane landed back home and I watched Sookie regretfully slip my ring off of her finger and into her pocket.

I'd known it was coming and even understood the rationale behind it – wanting to give her family a heads up about our relationship before learning their family was about to expand by one red poppy – but it still stung.

She'd worn it in the days that followed whenever it was just her and I, handing it over the moment we were together so I could slip it onto her finger all over again. But whenever she was out – in the world where we were still a secret – she would wear it on a long chain around her neck, nestled inside of her shirt and close to her heart.

An appropriate place for it, considering it was the same place where she kept me, even if I was sometimes quite literally inside of her shirt and doing very inappropriate things to her while I was there.

But today was *the* day.

D-Day.

D for divulge, since that's what Sookie planned on doing.

Divulging our relationship to her family.

Hopefully it wouldn't end up standing for 'denounce' when all was said and done.

Or worse.

Disown.

It was her biggest fear and the cause for keeping our relationship a secret. And I didn't know her family at all to be able to tell her it would happen any differently. But from the outside looking in, if they were as close as they seemed to be, I couldn't imagine them turning their backs on her, just because she happened to fall in love with the 'enemy'.

The rivalry between our two sides was very real, but it wasn't the Hatfield's and McCoy's real.

In fact, I suspected the only blood that would be shed would be my own, when her brother got in a punch to my face when he found out the truth.

I was already expecting it and looked forward to it even.

Because it would mean we wouldn't have to hide anymore.

So my little chicken shit was planning on telling her parents about us sometime during the game in the hopes her father wouldn't lose his cool in a crowd of spectators.

And with the crowd of trained first responders around, the method to her madness would also work in her favor if he ended up having a heart attack hearing the news.

A heart attack had been why he'd been forced to retire from the force to begin with.

I didn't blame her for being leery, not wanting to be the cause for his second brush with death.

God knows I would feel guilty as hell if he ended up kicking the bucket all because I couldn't walk away from his daughter.

Not that I'd ever *tried* to walk away from her.

So that fact would only compound my guilt if he died.

But Sookie had planned the entire thing out.

The timing of her reveal.

How she would put it into words.

What her arguments would be to counteract any arguments they would make to her against us being together.

It was all very elaborate.

And longwinded.

She'd even made a mockup of the ball field and stands.

With a seating arrangement.

And included a map legend that was color coded.

And I got another playful punch to the ribs, when after she'd spelled it all out for me, my first response had been an amused soft shake of my head, while I said, "You're telling them about our relationship, not invading France."

At least it had calmed her down some, but now that she was still MIA from the softball game, I was starting to get worried. She was picking up her parents at the airport and then driving them straight here, so I hoped she was just stuck in traffic or that their flight was late, instead of my little chicken shit being *too* chicken shit to go through with her elaborate plans.

The only thing that kept me from getting too worried was the knowledge she'd added an emergency evacuation route on her map.

One that led us to my car and ended with us living on the Paradise Coast.

Sookie had planned for every outcome, but every outcome she planned all culminated with us together at the end.

So I would just have to trust in that and let the chips fall where they may in the meantime.

But while I'd been ruminating over my missing fiancé, the song had ended so I followed my fellow firemen into the dugout. The game was being held on the Police Athletic League softball field, so we were the away team, which meant we went up to bat first.

I recognized their pitcher and knew she wasn't someone to be messed with.

At the plate or out on a call.

Kenya Jones was no joke.

So hearing the probie at my side on the bench, yelling out a slew of derogatory remarks to her, I turned towards him and warned, "Cool it, Flunky. Not only are there little kids around who can hear your assbattery, she'll knock you on your ass when you're up at the plate."

Or worse.

All of us would be targets.

Andre Paul had been on the job for a grand total of one month.

And since it had taken him a grand total of five times to pass the test to become a fireman, his nickname hadn't taken nearly as long to catch on.

"But that's what we do," he argued. "They say shit about us and we say shit about them."

"You have shit for brains," I argued in return. "So just keep your trap shut and learn from your betters or else I'll have you polishing the undercarriage of the rig when we get back to the station."

Normally I wouldn't care about anyone talking smack to the opposition, but today wasn't a normal day.

It was *D-Day*.

The last thing I wanted was for my future in-laws to wander by and get a whiff of the assholery going on in our dugout thanks to shit for brains Flunky.

The shitty scent would cling to me and I would be guilty by association.

I already had enough working against me for merely associating with their daughter. I didn't need ass face adding any more strikes against me.

But Flunky wasn't called flunky for nothing. The fact it had taken him so many times to pass the test I had since learned was a true indicator of his entire persona. He had a devil may care attitude and a God complex.

In his own mind, he knew it all and would live forever.

It was something I'd been trying to break him of since his first day on the job, but he had a thick skull.

Like secret-government-think-tank-in-the-bowels-of-a-secret-government-hideaway thick.

I worried nothing short of a direct hit by a nuclear warhead would be able to penetrate it.

So his responding scowl aimed my way wasn't all that surprising, but he swallowed whatever retort was on the tip of his tongue when Jake called out from a few feet down the bench, "Man, I don't miss doing *that*."

And then turning his own scowl towards me, he asked, "But did you *have* to drive through a muddy field before you made me clean the bottom of the rig?"

"Have you lost the keys to the rig since then?" I asked with a smirk.

Jake was known for losing everything, to include his gear, his phone, and his head whenever a pretty woman was around.

That was how he'd somehow managed to lose the keys to the rig, putting them down on a shelf in the grocery store, while attempting to pick one up.

"Hell no," he spouted with wide eyes and then added, "But if Heidi Klum walks by, then all bets are off. I will gladly polish the bottom of the rig, if it means I'd get the chance to polish her bottom."

"I don't think you have to worry about that," I laughed. "America might have talent, but *you* don't."

"She can press my buttons any time," he grinned. "In fact, I take the lit up 'X' in her box as tacit approval for me to go into hers."

"I'll visit you in prison," I nodded. "But I'm gonna laugh my ass off when irony bites yours and Bubba thinks *your* asshole is the 'X' marking *his* spot."

Then adopting a professorly tone, I eyed him and said, "No means *no*, Jake. No matter what the voices are saying in your head."

"Why do you have to shit all over my wet dreams?" he whined. "Isn't it bad enough you left us floundering in an anchorless circle jerk in Vegas? What if we'd run into Mike

Tyson? What *then*, huh? How were we supposed to handle him *and* a tiger? That's an eight man job at the very least."

I wasn't about to tell him their circle jerk was permanently anchorless, since I'd run off and gotten engaged, while they *hadn't* been running into Mike Tyson.

But I was saved from having to say anything when Flunky grumbled out loud, "No one invited *me* to go to Vegas."

Flunky hadn't endeared himself to anyone on the squad yet – least of all, *me* – so I turned to face him and narrowed my eyes, as I said, "That's because it would have taken you *five* flights to get there. Now shut up and watch the game or else I'm going to designate *you* as the water boy."

"Adam Sandler!" Jake yelled out. "That's what I'll do in prison! Form a football team and take on the guards in the longest yard."

He started calling out imaginary plays in the next moment, so thankfully my sanity was saved by Tray walking into the dugout and saying, "Big Daddy's here, so shut up and sit down."

Walking over and taking a seat where Flunky was already sitting, he'd narrowly missed becoming a seat cushion by sliding over at the last second. So I was smiling when I looked back at him and asked, "How's Big Mama doing?"

He'd texted me that he was running late because Amelia had been praying to the porcelain god all morning.

"Better," he shrugged and then warned, "But if you call her Big Mama within her earshot, I'm gonna kick your ass. She's not even showing yet and all I hear about is how huge her ass is getting."

"More cushion for the pushin'" I shrugged, with my mind automatically imagining what Sookie would look like when she was pregnant.

I couldn't wait to find out.

“So, Sookie looks like she’s got a glow going on.”

“What?” I asked, a little too loud and a little too surprised for it to sound in any way casual.

Pointing in the direction of the stands, I could see her sitting there with her parents, while Tray added, “Her skin is a lot tanner than it was last weekend.”

“Is it?” I asked in a high pitched voiced.

So I did my best to sound like I’d already surpassed puberty, when I added, “I hadn’t noticed.”

Her getting to the ball field.

Her sitting there, with her parents.

I hadn’t noticed a damn thing.

My Sookie sensor must be on the fritz.

Of course it would happen on *D-Day*.

Karma enjoyed fucking me in the ass.

“Where was it you disappeared to last weekend?” he asked. “The guys said you never made it to Vegas with them. Something about ditching them for some hot chick.”

“Who is *she*?” Flunky asked.

I knew he wasn’t asking about any random hot chick because his eyes were zeroed in on Sookie.

And a bit of drool was coming from the side of his mouth.

“*She is off limits,*” I heard myself snarl.

But seeing Tray's amused and yet challenging expression, I quickly added, "She's a blue blood and Jason Stackhouse's sister. You don't stand a chance with her."

And he literally wouldn't have a leg to stand on when I chopped both of them off with a hatchet, if he got anywhere near her.

It wasn't good for just saving babies from hot locked cars.

"She's *hot*," Flunky declared.

Hearing the leer in his tone, I knew mine was hot – as in, *hot under the collar* – when I said, "And you'll get burned if you even think about coming on to her."

"Just ask *Babe the blue-balled Ox*," Tray chuckled and gestured towards Quinn.

"*He tried to come on to her* at the wedding and Eric here was the one to set him straight."

"He was one grab away from sexually assaulting her," I argued back, seething all over again at the memory. "You can't tell me you wouldn't have done the same thing."

Tray calling himself Big Daddy was a spot on assessment of his personality. Those he held close to him were like family.

He knew damn good and well he would have defended her too.

"Definitely," he agreed. But then he added with a smile, "But I can't say I would've been *sovigorous* in my defense of her. You broke Quinn's nose."

"You say that like it's a *bad* thing," I huffed.

It wasn't.

Not even a little bit.

"You're looking pretty tan yourself," Tray mused, with a calculating stare.

“And?” I asked, looking everywhere but at him. “The sun is pretty big. Takes up the whole sky sometimes. It lights up the entire planet, so you can be anywhere on it and get tan from it.”

My window had shrunken down to minutes.

How many minutes, I wasn't sure. But I knew I only had literal minutes before I could just come clean and admit I'd been doing very dirty things with Sookie for the past year.

We would be out and I would be free to tell the world she was mine.

But just thinking about it made my eyes automatically move back to where she was sitting. If all went well, she was going to give me a sign.

By holding up her left hand and showing me the ring she no longer had to hide underneath her shirt.

But she was talking to her mom at the moment, so I didn't know if it was safe for me to say anything to Tray yet.

And all Mr. Observant Mother Fucker had to say at the moment was a disbelieving sounding, “Mmhmm.”

“Whatever.”

Granted. Not the best formed argument.

But at least I hadn't made up some excuse about rearranging my socks.

Again.

So that was something.

“Mmhmm,” he repeated.

I *could* lie to him, but I didn't *want* to, so instead I did the grown up thing.

I turned to look where Jake was still sitting a few feet away and said, “Billy Madison.”

“Knibb High football rules!” he shouted.

The rest of the game went as expected.

Their pitcher brushed us off of the plate.

Ours returned the favor.

We slid too fast and too hard into their players.

They returned the favor.

All the while I kept looking at over Sookie every chance I got, but she had yet to give me any sign she'd spilled the beans.

And in my anxiety I couldn't even decide whether or not her father didn't appear to be in the throes of another heart attack to be a good thing.

By the time the top of the ninth had come about, I was on edge so much *I* was likely approaching my own heart attack.

We were down by a score of six to four, but Tray had gotten a double to lead off the inning.

One homerun and we were back in this thing.

So I tried to concentrate on *that* instead of whatever was going on in the stands.

If Sookie *hadn't* told her parents about us by now, I was sure she had a good reason.

At least that's what I kept telling myself.

But with Flunky up at the plate, I was in the batter's circle waiting for my turn, when my attention was drawn completely to him.

He'd been wearing a sourpuss all afternoon, so I'd already been planning the tortures I would be bestowing upon him when we got back to the firehouse.

But standing up at the plate now, I planned an entirely new kind of torture for him, when he glanced down at the catcher – Jason Stackhouse – and said loud enough for me to hear, “Tell your sister I said thanks for last night and that I’m sorry for not sticking around this morning. Especially after she let me fuck her in the ass and all. *She was nice and tight* though. You should be proud.”

Everything that happened next was a blur.

All I know was that I blurred past Stackhouse and beat him to the punch.

Literally.

I knocked Andre to the ground and ended up on top of him first, with my fists taking turns tuning up his face, before my hands settled around his throat, so I could choke the life out of him.

I was doing society a favor.

No jury would ever convict me.

But if they did, I was sure Sookie would bake me a cake with a file in it.

Once again it was Jason Stackhouse who pulled me off of him, with asswipe using what little air he managed to pull into his lungs to snarl, “What the hell?”

“I told you to keep your fucking trap shut!” I roared back and tried to free my arms, so I could hit him again. But Stackhouse’s grip on me only tightened even more, so I used my feet to kick at dickface instead.

“What do you care?” he asked and then added to his future ass whooping by squawking, “She’s a Stackhouse! *A blue blood!* You said it yourself!”

“She’s my goddamn fiancé!” I yelled back.

Everything got quiet then.

And I do mean *everything*.

Quiet enough for my brain to catch up to what my mouth had just yelled out for the entire ball park to hear.

I was pretty sure it was Amelia's voice I heard shouting out, "I knew it!" from the crowd.

But my eyes were closed, avoiding the inevitable fallout for as long as I could, so I couldn't be certain.

All I knew for sure was that I'd just outed us in a big way and may have inadvertently stolen Sookie's thunder.

And given her father a heart attack.

For all of my inner talk about not doing just that – of letting Sookie tell them the news in her own time – I'd seriously dropped the ball.

I wouldn't blame her if she kicked me in mine the next time she saw me.

But it wasn't a kick to my balls that I felt next. More like the ground rumbling underneath my feet and my eyes snapped open in the next second at what sounded next.

Seeing the giant plume of smoke rising in the distance, from the center of an industrial park, I knew it wasn't thunder we'd just heard.

That was an explosion.

8 – Knocking on Heaven's Door

"Alright, gentlemen," Tray yelled out, turning from the fireball in the sky to face the rest of us. "Let's haul ass."

The sounds of phones and radios going off, alerting everyone about the call, rang out at the same time and Stackhouse released his hold on me, only to take a step forward and lean over Andre, warning in a deadly tone, “This ain’t over.”

Then turning to face me, the punch I’d expected was never delivered. Instead he unexpectedly said, “And as soon as *this* is over, you and me are gonna have a talk. And *you’re* buyin’ the beer.”

And a grin overtook his face when he added, “Just as soon as Sook is done handin’ you your ass.”

Huh.

So we were thinking along the same lines about at least one thing.

I was in deep shit with his sister.

But it seemed the shit didn’t run as deep with her brother, so that was something.

If I had him on my side – and if Sookie could hold off on killing me – maybe I even had a chance to convince her father I was good enough for his daughter.

But remembering how screwed I knew I would be if we ended up having daughters, my wishful thinking turned realistic.

No man would be good enough for *my* daughter, so I could hardly expect her dad to feel any differently.

Maybe I would lead off with that.

We had something in common, more than just Sookie.

And my realistic thinking had me believing more than likely it would be *her dad* that would deliver the punch to the face I was still expecting.

Clapping me on the back with an amused shake of his head, Stackhouse ran off towards the parking lot. In addition to the regular POV's, it was filled with patrol cars and every vehicle from our station. Some of the guys on the team were on duty at the same time, but in a situation like the one we knew we would be facing, it was all hands on deck.

My eyes automatically went back to the stand where I'd last seen Sookie, but with the amount of people filing down from them and running across the field, it was impossible for me to get a bead on her.

Having my Sookie sensor on the fritz was inconvenient in more ways than one.

So I could only hope she was doing okay after everything that had just happened.

And hope she currently was *not* doing CPR on her dad.

But I didn't have time to face the music right now. However what I couldn't help but face was Tray's face as he walked over to where Andre was still lying on the ground a few feet in front of me.

Now sitting up, he was trying to wipe the dirt and blood from his mouth, when Tray glared down at him and ordered, "*You* will stay behind and gather all of our softball gear and then take it back to the station."

"But there's a fire!" he whined.

"Which is why *you'll* stay behind to get our gear," he said with his glare still in place. "You've already shown you're not capable of following orders today, so I suggest you think long and hard about whether or not this is the right career for you."

And then letting his eyes dart to me for a second, he looked back down at him and added, "And whether or not you feel *safe* going to sleep in the same building as the rest of us. In the meantime, the *rest of us* who *know* what the fuck we're doing will handle the fire. Right now, I wouldn't trust you to put out a lit match."

"But I rode over here with everyone else," he argued. "How am I supposed to get everything back to the station all by myself, with no way of getting there?"

Kicking his cleats with his own and kicking up more dirt in the dirtbag's face in the process, Tray replied, "The old fashioned way."

Then glancing over at the now emptied out dugout and all of the gloves, bats, and helmets left behind, Tray added, "It would take a normal person two trips – *one*, if they were dedicated – but since it's *you*, I'm guessing it'll take *five*. So you best get moving."

Standing there, all I wanted to do was punch him in the face for every whiny word he'd uttered, but now wasn't the time for that.

Later, though.

His ass was mine.

But I was willing to let Stackhouse have a shot at him first.

He could kick Andre's ass, while Sookie was kicking mine.

The sounds of tires peeling out of the gravel parking lot grabbed my attention, along with the various sirens now blaring, and Tray grabbed my arm in the same moment, to pull me along with him as we began jogging towards the rig, while he asked, "You okay?"

"Yeah," I automatically responded. "I had his arms pinned against his sides with my knees, so he didn't even get a punch in."

"I'm not talking about the fight," he said, sounding frustrated and came to an abrupt stop. Looking over at the cloud of black smoke growing bigger in the distance, he turned back towards me and added, "I'm talking about *you*. You obviously have *some shit* going on and I need to know if your head is in the game before we go in to tackle firezilla."

"I'm fine," I argued back, but knowing I didn't *sound* fine, I calmed my tone before adding, "I've had *some shit* going on for the last year and while yelling it out for all the world to hear wasn't exactly the plan, the reveal *was* planned for today."

Running my fingers through my hair, I shrugged with my sighed out, "She'll forgive me – and possibly kick me in the balls – but Sookie and I will be fine."

It wasn't until I said the words out loud that I knew it to be absolutely true.

No matter what happened, Sookie and I would be fine.

"*Big Daddies!*" Jake yelled from a distance and brought our attention back to the parking lot.

Dangling out the side of the rig and now wearing his turnout pants, but still wearing his softball jersey, he shouted, "Get a move on! We gotta roll!"

Our feet automatically started jogging towards the rig again, with Tray snorting out, "A year. Now I'm never gonna get any peace."

"What are you talking about?" I asked, reaching the rig first and catapulting myself inside.

Tray followed me in and shut the door behind him before turning to me and saying, "The know-it-all I'm married to said Sook's been acting squirrely for the last year. Disappearing from time to time and not telling anyone where she's been or who she's been with. Turning down dates left and right. For a hot second Ames thought she might've started playing for the same team and was testing the waters by joking about it at the bar. So when Sook joked about it at the house, she got me to wondering. But it wasn't until the wedding that Ames became convinced *you* were the nut Sook's been trying to hide from everyone else."

If burying myself balls deep inside of Sookie at every opportunity counted as hiding nuts, then Amelia was a lot more perceptive than I'd given her credit for.

But her relationship with Tray suddenly made a lot more sense.

The priest had gotten it wrong.

He should have pronounced them as Mr. and Mrs. Observant Mother Fuckers.

All of our gear was in the truck, so I kicked off my cleats and started changing out of one uniform for another, when Jake put the rig in gear and cautiously piped up from the

driver's seat, "Now...*don't hit me*, but I gotta say it. *Well done*, Daddy Northman. My new Mommy is *fi-ine*."

"I'm gonna hit you," I warned, with a chuckle. "I'll just wait until you least expect it."

He would definitely get a smack up the backside of his head if he called her Mommy to her face.

And a punch to the balls if he asked her if he could breastfeed.

At the very least...

"Well, at least I know why you ditched us last weekend," he huffed from the exertion of making a sharp right turn. "I'd ditch us too if I could be with Mommy instead."

"And when I hit you," I replied with a wry grin. "It's gonna leave a mark."

"Scars are cool," he grinned. "Chicks dig 'em, especially when you embellish the truth a little and say you got them, rescuing puppies and kittens from becoming baby-kabobs."

Then turning to face me in the back of the cab, he waggled his eyebrows and said, "Throw in a little mouth to snout puppy CPR in there and you are *in* like *Flynn*."

"Watch the road, Knucklehead," Tray barked from his seat beside him, with his phone still at his ear.

I could tell by the questions he was asking he was getting more details about what we would be facing, but when I leaned to one side to pull my jersey off, I could see out the windshield and understood why he snapped at Jake.

The ladder truck we were in was huge and could easily take out anything short of a Mack truck if you weren't careful. It couldn't exactly stop on a dime either and thanks to having every emergency responder all gathered at the same location when the call went out, the route to the industrial park was congested with every lights and sirens equipped vehicle in the town.

We'd be lucky if we all made it there in one piece.

"Show of hands," Jake snarled from his seat. "How many think it'd be worth it to knock a few patrol cars outta the way, since they're driving Miss Daisy in front of us?"

The adrenaline was kicking in for all of us. It was a natural response, but playing bumper cars with the men in blue would only put us further behind.

Not that I really thought he'd go through with it.

Not that we all hadn't thought about doing it at one time or another.

But Tray was the one to get us all to focus on the fire instead of Miss Daisy by saying, "The explosion came from Pale Rider."

"Fuck."

I don't know which one of the guys in the rig actually said it, but we were all thinking it.

There were several companies housed in the industrial park, but there were four in particular that were especially dangerous and each one had been dubbed by us as the one of the four horsemen of the apocalypse.

Pale Rider – also known as Death – was the worst of the bunch.

It manufactured ethylene, a colorless flammable gas that was used in the manufacturing of plastics.

It was also an atom bomb, just waiting to be detonated.

There were pipes that ran all throughout the facility, with the gas running through it, and led to several large tanks on sight where they stored the final product.

It would be like walking into a building filled with bombs.

The individual chemicals that made up the end product weren't to be taken lightly either, but we'd trained for this exact scenario *because* the plant was located in our town.

So I reminded everyone of that fact, as we pulled up to the scene, by calling out, "Grab your Hazmat gear. You know what to do."

Stepping out of the truck was like stepping into a war zone. It was pure chaos with people – both injured and not – scattering in all directions. Most of the cops on scene weren't even in their uniforms and instead could be picked out based on their softball jerseys.

But we all knew each well enough to know who the leaders were, so I went up to John Flood, with my Hazmat gear in one hand and pulling on my oxygen tank with the other, while I said, "We need to cordon off the area and have everyone else in the park ordered to shelter in place."

We wouldn't have a good enough read on what we were dealing with for a while, so it was better to be safe than sorry.

But seeing the wounded being carried further away from the building, I turned to him and added, "And we're going to need to set up an area for the Med-Flight chopper to land. Some of these people are going to need to be airlifted out of here."

It was bad.

Bad bad.

I could already hear Tray over the radio clipped to my gear, ordering someone to put out a call to the surrounding towns to get their help. We didn't have enough buses to get all of the people who needed medical treatment to the hospital, so when Flood nodded and began barking orders at his people, I ran back towards the guys to get started when I heard someone calling for help.

Turning towards the sound, I recognized Hoyt Fortenberry.

Covered in soot and with a small gash on his head, he was still wearing his softball uniform as he was helping one of the workers from the plant get outside, practically carrying the guy since he could hardly stay upright.

So I detoured towards him and helped him get the guy to the triage area that was still in the process of being set up, yelling more out of exasperation than anything else, “What the fuck were you doing inside?”

“There were people still trapped in there!” he yelled back, but his frustration turned to worry when he added, “I didn’t see anyone else, but...”

Following his eyes when they moved back over the crowd until they finally settled on the exit, my stomach dropped hearing him say, “I think Jason is still inside.”

“Stackhouse?” I heard myself ask.

I didn’t think there was another cop named Jason on the force, but I could have been wrong.

But I didn’t wait around to find out the answer and instead ran into the building, without my Hazmat gear, shouting out, “STACKHOUSE!”

Knowing smoke followed the path of least resistance, I already knew from the velocity coming through the door that the fire itself was burning from somewhere deeper inside. In my own experience I knew by finding the fastest smoke coming through the smallest opening, *that* was where the fire would be found.

Now I just had to find Sookie’s brother before I found where those two things would be coming from.

“STACKHOUSE!” I yelled again, moving further into the building and keeping my eyes peeled for anyone left inside.

The guys were all still in the process of unloading the hoses from the truck and getting the gear out when I ran inside, so I was pretty sure I was the only one from the station in the building.

A fact that was confirmed when I heard Tray yelling into the radio, “NORTHMAN! GET YOUR ASS BACK OUTSIDE!”

Keying the mic on my collar, I replied, “I will. Just as soon as I find Stackhouse and drag his ass back outside with me.”

The building was huge and made up of cinderblock and steel, so the further I moved into it, the more unreliable my radio became because whatever Tray said in response mostly came through as static.

But I was able to pick out the words, “Fuck,” and “Asshole.”

I’d have to wait until later to find out whether or not he was talking about me or Stackhouse.

But he was probably talking about both of us.

The smoke wasn’t as dense, but that was only good as far as the odds of me finding him still conscious. Dense black smoke could render someone unconscious after only a few breaths and kill them within minutes.

But the white smoke was gaining in velocity the further into the building I moved.

I was getting closer to the fire.

“Hey! Is anyone in there?”

Hearing the voice up ahead I thought to be Jason’s, I put on a burst of speed and rounded the corner into a huge room filled with shit – pointy stabby shit – that I didn’t want to be anywhere near if there was another explosion.

But what I saw next felt like I was seeing it happen in slow motion and fast forward all at the same time.

Jason Stackhouse was standing at the opposite end of the room facing away from me and moving towards a closed door.

A yellowish brown smoke was coming out of the seams around it in small puffs, giving it a kind of breathing effect.

And I knew that could only mean one thing.

A backdraft.

Seeing him move towards the door, I may have shouted, “NO!”

All I could know for sure was that everything sped up – to include my forward motion – when I sprinted towards him.

I had no way of knowing if I reached him just in time or too little too late.

But just as he managed to lift his leg to kick the panic bar on the door to open it, I managed to take a flying leap at him as I saw the smoke being sucked back in through the seams, right before the pressure of the fire on the other side of the door exploded out into the room.

I had no idea how long I’d been out of it, but I came to finding myself lying on top of him. In my haste to run inside, I hadn’t closed my jacket and it ended up blanketing us both, protecting him from the flashover that had ignited across the room.

“Jesus,” he breathed out, once we both managed to open our eyes. “You weigh a ton.”

“I’d make a crack about your sister not minding,” I managed to chuckle. “But I’m not up for a fight right now, even if it’s true.”

I was the one lying on top of *him* and yet I felt like *I* was the one who was pinned.

“Yeah, well...seeing as how you just saved my ass with your own, I’ll let that one slide,” he huffed and tried to squirm out from under me.

When that got him nowhere, he finally pushed at my chest and said, “I’m figurin’ she already agreed to forever ever after with ya, but you gotta at least buy me dinner if you expect a two for one Stackhouse special...”

His eyes grew wide as his words trailed off, with him staring at my chest and making me say, "Give me a minute to catch my breath and I'll move."

It kind of felt like I'd had the wind knocked out of me, but not.

All I knew was that I couldn't seem to get enough air into my lungs.

"Try not to move," he said in an overly calm tone and gently tried to get out from under me.

"I just need a minute," I repeated, concentrating on trying to pull air into my lungs.

"Take two," he said with a weird look on his face, but tried to force a smile when he added, "You earned them."

"What is it?" I asked, turning my head to try and see what had him acting so strangely.

There were several small fires going on around the room now and figuring that was it, I said, "They're not going to burn out of control any time soon. We have time to get out of here."

Once the pressure of the fire that had been contained in that one room was released by the explosion, it had been reduced to mostly smoldering embers.

We had time.

Moving like I was made of glass, he managed to get out from underneath me, but I still couldn't seem to get my body to do what I wanted it to and asked, "Is there something lying on top of me?"

I couldn't turn around enough to see and explained, "I feel like I'm being pinned down by something."

"You're gonna be fine," he replied in a soothing tone.

"That's not what I asked," I responded warily and tried to figure out what was wrong.

Other than the fact I couldn't sit up or breathe right.

But moving my head in what little way I could, I was able to see more smoke now coming from the other side of the room where I entered in from.

Thicker. Darker. Faster.

Killer smoke.

Black smoke that could become flammable itself, so I tried to gesture towards it on the other side of the room and weakly ordered, "You need to go, Jason."

"Not without you, I don't," he protested in return and yet seemed leery of moving me.

Probably because I weighed a ton.

Or so I'd been told.

"I have the oxygen tank," I argued back. I could feel it still strapped to my back, so I said, "Just put the mask over my face and go get Tray or one of the other guys. They'll come and get me out."

"Yeah," he mused out loud. "That ain't gonna happen. Have you ever seen my sister when she's mad? Like *really* mad? I'd rather face dying in here than face her later on, if I left you here. At least in here my death will be quick. Sookie would take her time and draw it out."

"I love how evil she can be," I chuckled, but it had sounded forced, from what little air I had left and my vision was getting spotty.

"Why are we not moving then?" I asked, not sure if I was asking which one of us was lagging in the movement department.

So I used what remaining strength I had left to push myself up on my hands, but when I did I came face to face with a pool of blood underneath me.

Glancing down at my chest I saw my shirt was covered in red.

Further scrutiny led my eyes to see the tip of something pointy jutting maybe an inch or so out of the left side of my chest.

And then I remembered all of the pointy stabby things in the room I hadn't wanted to be anywhere near if there was another explosion.

"Son of a bitch," I grumbled and let myself back down onto the floor.

Sookie was gonna be so pissed.

But at least Jason and I seemed to be getting along.

So that was something.

"Yeah," he agreed and knelt down next to my head. "I didn't know how to bring it up that you couldn't get up because you got javelined."

My vision was back to being spotty at best and his words were starting to sound farther away, even though I knew he was right next to me.

But not knowing if it was just my vision or if it was the smoke in the room that was making everything seem darker, I managed to mumble out, "Go Jason. Leave me here."

There was no need for *both* of us to die.

Just one of us would be bad enough.

Fucking karma.

Not only did I finally get Sookie to agree to marry me, but even her brother seemed okay with it.

And now I was going to die before I could even find out if she was going to kill me for spilling the beans.

It was bullshit.

Pure and simple.

The last thing I registered before the darkness consumed me was something covering my face and the sensation of being dragged across the floor, as I heard a faraway voice saying, “Not. Gonna. Happen.”

9 – Don’t Cry

Two minutes later...

“Jesus FUCKING Christ!”

“That’s bad, man. That’s REALLY bad.”

“Okay...careful now! We’re gonna lift him onto the stretcher on the count of three.”

“One...two...THREE.”

“Alright, let’s move. The fire’s spreading this way.”

“You’re gonna be okay, Eric. Ya hear me?”

“You’re gonna be okay.”

Five minutes later...

“We gotta stay here and take care of this. You gonna stay with him until we can get there?”

“Yeah. I ain’t leavin’ until he wakes up and tells me to get the fuck out.”

“You sure you’re alright?”

“Huh? Oh, yeah. None of...none of that’s my blood.”

“What happened?”

“Asshole saved my life, that’s what happened. And now that he’s marryin’ Sook, it’s gonna be the talk around the Thanksgiving Day table for-fuckin’-ever.”

“Are you gonna call her?”

“Yeah...and once I tell her the reason why he’s all banged up...well...if you need me, I’ll be in the bed recuperating next to him.”

“Shut the door, Dawson! We gotta go!”

Eight minutes later...

“Not only do we have a police escort, but that’s the third intersection we’ve gone through where your buddies are blocking the traffic with their patrol cars.”

“And they’ll be blocking the rest of them all the way to the hospital.”

“What gives? We’ve never gotten that kind of treatment before.”

“He saved ME. That’s what gives. He’s one of ours now.”

“That street goes both ways, you know. I heard you were trying to get him out of there when they found you. You could’ve left him and just saved yourself.”

“Bullshit. He’s my family now and you don’t leave family to fend for themselves.”

Thirteen minutes later...

“You can’t come in here! Someone will be out to let you know what’s going on.”

“Eric! You’re gonna be okay! They’re gonna fix you up real good! You better take good care of him!”

“Get an OR prepped and I want a CT scan and an x-ray of his upper torso. I need to see what we’re dealing with here.”

“The trauma was due to a blast, is that right? No bleeding from the ears, but I want to see his lungs, gastrointestinal tract, and spinal cord. Air-filled organs and fluid filled cavities. The force of the blast would’ve made everything shift. Get someone to check out his friend who came in with him. He was covered in blood. He may have been hit by it too.”

“Don’t take off the oxygen tank yet. It’s holding the rod in place. I don’t want it to shift. Cut his clothes off around the tank.”

Eighteen minutes later...

“Will you look at that. He sure is a lucky son of a bitch. I couldn’t have placed that rod any better.”

“There’s some slight swelling around his brain, but not much.”

“Okay people, let’s get him into surgery. He’s gotta lottery ticket to buy, while his streak is still hot.”

Ten hours later...

“Please God...don’t let him die...”

Huh?

Why would I be dying?

Twelve hours later...

“Don’t let him die...don’t let him die...”

Christ...I hated it when she cried.

Eighteen hours later...

“I love you so much, Eric...SO so much...”

I love you too. Please stop crying.

Twenty-four hours later...

“Please wake up, baby...please wake up...”

I’m awake.

Why couldn’t she tell?

Twenty-six hours later...

“Don’t you die on me, Eric...I mean it....”

Well, at least she wasn’t sobbing anymore.

In fact, she sounded pissed enough to kill me, if I *did* die.

As convoluted as the thought was, I knew Sookie was stubborn enough to figure out a way to do it.

Thirty hours later...

“I can’t live without you, honey...I just can’t...”

God...not with the *sobbing* again.

Thirty-four hours later...

“You can’t leave me...not now...not ever...”

Not even the Jaws of Life could pry me from you now.

But thinking of the Jaws of Life made me wonder...

Was I late for work?

It felt like I should be at work...

Thirty-six hours later...

"It's time to wake up now, Eric..."

I'm awake, Sookie. Just pry my eyelids open and you'll see.

"ERIC...open your eyes..."

I'm trying...

Thirty-eight hours later...

"Shouldn't he be awake by now? It shouldn't be taking this long..."

What shouldn't be taking this long, again?

Come to think of it...where was I?

Thirty-nine hours later...

"Wake up, baby...wake up..."

I'm awake...

Forty-hours later...

"Eric? Can you hear me? Baby, squeeze my hand if you can hear me..."

There.

Maybe?

I thought I'd squeezed her hand, but it sounded like she was sobbing again, so maybe not?

Forty-two hours later...

"He should be awake by now...it shouldn't be taking this long..."

Was she talking to me?

But she'd said *he*, didn't she?

So who else was in the room?

Where were we again?

Forty-eight hours later...

"Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee; blessed art thou amongst women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus. Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death. Amen."

Jesus Christ!

You're PRAYING now?

Something must be *really* wrong.

But I couldn't *really* be dying.

Could I?

Fifty hours later...

"Please, Eric...please..."

Please, doll...just stop crying.

If only my stupid arms would work, then I could hug her.

I'd even settle for my eyelids fluttering open.

Then I could guilt her into turning off the waterworks.

I wasn't above it because I *really* hated it when she cried.

Fifty hours and five minutes later...

"I love you..."

"I love you too..."

"ERIC?" she shouted and in the next moment I felt her hand holding mine in a death grip, when my eyes finally did flutter open.

And seeing her red swollen eyes staring back at me, I wanted to hug her and at the same time hit whoever had made her cry.

And I would.

Just as soon as I recovered from...

Being hit by a semi?

At least, that's what it *felt* like.

"What happened?" I asked, with my voice sounding nothing like my own. It was dry and scratchy, but I forced myself to ask, "Where am I?"

"You're in the hospital," she explained, with her tone a lot softer than before.

But the tears were still leaking from her eyes, so I reached for her face with my free hand to wipe them away and pleaded, "Please stop crying. I hate it when you cry."

"Yeah, well you should've thought about that before getting yourself impaled by a piece of rebar," she huffed, with no real heat in her voice, and then warned, "Don't do it again."

"What?"

My head was swimming and everything felt foggy, but in a way like the fog was lifting instead of descending.

I couldn't decide which one I would prefer more.

I was exhausted, which was stupid since I'd obviously just woken up.

"How long was I out?"

"Two days," she replied, with a hitch in her breath and more tears streaming down her face.

"Two days?" I repeated, while automatically wiping the tears from her face.

Nothing was making any sense.

And not remembering how or why I'd ended up in the hospital for the last two days, I asked again, "What happened?"

"My brother was dropped on his head as a baby," she growled. "*That's* what happened."

Her brother.

Jason Stackhouse.

Sookie's brother.

Images filtered into my head in snippets.

The softball game.

Me lying on top of him.

That image didn't make any sense whatsoever.

There was only *one* Stackhouse I would be on top of.

And underneath.

And behind.

Okay.

Those images weren't exactly helping any either, so I repeated, "What happened?"

"My douchebag brother ran into a burning chemical plant, with nothing more than good intentions, blind stupidity, and a Saint Michael medallion hanging around his neck," she bit out.

A few more images filtered through my head with her words, but they all fell away again hearing someone else say, "I said I was *sorry*."

"You're *sorry*, alright," she snarled, turning to face the voice coming from somewhere behind her.

And by doing so, I was able to see for the first time that we weren't alone.

Not even close.

Because not only was her brother in the room with us, but so were her parents, her Gran, Tray and Amelia, and Jake.

And through the open door, I could make out Hoyt Fortenberry and a group of guys.

Both red and blue.

But it was seeing the entire Stackhouse clan that reminded me of something else.

Reaching blindly for her left hand, I held it up and saw she wasn't wearing her engagement ring.

But before I could freak out, apologize, or beg her to reconsider, Sookie seemingly produced it out of thin air and smiled down at me saying, "I was waiting for you to wake up, so you could put it on for me."

And then her eyes produced even more tears when she added, "For the last time."

“You’re going to dehydrate,” I frowned, wiping the tears away yet again before taking the ring from her fingers and slipping it onto the ring finger of her left hand.

For the last time, apparently.

“Does this mean...?” I asked in a whisper, with my words trailing off as I chanced a peek up at her parents.

But before she could respond, her father walked closer to the bed, with an intimidating stare as he said, “Does this mean that you dropped the ball by not asking *me* for my baby girl’s hand in marriage *first*?”

“Daddy!” Sookie hissed.

My mouth opened, not sure what I could or would say.

But he ignored it *and* Sookie swatting at him, as he went on to answer his own question by emphatically stating, “Yes.”

Sookie’s hand rose up again, like she was about to swat him for a second time. But he reached out without even glancing her way and covered her entire face with his hand.

I couldn’t be sure which one of us snorted.

Her from the suddenly dampened air flow or me from the ridiculous sight of it all.

But it was me.

Definitely me.

I knew it when my chest throbbed from the exertion.

Sookie’s hands went back and forth, trying to dislodge his hand from her face and smacking at his ribs in turn, with unintelligible mutterings coming through her lips.

I was pretty sure I heard the words ‘fuck’ and ‘ass’ though.

And I was pretty sure he heard them too, but he ignored it, with a soft smile forming on his face, while he looked down at me and said, “But I blame *her* for that.”

Then gesturing between Jason and Sookie, he added, “Apparently I raised both a dumb shit *and* a chicken shit.”

“I said I was *sorry!*” Jason chimed in, sounding more incensed than apologetic.

“I’m talkin’ *about* ya not *to* ya, boy,” he admonished, but the smile hadn’t left his face.

Not that Jason could see that.

So it was only more amusing when he winked at me and barked out, “Now make yourself useful and go get me a cup a coffee. You can handle *that*, right? Remember now...where there’s smoke?”

“There’s fire,” he replied sullenly.

“And what are you gonna do if you run across that again?”

“Leave it to the professionals,” he grumbled.

“Looky there,” he smiled wider. “There’s hope for you yet!”

But as soon as Jason left the room, he leaned closer and stage whispered, “There’s no hope for him.”

“There might not be much hope left for Sookie either,” I replied with a small smile. “If she doesn’t get any oxygen soon, she’s going to have brain damage.”

She’d been struggling to remove his hand from her face the entire time he’d been talking, with him intermittently dodging her attempted blows to his lower half.

“Good thing she’s short,” he chuckled, moving his hips out of her reach yet again. “Gives her a shorter reach.”

“I canf *ear* you,” she snarled.

Which I was pretty sure was Sookie speak for 'I can hear you.'

"You *should* fear me," he replied and released his hold on her, by pushing her head back and then leaning down to get in her face to say, "But you're giving natural blonds a bad rap for thinking you should be too afraid to tell your own family about who you were dating. He's a fireman. Not Jeffrey Dahmer."

"Jeffrey Dahmer would *not* have been okay, Sweetheart," Sookie's mother chimed in from the other side of the room. "Family dinners would've just been *too* awkward."

Sookie was making her pissed off face again, but her shoulders dropped in defeat and she rolled her eyes, before looking back at me and smiling as she said, "As you can see, I worried for nothing."

I supposed I *could* have been upset over having to hide our relationship for so long.

And if it weren't for my epiphany that morning in our hotel room on the Paradise Coast, I might have been.

But it had gotten us to where we were now, so I couldn't be upset about any of it.

Sookie had chosen me, with the belief her family would disown her for it.

How could I be upset, when it just so happened that she was wrong about their reaction to the news?

"Normally this is where I would be cleaning my revolver, while asking you what your intentions were with my daughter," her dad said, drawing my attention back to him, as he stared me down.

But all traces of his playful amusement disappeared, with him sounding much more sincere when he said, "But even if she wasn't already wearing a ring on her hand that tells me you're an honorable man, you put your own life at risk to save my son's life."

Reaching down, he took my right hand into his own and held it to form a handshake, while he said, "Thank you. And welcome to the family, son."

“Thanks and you’re welcome?”

And in reply to his questioning expression – I gathered, from my questioning response – I looked back at Sookie and asked, “What did I do?”

I still only had snippets of my memory, so I *really* had no idea of what he was thanking me for.

And I *really* didn’t see what was so funny about my question, but the entire room erupted into laughter that spilled out into the hallway.

But seeing them all – red and blue alike – laughing together at some joke I wasn’t in on, I decided that was okay too.

Because – in this one instance – it looked like karma was *finally* on my side.

10 – So Fine

Staring at Sookie across the crowded room, I simply watched as she tilted her head back and laughed at whatever she’d been told. But when she righted it again, her eyes immediately found mine and the smile she gave me made my heart skip a beat.

Christ, she was beautiful.

I don’t know how long we’d been staring at one another, but our silent conversation was interrupted by the sound of Tray’s voice asking, “How in the fuck did you hide it for so long?”

“Hide what?” I asked and only turned to face him when Sookie’s attention was brought back to the woman she was talking to.

An about to burst Amelia, who was days away from her due date, and no doubt regaling Sookie with Tales of the Terrible Pregnancy.

But I preferred that to hearing about her *mystical powers*, having *sensed* Sookie and I were in a relationship before I'd yelled it out at the ballpark.

And she pointedly ignored the fact she hadn't *sensed* Sookie telling her parents that very thing moments before I attacked Andre at the plate.

In spite of the fact Amelia had been sitting right next to Sookie in the stands.

She blamed the cardboard tray of French fries she'd been in the midst of attacking for *notsensing* Sookie's conversation.

Just like she blamed the not cardboard Tray she was married to for how wide her ass had supposedly gotten.

I hadn't really noticed, but I would say the blame lied squarely with the French fries.

Not that any of us were brave enough to say that to her face.

Run into a burning building?

Sure.

Tell a pregnant woman she was eating Idaho into a potato shortage?

No fucking way.

We were brave.

We weren't stupid.

But glancing back at Sookie and seeing the glint coming from her left hand, my mind filled in the blanks for Tray's question, so I answered him with, "Sookie isn't the type to go searching through my pockets."

If she had been, she would've found that ring a lot sooner than when it was finally revealed underneath a red paper umbrella on top of the sandcastle.

But the memory of that night made me wonder how Hunter was doing.

If I had his address, I would've sent him a picture of her that was taken a few hours earlier.

The one where she'd been walking down the aisle towards me – in her white dress and on her father's arm – on her way to becoming Mrs. Eric Northman.

And I would've personalized it with the caption:

“You're too little *and* too late, Little Man.
Not Sorry, Her Husband.”

Childish?

Yes.

But he was still a child, so it was okay.

Or so I reasoned with myself.

Besides, I was childishly giddy that we'd finally made it.

We were married.

And I didn't even have to dress in drag for the ceremony.

Yep.

It was a good day to be me.

“I don't want to know what Sookie would've been looking for in your pockets,” Tray chuckled, reminding me he was still standing beside me. “The way you two have been all over each other ever since the accident, I'd say you're lucky to have family on the force or else you two would've been arrested for public indecency by now.”

“Yeah,” I grinned.

It was *great*.

I still wouldn't change anything about how we got to where we were, but being 'out' certainly had its privileges.

Touching and kissing Sookie whenever in the hell I wanted to was one of them.

"*That* is what I'm talking about," he laughed and knocked into me to get my attention.

"That goofy fucking look you get on your face every time you even think about her. How in the hell did you hide *that* for so long?"

"I did it for her," I shrugged.

I'd do anything for her.

Sappy but true.

"I get it," he nodded. "Why you did it and why she felt like she had to hide it. But even if Corbett hadn't been your number one fan from the get go I'm sure he would've converted by now. That bar of his is packed every night of the week."

That was no exaggeration.

Ever since the accident six months earlier, when the lines between red and blue had been mixed into a vibrant shade of purple, the guys from our side of the tracks had adopted Corbett's bar as their new hangout.

You could walk in there any night of the week and see both cops and firemen sitting together and laughing with one another.

The quips about each other's professions hadn't ceased – in fact, if anything, they'd only *increased* – but we all had a better sense of humor when it came to one another.

Except for Quinn.

No one on either side liked him.

But everyone on both sides liked my newly minted brother-in-law – and loved to tease him even more – which was why I wasn't surprised to hear Jake animatedly say, "And then Uncle Jase went..."

I should've guessed he would start calling him Uncle Jase now.

Jake had been calling Sookie 'Mommy' since I'd first woken up in the hospital.

Luckily for him, she thought he was funny.

And even luckier for him, I'd been too beat up at the time to get out of bed and beat his ass before we'd all become desensitized to it.

But looking over at him now, Jake made some sort of Kung Fu "Hi yaw" sound and lifted his leg up Karate Kid style, reenacting what I'd eventually remembered about that day inside of Pale Rider.

If I'd known they were never going to let the subject drop, I would've claimed permanent amnesia.

But since I was within striking distance of him, I just reached out and shoved on his right shoulder, making him tip over to his left side, while I shook my head and said, "If he's your uncle now, that means he has a family obligation to beat your ass when you're being one. Are you sure you want to piss him off?"

Jason was one of my best friends now. But even if we hadn't bonded over everything that had happened that day, I suspected we would've gotten there eventually.

To paraphrase Sookie, "The bromance was strong in us."

We hung out so much she'd started teasing that maybe I'd hitched my wagon to the wrong Stackhouse.

But now that I'd legally hitched my wagon to her, she'd have to find something new to tease us about.

I doubted it would take her very long though.

Because we would undoubtedly give her ample ammunition, since Jase and I tended to revert into two twelve year olds whenever we were around each other.

But same sex marriages were legal now, so she couldn't claim she'd won me by default.

Jake just stared back at me before giving me a mock scowl and marching across the reception hall, looking as ridiculous as he sounded when he yelled out at the top of his lungs, "Mommy!"

And Tray and I shook our heads in unison, seeing both Sookie and Amelia turning around, with them trying to figure out which mommy he was calling for.

They both answered to it now when hearing it coming from him.

Walking up to Sookie, I could see him mouth the words, "Daddy's being mean to me."

And then he leaned down and whispered something in her ear, that I couldn't see or hear, that made her laugh.

And made him look back at me and waggle his eyebrows.

"That can't be good," Tray chuckled.

He was right, of course.

Because in the next moment, Jake was leading her out onto the dance floor, and grinned at me the whole way there.

"Now he's gonna get *two* ass beatings," I smirked. "One from me and one from Jason."

"He's gotta fall asleep sometime," Tray smiled. "We'll shave his eyebrows off when he does."

"They took so long to grow back the last time," I laughed. "He's been sleeping with one of those blind fold eye mask things on ever since."

But he hadn't asked Sookie about breastfeeding again, which was how he'd ended up looking like a fucked up Bond villain in the first place.

"You better go cut in on their dance before Jake loses more than his eyebrows," Tray chuckled warningly.

And looking over at them, I could see what he was talking about.

Jake was doing his Patrick Swayze routine, dirty dancing his way to an early grave.

But one of the other perks about no longer having to hide my relationship with Sookie was the sense of calm I had when it came to her and other men.

Men *other than* Quinn or Andre, with the latter of the two proving he was at least smart enough to transfer to another station, while I'd still been off from work for the two months it took for me to recuperate from the accident.

But that didn't mean he was out of the woods if Jason or I ever ran across him again.

Disrespect from douchebags aside, I wouldn't say my jealousy was necessarily a thing of the past, but it took a lot more to get a rise out of me when it came to Sookie now.

Everyone knew we were together.

And – more importantly – *I* knew she loved me like no other.

She loved me enough to give up her family if it came down to it, to be with me.

And now knowing how awesome they all were, I could better appreciate the sacrifice she'd been willing to make.

Besides, in *this* instance, *Jake* knew how far he could go with Sookie before he reached that invisible line of *too* far.

I didn't know exactly where *her* line was, but he was doing his best to creep up on *mine*.

Tray clapped me on the back with a smile, as I put my drink down and headed out onto the dance floor to save my wife from experiencing an entirely different kind of Body by Jake.

He would be experiencing something different too, when I made sure his body would be in traction for the foreseeable future.

Jake hadn't seen me coming, so it had been easy to grab him by the back of his collar and fling him off to the side, while taking her hand with my free one and pulling her back into my arms.

He managed to stumble his way into a group of women all dancing together, so I could only smile when he looked back at us and grinned, giving us two thumbs up.

"He needs help," Sookie snickered.

"I think he just found it," I chuckled in return.

They were all eying him like a piece of meat.

But the only one I cared about wasn't looking at *him*.

Instead she was pressing her hands against my chest, with her right one settled over my heart and her thumb automatically tracing over the scar that now sat to the right of it, as she smiled up at me and said, "Well hello, *Mr. Northman*."

"Hello to you too, *Mrs. Northman*," I smiled in return.

I liked the sound of it a lot more than I would've thought possible.

But then everything that had to do with Sookie made me feel things more than I would've thought possible.

It wasn't fair, really.

Even while wearing her wedding dress and she still somehow managed to wear the pants in our relationship.

Her nose scrunched up right before she softly snickered, "I'm not used to it yet."

"You will be," I smiled and then reminded her, "According to your godfather, we're going to be blessed with *six* sons. Their friends are going to have to call you something."

The look on her face had been priceless when he'd said it, while we'd been making the rounds to all of the tables and greeting the guests after arriving at the reception.

Scared shitless pretty much covered it.

Her father and I hadn't called her chicken shit for nothing.

And she didn't find any humor in the fact I'd laughed along with him, when she glared back at him and ordered, "You take that back!"

We laughed even harder when she made the sign of the horn, holding her middle and ring fingers down with her thumb, with only her index and pinky fingers up, stabbing them into the air and making a "Ptu ptu," sound, trying to ward off his curse.

Then she tossed an entire shaker of salt over her left shoulder for good measure.

"You think you're funny," she playfully glared. "We'll see how funny you find it if that curse comes true and you end up a single parent when I lock myself up in a mental ward."

"You're going to be a great mom," I smiled and leaned down to whisper into her ear, "And think of all the fun it's going to be *making* you one."

At the rate we went at it, she'd be lucky if they were spaced more than nine months apart.

"You seem to forget," she whispered, more from the shiver that was working its way down her spine, than from trying to stay quiet.

The effect I had on her alone only reiterated the idea we would be purchasing a Chevy Suburban in the future.

Once she'd shaken off the chills I'd just given her, she pulled back enough to look up at me and teased, "I've seen the way you and Jason are when you get together. I share his DNA. We should consider adopting instead because history has proven the mixing of the two is going end up with someone getting impaled by rebar."

"I survived it once," I shrugged with a grin. "I can survive it six more times."

Swatting at my chest with her hand, her entire demeanor changed and she glowered, "You're not a damn cat. You don't have nine lives."

I forgot sometimes how shaken the entire ordeal had made her.

Probably because *sometimes* we could joke about what happened.

But *sometimes* we couldn't.

I just hadn't figured out what tipped the scales either way with it yet. Since it had happened to *me*, I dealt with it better and didn't view it as that big of a deal.

Like Jake had said on that fateful day, scars were cool.

And I had an even cooler war story to tell at choir practice these days.

However, if it had happened to *her*, I would no doubt have killed myself in my attempt at locking her away somewhere to protect her from harm.

Sookie would have definitely killed me for even trying.

To paraphrase Patrick Swayze, "Nobody puts Sookie in a cage."

But knowing the scales were tipping towards *not funny* right now, I leaned down and pressed my lips against her forehead to soothe her angry kitten, before trying to lighten

her up by saying, “I’m gonna let you in on a little secret. Cats don’t really have nine lives.”

“I’m gonna let *you* in on a not so little secret,” she said after she’d taken a moment to calm down. “I don’t have six babies in me.”

“Not yet,” I grinned, seeing the sparkle return to her eyes. “But we can get started on them as soon as we get out of here.”

Trying to not smile – and failing at it – she twisted her lips and said, “You know what I mean. We are *not* having six babies. Sons or daughters or even a combination of the two.”

Having only sons would probably work out better for me in the long run.

Six of those, I was pretty sure I could handle.

Just as sure as I was that it would only take *one* daughter to be the death of me.

Staring back at a miniature version of Sookie and I would be toast.

Since karma and I had been getting along so well as of late, I didn’t know whether or not it would remain on my side.

Or turn around, bare its teeth, and then fuck me in the ass again.

“Well, not all at *once*,” I agreed with a knowing smirk. “I think that’s already been done by *someone*, but...their names *escape me* at the moment. *In fact*, I’m not even sure I *ever*knew what their names were *at all*.”

She smiled softly at the reminder of the conversation we’d had the first time we’d met, but her smile grew wider as she tilted her head and sighed indulgently, “Oh Eric...*my bigbullshitter*.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” I grinned, with my bald-faced lie, and then held her in a way that she could feel what I really wanted to distract her with, when I added, “Unless you’re referencing my more *Homeric* qualities.”

My ploy worked because her eyes glazed over and her grip on me tightened before she leaned closer and whispered, “How tacky would it be if we were caught fucking at our *own* wedding?”

“Not tacky at all,” I breathed out in a hoarse whisper. “In fact, I think it’s expected on some level.”

“As long as my family literally has their eyes wide shut,” she panted out. “I think I’m game for some debauchery, Mr. Northman.”

She might want her family to have their eyes wide shut, but mine were wide open, searching the room for a dark corner where I could christen my new wife by consummating our marriage.

We’d said our vows hours earlier.

We’d waited long enough.

And we continued tormenting each other until I was desperate enough to drag her off of the dance floor and into the nearest empty room I could find.

It just so happened to be a broom closet.

But neither one of us seemed to care about the lack of a romantic setting, with her hands diving for the zipper of my pants, while she laughed out, “You’re not the only one with Homeric qualities. I turn into Homer Simpson drooling over a donut whenever you’re around.”

Leaning down, I crashed my mouth into her own and gave her something to do besides laugh, but feeling her hand wrap around my shaft, I was forced to break our kiss when I panted out, “Fuck.”

Sookie had imposed a weeklong ban on fucking prior to the wedding.

And we'd only broken it a few times.

But it had been a few days since we'd last broken it, so I was more than ready to be with her again.

Too ready, even.

I was so ready, I could quite possibly finish before I ever made it inside of her.

So I forced myself to think of something other than how great it felt to have her touching me again and teased, "I don't see any drool, Homer."

Her tongue darted out to lick over her lips and I felt my balls tightening from the look in her eyes, just before she purred out, "Wrong lips, Mr. Northman."

"Fuck..." I breathed out again.

A word we both repeated once my hands managed to make their way through the fabric forest she'd covered herself in and discovered just how wet she was.

I didn't care that we had a mop at our disposal.

We weren't going to need it if I had my way.

"What are you doing?" she asked, when I dropped down onto my knees.

And seeing as how I was on my knees and the skirt of her dress was bunched up in my hands, she had a pretty big clue what I was about to do, so she didn't wait for a reply and said, "We still have a wedding cake to cut, so we don't have time for dessert! This is a fuck and dash! Not a fuck-a-thon!"

Smirking up at her, I said, "To quote Whoever-the-Fuck of Wherever-the-Fuck, *let themeat cake*. I've got something better to eat."

"Eric!" she hissed, when I dove underneath the white tulle forest.

But she hissed out my name for an entirely different reason, as soon as my mouth made contact with her lower set of lips.

I knew she was right, though. There were over two hundred people less than twenty feet away, all waiting for us to shove cake into each other's faces, so I didn't try to tease her orgasm out of her.

I went after it like it owed me money.

Holding her hip with one hand, I used two fingers from the other to thrust inside of her, while my lips sealed over her clit.

With the tongue lashing it got, one would think it *did* owe me money, but it didn't take long before she was tumbling over the edge of bliss once my fingertips found her inner easy button.

She was so blissed, I was lucky to have gotten those two fingers back.

But since this was a sprint, I didn't waste any time and hoisted her up against the wall before I was even fully upright. The skirt of her dress had risen up with me, so all it took was another second for me center myself and slam into her.

"Jesus," she panted out, with a wild look in her eyes and arched her back to give us a better angle, chanting, "Right there...right there...fuck! Don't stop."

"You sure are bossy now that we're married," I teased, but agreed with her wholeheartedly.

The whole building could burn down around us and I wouldn't care enough to stop.

She felt *that* good.

"Fuck!" she whisper shrieked before trying to quiet herself by pulling my head down to hers. But instead of kissing me, she only managed to moan against my lips, "Married sex *isso much better* than engaged sex."

I would have agreed with her if I could.

But I couldn't.

Because I needed all of my concentration to focus on not finishing the race without her.

She felt *that* good.

Since I'd barely given her enough time to even begin to come down from her first orgasm, she was already primed for another one. So all it took was a few more thrusts before she crossed the finish line and took me with her.

"Fuck..." I choked out in a hoarse whisper against her lips, with my entire body tingling.

It took a few more minutes before we both managed to catch our breath and I slowly set her down on her feet, holding her upright until I knew she could stand on her own, while she giggled, "Well, I guess we can cross broom closet off of our fuck-it list."

Grabbing a few paper towels from a stack on the shelf, I used them to clean us both up and smiled as I said, "At least it's fully stocked for our specific needs."

"If that were the case, it would be soundproofed," she giggled. "Do you think anyone heard us?"

Sookie was always giggly when she was cum drunk.

It was pretty adorable, if I do say so myself.

"Who cares?" I smiled. "We're married now."

As soon as we were back to looking as presentable as possible, she wrapped her arms around me and leaned forward. Pressing her chin against my chest, she stared up at me through her lashes, with nothing but adoration in her eyes and a soft smile on her lips, as she simply repeated, "We're married now."

I don't know how she did it.

But she *always* did it.

One look.

One word.

Any look and every word.

There was no rhyme or reason for it – no discernible pattern for me to point at and say ‘*that right there*’ was the cause – and yet she always somehow managed to make me love her even more.

Tray had been right to ask.

I don’t know how in the hell I’d hidden it for so long.

I just thanked god I no longer had to.

So even though I had no reason to hide it anymore, while I still had her all to myself – in a broom closet bubble for two – and before I was forced to share her with everyone else, I took a moment to just enjoy being with her.

And I had absolutely no reason to stop myself from leaning down and kissing her like my life depended on it.

Because at that moment in time?

I would have sworn that it did.

Epilogue – Sweet Child O’ Mine

Thanksgiving Day one year later...

“Jesus Christ!”

Hearing my father-in-law's yell, I glanced over at the TV and saw the Cowboys had just allowed their quarterback to get sacked, pushing them back another five yards.

And then my eyes went right back to watching Sookie like a hawk.

Sitting at the dining room table because "*Cushions hate me now,*" her hands rested on her baby belly, while she talked to her mom and Gran, who were setting the table.

Now twelve days past her due date, I was ready to leap out of my skin at the slightest twitch.

I hadn't been paying attention to anything being said and instead was singularly focused on Sookie's facial expressions and her involuntary reactions. We'd had two false alarms already, so when she'd woken up with mild contractions that morning, she refused to go to the hospital, only to be told it was another false alarm.

Actually, her exact words were, "*We'll go when I'm crowning. Let them send me home then!*"

She'd been moody – to put it mildly – but I could understand her frustration. We'd been waiting to meet little him or her for what felt like forever now, but it was Sookie who bore the brunt of it all.

She couldn't get comfortable.

She couldn't sleep for more than a couple of hours at a time.

She was restless and at the same time too tired to do much more than pace around the house.

But I'd caught her doing jumping jacks, hoping to speed things along, just the night before.

She looked ridiculous.

And I loved her even more.

At her last appointment the day before, the doctor told her if she didn't go in to labor on her own, he was going to induce labor on Saturday morning, so her mood had brightened knowing the end was in sight.

But until then, I refused to let her out of *my* sight.

Her go bag had been packed and sitting in the trunk of the car for a month now.

She'd dubbed it *Wishful Thinking*.

But I knew what the real hold up was.

One – The baby she was carrying was *mine*.

Of course it didn't want to leave her body.

That was how she'd gotten pregnant to begin with.

I never wanted to leave her body either and was inside of it as often as I could be.

But more importantly...

Two – Karma had reared its ugly head was fucking me in the ass again by keeping me on pins and needles, waiting for the baby to be born.

Being a first responder, I knew all of the things that could go wrong. The fact her pregnancy had been completely normal and relatively easy on her, only made me even more afraid that something *would* go wrong during the actual birth.

After all, karma did love fucking with me.

“Aren't you late?”

Glancing over at Jase, sitting on the couch beside me, I saw he was looking at Sookie, so my eyes returned to her in time to see her huff in his direction and say, “*God...did you nothear me bitching about that very thing? I just said I was twelve days late!*”

“I ain’t talkin’ about that,” he glared back at her. “I’m *talkin’* about you bein’ *late* for the parade.”

“What parade?”

Yeah...what parade?

The town always had a parade on Veteran’s Day, but that was a little over two weeks earlier.

Something Jason would know, since the police force was always there.

“The Macy’s Thanksgiving Day parade in New York,” he replied.

And then he sealed his own fate when he added, “God knows you’re *big* enough and blowing enough *hot air* over there to be one a them balloons they fly overhead.”

My eyes closed, not wanting to see the inevitable carnage, and I could feel my head shaking at his stupidity, while I slid further away from him on the couch – I didn’t want to be caught in the crossfire – and mumbled under my breath, “You really *were* dropped on your head as a baby. It was nice knowing you.”

Funny.

I never would’ve guessed I’d saved his life, only for it to be ended by his sister.

But he was on his own now.

C’est la vie.

But if the baby turned out to be a boy – we hadn’t found out the sex of the baby, wanting it to be a surprise – we could always name it Jason in his memory.

If Sookie had forgiven him by then.

But knowing the baby would be here no later than Saturday, I doubted that would be enough time.

She held a grudge like it was the last Chocodile on earth.

The chocolate covered Twinkies had been her pregnancy craving.

A word to the wise?

Don't stand in between a pregnant Sookie Northman and her Chocodiles.

You don't stand a chance.

I heard her sharp inhale, but before she could let loose on him it was my father-in-law who spoke up and said, "Smells like the turkey's done. Do me a favor, boy, and go kick the oven door open and see if it's ready."

"Ha...ha..." Jason glared.

I probably would've felt more sorry for him, if he hadn't brought it on himself.

Both on that day in Pale Rider and less than two minutes earlier by giving his pregnant sister a hard time.

But my eyes shot back to Sookie hearing her say, "Uh..."

And seeing her looking down at the puddle now dripping down from the chair she was sitting in, I quickly realized her sharp inhale had nothing to do with giving her brother a rash of shit.

It had to do with giving her brother a niece or nephew.

By the time she was looking up again, I was already on my feet headed her way, when she stared back at me and fearfully said, "I think the button just popped on our little turkey too. It's ready to come out of the oven."

Cue complete and utter chaos.

Her father channeled his former profession and barked at all of us, fruitlessly trying to direct traffic between the dining room, living room, and the front door.

Her mother ran off to get towels, only to return with enough of them to dry the entire US Olympic swim team – and then some – and proceeded to origami one into a diaper she then used to wrap my wife’s lower half in.

Her Gran used the napkins she’d been setting the table with to clean up the chair Sookie had been sitting in and then followed behind a now beach towel diapered Sookie, on her hands and knees, wiping up the trail of amniotic fluid she was leaving on her way to the door.

But it was Jason who ultimately turned into our savior.

I’d been too busy trying to get Sookie out of the house to react to anything else, so he was the one to step up and step in between us and the rest of them, shouting out, “You all juststop!”

The folded wet towel Michelle had been holding up against Sookie’s ass fell to the floor with a splat, now that Jason was standing in between her and Sookie’s ass.

So Adele – already down there – grabbed onto it and used it wipe up more drips, while Jason barked out, “You all are just going to *stop* and let them get out of the damn house!”

Seeing my golden opportunity, I scooped up Sookie in my arms bridal style and ran out of the door, calling over my shoulder, “Owe ya one, Jase! See you all at the hospital!”

~o~O~o~

“You’re never touching me again!” she screamed with her next contraction, contradicting herself at the same time by gripping my hand even tighter in her fist.

“It’s cute that you think that,” I teased, earning me her *cut-a-boo-boo-bitch* death glare.

But since she’d been in labor for the last eight hours and was in the middle of pushing our baby out of her body, I didn’t think she would actually stop, just to kick my ass.

You never knew though.

Sookie was as stubborn as they came.

So, in my mind, that meant the baby took more after its mother, since it was just as stubborn about being born when it *wanted* to be born.

And anxious to see little him or her myself, I leaned down and pressed my lips against her sweaty forehead, saying, “Now push.”

Twenty minutes later – and after much swearing on Sookie’s part – the doctor lifted our little turkey into the air and said, “It’s a boy!”

Huh.

A boy.

We had a son.

I would’ve sworn on a stack of bibles that having a son would’ve made me feel relieved – more sure footed – than if we’d had a girl.

I’d never been so wrong.

Because seeing his tiny little face turning red, from squawking at the top of his tiny little lungs, I felt the air leave my own and the tears fall down my face, feeling both elated and scared to death about what the future would hold.

What if I did something wrong?

What if I didn’t do anything right?

What if I really did drop him on his head?

So watching them clamping the umbilical cord and then handing me the scissors to cut in between the two, I looked back at Sookie and seriously said, “I think we should put him back.”

Inside of her, he was safe.

Outside of her was where all of the dangers were.

Even now, I was holding a pointy stabby pair of scissors in my hand and I knew exactly the kinds of dangers to be had with pointy stabby things.

What if I inadvertently raised him to be one of those kids who runs with scissors?

He could poke his own eye out.

“He’s not going to poke his own eye out,” Sookie chuckled – along with the doctor and the nurses in the room – making me realize I’d said at least some of my thoughts out loud.

Then sounding serious herself, she added, “But if you even *think* about putting him back, I’m going to poke more than just your eyes out.”

As much as I felt like I should argue my very valid point, I also knew how insane my thoughts were.

There was no going back for him.

Poor little guy got that from his old man.

Once I’d met his mother there had been no going back for me either.

After I cut the cord, they placed him on Sookie’s chest, so I leaned down and kissed her temple, staying there so we could both stare at him and simply said, “Thank you.”

It had been a blanket thank you, encompassing everything – from the day we’d first met to right at this very moment – but not knowing that, Sookie only smiled tiredly and said, “This is where I should be thanking *you* because I wouldn’t have him without your help. But after pushing him out all by myself, I’m totally taking all of the credit.”

“You deserve all of the credit,” I smiled.

I never would've guessed I could love someone so much in an instant, but staring at our son, I knew I was wrong.

"I am *not* doing that five more times," she warned before giving me a small smile and adding, "Just saying..."

I didn't comment, but only because it made sense to see how well we did with this one before thinking about adding another one to the mix.

I still liked the idea of having a big family though.

But I also knew now wasn't the time to bring it up.

"What's your name, little fella?" she asked, running her hand over his down covered head.

We hadn't settled on any one name, but now that I knew he was a *he*, only one name felt right given everything we'd gone through to get to where we were now.

I didn't even give Sookie the chance to say she'd been kidding when she actually agreed to it and headed out to the waiting room to tell the news to the dozen or so family members and friends who had all been there.

"It's a boy," I announced, with a huge smile on my face as soon as I stepped through the door. "Weighing in at eight pounds and fifteen ounces, Axl Northman was born at 8:15 pm."

Labor Day the following year...

Bearing down for the length of her next contraction, when it finally let up, she whipped her head my way and snarled, "You are *never* touching me again!"

"I don't need to," I chuckled. "You obviously can't keep your hands off of me or else we wouldn't be here."

Here in the Labor and Delivery ward, barely ten months after we'd last been there.

“I hate you,” she snarled, trying to twist her barely contained grin into something more intimidating.

“That’s alright,” I smiled back. “I have enough love to go around.”

And there was more than enough *lovin’* going on between us, or else we wouldn’t be there.

Again.

But at least this time I wasn’t so nervous. We got the hang of taking care of AJ pretty quickly, but with a baby, you pretty much had to.

It was sink or swim.

He was a great baby though, sleeping through the night before he was even two months old.

Granted, *the night* only lasted five to six hours now – when before it had lasted from sundown to sun up – but five to six hours of sleep was more than we’d been expecting to get.

And comparing notes with Tray and Amelia we knew we’d won the lottery in babies.

So –in a word – our son was *perfect*.

But the jury was still out on our second one.

We knew we were having another boy, but only because he’d chosen to do a spread eagle pose and show us the full monty the moment the ultrasound wand had been placed on her belly.

He was a Northman, so of course there was no doubt what we were seeing between his legs.

Hopefully the need to show the world what genetics had blessed him with wouldn't last throughout his lifetime.

Or – at least – *my* lifetime.

But at least we still had Jason on the force to keep him from having a long and storied rap sheet.

“I wonder if he's always going to be this literal,” Sookie panted out, with the numbers on the machine measuring her contractions beginning to spike again.

“What do you mean?” I asked, holding her hand and using my free one to push the stray hairs off of her sweaty forehead.

“Bobby insisting on being born on *Labor Day*.”

Where she was nearly two weeks late the last time around, Bobby decided he'd had enough and was coming out two weeks early.

AJ had been the one to name him though.

Still learning all of the sounds he could make, whenever he'd patted on Sookie's growing belly over the last couple of months, we would tell him, “Baby.”

And he would say, “Bub bub bub bub.”

So Bobby it was.

Because there was no way in hell we were naming our kid Bubba.

“Maybe he's just trying to right his brother's wrongs,” I smiled. “AJ was two weeks late, so he's coming two weeks early to even it all out.”

“Whatever!”

She was back to snarling, but now that she was obviously in the middle of another contraction, I didn't take it personally.

How could I be mad when she was giving me everything I'd ever wanted?

A family with her.

Christmas Eve the following year...

“Seriously,” she glared. “If you even *think* about touching me again, I’m going to turn you into a eunuch.”

We were having twins this time around, so I couldn’t blame her for threatening violence.

And we knew we were having boys again.

Her belly had gotten so big so quickly that the doctor had performed an ultrasound earlier than the last two times and that’s when he confirmed there were two of them. And we were told because they shared a placenta they would definitely be identical twins.

Long live the curse.

But still...

As much as she loved my forearms and biceps in limerick form, it was another part of me she loved the most.

And the most often.

So I smirked when I said disbelievingly, “Uh huh. We’ll see about that.”

Because seriously.

She couldn’t keep her hands off of me.

And at her continued glare, I possibly dug my grave even deeper. But my intent was to try and get her to laugh to take her mind off of the fact she was about to push out two more Northmans in a little over two years.

We had a two year old and a one year old.

And now we were about to have two newborns.

I'd gotten a promotion a few months earlier that came with a bigger paycheck and we'd moved into a bigger house, so I knew we could handle it financially. And Sookie had proven time and again that she'd been born to be a mom.

She was great at it.

But having four kids under the age of three was enough to drive anyone insane and since we'd only been *trying* to have the first one, we'd reached the point where it was either laugh or cry.

And I've mentioned how much I hated to see her cry.

So in an effort to keep that from happening, I cocked my eyebrow at her and dramatically swept my hand down the front of my body, while saying, "You know you can't resist the Lushbody."

At least her lady libido couldn't.

But my efforts worked because even though I knew she had another contraction coming up on her, she still managed to laugh out, "Oh my god! The size of your ego affects the tides more than the moon."

Unintentionally proving the validity of the latter half of her statement, I gave her my best sexy eyes and said, "I believe you were saying something to that effect when these two were conceived."

"Oh. My. God," I replied to her challenging expression.

I left out the part where she'd been chanting it over and over again.

But she'd been there.

She'd known what she'd said.

But here and now, having heard what I'd just said, if she could've smacked me, she would have.

Which was why I kept her hand in mine and refused to let go of it.

I was no dummy.

And an hour later I was a daddy again to two little more than six pounds each baby boys.

Corbett and Daniel Northman.

Or – more aptly – CJ and DJ.

Because not only had we decided to stick with the unintentional alphabetized naming of our boys – only the first one had been intentionally conceived anyway – but because we knew they would be the last – I was getting a vasectomy in a few weeks – we also decided we would stick with tradition in picking their middle names.

James, just like their brothers.

As much as I still liked the idea of seeing if the curse could survive long enough to give us six sons, like her godfather had predicted on our wedding day, Sookie wasn't having any part of it.

But she was right.

Four was enough.

Veteran's Day three years later...

“You and your freaky healing abilities!” she yelled. “I can't believe you did this to me again!”

“You weren't complaining about my ability to heal when I got staked by a piece of rebar,” I laughingly reminded her.

When she'd been acting weird seven and a half months earlier, neither one of us had seen the signs.

Probably because neither one of us even thought about the possibility of her becoming pregnant again.

But she was.

And that was how we found out my body had spontaneously healed from when I'd had my vasectomy.

But seeing she wasn't seeing the humor in the situation, I smirked with my shrugged, "Hey, at least it's only one this time."

CJ and DJ would be three in a little over a month, but they showed no signs of giving up on the terrible twos until the very last moment.

And maybe not even then.

We were keeping our fingers crossed though.

AJ and Bobby – we both nixed the idea of calling him BJ for obvious reasons – were the complete opposites of each other personality wise. But you couldn't pry them apart with a crowbar and were close enough that they acted like twins, even though there was a ten month age difference in between them.

AJ had just started kindergarten a couple of months earlier, but he was the good one, so Sookie's load hadn't been lightened with him gone all day.

If anything, without him there to help her keep the others in line, her load had been added onto.

So I did feel a little guilty for putting yet another baby on her already full docket, but it wasn't my fault.

I blamed the curse.

And I knew she did too when we went for the first ultrasound and no sooner had they asked if we wanted to know what the sex was, when we both blurted out, “It’s a boy.”

But at least now the boy had a name.

Edward James.

Long live the Northman tradition.

Father’s Day eight years later...

“Higher Daddy! *Higher!*”

We’d made it for five long years before karma had reared its ugly head again. Sookie had decided to take matters into her own hands by getting her tubes tied not long after EJ had been born.

And yet still, we were each taught the hard way that you couldn’t fight fate, when I still managed to get her pregnant.

All of our friends and family thought it was a riot, but having five boys aged ten through five, that was the sum total of our daily life.

A riot.

As in riot gear was often needed.

Not a riot, as in funny ha-ha.

It turned out my body wasn’t the only one that could spontaneously heal itself, but Sookie just blamed the amount of me that had been in her over the years for infecting her with those same properties.

And she had taken the drastic course of electing to have a partial hysterectomy by having her uterus removed, after the last one was born.

She’d told me it was either a hysterectomy or a hysterical baby mama.

Hysterical as in a psyche ward would be her new home.

Not hysterical as in funny ha-ha.

But having removed 'the oven' no more baby Northmans could be cooked.

Because even she had to finally concede that she couldn't keep her hands off of me.

Of course, ten years later and five boys in, we knew what we were doing by the time the sixth one rolled around.

I could diaper a baby and make a bottle with my eyes closed.

I'd even done it with my eyes closed on many a long night.

When they'd done the ultrasound and we were told that the baby wasn't being cooperative enough for us to find out the sex, we'd just waved the guy off because really...

Long live the curse.

We'd even joked that we should name it Fucked, since that's what we were; that's what we'd done to bring about our sixth kid; and the letter 'F' came after the letter 'E'.

Fucked it was.

We just hadn't decided which F name we would actually be putting on the birth certificate, having run out of juice by that point, in trying to come up with yet another name.

However, I obviously hadn't run out of another kind of juice, which was how she had ended up pregnant again.

They always said that fate was funny thing.

But karma?

Not so much.

Because nothing had prepared me for when the last one had been born. I'd been excited, of course. I loved all of my little terrors and I thought it would be no different with the last one.

Boy was I wrong.

Because it wasn't a boy.

It was a girl.

My blasé been-there-done-that-got-the-stained-t-shirt-to-prove-it façade crumbled the moment I laid my tear filled eyes on her.

My daughter.

And I wasn't the only one who had been gobsmacked by the news.

Even the doctor, who had delivered all of our kids, had sounded shocked when he'd made the announcement.

It was a Christmas miracle.

It just so happened to occur on Friday, June the 13th.

Unlike the rest of the boys, she hadn't been born on a holiday and even though some viewed Friday the 13th as an unlucky day, I knew the exact opposite to be true.

Nobody could look into those baby blue eyes and feel anything but fortunate.

"Higher, Daddy!" she squealed again, soaring through the air on the swing I'd been pushing her on, and taking my heart with her.

The curse might have been broken with her birth, but the intent behind it held true.

I had been truly blessed.

I had five sons – A through E – and one Felicity to prove it.

Felicity James Northman.

Because even though the curse had been broken, some things still held true.

Long live the Northman tradition.

~Fin~

Outtake – Prologue – November Rain

The Chance Encounter

EPOV

One would think the first thing to have caught my eye would have been the two full grown geese and half dozen or so baby geese, wandering around in circles in the middle of the road.

Or maybe it should have been the makeshift ‘traffic cones’ that were in all actuality a pair of red high heeled shoes placed in the middle of each lane.

Then again the open red golf umbrella perched on the double yellow lines on the other side was pretty eye catching too.

But apparently not eye catching enough because it wasn’t that or any of the others that had caught my eye *first*.

Instead it was the most perfect ass I’d ever seen.

I wanted to marry it.

Among a variety of other – less wholesome things – I wanted to do to it.

But *it* was *all* I could see since its owner was doing some sort of weird yoga position on the side of the road that looked as though it involved folding in on yourself and causing complete strangers to idly muse about loving, honoring, and cherishing your ass for as long as you both shall live.

I was oddly fine with that.

Her ass was *that* great.

The fireman in me wondered for a moment if there really was something wrong with her, that made her ball up like that, while the pervert in me wondered if all she needed was a stiffened part of *me* to help straighten her out.

Either way, I was more than willing to help her out.

There wasn't any other traffic on the road, but I parked my car diagonally across both lanes, just in case anyone came along, and turned my hazard lights on before getting out of my car.

And that was when I figured out three things in quick succession.

One – Nothing appeared to be wrong with her in a medical emergency kind of way.

Two – I would likely never know the joys to be had by holding onto her ass while I fucked her from behind, because:

Three – Karma had just fucked *me* in my own not so perfectly formed ass.

Because it was only then, when I could see the face of who owned the most perfect ass I'd ever seen, that I realized who she was.

Jason Stackhouse's sister.

Her name was a mystery to me, but her lineage wasn't. A descendant of a long line of men in blue, she was as blue as I knew my balls were going to be when I would eventually have to walk away from her.

But seeing her trying to reach for something in the storm drain had me walking towards her instead, while I called out, “Is everything okay?”

SPOV

I’d vaguely registered the sounds of another car coming to a stop, but I didn’t look up because I was *so close* to reaching it.

If only my arms were just a *wee bit* longer.

My arms, which were now covered in muck and god knows what else, making me not only late for my blind date, but disgustingly dirty to boot.

At least I *hoped* that brown sludge was *just* dirt.

But the fact I was okay with being late and possibly shit covered to boot said a lot about how excited I was to be going on this blind date.

I already had a bad feeling it was going to be a shitty night anyway, so why not get a head start while I was at it and cover myself in it?

But looking over at the sound of a man’s voice, I sat up on my knees and did a quick head count of the other baby geese before looking over at the owner of said voice.

Ay Papi...

Come to mama...

I recognized the poppy immediately of course. Even if he hadn’t still been wearing half of his uniform – with the yellow stripes circling the hem of his pants, and the suspenders dangling from his sides – being nearly as tall as one of the ladders on the fire truck I’d seen him driving on occasion, it was impossible to *not* recognize him.

It was also impossible to not spring a leak seeing him up close for the first time.

So it was a good thing geese could swim.

I was about to flood the road with my lady lake.

“What are you doing?” he asked, trying to peer down into the storm drain as he got closer. “Did you drop something?”

Do my panties count?

How about my inhibitions?

Because all I wanted to do now was to stop, drop, and roll all over him.

Naked.

I didn't know what his name was, nor did I have any way of knowing whether or not he knew I was a Stackhouse. Not for nothing, but our family was well known in our town for being a part of the police department.

For all intents and purposes, I was staring back at our arch enemy.

Daddy had even not-so-jokingly joked that he'd rather the bar burn to the ground than call the fire department.

And up until that very moment, I had agreed with his illogical logic.

Now I wanted nothing more than to get a good look at his hose and find out firsthand if he knew how to wield it.

Or if I could swallow it.

I was suddenly feeling mighty parched.

But rather than embarrass myself by throwing myself at him – and having my brother show up to arrest me for sexual assault – I stood up and looked up – *and up* – at him and gauged his sense of humor by teasing, “I was in the middle of a lightening round of Duck Duck Goose when this one decided to make a run for it, but I refuse to be bested by a gosling.”

EPOV

Beautiful *and* a sense of humor?

God really did hate me.

It would be blaringly obvious to her I was the mortal enemy, since I hadn't bothered changing at the end of my shift, with me just wanting to get out of there. I'd had a particularly difficult twenty-four hours and had been driving around aimlessly, trying to clear my head before I went home.

Now I just wanted to know if I could convince *her* to go home *with* me.

My other head was suddenly in need of clearing too.

But I wasn't a complete dick, even if the ultimate prize would be getting my dick completely inside of her at some point in the future, so I walked over and dropped down on my knees in front of her to get a better look.

At her legs.

And then the baby goose.

Like I said, I wasn't a *complete* dick.

The grate of the storm drain was bolted in place, so I couldn't pull it off. But looking around, I spotted a long stick nearby and was about to grab it, when I heard her say warningly, "*Kate...*"

"Kate?" I asked, trying to see passed her – a feat, considering I couldn't seem to tear my eyes away from her ass again – only to see she was the only thing standing in between me and a rather intimidating mother goose.

Who knew they could look so mean when they weren't wearing a bonnet and reading nursery rhymes?

But rather than admit I was intimidated by Scrooge's Christmas dinner, I chuckled, "How long has this game of Duck Duck Goose been going on that you've had the time to name them?"

Holding her arms out at her sides, she made some sort of weird flapping motion and giggled, "I didn't name them. TLC did. Jon and Kate plus eight, if you count Runaway Ryan trying to flush itself down the drain."

"Ryan?" I asked, not knowing if one of their eight kids had the same name.

Or even if the baby goose was a male.

How in the fuck could you tell the difference?

"Gosling," she laughed again, still facing the mother goose and moving her arms as though she was trying to balance on a high wire. "He's really gone downhill since *The Notebook*. Literally."

I couldn't decide whether I wanted to laugh or be jealous that she'd once – and maybe *still* – considered another man to be 'uphill', which was just as ridiculous as my reply when I heard myself say, "Their last name was Gosselin."

Turning to face me with wide amused eyes, her tone was that of a schoolyard taunt when she said, "I can't believe you know that."

"And I'll deny it to my dying day if you tell anyone I know that," I smiled in return. Feeling my cheeks heat up, I quickly deflected with, "Are you doing some sort of chicken dance mating ritual?"

"Well, *you're* the *chicken*, when it comes to the branches of civil service, so you tell me," she playfully taunted. "Do I make you feel like mating?"

"Do you really want me to answer that?" I heard myself say.

Or maybe it had been my dick that had answered her.

It was hard to tell – in more ways than one – when we had both been thinking the same thing.

SPOV

Yes?

No?

God...when did it get so hot out here?

And when in the hell did I turn into such a hussy?

Seeing him take a moment to wipe the sweat from his brow with his forearm was enough to remind me when.

Those forearms could make a nun renounce her vows.

And I hadn't been to church since I couldn't remember when, so I was barely a catholic anymore.

I didn't stand a chance.

But I didn't have a chance to answer either way, unless my shriek counted right before I answered his arched eyebrow with a yelped out, "I just got goosed by a goose!"

"Lucky goose," I thought I heard him mumble at the same time I turned to face Mother McGoose-my-caboose and admonish, "*Bad Kate. Bad!*"

She honked in reply and spread her wings out, charging at me and making me yelp again, as I jumped backwards and grabbed onto my umbrella.

Using it like a shield, I moved closer to my future baby daddy and crouched down beside him giggling, "I'll protect you, Chicken. She's pissed they cancelled her show."

"My heroine," he smirked and added, "But if she manages to take us out, do you think they'll suspect *fowl* play?"

That was so not fair...

Because, seriously?

How much was a girl expected to resist?

All I wanted to do was hug him and squeeze him and fuck him until death do we part.

Was that asking too much?

But rather than admitting I was two seconds away from rom-com-cumming all over him, I only grinned and said, “Hopefully. It would serve her right – and probably a dinner party of eight – if her goose gets cooked.”

His throaty chuckle tickled its way across my ovaries and down my hatch, making me do a quick check to make sure I wasn't squatting over the pile of eggs I was keeping warm just for him.

He was gonna make pretty babies.

And if I had my way, we were going to have a whole gaggle of them.

EPOV

Not only was her ass perfect, but she – as a whole – was fucking gorgeous.

I would bet my life she could only look better if I was in the middle of fucking her.

And I probably would be gambling with my life if I'd given in to my urge to kiss her right then. With the way she was crouched down beside me, the umbrella made it seem like we were in our own little bubble.

But our bubble was popped before I could do anything, when a tiny sound of protest rang out from the grate beneath us.

Little bastard.

“No wonder they cancelled your show,” I groused, looking down at the ugly little shit staring up at me.

So I wasn't watching and only heard the distinct sound of something hitting the umbrella, just as she tumbled into me and the honking protests started reverberating all around us.

“You'd think she'd have more patience, being a mother to so many,” she giggled, while trying to right herself at the same time and using the umbrella to hold back the goose, before she added, “But I'm losing mine, so do you think you can reach it?”

Right.

This was a rescue.

Not a Nicholas Sparks movie.

Not that I would admit to knowing what those were.

On purpose.

Taking hold of the stick, before I ended up blurting out movie titles that starred Hugh Grant or Julia Roberts – or both – I laid down on top of the grate – grateful I hadn't bothered to change at the end of my shift – and used it to coax the little shit up towards the side of the drain where I could reach it.

I had just managed to get my hand around it when she said out of the blue, “I don't suppose you're running incredibly late for a blind date, are you?”

“What?” I asked and then answered, “No, why?”

And then I heard another tiny sound of protest – coming either from my throat or the bird in my grip – when I heard her sigh out, “Oh, so I guess that's just me.”

Loosening my grip on the bird before I inadvertently squeezed it to death, I pulled it out of the grate and shoved it under the umbrella towards its mother, before looking back at the girl who'd just flushed my dreams down the drain and said, "Oh. A date, huh?"

"A blind date," she nodded, looking a little put out. "Blind, as in I've never met him before. Not blind, as in Stevie Wonder. But I do have a soft spot for singers, so..."

Her words trailed off, but it didn't matter since I'd stopped listening and was already imagining her willing to put out for her blind date if he could sing.

And I could admit it was completely insane to feel like I'd just been kicked in the blue balls.

She was *My Cherie Amour*.

Only she *wasn't*.

"So what does he do for a living?" I heard myself ask.

Like it was any of my business, whether or not he was in the music business.

"I don't know," she shrugged. "He's the son of a friend of my Gran's, so I only agreed to go out with him to get her off of my back."

"Oh."

Now really wasn't the time to be imagining getting her on her back – underneath me – so I forced my face into a neutral expression and peered around the side of the umbrella saying, "It looks like the Gosselin family is heading off in search of a new network, so I think the coast is clear."

Slowly closing the umbrella, like she was afraid Freddy Krueger would jump out at her any second, when she saw them all waddling away, she turned back to me and smiled, "I do love a happy ending."

I'd love one too.

However, *she* had a blind date to get to, so that wasn't in the cards for me tonight.

But remembering who she was – a blue blood through and through – helped to ease some of the sting, knowing I could never really be with her anyway.

I didn't care about that one way or the other, but knowing of her family – and having dealt with her brother on several occasions – I doubted any of them would be happy about it.

So I stood up and was about to hold out the lesser of my dirty hands towards her to pull her to her feet, but she'd already stood up when I did.

It was probably for the best.

If I touched her, all bets would be off.

Other than the one where I was gambling with my life.

That bet would be *so* on.

Everything suddenly felt a little awkward now that the geese were gone – which was weird in and of itself – so I just nodded when she said, “Well...thanks for all of your help. I don't know how long it would've taken me to reach the little fella. I'm pretty sure I stopped growing when I was in my early teens, so my arms weren't going to get any longer.”

“Glad I could help,” I smiled softly in return. But catching the flash of red in my peripheral reminded me she had somewhere to be, so I pointed at her shoes still moonlighting as traffic cones and added, “You should probably get going if you're already *incredibly late*.”

Her lips pursed to one side, which only made me want to kiss them happy again, so before I could make that epic mistake, I started heading back towards my car, only to stop and turn around, when she called out, “Hey! I never got your name.”

I'd give her more than that.

And that.

Although Jason Stackhouse's Sister Northman was a bit of a mouthful.

"Eric," I called back. "Eric Northman."

"Well it was nice to meet you Eric Eric Northman," she smiled. "And thanks again for your help."

I was waylaid watching her bend over to retrieve her shoes – that ass would be the death of me, I was *sure* of it – but when she slipped them on and began walking away, I called out, "Hey! I never got *your* name."

She was clearly pleased when she reached the corner and turned back around, looking back at me with an amused – if not challenging – expression when she called back, "Sookie. It rhymes with *cookie*."

Then she disappeared around the corner, leaving me with a sudden sweet tooth.

And cookies weren't the only thing I was craving.

The Broken Heel

SPOV

Stupid, stupid, STUPID!

Stupid for not just canceling the blind date.

Stupid for agreeing to go on it in the first place.

And *epically stupid* for bringing up the fact I was late for a blind date to my future baby daddy.

We could be fertilizing our future goslings right now, if I'd just kept my trap shut and my legs open.

But *nooo...*

Instead I'd been sitting at a table for the last hour, with the most boring man in the history of boring men, while my mind was still in the gutter.

And on the man who'd been in there with me.

Eric Eric Northman.

No wonder he was a fireman.

He'd probably spent his lifetime putting himself out.

He was *that* hot.

"So," Boring Bill began, in his newest attempt at boring me to death. "Do you have any other aspirations above working at your family's tavern?"

"Higher aspirations?" I questioned.

Did having my kitty getting stuck up on top of Eric Eric Northman's tree trunk count?

But I couldn't help taking offense – nor did I try to hide that fact.

I was sure my expression looked like he'd just dropped trou and left a steaming pile of shit all over my future livelihood.

Ass face.

"Yes," he nodded. "Surely you don't plan to spend the rest of your life as a waitress or bartending, unless of course you're just biding your time until you get married."

"Excuse me?" I asked, wishing I hadn't left my umbrella in the holder by the door.

If I didn't use it to shield myself from the shit spewing out of the asshole underneath his nose, I could always use it to beat him to death.

“I meant no offense,” he offered, with his hands held up and quickly backtracked by saying, “It’s noble to work in your family’s business.”

“Uh huh,” I glared. “*Noble...like not* throwing my drink in your face?”

If my glass wasn’t empty – my figurative one hadn’t even been half full before this date had even begun – he would see just how noble I’m *not*. I’d ditch him here and now if it weren’t for the fact his mother and my Gran were church buddies.

She would be mortified to hear I’d shown my ass on a date she had set up.

And then she’d take a switch to mine.

But since he seemed to be stuck in the land of The Cleavers, I stood up – thereby taking my beaver with me – and meant to offend him when I said, “If you’ll excuse me, I need to go take a leak.”

I’d known my night would be shitty, but I never thought I’d be stuck on a dysentery date.

So it was only appropriate for the shit to pile on when I stomped away and the heel of my shoe gave way, sending me toppling into the guy sitting at the end of the bar.

EPOV

I knew karma was just having a grand old time fucking me in the ass, when I walked into the bar and grill around the corner from my place and saw my sweet tooth sitting at a table in the far corner of the room.

Of all the gin joints, in all the towns, in all the world, she walks into mine...

She didn’t appear to notice me – or to be having a good time – so I couldn’t decide if it was a good thing or a bad thing.

Not noticing me and/or not having a good time.

And then I decided it was both, depending on how I wanted to look at it.

But I'd been making a herculean effort to *not* look over at her once I sat down at the end of the bar, which was how she managed to blind side me.

Literally.

I'd barely registered the squeaked out, "Shit!" right before she fell against the back of my left shoulder, with that same arm automatically reaching out to grab onto her.

But it decided all on its own to pull her onto my lap.

"We have to stop meeting up like this," she giggled and then winced when she tried to stand up.

Not that my arm was having any of *that* nonsense, so I pulled her back against me and teased, "I disagree. But if this is you falling for me, then my only complaint is I don't want you hurting yourself in the process."

"Sometimes a little pain goes a long way to adding to the experience," she smiled.

My dick agreed.

It was in pain and happy about it.

But glancing back towards the real – and just as irrational – pain in my ass, I sized up her date and asked, "How's it going with Stevie Wonder?"

"He's blind to the fact we've entered the 21st century and is acting more like a wannabe Ward Cleaver. But he can just leave my beaver alone," she growled.

It was adorable.

And only turned me into even more of a smitten kitten.

"Finally," I smirked. "Something we *can* agree on."

And I had no issue with cleaving the hands from his body if he even attempted to touch her beaver.

SPOV

Using his hand to run down the length of my leg, he said in a low voice, “Let me see.”

My beaver?

What?

Here?

While I tried to figure out if I was enough of a hussy to comply – and another part of me calculated the low light to lower lips visibility ratio – I found out I truly was a hussy when I was disappointed to find out he’d been talking about my ankle.

And I knew he mistook my noise of disapproval to mean something else when he added, “Did you twist it?”

Does my twisted sense of propriety count?

“Does it hurt?”

I wouldn’t call the throbbing in my lower half *painful*, but I was in pain just the same.

“Can you bend it?”

Like Beckham.

He would be amazed at how well I could handle his balls.

And I would definitely agree to be his beck and call girl.

Huh.

I guess that really did make me a hussy.

At least I *would be* for *him*.

“Sookie?”

“Sookeh?”

My beaver, which had been sitting up like a meerkat hearing a whistle when Eric Eric Northman had said my name, immediately dove for cover hearing the mangled version coming from Boring Bill.

Unable to not turn around – because I was a natural blond and stereotypically it would *beme* to go looking in the basement of a haunted house on Halloween night to find the cause of the noise that turned out to be Michael Myers – I confirmed I’d somehow managed to straddle the line where wet dreams and nightmares came true, when I saw Boring Bill cautiously approaching as he asked, “Is this cad bothering you?”

“Cad?” the unicorn I was sitting on snorted.

He had to be.

Only something so pretty could be one.

And I was even more convinced, since I was pretty sure I was sitting on top of his horn.

Now, if only I could figure out a way to ride him.

Yee haw!

Leaning closer at my side, I could smell the aftershave he was wearing and from the torrential downpour it caused down below, a rainbow shot out of my pot of gold, when he whispered, “I think you overshot saying he was from the 1950’s. *1850’s...maybe...*”

Maybe I could cum just from the sound of his voice.

God knows I was close to finding out.

EPOV

“Are you cold?” I asked her, pointedly ignoring her date, when I felt her shivering in my arms.

The air conditioning was on, but it wasn't ice cold in the bar.

"Nope," she replied, even as I watched the goosebumps rising up on her flesh.

But then I figured she might not have been answering me when she added, "I'm fine Bill. Eric and I are old friends. I just ran into him when the heel broke off of my shoe."

Old friends?

I guess for a moth that only lived for two days, a *two hour* friendship would be considered *old*.

God knows I was attracted to her flame.

And her ass.

I'd been mapping it with my thighs from the moment I'd pulled her onto my lap.

So maybe I really was a cad.

If only I was a CAD.

Because if I had the ability I would make a computer aided design 3D image of it to save for all eternity.

Future generations should know just how great her ass is.

Was.

Christ...when did it get so hot in here?

"Oh," Dockers Dickface uttered, with his eyes moving down to see her broken shoe lying on the floor. And then he grimaced when he said, "I didn't realize the floor was so dirty."

If he could've read my mind he would know what dirty *really* was.

But not being a mind reader myself, I glanced down to see what in the hell he was dickfacing about, and not seeing anything on the floor, I realized he must have been talking about the bottom of Sookie's foot.

Still dirty from when she'd been playing Duck Duck Goose.

I suddenly felt more conceited than I had any right to, knowing something about her *that*he didn't.

How her feet came to be dirty.

And I felt something other than conceited, thinking of her as *my dirty girl*.

But she wasn't *my girl*.

She wasn't even *my date*.

She was *his* date.

And she was Jason Stackhouse's sister.

So it was that final thought that made me finally release her from my lap and set her back down on her feet.

SPOV

What?

What...what's happening?

Why was he putting me back on my feet?

My unicorn ride wasn't over!

Did you hear me yell Yee Haw?

Then standing up himself, he kneeled down on bended knee in front of me.

So help me God, I almost shouted *YES!*

In that moment I would have agreed to anything he asked of me.

I wanted the whole kit and caboodle.

And my tongue wanted to doodle its way all over his body.

But instead of asking for my hand in marriage – I would've settled for giving him a hand in getting undressed or even a hand-job – he gently took my ankle in his hand and lifted it up before sliding my broken heeled shoe back onto it.

Then smirking up at me, he took my other ankle in his hand and said, "Give me your other shoe, Pisa."

You wanna Pisa this?

God knows I was willing to give him a hell of a lot more than just a piece of my ass.

He could have the whole damn thing.

But instead of saying that, I did as he asked – because who could say no to a unicorn? – and watched as he slid my other shoe off.

And then broke out those nun renouncing forearms of his when he broke the heel off of that one too.

God help me...

Slipping it back onto my foot, I felt like Slutarella, but Walt Disney was a lying mother fucker because my Prince Charming stood up and then retook his seat on the bar stool, saying, "There. You're a little shorter than when you first walked in here, but at least you can walk now."

I was shorter because I lost all sense of decency the moment I laid eyes on him.

But since his eyes had gone back to the beer in front of him, I had no choice but to retreat with a mumbled out, “Thanks.”

For nothing.

I’d been wanting a whole lotta *something*.

Because I’d felt a whole lotta something going on in the depths of his jeans.

And instead of sticking a whole lotta something in me, he turned and twisted Michael Myer’s butcher knife to kill what was left of my wet dreams, by saying, “Enjoy the rest of your date.”

Fuck.

I’d forgotten about Boring Bill.

Who was still standing there.

Useless.

It was useless to want something I obviously couldn’t have.

Unicorns were hard to come by for a reason.

Cumming *with* one was just a silly fantasy.

But it was just as useless to continue on with my charade of a date.

Bill wasn’t a unicorn.

Hell, he sounded more like Foghorn Leghorn.

So it wasn’t very long before I Porky Pigged my way out of there and called an end to my horrible night, with a, “That’s all folks!”

As soon as I stepped outside, the forecasted rain made its appearance, falling in buckets from the sky. It was why I'd brought along my umbrella, but instead of letting the gloom get to me, I decided to let it cleanse my shitty night away.

So I kicked off my ruined shoes and decided my feet would be the first part I would get clean.

But knowing it would take a hell of a lot more to cleanse Eric Eric Northman from my mind, I pulled out the big guns.

Gene Kelly style.

The Red Umbrella

EPOV

I forced myself to not turn around to see how their date was going and just focused on finishing my beer. I'd planned on grabbing a bite to eat while I was there, but I managed to lose my appetite.

It was easily done, when what I really wanted to sink my teeth – as well as other parts of me – into wasn't something I could have.

I felt like a diabetic in Willy Wonka's Chocolate Factory after my sweet tooth walked away.

But I wasn't the owner of a golden ticket.

Or a pair of pleated Dockers.

Dickface.

So I kept reminding myself she was a Stackhouse. As much as I was willing to cross a whole host of lines with her, having seen for myself her brother's distaste for my kind, I was sure it wouldn't be pretty if I tried to make any moves on his sister.

I couldn't date her.

I couldn't *anything* her.

And while she seemed perfectly friendly towards me, her teasing taunts about my chicken civil service job told me she was well aware of the rivalry between our two sides too.

I didn't think I was imagining the chemistry between us and sure, she'd flirted with me, but that didn't mean anything.

Maybe she was just a natural born flirt.

I wanted to know if she was a natural born blond too.

But thinking with my dick would get me arrested.

By her brother.

But ultimately, it didn't matter.

Because no matter what my intentions were – I was too mixed up to even know what they were or would turn out to be – what I *did* know was that *ultimately* it would never work out.

I highly doubted I would ever be welcomed over by her family for Thanksgiving Dinner.

Or even a Christmas goose.

But I was also quickly coming to learn I didn't have much willpower when it came to her, so it was only a few minutes later, when I found myself turning around to see her.

I could *look* as long as I didn't *touch*, right?

Again, that is.

Both looking and touching.

But instead of finding her where I expected her to be, I only found an empty table.

They were gone.

Together.

Ugh.

As irrational as it was, thoughts of them heading out somewhere to dance cheek to cheek – or worse – in between the sheets made me decide to call it a night.

Throwing some money down on the bar to cover the one beer I'd ordered and didn't even manage to finish, I stormed outside only to find the thunderstorm – the one I only now recalled being in the forecast – had made its appearance.

Figures.

Fucking karma.

I'd walked to the bar, not knowing how many beers I would be having that night, so I wouldn't be tempted to drive home.

Hunching forward, I was already soaked through by the time I reached the corner and was just about to turn my trot into a full-fledged jog, when I saw it.

The red umbrella.

And then I saw her.

All alone.

No Dickface in Dockers in sight.

But instead of holding the umbrella overhead to keep the rain off of her, she was twirling it off to the side, while she swung herself around the pole holding up the street sign.

And...

Was she singing?

SPOV

My singing in the rain was interrupted by a chuckle out, “What are you doing?”

I know my mouth was still hanging open because I’d just reached the, “*Raaaiinnn...*” part of the chorus, but seeing the unicorn standing there, I figured my night couldn’t get any worse.

Until I realized I looked like a drowned rat right about now.

And I *know* I sounded like a drowning cat when I sung.

When Gran had brought up the blind date she was looking to arrange on my behalf, she’d caught me on a day when my defenses were down and my glass had been half full. And besides that, it wasn’t just her pecan pie recipe that made her a ringer at every bake sale.

She could sell a glass of water to a drowning man.

So the night’s festivities had been sold to me as some decent food and light petting.

Alright.

So I my half full glass and my longtime empty naughty parts may have added on that last part, but the closer the day came, the more I started to dread it.

Probably because Gran had oversold herself.

She should’ve quit while she’d been ahead, instead of going on and on about what a nice man he was.

I didn’t want nice.

I wanted naughty.

But Eric Eric Northman had already made it perfectly clear that while he was willing to get in the literal gutter with me, he wasn't interested in letting me take a ride on his naughty parts.

So I decided I had nothing to lose and let him see the full tilt crazy he'd managed to avoid, when I just shrugged and continued on, singing out, "*I'm SIIINGING in the rain...I'm siiinging in the RAIN...*"

But when I finished my spin around the 8th and Main pole, I ended up slamming right into the front of his body, with his hands wrapping around my waist, so the next line came out as a breathy whisper.

Even so, it was all too true.

"What a glorious feeling..."

Yep.

That's all she wrote.

I couldn't think of anything else but what a glorious feeling it was to be pressed against him.

"Where's your date?" he asked, holding me tighter in his arms.

If those forearms would be the death of me, then his biceps would be my resurrection.

God knows my entire body felt like it was coming alive.

Or maybe I was just cumming?

I couldn't really be sure.

I didn't really care.

But he'd asked me a question.

Right?

One I couldn't really recall the answer to at the moment, so I heard myself say, "What date?"

EPOV

I don't know what in the hell it was about her that had me so captivated, but watching her singing and dancing in the rain – wild and carefree – like she didn't have a care in the world, it only made me want her more.

And Dickface was obviously a Dumbass to boot for letting her leave all by herself in the middle of a torrential downpour.

But hearing her casually dismissing his entire existence, it was all I needed to hear for me to lose all sense – and all sense of control – when I found myself leaning down and kissing her.

If she meant to slap me, she missed because her fingers got tangled up in the wet hair at the back of my head and held me tighter, while she used her bare feet to easily scale the wet denim covering my legs before wrapping her legs around my waist.

And then I remembered how well she could do yoga.

It made me wonder what other positions I could bend her into.

And I only realized she was still holding the umbrella in her other hand when the rain disappeared over our heads.

Or maybe the gray skies had cleared up.

If I didn't have my tongue down her throat, I was sure I would be wearing my happy face.

But remembering where we were – who *she* was juxtaposed against who *I* was – made me break our kiss long enough to ask, "Wha...what are we doing?"

I had been the one – for all intents and purposes – who had pounced on *her*.

So it would be *my face* on the mugshot and *my name* on the Sex Offenders Registry, if this all went south.

“What I’ve wanted to do since the moment I laid eyes on you,” she replied, with heated eyes before crashing her lips back against mine.

Well...

As long as we had *that* cleared up.

Having already gotten a glimpse of her ability to work a pole, it wasn’t all that surprising to feel her working my body in the same way.

Only now she’d switched things up, grinding against me instead of twirling.

It was giving me ideas.

Ideas that would end up with me being a registered sex offender and I heard myself repeat, “What are we doing?”

“If you don’t know,” she growled. “I’m doing it wrong.”

And with that, her hand not holding the umbrella slid down my body to cup my raging hard-on over my jeans, stroking against it as she said, “It’s called foreplay and it ends with you inside of me. So you can either take me home and we can finish there or you can put me down and we’ll finish right here.”

Well...

Now that *that* was cleared up...

Since the sidewalk didn’t look all that inviting, I stared back at her and asked in a hoarse voice, “Where do you live?”

Leaning away from me, she looked adorably confused and looked around for a moment before she dropped the umbrella from her hand, so she could point in opposite directions, saying, “That way?”

“Right,” I grinned and brought her body back to being flush against mine. “My place it is.”

How in the hell we managed to make it there, I’ll never know, since we hadn’t come up for air the entire way. But eventually her back made it to my front door, with me holding her there with my body, while I fished my keys out and unlocked it.

Kicking it shut once we were inside, I didn’t waste any time and carried her back to my bedroom, intentionally falling with her when I laid her down on the mattress.

My lips refused to leave hers, so it had been unavoidable.

That being the case, it made it really difficult to undress her.

Not that that was going to stop me.

I was a fireman.

A trained professional in the art of facing difficult and even dangerous situations.

But pulling away long enough to rid her of the flirty little sundress that had been taunting me for hours and laying eyes on her mostly naked body for the first time, I realized the real dangers I was now facing.

One – I was going to want more than one night with her.

Which led me to danger number two and came out in a strained, “Your brother is going to kill me.”

SPOV

Well, I guess that answered the question as to whether or not he knew I was a Stackhouse.

And he was also right.

Jason *would* kill him – *and* me – if he found out I was fucking the enemy, but I sure as hell wasn't about to stop now and said, "I'll just claim the SODDI defense."

"What?" he asked, looking both confused and turned on.

But everything about him turned me on, so I went to work on getting rid of those pesky clothes covering my prize, while I replied, "Some other dude did it."

It was a very popular defense, according to all of the guys laughing about it at the bar.

"Bullshit," he hotly declared.

And he looked *smokin' hot*, when he leered back at me and said, "I'm the *only* dude *doingit* to you."

Did I mention he was hot?

Sooo hot...

So it was my baby maker doing all of the talking for me when I replied, "More doing. Less talking."

He took direction very well.

Very well because the next thing I knew he was all over me.

Hands. Lips. Teeth. Tongue.

I became well acquainted with all of them.

Christ...I didn't even know his middle name and yet I knew he was packing a bazooka.

It made me want to blow him until he popped.

So maybe his middle name was Joseph?

As in *Bazooka Joe*?

And wanting to find out if he was bubblegum flavored, I put some of the wrestling moves I'd perfected over the years – my brother would be furious if he knew what his training was doing for me now – to good use and flipped him over.

His shirt was long gone, but his jeans – while opened – were still clinging to his body, so I ripped them off like a wrapper from a Twinkie and went to work, trying to work out his creamy filling.

“*Fuck...*” he bit out in a strangled gasp, with his hands going to the back of my head, but letting me set the pace.

I may have been sucking his dick less than three hours after I met him, but he was nothing if not a gentleman.

Even if I was in no way acting like a lady.

What with all of the dick in my mouth.

But even with all of the dick in my mouth, there was no way I could get *all* of his dick in my mouth.

Not without practice.

It only gave me more incentive to want this – whatever we were doing – to happen more than once.

Practice made perfect.

Just like him.

Perfect.

One of his hands disappeared from my head and I heard some sort of banging going on from somewhere beside us. But it wasn't until I heard the distinct sound of a foil wrapper being crushed in his grip that I realized we had another kind of banging to get to.

Pulling back, I took a moment to appreciate the sight of him at full mast, before taking the wrapper from his hand and ripping it open, so I could slide the baby making barrier onto him.

Too soon to fuck him?

Definitely not.

Too soon to make that gaggle of babies with him?

Definitely so.

But that was okay.

Practice made perfect.

Just like our babies were gonna be.

Perfect.

EPOV

I'd only reached for a condom to be ready for the inevitable, but I'd intended on returning the favor – wanting to taste *her* flavor – once I could get my eyes to uncross.

But it felt like an impossible feat.

At least it was, until I felt her sliding up my body and straddling hers over my hips, before placing my tip at her entrance and softly breathing out, “All aboard...”

“*Jesus...*”

Bracing her hands against my chest, mine went straight to her hips, holding on as she slowly worked her way up and down the length of my shaft, until I doubted I would ever see straight again.

Fuck it.

If I couldn't draw disability, I could always volunteer to be her sex toy.

I couldn't imagine anything better than being inside of her for the rest of my life.

But it turned out my imagination wasn't for shit because it wasn't until she had finally worked her way all the way down my shaft that I realized just how much I wanted to stay there.

Forever.

In my bed.

Inside of her.

"Wow," she panted, making me uncross my eyes enough to see the smile on her face, right before she giggled, "You really *are* a unicorn."

"Is that a good thing?" I asked, hoping it was, but not sure if it wasn't some sort of insult I was too brain dead to understand.

All of my blood was currently south of my waist and I didn't think it would be returning to the rest of me any time soon.

"Well..." she smiled and then leaned down, pressing her lips against mine as she ended with, "Let's find out."

It turned out the answer was yes.

Yes, it was a *very* good thing to be a unicorn.

Not only did I find out how flexible she was – *very* – I found out what it was like to watch her ride me like she was trying to win a rodeo.

I found out she was my new favorite flavor.

I found out my rebound time with her was that of a thirteen year old boy, with his first Victoria's Secret catalog clutched in his hands.

And I found out my imagination hadn't done her any justice when I got to experience firsthand what it was like to fuck her from behind.

Her ass really would be the death of me.

I knew it when I came so hard, I would've sworn I was having a heart attack at the same time.

It was hours later by the time we took a breather. Both of us looked the worse for the wear, thanks to both the fuck-a-thon we'd just gone through, as well as having been caught out in the rain.

The bed was damp from both the rainwater that had covered us and the sweat and cum we'd added on to it, but I would be damned if it wasn't perfect.

Just like her.

A fact that was only reiterated when she turned on her side to face me, still trying to catch her breath, with her eyes twinkling as she giggled, "That was as fun as it says on the box."

God help me...

Why did she have to be a blue blood?

A Stackhouse nonetheless?

I couldn't for the life of me think of a way this – whatever it was we were doing – could ever work out.

A part of me had foolishly hoped that by finally having her – a bite of the forbidden fruit, as it were – I would be sated. I would have gotten her out of my system and then I could move on.

No harm. No foul.

But no.

I was just a fool.

But even knowing no good could come from it, I didn't even try to resist my next urge and gave in to it immediately, by sliding over and closing the distance between us.

Pressing my lips to hers, I felt like I could finally breathe again.

I was sure I'd figure out a way to breathe on my own again one day.

Then again, maybe not.

Either way, that day didn't have to be *today*.

In the meantime I would just enjoy whatever this was we'd just started and pray it wouldn't end anytime soon.