

Title: **Love Story**

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Chapter 1: Chapter 1

Love Story

SPOV

I ran out of the house in tears, unable to stare at my virtually packed up bedroom for another moment, and ignoring my father's shouts of, "What's wrong?", as I fled out of the front door.

He knew what was wrong.

It was the middle of August in Northern Louisiana, but I paid no mind to the heat and humidity while I ran as fast and as far as my legs could carry me with no conscious destination in mind. I wanted to get away, but there's just no way to run away from your own heart, I realized, when I came to the fairgrounds on the outskirts of town.

I found a shady patch of grass near the edge of the lake and wiped the tears and sweat from my face as I thought back to when it all began.

It was on another mid-August afternoon when my Gran had taken me to this very location. I was six years old and there had been a carnival in town that I begged her to take me to. I was so excited to be going somewhere other than another doctor's appointment that I wore my best sundress and a plastic tiara I'd gotten for Christmas. She had always encouraged my imaginative spirit and was watching me for the day while my father, the town Sheriff, was working. Gran was my caretaker whenever Daddy had to work, so she was like my mother and grandmother all rolled into one.

My real mother had died while giving birth to me two months before I was due to have been born. She had been caught up in a real bad storm, while driving home from the store that night, and a flash flood forced her car down an embankment. It was Daddy who found her hours later, while he was out on patrol, but she had lost a lot of blood by then. The trauma of the accident had induced her to go into labor prematurely and once they got to the hospital she lost consciousness. The doctors had to perform an emergency c-section and she died moments after I was born. My lungs weren't fully developed and I was in the neonatal intensive care unit for weeks before Daddy could finally bring me home.

Gran stayed with us a lot in the beginning and I was in and out of hospitals throughout my early childhood due to illnesses brought on by me being born too soon. I was small for my age and very pale due to being kept indoors because of my asthma. My immune system wasn't the best either so, being an only child, the only people in my life were Daddy and Gran.

I was the apple of Daddy's eye, but even as a child I would sometimes see the sadness he couldn't always hide whenever he looked at me. Gran said it was because I was the spitting image of my mom and that Daddy loved her so much, he'd never really gotten over her death. He didn't have time to mourn for her when she first died because he was so worried about me at the time and my health didn't start to improve, once and for all, until I turned five. My birthday was in July and Daddy was still so worried that he didn't let me go to school that fall, meaning I would be a whole year behind everyone else my age when I finally did start.

Gran loved to read and it was a passion she instilled in me from the very start. My favorites were fairytales, of course, and I begged her to read me the same stories over and over until I was able to read them on my own. Whenever Daddy had to work nights, I would sleep over at Gran's house and she'd let me stay up watching old movies with her like 'Gone With the Wind'.

I had just watched 'Romeo and Juliet' with Gran the night before, but I'd fallen asleep before the end. Back then, I was so sure they had lived happily ever after; they were, after all, so very much in love. How could their love story *not* have a happy ending?

I clutched Gran's hand as we walked around the fairground, burying my face into the folds of her skirt whenever one of her friends would stop to chat with her. I was extremely shy, having been so sheltered my whole life, which was one of the main reasons Gran had told Daddy that I *had* to start school in a few weeks. He'd been contemplating keeping me home for another year, but Gran wouldn't hear of it. Daddy was a big strong man and I'm sure he could look very intimidating with or without his Sheriff's uniform on, but he would never think to go against Gran when she took a stance on something. She was intimidating in her own right.

After seeing all of the rides and games, Gran wanted to sit in the shade near the lake to cool off for a bit. I didn't know any of the other children and was too shy to wander over and introduce myself to them, so I stuck to Gran's side like glue. A few of her friends from church eventually made their way over to where we were sitting and when I couldn't take their curious glances any longer, I wandered a little ways away to where an empty wooden lifeguard stand sat near the edge of the lake.

It wasn't very tall, but neither was I so it seemed a hundred feet high to me at the time. Looking up, I imagined the very top being a balcony of a castle, just like in the fairy tales I loved to read. I'd never played outdoors before for very long, but after a few minutes I swallowed my fear and climbed up the stairs to the top. I'd felt my confidence grow with every step and I was amazed at how much I could see of the crowd from the platform where I stood.

The whole town must have been there and I watched the families walking and laughing as though they didn't have a care in the world. I closed my eyes and turned my face towards the sun, enjoying the warmth of its rays across my face, and when I opened them up again it took a few

minutes before I was able to see passed the colors swirling in front of my eyes. When I was able to finally focus, the first thing I saw was the head of a young boy walking towards me with hair the same shade of blonde as mine.

He looked to be around my age, but his build was lanky and his movements were awkward, wearing clothes that looked to be a little too small for him. They were dirty and torn and his hair hung in his eyes, almost brushing the tops of his shoulder, and I could see a faint bruise on his cheek that was almost healed. I still thought he was the most handsome boy in the world.

"Hello," he said shyly, looking up at me.

I'd never interacted with any other children before, my imagination had been my only playmate, and with the movie of the night before still fresh in my mind I replied without thought, "Romeo, save me!"

His eyebrows furrowed in confusion looking back at me before his whole face turned beet red and he angrily spat out, "Why are you making fun of me? I was just saying, 'Hi!'"

I watched him scoop up a handful of pebbles and turn to face the lake, throwing them one by one into the water and I climbed halfway down the stairs saying, "I wasn't making fun of you!" I was desperate, afraid that my first potential friend would hate me before I ever learned his name.

"You're just like everyone else. Just because my clothes aren't as nice as yours and I'm not rich like you, doesn't mean that you can make fun of me."

"But I wasn't making fun of you! And I'm not rich." We weren't rich by a long shot. Daddy's health insurance covered some of my medical needs, but I knew he had to pay for a lot of my tests and medications himself because whenever I would ask why he had to work yet another overtime shift he'd say, "So my baby girl can have the medicine she needs." He was often tired, but he never once complained. I'd learned guilt at a very early age and my Gran taught me to appreciate the little things in life. I never asked for, or even wanted anything special and was grateful for whatever I was given, knowing there wasn't much money to spare.

He looked back at me, eyes narrowed, and with suspicion in his voice he asked, "Then why did you call me Romeo?"

For whatever reason, I didn't feel shy around him. Maybe it was because he had seemed even more introverted than me, but I answered him honestly, having no brain-mouth filter at the age of six, saying, "Because you look like a prince to me and I wanted to be the princess you were coming to rescue."

He pondered my response for a moment and took a few steps closer to where I stood on the stairs as his eyes crinkled in thought and he asked, "Well who's Romeo?"

I excitedly told him all about Romeo and Juliet and everything I'd watched the night before ending with, "You'll be the prince and I'll be the princess. So will you play with me? Please say

yes." The anticipation I felt while waiting for his answer had my heart beating double time in my chest. I wanted him to be my friend, only then realizing how much I'd been missing out on with my sheltered childhood.

He remained silently standing there, tossing the pebbles haphazardly around us, but my nervousness faded away and my heart began to soar as I watched a smile start to make its way across his face. As he opened his mouth to reply we were both startled by the booming voice of my father saying, "Eric Northman! You get away from my daughter!"

Both of our heads turned to see my father quickly striding towards us asking, "Sookie, are you alright?"

Before I could answer my prince looked up at my father asking, "*Your* daughter?"

"That's right and you'd better leave Sookie alone. Now go on before I haul you back to your momma. She won't be too happy seeing me with you again so soon."

He looked back at me and the sadness in his eyes brought tears to my own before he dropped his head saying, "Yes Sheriff Stackhouse."

He turned and ran off, disappearing into the crowd, and I sat down on the stairs breaking down into sobs begging, "Please don't go!" If he heard me, he didn't come back.

"Corbett Stackhouse! What's gotten into you? They were just playing!" My Gran's voice was harsh and coming closer, but I couldn't see through the tears in my eyes.

"That boy is nothing but trouble. Just last week I found him vandalizing one of the vacant shops in town and now I find him throwing rocks at Sookie! He's lucky I didn't throw him in the back of my cruiser and take him home," my father angrily defended himself.

"He was *not* throwing rocks at Sookie. I was watching them the whole time. And seeing as how his momma, Arlene, is always running off looking for her next husband, it's no wonder he's out wandering around and getting into trouble." She wrapped her arms around me, trying to calm me down, and her voice softened saying, "You should take pity on him Corbett."

"He's ornery," my father grumbled. I felt him try to pick me up, but I wrenched my body away from him, angry that he made my friend go away, and clung to Gran with all of my strength. "Baby girl," my father cooed, "I'm just trying to protect you."

"But he's my friend," I choked out.

"You don't need friends like him," he practically snarled. "You'll make better ones once you start school."

Gran folded her arms around me while I cried into her chest and she huffed in annoyance at my father, but said nothing. When he finally walked away, she waited for my sobs to lessen and

whispered, "Eric is a fine friend to have. Don't pay no mind to your father Sookie, he just gets blinded sometimes when it comes to you."

I held onto Gran's words of comfort and I counted down the days until school would start, hoping that I'd see Eric again. I had no idea of how old he was and Gran didn't know when I'd asked her. I didn't dare ask Daddy about him, after seeing his reaction at the fairgrounds, so I kept quiet and never mentioned Eric's name whenever he was around.

But the first day of school came and went without me seeing Eric at all. I'd looked for him at every opportunity to no avail. All of the kids in my class seemed to know one another and shunned me as an outsider, so I was left to sit all by myself in the cafeteria and on the playground at recess. I'd heard a few of them whispering about me being 'sickly' and they all agreed right away that they didn't want to catch whatever I had so they wouldn't even come near me. I held the tears back until I saw Gran waiting for me outside of the school and the floodgates opened. She was worried until I finally sobbed out everything that happened that day and she held me in her arms trying to soothe me with soft spoken words of comfort.

It continued on that way for the next few weeks. I would go to school, hoping to see Eric, and come home crying every day because no one else wanted to be my friend. It didn't help that I was too shy to talk to anyone, but I just couldn't summon the courage after the one attempt when I'd tried, at Gran's urging, to walk over to a group of girls at recess and they all ran away from me screaming.

I was surprised in mid-October when I was called down to the Principal's Office, with no clue as to why he wanted to see me. When I walked into the outer office my heart nearly leapt from my chest when I saw Eric sitting on a bench just outside of the Principal's door.

"Eric!" I nearly squealed in excitement.

His head popped up and a small smile lit up his face. "I thought I was supposed to be Romeo."

He remembered.

I plopped down onto the bench next to him saying, "You can still be Romeo, just not in school. I haven't seen you once since the first day of school started. What grade are you in?" The words kept pouring from my mouth like water through a sieve and I was sure it was more than I'd spoken the entire time since I'd started school.

He sighed answering, "I'm in the first grade. I should be in second, but I got held back last year."

I could tell he was embarrassed, so I didn't ask why and since I was still wondering why I'd been called to the office, it made me instead ask him, "Why are you here?"

Eric chewed his bottom lip before answering, "Umm...I think I'm going to get detention."

"Why? What did you do?" I asked feeling scandalized. Just the thought of being in trouble like that made my insides quiver.

"I haven't turned in any homework and I got mouthy with Mrs. Bellefleur when she kept asking me 'Why?'."

I knew Mrs. Bellefleur's husband was one of Daddy's Deputies and I didn't even think before the next question fell from my lips. "Well why haven't you been doing your homework?" I didn't have much homework at all in kindergarten, but all of it was so easy that I just breezed right through it. Gran had already taught me everything we were learning in class the year before, so I wasn't learning anything new.

Eric looked down with his fingers twisting together in his lap barely whispering loud enough for me to hear, "Sometimes the letters look all jumbled together when I try to read them. My mom is a waitress and works a lot of nights because the tips are better and when she does have a night off, she usually goes out on dates, so there's no one around to help me. She says I need a 'male role model'."

He was home alone? I couldn't even fathom the idea of being left home alone, even knowing he was probably at least a year older than me. I wondered where his father was since he needed a role model, but I knew better than to ask.

Before I could say anything in response, the outer office door opened causing both of us to look up in unison to see my father coming into the office. His eyes lit up for a brief moment seeing me until he saw who I was sitting next to and he shook his head muttering, "Surprise, surprise." He looked back at me saying, "Come on Sookie," and held his hand out for me to take.

I looked back at Eric and asked quietly, "Maybe we can play together one day after school?"

He didn't have a chance to answer me because my father grabbed my hand and pulled me to my feet, shuffling me into the Principal's Office. I took a seat in one of the chairs in front of his desk, terrified I'd done something bad enough to warrant my father's presence, so I was in shock when the principal said my teacher recommended I skip kindergarten and go directly into the first grade. She'd noticed that I wasn't learning anything new and had even unofficially tested my knowledge just to be sure.

I sat there catching flies while Daddy was proud as a peacock and signed all of the necessary paperwork for me to go into the first grade classroom the following morning. The great thing about living in such a small town was that there was only one teacher per grade, so I knew I'd be in Eric's class. I couldn't wait to tell him and my mouth was halfway open to share the good news before we'd even left the office, but Eric was already gone.

The next morning I bounced, literally, all the way to school with Gran chuckling at my side. I'd chattered nonstop to her the day before about being in Eric's class, with her smiling and nodding at me, unable to get a word in if she'd wanted to. She left me at the front door of the school and I practically skipped to the first grade classroom before walking inside. My eyes scanned the

students already in their seats, but Eric wasn't among them. Mrs. Bellefleur greeted me, we'd met once when Daddy stopped by the station with me in tow, and pointed to a desk towards the back for me to take.

Once I put all of my things away, my eyes kept moving back and forth from the clock on the wall and the door, waiting for Eric to walk through. I couldn't contain the grin that spread across my face when he finally entered the room, but he'd kept his head down while moving towards the back and didn't see me until he sat down at the desk across from mine when I leaned over whispering, "Hi Romeo."

His eyes met mine and my grin got even bigger when he smiled back at me saying, "Hi Juliet."

From that day forward we were like peas and carrots. Eric and I spent every day side by side. It didn't take long for me to figure out that, like me, he was shunned by the other students too. He never talked to anyone but me and I'd heard some of the other boys picking on him for not being as athletically inclined as them, while the girls snickered over his clothing that were always just a bit too small. He was so much taller than the rest of the class and even though I knew he was a year older, he was still exceptionally tall and he seemed to grow like a weed.

I'd noticed on our first day together, in the cafeteria, that his lunch consisted of nothing more than a can of soda and a small bag of chips he'd brought from home. Gran would have never tolerated that and when I asked him, he'd said he packed his own lunch every day because his mom was still asleep when it was time for him to leave for school. He was eyeing the ham and cheese sandwich Gran had packed for me, so I ate one half and shared the other with him. When I later recounted the story for Gran, she made sure to pack extra food in my lunchbox every day after that, which Eric appreciated if you took into account how fast he'd wolf it down.

Every day I'd tell Gran something new I'd learned about Eric, not really understanding the reality of his situation, and every day Gran's expression darkened hearing of his plight until one afternoon, a week after I'd started first grade, she asked Eric what he normally did after school. He said he just went home or would go for walks. His mother was rarely home, but Gran told him he was more than welcome to come home with us every day and stay until after dinner if his mother said it was okay. I swore Gran was about to spit nails when, the next day, Eric told her his mother's answer was, "I don't care."

I was over the moon I was so happy and we quickly learned just how big of an appetite Eric really had. That boy could and would eat everything you put in front of him. He wasn't able to put off doing his homework anymore either, since we were in the same class and I knew we had some. I didn't understand why Eric got confused on what I viewed as simple sentences and words, but Gran figured out relatively soon that Eric had a learning disability. She checked out books from the library, while we were in school, on dyslexia and read up on it so she would be able to help Eric. When he started to show some improvement, she took it upon herself to speak to Mrs. Bellefleur and with a little bit of extra attention in the classroom, slowly but surely, Eric's grades began to improve as did his self-confidence.

Mondays through Fridays were my favorite days of the week, but weekends were horrible. Daddy rarely worked them, unless it was for an overtime shift, and while he knew Eric came home with us to Gran's house during the week, he wouldn't allow me to play with him on the weekends. I didn't find out until later that Eric had become so accustomed to spending time at Gran's farmhouse, he started showing up out of the blue every weekend, helping her with the yard work and small chores around the house just for the company. She would always make sure he left with a full belly and leftovers to take home.

Days became weeks, weeks became months, and before I knew it, months became years. Eric and I were the very best of friends throughout elementary and middle school. We spent every free moment we had, together at Gran's house. Because Eric was with us so much, it had kept him out of finding trouble on his own, so Daddy didn't have much to say about him anymore. He still didn't like him, but he'd run out of excuses as to why. Gran had said it was just him being overprotective, but as long as he didn't try to make me stop being around Eric, I didn't care what he thought of him. He didn't know him like I did and I doubted he would ever even try.

The summer before we started high school, with the help of Gran's cooking, Eric really grew into himself. His height shot up, hovering over six feet tall, and his arms, chest and back filled in with nothing but muscle from pushing Gran's old lawn mower over an acre of grass once a week and scattering wheel barrels full of mulch in her flowerbeds. His skin was tanned a golden bronze from being shirtless nearly the entire summer and I definitely noticed.

I'd always had a crush on Eric from the very beginning, but I had to keep myself from swooning whenever he pushed the lawn mower passed the flowerbed I was weeding. His hair was lighter from being in the sun so much and still hung down to his shoulders, with sweat beading across his entire body. It made me *feel* things, but I never acted on them, afraid of messing up our friendship. According to Gran, I was going to be a late bloomer and hadn't really filled out yet, but that didn't stop me from doing yard work in nothing more than short shorts and a bikini top with my skin just as bronze as his. More than once, I thought I'd made Eric *feel* things too because he'd abruptly have to take a break and sit down for a while in the shade after I'd catch him looking my way.

On the nights I slept over at Gran's, Eric would come back once it was dark and we would sneak off together, after she was asleep. We'd walk through the fields to a nearby stream and lie down in the grass talking about everything. Neither one of us had seen much outside of Bon Temps, but lying together out, under the stars, we'd close our eyes and I'd tell him some of the stories I'd read of faraway places, recalling every little detail I could. We envisioned going off on adventures together, exploring what we considered to be exotic locales and I couldn't imagine a more wonderful life.

That was the summer I'd learned more of Eric's horrible home life, which up until that point, he'd never talked about in much detail. He never knew who his father was and he'd said, quite bluntly, that he didn't think his mother knew either. She mostly ignored him, but whenever she'd had a few too many drinks she would openly blame him for her miserable life, telling him she'd wished he'd never been born. Eric's mom had recently gotten married, for the fourth time, to a man named Rene. He and Eric didn't get along at all, so neither Rene nor Eric's mom cared whether

he was home or not. When she'd married him, Eric had hoped it would finally make her happy, but instead it only added another person to his life telling him how worthless he was.

My heart broke for him and even with my vivid imagination I couldn't picture what it would feel like to not be loved by your own flesh and blood. My father had his faults, but loving me unconditionally wasn't one of them.

It was during one of those midsummer nights when I felt Eric's hand tentatively wrap itself around mine, for the first time, wearing a cautious look on his face as though he wasn't sure of what my reaction would be. He relaxed again once I smiled, lacing my fingers with his, as I continued describing the Pyramids in Egypt and three nights later I shared my very first kiss with Eric Northman on a hot summer night under the Louisiana star covered sky.

That September, we walked into the high school on the first day of our freshman year hand in hand and in my mind we were no longer like peas and carrots, but more like two pieces of a puzzle that fit together perfectly. Bon Temps and the nearby town of Clarice shared the same high school, so there were new faces to be seen, but I didn't fail to notice the shift of how our fellow Bon Temps classmates now felt towards Eric; mostly our fellow *female* classmates. We'd kept to ourselves, as we always did all summer long, so Eric's recently filled out form was new to them. Gone were his awkward movements and lanky limbs, replaced by inner confidence and a whole lot of muscle with a bit of swagger added to the mix now that we were holding hands in public. He'd even whispered to me that everyone was jealous because *I* was *his* girlfriend.

He'd never come out and asked me point blank to be his girlfriend, but I wasn't going to say any differently. I'd *wanted* to be his girlfriend in the worst way, so if he just assumed it was a done deal, then so be it. He was as wrong as he was oblivious though because our classmates were definitely not jealous of *him*, but of *me*. They were coming up to him left and right, asking him about his summer while barely acknowledging me at all. It was as if I had a scarlet letter pinned to my shirt that caused everyone to point and stare, but not talk to. When our hands became separated due to the new members of the Eric Northman Fan Club converging on him, I was jostled away with the space I had been occupying filled with three other girls surreptitiously fighting each other for the spot I'd just vacated.

He was adorably confused by his sudden popularity, so I couldn't find it within myself to be mad and it took Eric all of a second to register I was no longer standing next to him. With his height advantage, he spotted me easily and gravitated towards me with the crowd parting in front of him. When he grabbed my hand once more, I heard the collective sigh of the group and saw their death glares, but I didn't care. He was mine. He'd said so.

The next three years passed by in a blissful blink of an eye with proclamations of love made daily by each of us to the other. I'd finally filled out, much to my father's dismay, and even more so to Eric's. Boys who had never given me a second glance were suddenly very attentive and the girls continued to pursue Eric like I was nothing more than a figment of their imagination, but we only had eyes for each other. Gran called it 'sweet'. Daddy called it a 'passing fancy'. The way he talked you'd think he hadn't paid any attention over the previous two thirds of my life, but that wasn't the case. He paid attention in great detail to: every article of clothing I attempted to leave

the house in; the amount of space in between Eric's body and my own whenever we were together; and, more often than not, he would pass by Eric and me in his police cruiser whenever we went out for a walk together.

I hoped one day my father would actually approve of Eric, with the guilt still eating away at my insides knowing he'd sacrificed so much for me, so I couldn't find it in myself to really be upset with him whenever his overprotective streak kicked in.

However Eric's mom and stepfather were the complete opposite. He could probably disappear for weeks and they still might not notice he was gone. They seemed to get angry at him for no other reason than he'd come home. I felt so bad for him, knowing what a horrible home life he had, and I was happy that I could put a smile on his face whenever we were together.

The summer before our senior year of high school Eric had gotten a job in town bussing tables at the local bar and grill, Merlotte's. He was saving every penny because his stepfather had told him once he graduated high school he would be on his own and wouldn't be allowed to 'freeload' there any longer. His grades, while improved, were nowhere near good enough to get a scholarship and when Gran heard about what Eric had been told, she said he'd always be welcome in her home which was a great big relief to both of us knowing he'd always have a place to stay. Gran loved Eric like he was her own flesh and blood, the feeling was mutual, and over the years we'd had to talk her down from heading over to his house to give Eric's mother a piece of her mind. She would never say anything derogatory about his mom out loud, but you could see the Stackhouse temper flare up within her whenever she heard about the latest slight Eric suffered at his mother's hand.

But me? My grades were pretty good. Good enough that I was offered several scholarships that would cover the majority of my college education, but I was more than willing to go to the local community college so I could still be near Eric. My father had other plans though and made me apply to LSU, Tulane, and a few other four year universities, saying over and over that I had so many available options in front of me. In my teenage mind, Eric was the only option I wanted.

I loved him with all of my heart and soul. We'd been together for so long that I could barely remember what it was like before he'd come into my life. We took our relationship seriously, but my father refused to see it. And for all of his glare filled stares whenever Eric would hold my hand, Eric was always a complete gentleman towards me. We'd kissed *a lot* and *often*, eventually progressing to some mild and then intense petting, but he never pushed me for more than I was willing to give. I had no preconceived ideas on where or when we would finally go all the way, but I knew my first time would be with him and I hoped my experiences would only ever be with him.

Eric and I were still going strong as we started our senior year until I started getting acceptance letters to the colleges my father had made me apply to. I didn't want to go to any of them, telling Eric over and over that I just wanted to stay near him, but he started saying things like he 'didn't want to hold me back' and I 'had so much potential'. He'd been there to hear some of my father's badgering about college and it seemed, ironically, they finally agreed on something. It was the first time Eric and I had actually fought with each other and it scared me to death.

I refused to make a decision on any of the colleges I'd been accepted to and both Gran and Eric quickly learned to stay neutral throughout. They were like Switzerland whenever my father would start lecturing me on what was best for me, like I didn't know for my own self! He'd tell me what Eric and I had was nothing more than puppy love and how he wouldn't let me (*Let me!*) make a bad decision based solely on that, ruining the rest of my life. They remained mum whenever I fought back with how much Eric and I really loved each other and that I didn't want to be so far away from him for that long. I didn't want, or care, to go to a four year university and would happily take classes locally. I'm pretty sure I saw steam shoot out of his ears when I told him if he didn't like it and continued to push my buttons, I would just move in with Gran once I graduated as well. He knew who Gran's other boarder would be.

Eric wisely remained silent while Gran just called us stubborn when neither one of us would budge on our stance. The line in the sand had been drawn and it remained a standoff until that winter when my whole world seemed to end in the matter of one week.

It was the second week in January when I'd swung by Gran's house after school. We'd all spent Christmas and New Year's celebrating together there, Eric included of course, and I'd promised to help her put the decorations away. Eric had to work at Merlotte's, so I was alone when I'd entered the house and found Gran's lifeless body lying on the worn linoleum floor in the middle of the kitchen. I barely had the wherewithal to dial 911 before I completely lost it and my father happened to be at Merlotte's when he got the call over his police radio. Everyone there could hear what the dispatcher had said, so Eric jumped into the cruiser with him and thankfully my father allowed it. It took both of them to pry my arms from around Gran's body as I begged her over and over to not leave me. She'd been my only mother figure and when Eric carried me into the living room, he curled around my body on the couch sobbing just as hard as me, feeling the loss of the only mother figure he knew as well. My father was lost in his own grief and we couldn't bring ourselves to leave what had been our second home that night, with the three of us sprawled out on her living room furniture. None of us slept a wink and the medical examiner later ruled her death was due to a heart attack. A large piece of my own heart was buried with her in the Sweet Home Cemetery next to the farmhouse three days later with the whole town coming out to bid her farewell.

Daddy contemplated moving back into his childhood home and selling ours, since Gran's house had been in the Stackhouse family for over 150 years, but it just wasn't feasible. Gran had a small mortgage and property taxes, but Daddy had taken a lot of equity out of our house to help pay for all of my medical needs way back when I was younger and he couldn't afford to keep both. The housing market had tanked nationwide, but there was no way he'd be able to sell our house for what he owed on it and sadly had to put Gran's house on the market where it was likely to sit for months.

That also meant Eric no longer had any place to stay once he graduated from high school. He was still saving all of his money and since he had already turned eighteen, Eric knew his parents could legally kick him out whenever they wanted, so he made sure to stay out of their way and off of their radar. It was on the Friday night after Gran's funeral that the rest of my world began to crumble apart.

Eric had been working at Merlotte's, like he did every Friday night, when his stepfather came in. Rene was an abusive alcoholic and when he got cut off from being served any more drinks a few hours later, he became belligerent. When the owner, Sam, threatened to call the police, Eric stepped in trying to diffuse the situation by offering to drive Rene home. He took Rene's keys and stuffed him into the passenger seat to drive them home when, on the way there, he rolled through a stop sign and was pulled over by Andy Bellefleur. When he smelled the booze coming out of the car he made Eric do a field sobriety test, which he passed, and when Andy asked for permission to search the vehicle, Eric didn't think anything of it, saying yes.

The little bag of marijuana was located underneath the driver's seat. There was only a negligible amount left inside, but it was enough to put Eric in handcuffs. Even though the car belonged to Rene, Eric was arrested for possession of an illegal narcotic because he was the operator of the vehicle and Rene was quick to throw him under the bus by saying it wasn't his. When Andy called my father later on that night, telling him what happened, he was furious and forbid me to see Eric anymore. I begged and pleaded, yelled and screamed, saying Eric would *never* do something like that, but he wouldn't listen.

I didn't hear from Eric all weekend long. There wasn't a phone at his house and since he didn't have a cell phone I never bothered asking for one either knowing I would only want to talk to Eric. My father watched me like a hawk, knowing I would bolt at the first opportunity, so I didn't get to speak to him again until I saw him the following Monday at school. He explained everything that happened and I told him I never doubted him for a second, believing with all of my heart that he was innocent.

Unfortunately, Eric's mother believed Rene's lies and with Gran gone, so was her offer of a place to stay. His mother was on the verge of kicking him out, so he was forced to make a deal with her saying if she would let him stay there until graduation he would enlist in the military and leave home immediately afterward. She'd taken him to the Army Recruiting Station in Monroe the following morning and stood there watching as he signed on the dotted line, committing himself to six years in the military. He would be leaving the day after graduation.

I immediately went into denial saying there had to be a way out of it. I'd do whatever I could to find us a way out the mess we'd been unwillingly thrust into, but Eric refused to even humor me. In all of the time we'd known each other, he had never once lied to me and always told me the truth, no matter how much it might hurt me, and he didn't make any exceptions that day either.

I was inconsolable to the point where I couldn't function at all and had to go to the guidance counselor's office where I cried even more. Mrs. Fant, the school's counselor, listened to my garbled sobs and patted and shushed me for most of the day. Eric had tried to check on me a few times only to be swatted right back out the door by Mrs. Fant. She, too, repeated the words my father had spoken to me over and over saying now was the time for me to think about what *I* wanted for my future and that while young love can seem quite genuine, it often fizzled out as you got older and figured out who you were always destined to be. I fought with her too saying that just because young love could be difficult, it didn't make it any less real. My mind was in complete turmoil. I would wait for him forever if I had to, but all it would take was one word

from Eric and I would run away with him in a heartbeat because it was my firm belief that I was *destined* to be with him.

Even with those kinds of thoughts running through my head, a part of me took in what Mrs. Fant had been saying, although my heart and voice still protested her words. My new reality was, with Gran gone and the next six years of Eric's life committed to the United States Army, I no longer had any reason to stay in Bon Temps, other than my father. We hadn't been seeing eye to eye for a very long time and while I still loved him, I didn't like him very much at the moment. I thought if we had some time and distance apart, perhaps I would come to like him again sooner rather than later. He was the only family I had left and I didn't want to irrevocably damage our relationship.

After talking it over with Eric the next day, I reluctantly agreed to accept the offer to attend LSU and I thought my father was on the verge of doing cartwheels across the house when I broke the news. He still refused to let me see Eric, but he couldn't stop us from spending time together at school. It was the only time we could be together, but we each swore up and down that although we would be physically separated for a long while, we would still make every effort to see each other whenever it was possible.

Both of us walked around in a complete funk for weeks knowing what would soon be in store for us, but in an effort to cheer me up when our Graduation Day was looming on the horizon, Eric made a promise to write me love letters while he was in basic training knowing my love of anything romantic. Even after so many years, I still firmly believed in fairytale romances with happily ever afters and knowing writing still wasn't his strong suit, it made his offer all the more special.

On the day of our graduation I stood there in my cap and gown trying to keep the tears at bay. I had no idea how I would be able to last without seeing Eric for such a long time. We'd spent practically every day together for the previous twelve years and, remembering Mrs. Fant's words, I couldn't help but wonder if that day would be our last. I decided then and there that if it *was* to be our last day together, I wanted to have good memories to fall back on.

I stepped out of line and moved forward to where Eric stood alphabetically ahead of me, pulling him down and whispered into his ear, "I want to see you tonight." He would be leaving on a bus at six o'clock the next morning so it would be our last chance to see one another.

"But your father..." he began, but I shook my head no effectively halting him mid sentence.

"I'll wait until he goes to sleep. Will you meet me by the stream behind Gran's around midnight?" It had become 'our spot' after spending so many summer nights together there and my father was normally out for the night by ten, but I wanted to give myself extra time thinking he would likely be on alert knowing Eric would be leaving the following day.

"Of course I'll meet you Sookie," he whispered and leaned down placing a kiss on my forehead.

I could see the love he felt for me in his eyes so I had no doubts when I whispered back, "And bring some *protection* with you." We'd come close to going all the way a couple of times before my father forbid us to see one another, but it had been the lack of condoms that halted our progression. Neither one of us was ready or willing to chance an unplanned pregnancy at our age.

His only response was to raise his eyebrow while a bittersweet smile spread across his face, so I simply kissed his cheek and went back to my spot in line feeling happy for the first time in weeks, knowing Eric and I would be spending his final night together.

As our names were called, each student traipsed across the stage to receive their diploma with some families cheering wildly for their son, daughter, brother, or sister. My father gave a shrill whistle when it was my turn, but I didn't look his way. I blamed him for most of the heartache I'd felt over the previous weeks and even though it would break my heart, if push came to shove and I was forced to choose between them, Eric would come out on top.

Once the ceremony was over, I hugged Eric tightly and gave him a sad kiss before my father dragged me away. He wanted to take me to a celebratory dinner, but I begged off claiming to have a headache so he would take me home. I couldn't hide the tears and my father knew better than to ask what was wrong with me, so I grabbed a book to drown my sorrows in while soaking in the tub. When the water turned cold, I reluctantly got out and put on my pajamas, climbing right into bed. It was barely 7:30, but I didn't want to sit with my father in the living room, giving him more of a reason to stay up.

He checked on me once around 9 o'clock and I mumbled incoherently that I had a migraine, so he kissed the top of my head saying he'd see me in the morning and left my room, shutting the door behind him. I lay there for the next two hours staring at the clock, willing the time to move faster and knowing I'd be begging for it to slow down once I was with Eric again.

I'd heard my father go into his room around ten and could hear his loud snores twenty minutes later, but I forced myself to stay still until he'd been asleep for 30 minutes. I got up and quickly changed out of my pajamas a little before eleven and silently climbed out of my bedroom window. Our house was a couple of miles from Gran's, which was still on the market. It would tear me up inside whenever it was finally sold and as soon as it came into view, my eyes smarted with tears recalling all of the wonderful memories of my time spent there.

It wasn't the time for that so I quickly wiped them away and took the well worn path through the fields to the stream. I was a half hour early so I was surprised to find Eric already waiting for me. He'd thought to bring a blanket, which he was sitting on, spread out on the grass and a camping lantern because there was a new moon that night.

"You're early," I said with relief. I would have gone crazy waiting for him to arrive.

"So are you," he smirked. His voice was amused, but his face told me he was both nervous and happy. That made two of us.

As soon as I was within reaching distance, he pulled me down onto his lap and kissed me like he hadn't seen me in months. Suddenly I found a silver lining in our situation if kisses like that were what I had to look forward to. When we both needed to breathe, Eric buried his face into the side of my neck inhaling my scent and whispering, "I love you Sookie. Nothing can or will ever change that."

"I love you too." I felt the tears spring up again so I fought them back by pulling Eric's lips back to mine. What started out as a tender exchange quickly ignited into an inferno with our hands pulling at each other's clothing, both wanting and needing more contact.

My shirt came off first, but was quickly followed by Eric's. He was definitely in awe of my breasts and eagerly reacquainted himself with them while I kicked off my shoes and shimmied out of my shorts, leaving me in nothing more than my bra and panties.

Eric had seen me in a bikini hundreds of times, but there was something different when he saw me in just my underwear because he stopped what he was doing to take in every detail with his eyes. I thought I would feel self-conscious, but just like I'd never been shy with Eric as a child, this was no different.

"You're beautiful," he whispered, leaning down to kiss me again and pressed his body against mine until we were both lying down on the blanket. His lips stayed on mine while his hands wandered behind me and once he'd successfully removed my bra, his lips followed after his hands.

We'd only ever groped each other through our clothing before, so the sensations brought on by the heat and moisture of his mouth on my breasts was brand new. Up until then, I had no idea he could light a fire even lower on my body without even touching it, but he could and I wondered what other innate abilities he possessed that I was about to discover.

My hands fisted into his hair, the long blond locks that I'd always loved and would soon be gone. I pondered asking him to send me a lock of his hair when they cut it off once he got to the military base, but one of his hands slipped into the front of my panties and all thoughts unrelated to the pleasure he was giving me ceased to exist.

His fingers rubbed along the length of my folds and he pulled himself up high enough to look at me, with hooded eyes, practically growling, "You're so wet." I didn't have time to blush because his lips crashed back onto mine and I could feel how turned on he was. It was pressed against my inner thigh through his shorts.

I'd stroked along his length before, over his pants, and I had to admit I was intimidated and more than a little afraid of his size. I had nothing to compare it to, or any girlfriends to compare notes with, but I really didn't see how *that* was going to fit inside of me. I was all for trying though so I reached down and unbuttoned his shorts, kicking them as far down as I could with my feet. His...*manhood? Burgeoning length? Broad sword?* (I read too many romance novels) slapped against my leg and once I ran my hand along his newly dubbed, *gracious plenty*, it was apparent I hadn't a clue as to the reality of what his pants actually contained until that moment.

He was *much* larger than I'd thought, but I was already committed to him and to seeing this through so I wrapped my hand around him at the base, firmly stroking up and causing his head to snap back with a hiss of pleasure. Hearing him making that sound and knowing I was the cause of it, turned me on even more. I increased the speed of my hand, rubbing the moisture pooling at the tip back over him on my downward stroke, while Eric's mouth and fingers multitasked their way over my upper and lower halves.

He slipped a finger inside of me making me gasp at first, but it soon turned into moans as he added a second finger. He continued thrusting them in sync with the strokes of my hand on him when I felt a pull in my lower abdomen as the multiple sensations ran through me. It continued to grow, making my movements more frantic and my pace increase, when his fingers ran over a spot inside of me catching us both by surprise as I screamed out with the pleasure that suddenly exploded through my body. Whatever I thought I'd been doing in the shower or in my bed late at night was wrong. All wrong. What Eric had just done was right. All right.

When I could finally see straight, I looked at Eric to see he was wearing the biggest smile I'd ever seen as he asked, "Are you okay?"

"I'll say..." I giggled. He leaned down kissing me again until my toes curled, but I pulled away first, wanting to finish what we'd started.

I wrapped my hand around him again asking, "Did you bring the condoms?"

His eyes furrowed slightly when he replied, "Yes, but are you sure you're ready for this? I don't want you to feel like you *have* to do this just because I'm leaving tomorrow." He leaned down, pressing his lips against mine in a gentle kiss declaring, "I would wait forever for you."

I felt the tears trickle down into my hair at the sincerity in his voice and I responded, "Yes, I'm sure. I'm sure about you; about us. I love you Eric and I want to experience everything that happens in a loving relationship with you."

I pulled him back into a kiss that quickly inflamed our passion until neither one of us could wait any longer. Eric reached back for his shorts, pulling a condom from his pocket, and carefully rolled it on before settling himself between my legs.

"Tell me if I hurt you, okay?" he asked worriedly.

I reached up, tucking a lock of his hair behind his ear, and said, "I'll be fine, just go slow."

Eric braced himself on his forearms above me, maneuvering his body until he was poised at my entrance, and slowly pushed inside of me. Both of us held our breath as he inched his way forward, stopping whenever I bit my lip at the stinging sensation I felt until my body slowly relaxed around him and then he would push forward again. It seemed to take forever until he was finally all the way inside of me and once the discomfort began to fade away, I urged him to start moving.

Slowly he eased his way out before pushing back in and after a few thrusts the discomfort was replaced with pleasure, so I began to push my hips up against his. I could feel my inner muscles contracting around him and it only made my pace increase, wanting that feeling of euphoria again. Eric pushed his upper body up onto his hands, changing the angle of how our bodies met and the friction against my clit was unexpectedly welcomed. I could feel myself approaching the edge of bliss when I looked up to see Eric staring down at me. The love mixed with lust in his eyes as he stared back into my own was too much and I yelled out his name unable to keep my orgasm at bay for another second. It was enough for Eric to go over the edge with me as his whole body tensed and he grunted out my name with his release.

We were both panting sweaty messes, but I pulled Eric down feeling safe and loved with the weight of his body on top of mine.

Eric leaned up, looking into my eyes and whispered, "I love you."

"I love you too." I couldn't force the tears back no matter how much I tried, so Eric simply held me, allowing me to cry it all out. He'd always hated seeing me cry, but in this instance he knew it was what I'd needed to do.

When the sky began to lighten we knew it was time to start heading back to town. Eric had brought his things with him so he could go straight to the bus stop after he walked me home and I cried all over again seeing that all of his belongings could fit into a duffle bag. He deserved so much more than the shitty life he'd been born into and I had to force myself to stop crying so he could at least leave without his last memory of me being a tear covered wreck.

I soon found out I couldn't even give him that.

When we neared the front of my house, my father was waiting on the front porch and he stormed up to us shouting, "I TOLD YOU TO STAY AWAY FROM MY DAUGHTER!"

"Daddy, stop!" I cried.

"Sheriff Stackhouse..." Eric began, but my father cut him off.

"The best thing you ever did was join the military, so just go and forget the name Sookie Stackhouse!"

I could see Eric was hurt by his words, but he stood tall with his head held high replying, "With all due respect sir, the best thing I ever did was fall in love with your daughter." Eric had never once disrespected my father or raised his voice with him, which never ceased to amaze me, but it wasn't a trait we shared.

"STOP IT DADDY!" My nerves were raw, but seeing Eric's smirk when I stomped my foot in frustration forced me to smile. We would be okay no matter what.

Completely ignoring my red-faced father, I turned towards Eric and wrapped my arms around him, squeezing him tight and said, "I love you Eric Northman and don't you forget it. I'll be looking for my love letters, so I hope you've got plenty of paper in that bag of yours."

With his face buried in my hair once more he said, "I love you Sookie Stackhouse and I always will. Try not to get any paper cuts opening all of the letters you'll be getting, you always get dizzy whenever you see blood."

"That happened *one time*," I protested unwilling to let him go just yet.

"But I always worry about you, so try not to get into too many dangerous situations while I'm gone. Maybe I should send you a letter opener."

"Death by mail," I snorted, looking up at him.

"There's the smile I wanted to see," he said softly before leaning down and, given our present company, gave me a chaste kiss on the lips. "I'll call you as soon as I can and I'll write you too." I could barely hold it together when I saw his eyes fill with tears as he said, "I love you," before turning back towards town.

"I love you too!" I called out after him and he turned to give me one last wave goodbye before breaking into a jog as he turned the corner. I might have been able to handle it better if it weren't for the tears I saw falling freely down his face and I crumpled to the ground sobbing.

I felt my father's attempt to scoop me up, but I pushed him away crying, "He's gone, are you happy now?"

"It's for the best Sookie. You don't need someone like him in your life. I won't allow it."

I pushed myself up off of the ground, glaring at him and said, "There's nothing you can do about it. There's nothing left for you to punish me with and I'll be gone in a few months. Eric and I will be just fine, you'll see."

I'd never seen the look that crossed my father's face before as he said, "We'll see about that," and it frightened me. "You've got another six weeks until you turn 18 and as long as you're living under my roof, you **WILL** do as I say."

We each returned to our metaphorical corners with me ignoring him as much as possible from then on. I would lie in bed crying every night, missing Eric and missing Gran. If she were still there, none of it would have happened. Eric would be living with her and she was the only one that could get Daddy to back down when he got as stubborn as he'd been acting lately.

I tried not to worry too much when I didn't hear from Eric right away, figuring he would be busy getting all of his beautiful hair shaved off and into his new uniforms; which I had to admit, I was looking forward to seeing him in.

When a whole week went by with no calls or letters, I told myself that the training he was going through was very intense, with long hours, but he would write or call the first chance he got.

When another week went by with no calls or letters, I told myself that he was probably still getting into the swing of things there and writing didn't come easily to him so he'd probably started numerous letters, wanting to get them just right and wouldn't send them until he deemed them perfect.

Then another week went by, and another. With so much time on my hands, and no friends or family (I was still mad at my father) to occupy me, I had nothing to do *but* think. I couldn't come up with any plausible excuses as to why Eric hadn't contacted me in the time that he'd been gone. I had a stack of letters I'd written to him, one for every day he'd been gone, ready to mail out, but I had no address to send them to. I knew better than to go ask his mother if she'd heard from him so I was left at a complete loss on what to do or who to contact. The faith I had in him, in us, was slowly fading; something I'd never fathomed was even possible.

I started spending my days in bed, unwilling to face the world, and tried to lose myself in my dreams of happier times spent with Eric. My weight dropped when I lost my appetite and the most interaction I got from the outside world came from the television I blankly stared at for hours on end, not taking in anything playing out on the screen. I was too numb to even maintain my hostility towards my father, but couldn't muster up much more than the occasional grunt in reply to whatever question he'd ask me. I knew he was worried about the change in my demeanor, but I didn't care enough...to care. Never in my life had I felt so alone.

In what had to be a desperate attempt to draw me out of my shell, he sat down on my bed one evening saying, "It's probably all for the best." I didn't bother asking him what he was referring to because I already knew; Eric. "He's a boy from a small town that's finally gone out into the world, seeing everything it has to offer. It would only be natural for someone to want to experience everything out there and, in doing so, sometimes time slips away and feelings change. You'll see when you start college in a few weeks. You'll be so busy with your classes and making new friends, that you won't even notice he's not around anymore."

The whole bed shook with the new round of sobs I'd been too deadened to cry in the last few weeks and he left my room without ever bringing it up again.

Now, here I was back out at the fairgrounds where we'd first met. I didn't realize I'd been crying while I reminisced over our lives together until I saw the front of my shirt was soaking wet from my tears. I saw the lifeguard stand a few feet away, barely seven feet off the ground, and could hardly believe I'd once thought it so tall. I would be leaving in a few short days to go down to LSU to get settled before classes started the following week, so I saw it as my last opportunity to say goodbye to Eric.

I pushed up off of the ground and dusted myself off before walking over and climbing up the narrow stairs to the top. As I stood on the 'balcony' I'd imagined as a young girl, I found it ironic that I'd once called us Romeo and Juliet thinking it was a love story with a happy ending. Of course I knew better now and a stray tear ran down my cheek realizing Eric and I wouldn't be

having one either, but I wouldn't be bitter about it. Even knowing how everything turned out, I would do it all over again choosing to just be grateful I'd once had him in my life. I was still in love with him, despite everything, but even if that somehow changed, I knew he would always own a piece of my heart.

Smiling for the first time in weeks, finally feeling a sense of peace wash over me, I turned my face towards the sun and said goodbye to my first true love.

EPOV

I stepped off the bus with my duffle bag thrown over my shoulder and headed towards Sookie's house doing double time. Almost nine weeks had passed since we'd said our tearful goodbyes without a word from her. I wrote her everyday and anxiously awaited her replies, only to be disappointed over and over when I didn't get so much as a postcard. When my letters started coming back to me marked 'Return to Sender' I knew something was wrong, so I called her house at the first opportunity I had.

Basic training was no joke and we didn't have any free time at the beginning, but as the weeks passed by we slowly earned more liberties, like using the phone. I tried calling during different times of the day, different days of the week, but each and every time her father would answer the phone. Each and every time I would ask to speak to Sookie, and each and every time he would tell me that she didn't want to speak to me.

I didn't believe him for a second. Somehow he'd managed to intercept my mail and keep her from answering the phone. Let's see if he could keep her from answering the door.

I was worried to death that she was left thinking I'd forgotten all about her. I knew how lonely I'd felt not being able to talk to or hear from her in the two months I'd been gone, but I also knew it was her father's doing. She likely had no clue the lengths he would go to, to keep us apart and I would be damned if I'd let it continue on. I figured she'd be leaving for college soon and he would never give me her address there, so as soon as I graduated basic training I hopped onto the first bus back home, on leave for a few days until I had to depart for my first assignment.

I learned firsthand how difficult it was not being with Sookie for such a long time and I didn't like it at all. I missed her so much and wanted for us to be together all the time, so after another failed attempt at calling her one night, I looked on the internet and saw that LSU offered many of their courses online. Sookie could still attend college from anywhere in the world as long as there was internet service. My first assignment in the army would be at Stuttgart Army Airfield, in Baden-Wuerttemberg, Germany and I wanted her to come with me so we could explore everything together like we'd always imagined.

I wanted her to come with me as my wife.

As soon as I rounded the corner of her street and her house came into view, I sprinted the remaining distance calling out her name as loud as I could.

When her front door swung open I half expected her father to be holding a shotgun pointed at me, so I was surprised when he had nothing more than a look of resignation on his face.

"Where is she?" I demanded.

"You're not going to give up are you?" he asked, completely ignoring my question.

"No, I'm not. Now where is she?" I asked again.

"You're going to ruin her life. She has a chance to go to college and experience the world. If you love her as much as you claim to, why would you want to take that away from her?"

Deep down, I always knew everything he'd done over the years was based on his love for Sookie. It was the only thing that kept me from being disrespectful to him through the years and the time had come for me to convince him of how much I loved her too.

"Sheriff, I know how much you love your daughter and that you only want what's best for her, but I love her too. From that very first day when we'd met at the carnival, I knew there was something different about her. She was sweet and caring, and for whatever reason decided I was worthy of being her friend. She was the first person that made me feel like I mattered with the smile that would always light up her face whenever she saw me. She never judged me for what I lacked in material things, but based on who I was inside."

"She learned it from your mother," I raised my eyebrow at him knowing she didn't learn it from him before continuing. "Gran was the first adult in my life to care enough to bother trying to figure out what was wrong with me and then go to the trouble to fix it. Without her, I don't know that I'd be able to read even now and before her, there were many nights that I went to bed hungry because my mother spent her last dollar at a bar trying to pick up a new guy. Don't you see that *your* family is *my* family. How could I *not* fall in love with your daughter when my entire life has revolved around her? She's like the sun my world orbits around and there's nothing I wouldn't do for her; no sacrifice I wouldn't make. So if you can look me in the eye and honestly tell me that she's been doing fine without me in the time that I've been gone, I'll turn around and never darken your doorstep again."

I watched as he contemplated everything after I'd bared my soul to him and just when I thought he might end up closing the door in my face he said, "She's been miserable. She won't eat, she barely speaks. It's like she's dead inside and it's killing me."

My heart broke all over again, but I knew this was my one shot at getting him to finally see me as someone worthy of his daughter's attention. "Mr. Stackhouse, I love your daughter with all of my heart and I want to spend the rest of my life with her. I know she values your opinion so I'm asking you for your daughter's hand in marriage. I'll ask her to marry me, with or without your approval, but I'd like it just the same and I know it would mean the world to her."

"Now? But what about college? You're both too young!" he flustered out.

I was thankful I'd already checked it out, so I didn't hesitate when I replied, "LSU offers full courses online. She can still attend college no matter where we are. And I know that we're still young, and I don't think we'll have an easy time of it, but I love your daughter enough to make whatever sacrifice I have to so we can be together. I'm not a bad person..."

His chest rose and fell with the huge sigh he let out and answered, "I know you're not. You probably haven't heard, but your stepfather got arrested last week for distributing illegal narcotics. He was within a thousand yards of a school too, so he won't be seeing the free world for a few years. I don't believe the marijuana in his car was yours and I don't believe you'd hurt my daughter. She was always full of sunshine when you were around, but since you've been gone you can barely see her though the clouds. I want to see her shine again so if you want my seal of approval, you've got it."

A feather could have knocked me down at that moment. I never thought he'd actually agree and only hoped for a begrudging *'I'll kill you if you hurt her'* type of consent. If it weren't for the handshake he then gripped me with, I probably would have fallen over from the shock.

"I don't know where she ran off to, but she headed that way," he said as he released my hand and pointed down the road.

I dropped my bag on the porch yelling out, "Thanks Mr. Stackhouse!" as I took off running in the direction he'd pointed towards. I kept running for miles, calling out her name, until I reached the fairgrounds. She was standing at the top of the lifeguard stand with her eyes closed, facing the sun. It was the exact same picture I'd seen on the first day we'd met and I was drawn towards her now just as much as I had been back then. The only difference was today I could tell she'd been crying.

I walked forward waiting for her to open her eyes, but unable to wait another minute, I cleared my throat to get her attention. Her eyes shot open and took a moment to adjust before she could see me standing on the ground below her.

"Hi Juliet," I said, recalling our first exchange with a smile.

As my eyes took in her features, I could see how much smaller she was by the way her clothes hung off of her frame and her skin was the palest I'd seen in years, almost like when we'd first met. It was difficult to stand there without trying to touch her, but I could see the doubt etched on her face and I knew I had to explain.

So I did. I told her everything that happened since I'd been gone and I had every one of the letters I'd written to her in my duffle bag back at her house. The more I talked, the more her face seemed to brighten and when I was through, I waited patiently for her to process it all.

"I kept waiting to hear from you, some sign or acknowledgement that you were still thinking of me, and when I didn't, my mind conjured up all kinds of reasons why. Just today, it settled on believing that our relationship would never progress beyond childhood sweethearts, no matter how much my heart tells me I'm wrong." She looked into my eyes and asked, "Am I wrong?"

I fought the urge to pull her down and into my arms, knowing after everything she'd been through over the last two months she needed to be able to make the choice to come to me. So I did the only thing I could think of and said, "I know your father's approval is important to you and it took quite a little persuading, but..."

I knelt down on the ground in front of her and pulled out the small engagement ring I'd bought using the money I'd saved from my pocket. Holding it up I said, "All I know is that *we* belong together; I know that I could never be happy without you by my side; I know that I love you more than life itself. Will you marry me Sookie?"

I'd never been so nervous in my entire life and my hand shook as I watched her slowly descend the rickety wooden stairs towards me with her tear filled eyes going back and forth from my face to the ring in my hand. She seemed at a loss for words, so I thought I'd help her out.

"Sookie, every love story needs a happy ending, you told me so. Baby, just say 'Yes'."

A huge grin lit up her face as she said, "I don't know, you never even officially asked me to be your girlfriend, so marriage is kind of a big jump, don't you think?"

I could see the life coming back into her eyes and I pulled her down into my lap, burying my face into her hair and growled, "Sookie..."

"Yes, Eric?" she giggled.

"No, not 'Yes, Eric?' Say 'Yes Eric.'"

Our story would have a happy ending, but it had only just begun when she whispered into my ear, "Yes Eric."