

Title: **One and Only**

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Chapter 1: Chapter One

Chapter One

SPOV

Bill had decided we would move ourselves and drive to Seattle so he could save the money his company would've paid for professional movers and airfare. I wasn't keen to spend close to four days driving there, especially since I knew we'd be listening to nothing but jazz and he wouldn't let me do any of the driving, but it wasn't like I had much of a choice. I also hated that we'd be leaving the week before Thanksgiving, but tried to appease myself knowing we'd at least be set up in our new apartment by the time Christmas came around. Christmas had always been my favorite holiday, but this would be my first one without Gran. I'd planned on visiting her grave Christmas day, but now that that was no longer an option I had to settle on bringing a grave blanket to the cemetery before we left. Bill had thought it was a waste of money, but I used my tip money from my waitressing job, so he couldn't say too much. That money was for me to do as I wished while my paychecks were direct deposited into his account and I was so angry at him for being so coldhearted about my Gran that I gave him the silent treatment for the first leg of our trip, reminiscing on how we came to be there in the first place.

"We're moving," he'd said without any fanfare.

My fork clattered to my plate hearing Bill's words, but when my mouth opened to protest he gave me that look; the one that told me that he knew best and he shouldn't be questioned. Unfortunately, it was a look I knew well.

My parents had died when I was seven and my Gran, who had raised me since then, passed away just a few months earlier. She had approved of my relationship with Bill because he was nothing but a proper southern gentleman in her presence and I'd never told her otherwise. He'd been that way with me in the beginning too and for the first time I'd felt adored by someone I wasn't related to. Bill came from a somewhat privileged background and I'd felt lucky to have caught his eye, but even more so because he pursued me so zealously. He'd quickly become my whole world, to the detriment of my other friendships, and when Gran had passed away he'd convinced me to sell the farmhouse that had been in my family for generations and move in with him. I hadn't really wanted to, either sell the house that had been my home for the majority of my life or move in with him, and I guessed my cat Tina didn't want to either because she ran away only days after the move, but Bill convinced me it was all for the best. At the time, I'd felt so lost in

my grief over losing my last family member that I really didn't have the willpower to make much of an argument.

My friends, who I'd known for my entire life, disappeared one by one as well. None of them approved of Bill, with each of them doing their best to try and convince me that our relationship wasn't a healthy one, but he didn't approve of them either and said they were just jealous of what we had together. A part of me believed them, but I was stubborn by nature and determined that I would one day change Bill's views; on me; on my friendships; on my wants and dreams and yet here we were, two years into our relationship, but I was the only one that had changed and now I didn't know how to even start to find *me* again.

"Where are we moving to?" I asked, adding, "And what about my job?"

His face held no humor, but then it rarely did as he answered, "Seattle and you're a waitress Sookie. It's not like you'll have a hard time finding a new one."

He didn't think highly of my job either, but had made it perfectly clear he'd expected me to pull my own weight financially. I'd had to drop out of the community college I was attending part time when Gran got sick and the money I'd saved for my education went towards her medical bills, so there wasn't anything left for me to use to go back until I'd sold the farmhouse. I'd suggested to Bill that I could use that money to finish my education, but he was adamant that we had to save it for when we got married and bought our own home.

Not that he'd proposed yet.

I wasn't even sure that I wanted him to anymore.

I'd kind of wondered if that was the purpose for our dinner in a fancier restaurant that night and the fact that he expected me to move with him halfway across the country only fueled that thought, but with his next words I knew that wasn't the case at all.

"I've been promoted. That's why we're moving. I'm being sent to work at the corporate offices in Seattle." He sat there smugly, always the first one to expect praise to be heaped upon him but rarely ever doled it out, and asked, "Aren't you going to congratulate me?"

I'd never felt more confused and my brain settled on Seattle. Where it always rained? I was a child of the sun and cherished the times I could lay out with a book in hand and the radio on. Bill didn't approve of my little vanity either saying I would age prematurely, so I'd bought some self-tanning lotion that I kept in the bathroom as a red herring and always listened for his car whenever I felt brave enough to chance it. I hadn't been caught yet.

He had still been looking at me expectantly, so I'd forced a smile onto my face and said, "Congratulations Bill."

I'd tuned out the rest of his self-glorified diatribe and tried to come to terms with the fact that I'd be moving away from the only place I'd ever called home while trying to find the silver lining to

my situation, but the best I could come up with was hoping the change in scenery would be a fresh start for us both.

The next few weeks were busy with me packing up our apartment, but no matter how much I tried to be happy we were moving, a little piece of my heart darkened with every cardboard box I sealed. I wanted to try to find the time to at least talk to my old friends to let them know that I'd be leaving, but Bill kept track of my cell phone calls and since he was a computer guru, I didn't dare use our home computer. I'd hoped to make the calls from the diner where I worked, but I chickened out every time I had the chance. Not only was I afraid that Bill would somehow find out, but I knew they would try and talk me out of going. It probably wouldn't take much effort on their part to do just that, but I had nowhere to go if I stayed.

Tara and Sam were my closest friends, once upon a time, and the ones I missed the most. I really wanted to talk to them before we left and I knew hearing their voices again, finding out all they'd been up to over the last year, would be like a balm to soothe my soul, but I hadn't realized how much time had passed since I'd last spoken to them or how much I'd missed them until I knew I wouldn't be seeing them again. Bill would have had a conniption if he knew I'd wanted to speak to Sam since he was always worried that any man that talked to me was his competition, no matter how many times I tried to tell him otherwise. At first I'd been flattered that he loved me so much to get that jealous, but now it was just tiresome and had gotten to the point that I didn't even make eye contact with other men if I could avoid it just to save myself the hassle later on, but I was hoping maybe with us living thousands of miles away he'd be okay with me talking to Tara again.

I'd spent the whole first day watching the scenery go by and with every mile we traveled I felt a little piece of myself die inside. The more I sat in silence and thought about what my life had become, the more I realized how much I had changed. I used to be fun loving and had more friends than I could count. Now I rarely smiled, at least genuinely, and the only person I had in my life was calling me childish every hour on the hour, caring nothing for the fact that I was giving up everything for him; *had* given up everything for him.

If nothing else, at least I could count on Bill to be punctual.

"Bill?" I asked tentatively. We were well into day two of our journey and were somewhere in Wyoming. The ground was covered in snow and it was the first time I'd ever seen any real accumulation. It was also the first time I'd smiled in a long time seeing it, even though I wasn't dressed for that kind of weather. The coat I had on was fine for a Louisiana winter, but I'd need a new one now, certain I would freeze if I was outdoors for longer than it took to walk to and from the car.

"You're talking to me now?" he drawled out.

It was a fair question since I hadn't really said much more than what was necessary to him since we'd left Louisiana. Instead, I ignored his question and shored myself up knowing I would have my work cut out for me, saying, "Bill, I was thinking. Once we get settled I think I would like to start keeping in touch with Tara again. I've known her my whole life and now that we're moving,

I'd like to be able to hear about what's going on back home." I conveniently left out the part where Tara and Sam were friends, so I'd be able to vicariously catch up with him through her.

Out of habit, I flinched slightly seeing him tense up. He'd never hit me or even raised his voice really, but he didn't need to. His tone and scathing looks were enough to bring me down to my metaphorical knees.

"Seattle will be your home now, so there's no need. Besides, you'll be busy setting up our new home and looking for work."

"But..." I tried to continue on with my planned speech. I'd been working on it for close to two days now and ignored the warning bells going off in my head, telling me to shut up and try again at another time.

"But nothing," he interrupted me. "You expect me to allow you to talk to your poor excuse for a friend when you haven't even apologized for your behavior over the last two days? I don't think you appreciate just how much I have to put up with, with you."

My stomach and head dropped in unison from his tone and my mouth opened, ready to apologize. It was almost automatic anymore. In fact, I was sure I'd said 'I'm sorry' more often than 'I love you' over the last year, but I swallowed the words instead with my brain repeating his use of the word 'allow' over and over again and I turned my head to look out the window while my mind replayed our entire relationship over the last two years all over again. If I was honest with myself, I hadn't been happy in a very long time. If I was honest with myself, thoughts of breaking up with Bill and staying in Louisiana had crossed my mind more than once over the last few weeks, but I didn't have anything or anyone. Bill kept a tight rein on the money with my paychecks direct deposited right into his account and Bill used that to pay for my things, like clothing and toiletries, all of which, over time, he'd begun to select without any of my input. My tip money was the only money I actually got to keep, but since Bill took care of everything else I hadn't really wanted for anything and I'd used the majority of it that I'd saved on the Christmas present I'd bought for him with the rest going towards Gran's grave blanket.

If I left him now, I'd have nothing. Literally.

But what would it end up costing me by staying with him?

"I see you're back to being childish," he snapped when I hadn't said anything and I half thought about just asking him if he even loved me anymore. It had been a long time since he'd said the actual words and even longer since I'd felt loved by him, but then I decided against asking knowing I needed to figure out what I felt before needing to know how he did.

I heard the GPS telling us to take the next exit and knew we would be settling down for the night. Bill had broken up the trip into ten hour shifts spread out over four days and my stomach growled since we hadn't stopped to eat after having our free continental breakfast first thing that morning. The town we'd be staying at for the night was small and while there was a larger city a mere thirty miles farther down the road, it would've thrown off Bill's timetable.

God forbid.

The motel we'd booked a room at for the night had appeared much cleaner in the photos online, but I was just grateful it had heat. My coat was definitely too thin for the kind of winter weather we found ourselves in and when the clerk said the only place in town to get something to eat at that time of night would be the bar across the street, I almost begged Bill to drive us there, but managed to keep my mouth shut since I was still *being childish* and shivered my way there in silence.

There were a few people scattered around the room with several sitting up at the bar and since there didn't appear to be a hostess, we chose a table near the fireplace in the corner of the room and sat down. Bill grimaced seeing they only had standard bar fare on offer and huffed out, "I have to use the restroom. When the server arrives just order us a salad with the dressing on the side and water with a wedge of lemon." He looked around the room haughtily, adding, "In a *clean* glass."

I hated it when he got like that. Personally, I thought the bar had character. The floor was a dark hardwood with rich cherry stained wood paneling that rose up from the floor to the height of the tables and the walls were painted in an eggshell color with Celtic wall art with signs hung above each of the booths depicting Irish cities like 'Corcaigh/CORK' and 'Luimneach/LIMERICK'. Surrounding the stone hearth were green hand painted phrases, I assumed in Gaelic, and were beautiful looking even though I didn't understand them at all. It was obvious the owner had an affinity towards Ireland and I wondered if they were of Irish descent or just did it for the sake of having an 'Irish pub'.

I was staring down at the menu debating on ordering a greasy cheeseburger or fish and chips, just to get on Bill's nerves since I knew he wouldn't approve, when the shadow of a person appeared over the table and I looked up immediately becoming awestruck. Handsome would be putting it mildly because the man standing there was utterly gorgeous. His blond hair was the same shade as mine and hung down to his shoulders and his broad shoulders were on display thanks to his black tank top that was tucked into faded low rise blue jeans and ended in black biker boots. Black tribal tattoos snaked down his arms and peeked over the neckline of his shirt mingling with classic Celtic designs and I shivered just looking at him, but I didn't know whether it was just from his looks or the fact that he was wearing so little clothing when I was sure penguins would thrive in the weather going on outside. Whichever one it was, he was certainly giving me happy feet.

It had been a long time since I'd felt them.

My smile mirrored his own as he asked, "Well doll, what can I get ya this evenin'?"

I blushed clear down to my toes which only deepened when a low chuckle rumbled through his chest, but my eyes refused to look away from the living breathing Adonis in front of me. His Irish accent only added to his charm and that would be why I hadn't seen Bill walking towards us until I heard him say, "My wife and I will be having salads if you can manage to stop flirting with her."

The man's gaze flicked down to my naked left hand and we both looked over at Bill, with me about to deny the fact that we were married when the look he gave me made me shut my mouth. Adonis cleared his throat, making Bill look back at him, and smirked down at him since he was at least six inches taller, clearly not intimidated, saying, "Ask me bollix and see what they can do for ya." I wasn't sure what that meant exactly, but I could only guess that it wasn't good. His eyes turned back towards me and his eyebrow cocked up with him smiling and asking, "Is that what you want darlin'? You got a grand bit o'kit and I'd hate for ya to lose any o'it."

I wasn't really sure what he'd meant, but hoped it was some sort of compliment and after everything I'd been thinking about recently, it felt kind of nice hearing it. I was curvy, much to Bill's dismay, and had to adhere to a strict menu at home that he made up, but since I worked at a diner, I tended to get my fill of greasy foods when I was away from his prying eyes. I knew it was a bad idea before I even opened my mouth, but since I was still being childish and I felt a little stronger having my handsome temporary Irish ally at my side, I smiled back at him saying, "Actually, I'll have a cheeseburger."

"Sookie," Bill warned.

My elation was quickly snuffed out knowing from *that* tone I was in deep trouble now and the remaining two days of our trip would surely be uncomfortable at best. My options were nonexistent at the moment since I had to rely on Bill for everything, so I gave in and with my eyes looking down at the table in defeat, I mumbled, "I'll have the salad."

I didn't dare look up until I heard Adonis say, "Your orders will be right up," and his shadow disappeared from the tabletop. Bill took a seat opposite of me and when I finally chanced a peek at him I could tell he was seething inside.

"Is that how you act whenever I'm not around?" he asked. I knew better than to say anything; knew he didn't want me to answer since he'd already decided on the answer himself and he continued on, saying, "You flirt with strange men like a common whore?"

"I wasn't flirting Bill," I mumbled meekly. I barely batted a lash at Bill likening me to a whore since nasty name calling was on his list of 'Do's' when he was in a mood and instead I was stuck on the accusation I'd been flirting. I doubted I even remembered how to flirt and I certainly wouldn't have tried with Adonis, even before Bill came along, since he was clearly out of my league.

"You most certainly were. And what did you think you were doing ordering a cheeseburger? Haven't we discussed your weight? If you're not careful you'll balloon up and not be fit to be my wife much less the mother to my children."

The more he chastised me the more I realized that the promise of being his wife or mother of his children was truly the last thing I wanted. In the beginning it was all I could think about; a white picket fence; 2.5 kids and a dog. There would be bake sales and PTA meetings and for the first time since my early childhood, I'd be a part of a normal family. I'd completely romanticized our

relationship which had been easy to do when it was still new and somewhere along the way I'd lost myself trying to become what he wanted me to be.

But now? After all of the thinking I'd been doing, now I could only hope that I'd be able to squirrel enough money away before he actually proposed so I could get away from him and try and find me again, but I knew I'd have to watch myself in the meantime and play along until I could make my getaway. It would be harder to do from Seattle, but not impossible and I latched onto that thought feeling scared but happy now that I could picture a light at the end of the tunnel.

I kept my head and eyes down in submissive silence, but my temporary happiness disappeared as my stomach dropped when a cheeseburger appeared on the table in front of me. When I looked up, I saw the Adonis standing there with a grin on his face as he said, "It's on the house. You look like you need a little more meat on your bones."

I knew he was just trying to be nice, but he was unknowingly making my immediate future worse and I could feel Bill staring a hole into my forehead, so I snapped at my former ally, "I ordered a salad. Please take this away and just give me what I asked for."

I wanted to beseech him with my eyes so he'd understand that it wasn't him I was angry at, but I wouldn't dare knowing Bill hadn't taken his eyes off of me. Adonis's eyes narrowed angrily back at me and he snatched the plate from the table, but as he did so it was then that I'd noticed he'd already left two salads off to the side and he pushed one in front of me, snarling, "Enjoy," before he stomped away.

Bill hadn't moved a muscle, so I didn't pick up my fork even though I was starving, waiting to see what his reaction would be although I doubted it would be good.

"You weren't flirting, huh?" he asked in a low voice that trickled uncomfortably down my spine. "Do you think he randomly offers free meals to any of the other patrons?" Bill looked around dramatically before making me and our silverware jump when he pounded his fist on the table, saying, "No! He doesn't!" I curled in on myself when Bill abruptly stood up with his chair skittering behind him and before he stalked out of the bar he leaned down, putting his face directly in front of mine, and said, "You have no idea of how good you have it with me, so maybe you need to see what your life would be like without me."

My first thought was that I'd be happy again, but I didn't dare say it out loud knowing enough damage had been done for one night. Unfortunately, it wasn't the first time something like that had happened and I knew Bill would be angry and takeoff without another word. I figured he'd be taking a walk outside to cool off and hoped he would settle down enough for me to apologize when he came back, even though I didn't feel sorry, but I knew it was my only option at the moment unless I wanted to spend the foreseeable future with a brooding Bill. My appetite was lost though, so I merely picked at the salad for something to do and cringed when Adonis strolled by and dropped the bill onto the table without a word. I wanted to call him back and apologize, but I was too afraid that Bill would walk back in at that precise moment, so I clamped down on my lips before the words could come out.

That light at the end of the tunnel was so dim now, it was virtually pitch black.

Chapter 2: Chapter Two

Chapter Two

EPOV

I wished she would leave already. Her wanker husband was a gobshite; a complete and utter tool, but, even so, I still couldn't seem to take my eyes off of her. From the moment she stepped into my bar it was like she'd brought the sun in with her which was a rare sight these days with the days getting shorter and the nights getting longer. I hadn't even noticed that she hadn't come in alone, but I should've known better than to think someone as pretty as she would be all by her lonesome.

The wanker had been gone for a while now and I wasn't sure what was going on between the two of them, but it didn't look good and when all she did was pick at her salad, I felt like the tool and wished I'd left the burger on the table for her instead of getting langered and snatching it back. There was nothing to be done for it now I supposed and forced myself to concentrate on my other work instead of staring at her, so I was taken a bit off guard when she was suddenly standing in front of me with the bill in her hand.

Her eyes only met mine briefly before dropping to her feet as she softly said in that sweet little accent of hers, "Um...my boyfriend must have gone back to our room. We're staying at the motel across the street and he has all of the money with him, so would it be okay with you if I run over there and get it from him and come back and pay?"

Boyfriend? He'd said they were married, but I was just anxious for her to be gone already knowing I wouldn't be able to concentrate on anything else so long as she was in the room, so I just waved my hand at her dismissively, saying, "Don't worry about it."

Her head shot up as she said, "Oh no! I'll pay for the meal. I just need to go get the money."

I could see that she was a stubborn one and in an effort to be rid of the distraction she was, I said, "Fine." I didn't care one way or the other; they were just feckin' salads, but she needed to leave because if he came back in and got mouthy, I wasn't sure I'd be able to stop myself from punching him in his cake-hole.

She opened her mouth again, but nothing came out at first until she finally said so low I could barely hear her, "I...I'm sorry. About earlier," but she turned tail and scampered out the door before I could reply. Even when she'd snapped at me earlier there was something about her that struck me as off considering she was nothing but rosy smiles until the arsehole showed his ugly mug and truthfully it wasn't her I was mad at, but seeing as how they were staying at the motel

across the way, I didn't give it too much thought considering they'd probably be on their way come morning.

I forced myself to quit thinking about her and yelled out last call since there weren't too many customers left with the weather calling for more snow that night, I started closing up the place when the last two regulars paid up there bar tab. I only had two part time cooks on staff and normally had a waitress that doubled up as a bar keep when it got busy, but I'd had to let Felicia go a few weeks earlier. She'd gotten it in her nutter head that we were a couple when we'd never even been out on a date. We'd fooled around once after we went on the lash a bit after hours there at the bar, but that was the extent of it and I should've known better than to mess around with an employee, so I swore off doing it again if I ever managed to get that position filled. There weren't many looking for jobs in those parts and the ones that were, well...I'd need to go on the lash again to be dumb enough to hire them.

After wiping down the tables, I stacked the chairs on top, busying myself with cleaning up the rest of the bar and had forgotten all about the doll with the wanker boyfriend until I was locking up for the night. My eyes went straight to her as soon as I stepped out into the cold when I saw her standing outside the motel across the street with her whole body shivering and tears streaming down her face. I felt like a giddy schoolgirl thinking I might be getting that punch in after all and I walked across the street flexing my hands in preparation for my early Christmas present, but when I got closer I could see she was truly distraught.

"Are you okay?" I asked and felt bad when she jumped in fright, so I put my hands out signaling I wasn't gonna to hurt her. Him? I was definitely gonna to put a hurtin' on him.

"Yes," she answered immediately, but was quickly overtaken by sobs as she sputtered out, "No..."

I never did like seeing a lass in distress and couldn't stand watching her body trembling like it was. Her coat was no match for the chill in the air, so I took off my leather jacket, leaving me in the hoodie I'd just pulled on, and draped it over her shoulders, asking, "What's got you so upset doll?"

The eejit wasn't worth her tears as far as I was concerned, but she was shaking so violently that I wrapped my arms around her on instinct with my hands rubbing up and down her arms and back trying to warm her up. Her body had initially stiffened, but while she didn't exactly melt into me, she didn't push me away either and after a minute or two she seemed to relax a little bit in my arms. When she calmed down enough to speak, all she said was, "He left."

"Who?" I asked. "Your boyfriend?" While I didn't exactly like the idea that he was her boyfriend, it was a hell of a lot better than him being her husband.

She nodded against my chest, so I offered, "Well, why don't you just wait for him in your room instead of out here where you'll freeze to death?"

She shook her head with the cold air killing her shyness as she buried herself deeper into my arms trying to get warm and said, "No, he left me here. He checked out of the motel and left."

What. In. The. Feck? I stood there dumbfounded for a minute wondering what kind of arse leaves his auld wan in the middle of the night in a strange town. From what she'd told me earlier, I already knew he'd had the money between the two of them and would've offered to pay for her room for the night, but the motel office had already closed. There wasn't a lot of traffic round about now, so they didn't keep it manned twenty-four hours a day like in larger towns and cities.

"Come on," I urged, trying to pull her along with me back towards the bar.

Her body locked up as she pulled away and dug in her heels, asking, "Where?"

I wasn't offended knowing it was smart of her to question where some spastic was trying to bugger her off to in the middle of the night, but I was starting to get cold too and said, "You can stay the night at my house." When she looked a bit apprehensive at the thought, I added, "I'd get you a room here, but as you can see there's no one left to hire a room from. You can't just hang around here all night long waiting to see if he'll come back. You'll freeze to death."

She stared up at me with a look like she was trying to read my mind and while I wouldn't kick her outta my bed for eatin' crackers, at the moment at least, I had nothing but honorable intentions, so if she happened to have that strange power I wasn't worried by what she would hear. When another violent shiver worked its way down her spine it seemed her self-preservation instincts kicked in with her finally giving in as her teeth chattered out a soft, "Thank you."

If I'd thought she'd been a distraction before, that was nothing compared to how I felt now that I knew I'd be spending the night with her under the same roof and a million questions ran through my head, but they would have to wait until we got to my place. I really wished I hadn't taken my motorcycle in to work that day, but it hadn't been too bad out when I'd left that morning and the sun had been out. Now we were both going to freeze on the way back, but I only lived a few miles away so it wouldn't be for too long.

She balked again seeing our mode of transportation, but it would be quicker than walking back and I put my helmet on her head, maneuvering her arms into the sleeves of my jacket before zipping her up, and said, "I'd offer you my gloves, but I'll need them, so when you climb on, wrap your arms around me and stick your hands into my pockets."

Her eyes widened at my request and she spat out, "I'll do no such thing!"

When my head caught on to what she must have been thinking, I gestured to my hoodie with the center pocket and said, "This pocket."

I was sure she was blushing, but her skin was already red from the cold and considering the affect watching the way she bit down her lower lip was having down below, I tried to lighten the mood by wagging my eyebrows with a smile and saying, "But we can renegotiate later on after you've warmed up."

And I wasn't even joking.

It worked because she laughed a little and smacked my chest, but didn't hesitate to climb on behind me with her arms wrapping around my body. I could still feel her trembling against me and wished there was another way for me to try and keep her warm, but the best I could do was block the majority of the wind from her as I started the bike and headed for home.

When I pulled up in front of the house five minutes later I parked in the front so I could get her inside as quickly as possible, but she didn't seem to want to let go of me at first. I figured she was frozen and rubbed my hands along her arms trying to get her circulation going again before prying them off of me, but her legs must have been frozen too because she didn't get off of the bike when I did and just shook on top of it, so I left her there while I opened the front door and went back, lifting her up into my arms and carrying her inside bridal style. Once I kicked the door closed behind me I set her on the couch and got a fire started in the fireplace, wrapping her in a blanket, and got a pot of coffee brewing before I went back out to put my bike away in the garage since they were predicting a couple of feet of snow to fall over the next twenty-four hours with it already starting to come down.

I found her right where I'd left her when I got back inside only now she was shivering even worse and I knew the quickest way to warm her up, but wasn't sure how she'd feel about it as I asked, "Would you like to take a bath?"

Her eyes bugged out of her head, so I put my hands up again, saying, "It's the quickest way to warm you up, that's all doll."

Not that I'd be opposed to helping her scrub her back. Or her front. She wouldn't even have to ask nicely.

She bit her lip again and her eyes fell to her feet as she nodded, saying, "Thank you."

She looked so lost in that moment that had that eejit been anywhere nearby I might have very likely killed him for putting her through this; forcing her to rely on a strange man to take care of her with nothing more than the hope that I wouldn't rape or kill her. At least the return of my anger was doing a good job of warming me up and I walked down the hall motioning for her to follow me into the jax and turned on the faucet to get the water warmed up. I pulled a couple of fresh towels out of the linen closet and left them on the sink for her when it dawned on me that she had nothing to wear besides what she had on, so I said, "Wait here," and went into my room. I knew she would be swimming in my clothes, but it was better than nothing and dug out a pair of sweatpants with a drawstring, another sweatshirt, and a thick pair of socks for her to wear as pajamas. When I handed them to her, I said, "I know they're too big, but at least they'll keep you warm. Feel free to use whatever you find. There's an extra toothbrush in the cupboard." I looked around the room trying to remember if I'd forgotten anything and asked, "Do you need anything else?"

When my eyes landed back on hers I could see she was still feeling apprehensive, but she didn't elaborate on whatever it was she was feeling and only asked, "What's your name?"

I remembered her name was Sookie from when the gooter boyfriend had snarled it at her earlier and rolled my eyes thinking, '*Who's the eejit now?*', since I hadn't properly introduced myself yet. Smiling, I answered, "Eric. Eric Northman at your service," and bowed dramatically hoping it would lessen the tension she felt and when I stood up again I was greeted with a tentative smile. I was further shocked when she took a step closer and leant up on her tip toes, placing a chaste kiss on my cheek, saying, "Thank you Eric."

As soon as her lips touched me there was a definite spark between us, but I figured it was probably just static electricity and I quickly backed out of the room and shut the door after me while forcing away all thoughts of her being naked behind that door and just busied myself by changing the sheets on my bed. I had two bedrooms, but the spare room had just been used as storage and while I had another bed in there, it was currently up on its side with a bunch of boxes strewn about the floor. I wasn't going to make her sleep on the couch and I'd fallen asleep on it on more than one occasion, so I knew I'd be fine and when I heard the water turn off I poured us each a cup of coffee and brought them out to the living room. I was stoking the fire when I heard her clear her throat behind me and couldn't help laughing seeing her in my clothes. She wasn't swimming in them; she was drowning, but I thought she looked quite adorable in them so I was pleased.

As soon as she settled herself on the couch I handed her a cup of coffee and sat down at the far end, asking, "Do you want to talk about it?" I wasn't so sure I wanted to hear about it, but I figured she might want to get it off her chest and as a bartender, I'd learned how to be a great listener.

I immediately regretted my words when her lower lip started to tremble, but she bit down on it making it stop. It wasn't nearly as sexy as it had been back at the bar and only made me want track that arse down for upsetting her so. Finally she took a deep breath and said, "I wouldn't know where to begin."

It turned out, that was all she needed to say in order for the last two years of her life to come tumbling out of her mouth and the more she told me, the further enraged I became. I was no saint, but I couldn't understand how anyone could treat someone as sweet as her so poorly, nor could I understand why she would let him. I couldn't see any bruises or anything on her, but then all I could see of her skin was her face and hands, so that didn't tell me much. If he had been physically abusive towards her, she wasn't saying and I didn't feel right pushing her for answers either, so instead I fumed over the fact he'd taken off in the dead of night with every last thing she owned, including all of her money, and left her with quite literally nothing. I still thought she was better off without him though, but she took me by surprise, saying, "I really am sorry."

"What are you apologizing for?" I asked completely flummoxed and hoping like hell she wasn't somehow apologizing for the wanker leaving her there.

"For snapping at you earlier and for putting you out like this," she replied softly.

It wasn't like a made a habit of bringing home pretty girls in the dead of night, at least not recently, but I would've thought all of her attention would be focused on the fact she'd had a

shitty run of luck as of late, so I was still surprised by her gratitude. I couldn't rightly blame her for how she'd spoken to me earlier that night now that I knew what she'd been dealing with and said sincerely, "You have nothing to be sorry for doll." The feckin' fish on the other hand would definitely be sorry if I ever got my hands on him.

I could tell it was a struggle for her to keep her eyes open for much longer and stood up, taking the now empty mug from her hand, and then holding out my own saying, "C'mere. Time for bed."

Her earlier apprehension had disappeared entirely and she took my offered hand without hesitating as I led her down the hallway where I showed her into my room and pulled the covers back, saying, "Climb in."

I'd seen her look into the open doorway of the spare room when we'd passed it by, so it was no surprise when she asked, "But where will you sleep?"

Even though I'd already planned on sleeping on the couch, I was surprised by my own disappointment at her assumption we wouldn't be sharing the bed, but I quickly brushed it off and took one of the pillows from the top, tucking it under my arm and answered, "On the couch." She was already shaking her head no when I put my hand up to stop her, saying, "I fall asleep on the couch all the time. I'll be fine."

When she pulled her lower lip in between her teeth it was right back to being sexy again and all I could think about was sucking it back out with my own two lips, but I knew that would be wrong. She was probably in shock and definitely had a rough night, so I was thankful when she finally released it on her own and said, "Well, thank you again Eric. I'll try and be out of your hair in the morning."

I had a whole list of reasons why I didn't think that would be the case, as well as a few on why I kind of hoped she might stay for a while, but I kept them all to myself and just offered, "I'll see you in the morning."

I turned and left the room, shutting the door behind me, and got settled on the couch. Running my own bar made me a bit of a night owl and I didn't miss early morning meetings one bit, so I flipped on the TV and tried to not think about the blond distraction lying in my bed. If I had a hard time concentrating on other things before when she'd merely been a patron, I was done for now that I not only knew more about her, but she was a scant few feet away; in my bed. Her sorry excuse for a boyfriend leaving her was more like a blessing in disguise as far as I was concerned, but I'd kept those thoughts to myself and spent the next hour running different scenarios through my head as to how I could help her. Even if I arranged for her to get back home to Louisiana, from the sounds of it, it didn't seem like she had anywhere to go home to. Not to mention the fact that he'd taken off with everything she owned.

I was in the middle of imagining different ways I could kill him and where I could hide his body when I heard Sookie cry out and shot down the hallway into my room expecting there to be an intruder. However unlikely it was, I hoped it'd be the gomey.

Instead I found her tossing and turning having some sort of nightmare and I gently shook her awake, saying, "Doll, wake up."

She jerked awake and it was only then that I saw she'd been crying. Her eyes were slightly swollen and rimmed red and my chest ached seeing it, so I smoothed the hair away from her face saying softly, "You're alright. T'was just a nightmare."

Her breaths were still ragged and her eyes were slightly unfocused, but when I went to pull my hand back she snatched it out of midair pleading, "Would you mind...staying with me? Just until I fall back to sleep?"

Since I was willing to kill her boyfriend for her, I couldn't justify not giving in to her simple request and sat down on the edge of the bed, prepared to stay there until she fell asleep. Instead she slid over making my eyebrow creep up into my hairline, silently asking if she was asking what I thought she was asking. She hadn't let go of my hand though so my options were to pull it from her grasp (unacceptable), sit there with my arm stretched halfway over the mattress, or just lie down next to her. I reasoned that lying down next to her would be the simplest choice, no matter that it was the one I wanted the most, and situated myself on the bed so we were lying there facing one another in the dark room. With our hands still clasped between us, I watched as her eyes fluttered shut and barely heard her whisper, "Thank you Eric," before she drifted back to sleep.

Chapter 3: Chapter Three

Chapter Three

SPOV

I woke up to the sound and smell of bacon frying and opened my eyes feeling a bit disoriented until I remembered the events of the night before.

Bill had left me.

And not just in the 'he left me for another woman' sense or something else a little more palatable. He'd literally left me in the middle of nowhere with exactly \$3.78 in my pocket. I didn't even have my cell phone because it was packed away along with every other thing I owned which Bill also took with him.

I was stunned when I'd stepped outside the bar the night before and saw that the moving truck with his car hitched to the back was gone. I'd thought he'd only taken off in a huff, but not once did I think he wouldn't be back and it didn't take long for me to get cold enough to go into the motel office to request a second key to our room. Bill had held onto the one we'd gotten when we checked in, but the desk clerk just looked at me oddly as he told me that Bill had already checked out.

I wandered back out into the cold with a small part of me actually feeling relieved he was gone, but it didn't take long before a much larger part of me was terrified. I'd already decided I didn't want to be with him anymore, but I wasn't ready to be away from him just yet. I needed time to make plans; I needed time to save up any money and then figure out a way to get back home to Louisiana, but now not only did I have no home to go back to, I had no way to get there. He'd left me completely stranded.

Both relief and fear warred inside of me because of it.

If it hadn't been for Eric's kindness I imagine I very well might have frozen to death and I certainly didn't deserve his charity after the way I'd treated him, but I was grateful for him beyond words. He was a complete stranger, but for some reason he made me feel safe. It was something I hadn't felt in a long time, probably not since before Gran had died, but I knew I couldn't rely on his kindness for very long. I'd never been one to take handouts and had always worked for everything I had, but seeing as how Bill had left me with nothing I would have no choice but to swallow my pride and gratefully accept whatever I might be offered until I could figure out what to do, but no matter how much I tried to focus on my own problems, my thoughts kept drifting back to Eric.

And they were exactly innocent thoughts either.

He was no doubt a very handsome man and while I knew there was no way he could fall for someone like me with all of my baggage, I still couldn't help but wonder why someone as nice and as good looking as him was single. He clearly lived alone, so I surmised he might have a girlfriend somewhere, or a boyfriend for all I knew, but something told me he was straight.

It was that same something that told me to mind my own business and stop thinking about him like that because not only did I not need to jump into another relationship, but the likes of Eric Northman would never like me in that way.

It was none of my business, all of it. I had my own problems to deal with, so I pulled myself out of bed and wandered into the bathroom to take care of my morning routine and once my teeth were brushed and my hair suitably tamed with a little water from the sink, I made my way into the kitchen where I saw Eric standing at the stove. He must have heard me coming because he didn't even turn around as he said, "I hope you're hungry."

God. I'd somehow forgotten about his Irish accent and ignored the way it made my stomach flutter, along with one or two other bodily reactions that couldn't be helped, as I agreed, "I am." I actually felt like I was starving, given I really hadn't eaten much the night before, and since I already felt bad for imposing on him like I was, I quickly asked, "Is there anything I can do to help?"

He turned and flashed me a blinding smile, making way more than just my stomach flutter, saying, "I've got it handled. Why don't you get yourself some coffee and have a seat."

I did as I was told and tried not to stare at the back of him as he cooked, but he was a big guy in a small kitchen, so there really wasn't much else to look at, but I forced my eyes away from him and started picking apart a paper napkin out of nervousness, saying, "I really appreciate everything you did for me last night."

"T'wasn't nothin' at all," he replied. "Me auld lade would have me hide if I left a fine young lady such as yourself out in the cold."

"It wasn't 'nothing'," I argued, while making a mental note to ask him later about the words he used that I didn't understand. "If it wasn't for you, I can't imagine what I would've done or where I would've gone." Tears pricked my eyes just thinking about it and I didn't realize Eric had turned around until his hand reached out wiping away one that broke free.

"Now, now," he said softly. "We'll have none o' that around here. You're much prettier when you smile, so why don't you give that a whirl?"

I don't know if it was his words, his accent, or a combination of both, but my tears dried up just as fast as they'd appeared and a small smile formed on my lips. I wasn't even close to beautiful that morning having noticed in the mirror that my eyes were puffy and red and my hair was all over the place since I'd gone to sleep with it wet, but of course he was too nice to say anything about it.

'Nice' was nice for a change.

He slid a plate with heaps of food on it in front of me and I waited for him to start eating before putting a dent into it all. "You're a great cook," I said in between mouthfuls. It wasn't a lie either. Bill was great at finding the blandest recipes in history on the internet, but I was the one that did all of the cooking. I took the fact that Eric could cook and didn't seem to mind doing it as another 'nice' perk.

"Me auld lade taught me all I know," he said a bit wistfully.

I wasn't quite sure what an 'auld lade' was and felt ignorant, but asked anyway, "Is that like your old lady? Are you married?" A flash of something flitted across his eyes too quickly for me to hold onto, but when his face settled on being a little amused, I apologized, "I'm sorry. I've just never heard that word before."

His hand started to reach towards my own, but he pulled back at the last minute and I tried to hide my own disappointment seeing he was still wearing a smile as he said, "Me 'auld lade' is my mum; mom; mother. 'S all the same thing."

I let it slide that he didn't answer the part about him being married, but since he seemed open to explaining some things, I remembered not quite understanding what he'd said to Bill in the bar the night before and asked, "And what about bollix? You told Bill to ask your bollix."

Eric half-laughed and half-choked on the food he'd just put into his mouth and covered it with his hand as he tried to chew and swallow while chuckling. His eyes were leaking tears when he finally caught his breath enough to ask, "Are you sure you want to know? It's not really polite conversation for a man to be having with a woman."

Bill used to parcel out information piece by piece whenever he saw fit and it was just one more thing to add to the funeral pyre of our relationship. I swore to myself right then and there that I was done with not only Bill, but living in the dark and while whatever it was he was might possibly tell me wasn't important, I did want to know. I wanted to have a give and take conversation where I didn't have to censor myself or my thoughts. I wanted to speak freely with someone else and know that there would be no repercussions because I might have my own opinion that opposed theirs, but they wouldn't berate me or brow beat me with my lack of education or knowledge of how things are done in the *real world*.

It felt nice to be out of my 'cage' and stretch my legs as it were, but just feeling that way made me realize just how bad it had been and I didn't know if I should cry over having put up with it for so long or cry in joyous relief that it was finally over. I already knew a small part of the old me was clawing her way to the top for the sheer fact I hated Bill had been the one to leave me first and not the other way around, but I had no intention of seeking him out just to try and right the scales of justice in my mind's eye, nor did I have any reason to take out my Bill frustrations on Eric. I'd already done that once and he was wonderful enough to overlook it in my time of need, so I looked back him and said sincerely, "I would like to know. I promise I won't be offended."

He just shrugged his shoulders like it was no big deal and enunciating his words, he explained, "Translated, 'ask me bollix' means he should ask my balls. In other words, I could care less what he was asking for so he might as well be talking to my balls."

"Oh," I replied. I felt my cheeks enflame hearing him talking so casually about his...uh...balls, but I didn't find him to be crude at all. If I was honest, I actually found him to be quite charming and definitely handsome. He was the exact opposite of Bill in both looks and personality, but I found I had to keep reminding myself that I didn't stand a chance interesting someone like him and I really shouldn't be looking to interest anyone at all right now. Bill and I had just broken up and what I needed to figure out was what I was going to do now that I was free.

I only further depressed myself knowing I should've meant, 'now that I was single.'

We finished our meal in relative silence and I got up from the table insisting he allow me to clean up, but while I was clearing off the table I figured I might as well get it out of the way and asked, "Do you mind if I use your phone when I'm done?"

"Sure," he hesitated. I wondered why until he asked, "Calling your boyfriend to see if he's come to his senses yet?"

To say the words left a bitter taste in his mouth would be putting it mildly considering the way his lips were contorted, but I was hardly lying when I scoffed, "Not if he was the last man on

earth. I was going to try and get a hold of one of my old friends to see if they could loan me the money to get home and maybe put me up for a while until I can find a job and someplace to live."

"Oh," he replied and continued to just stare at me with an odd expression on his face until I finally turned around to carry the dishes to the sink when he said, "Well, I'm afraid you'll be stuck with me for the next few days at least, so I hope that's okay with you."

"What?" I asked whipping my head around to face him again only to see him pointing at the window. I walked closer and looked outside for the first time that morning not really believing what I was seeing while knowing it was real. Everything was white and I do mean everything. I remembered seeing he had a garage on that side of his house from when we'd pulled up the driveway the night before, but I couldn't see it from where I stood with the snow piled up at least waist high, if not more, and it was still coming down.

"Oh my God!" I said to no one in particular. "I've never seen so much snow." Snow was extremely rare back home and it never stuck to the ground whenever we got the occasional flakes, but it seemed I was in the midst of a complete white out.

And I felt a little giddy from it wanting to pull 'A Christmas Story' and run outside to stick my tongue onto the nearest metal surface. At least I wasn't likely to put an eye out doing it.

"Don't worry," I heard him say from behind me. "You'll warm up quick once you get a rhythm going with the snow shovel."

"Of course," I agreed and turned around to face him again thinking I could just wear his clothes over the top of my own. Layering was the way to go and I was sure he was right in that I'd stay warm from the physical exertion alone. "Just point me towards one and I'll get started as soon as I change clothes." It was the least I could do after everything he'd already done for me and I wasn't about to turn down my first chance at experiencing a real snowfall.

A look of horror came on his face as he stood up waving his arms around like he was trying to put out an imaginary fire, saying, "I was just kidding. There's no way I'd allow a guest in my home to shovel snow. I'm having a hard enough time sitting still while you clean up. It feels wrong."

My spirits plummeted again as I felt my jaw clench when he'd said the word 'allow', with it bringing back unpleasant Bill related baggage, but I forced myself to relax knowing Eric hadn't meant anything bad by it. It only fueled my realization over just how damaged I was and I took a deep breath to try and calm myself down. Even though Bill had left me without a word; without any money or clothes or even a place to stay at the time, for once in my life I actually *knew* something was for the best and now that I was finally free of him I could feel just how much our relationship had weighed on me because the burden of it was no longer there. My body had already come to this conclusion all on its own because my shoulders were no longer drawn inwards and my back stood straight with me literally feeling lighter than I had in years, but seeing Eric's unsure expression, I forced myself to smile and tried to ease his anxiety by saying,

"I have to disagree." I turned back to the kitchen sink and flipped on the faucet, adding, "It feels right."

Without a doubt, any future without Bill in it was right for me.

Chapter 4: Chapter Four

Chapter Four

EPOV

Was it wrong to feel ridiculously happy hearing her say she felt right in my home? Or maybe she just meant cleaning up the dishes? Whatever she'd meant, she was still stuck with me for at least two days if not longer. I had plenty of staples stocked up and a freezer full of meat, so we didn't have to worry about food, but I felt bad that she would be stuck wearing my clothes, unless, of course...

Did I want to go there?

The truth of the matter was that there were lots of clothes packed away in boxes in the spare room that would fit her. Lots and lots. They were only there because I hadn't bothered sorting through them so I could finally get rid of them once and for all, but I knew by showing them to Sookie I would likely have to explain where they came from and who they belonged to; explanations I wasn't so sure I was ready to give. It wasn't something I ever talked about because I'd left my past firmly behind me, but that didn't mean the ghosts didn't find a way to haunt me every now and again however it only took me seeing her trip over the too long sweatpants she was wearing for the umpteenth time that morning for me to get over myself already. I felt guilty about a lot of things, but I shouldn't be ashamed over what I now knew was beyond my control and asked Sookie to follow me into the spare room.

Besides the spare mattress and a few odds and ends that hadn't found their way out of the room were several cardboard boxes stacked everywhere there was space; boxes filled with memories of a life I tried hard to forget and I gestured to them, saying, "Since you'll be stuck with me for a bit, you'll probably be more comfortable in clothes that fit." I pulled the tape off of the box nearest me, ripping the scab off an old wound in the process, and pulled out handfuls of women's clothing, many with the tags still hanging from them, and held them out to her saying, "These should be better than what you've got on now."

Ripping open the box wasn't so much painful as it was irritating, or perhaps debasing because in doing it I was acknowledging a part of my life that I was still a little ashamed of. It could also be that revealing this part of myself to someone as kind and sweet as Sookie was a factor, so I tried not to think on it too much and just continued to watch her watching me. I knew she was curious as to why I had boxes full of women's clothing, all of it designer, and the majority of it unworn, but unless she asked, I didn't plan on telling.

Falling asleep while holding her hand the night before had felt odd, but in a good way. It had been a long time since I'd shared my bed with anyone and I'd never brought any woman home since I'd moved to Wyoming, but seeing Sookie lying there didn't feel as weird as I thought it should have. Waking up next to her was an entirely different story though because while we'd both gone to sleep with each of us on separate sides of the bed and only our hands connected, I'd woken up with my body curled around the back of hers with my arms wrapped around her and her own arms holding them in place.

I won't even mention the other part of me that was happily cuddling up very inappropriately with her backside or the way she moved back towards me in her sleep with every inch I shifted away from her trying to be a gentleman. I finally had to force myself away from her and slid off the mattress onto the floor before she could unknowingly tempt me further.

Just thinking about it made my eyes shoot back to her perfectly heart shaped arse, even though it was now hidden by the sweats she was wearing, but I knew was there just the same thanks to my unplanned wake up call. She was bent over at the waist digging through the box I'd opened and had no idea I was ogling her behind, but I hadn't been kidding her the night before at the bar when I'd talked about her curves. She was walking perfection in my book and her southern accent only sweetened the pot.

I tried to physically shake it off knowing she was in no place to be looking for any kind of relationship, nor was I looking for one either, but had we met under different circumstances I would've definitely chatted her up. Hell, I'd even tried that while her boyfriend was standing there glaring at the two of us.

I should've just punched his gob and been done with it.

I wasn't looking forward to her leaving, but knew nothing could be done for it and left her to sort through the boxes on her own while I made myself useful building another fire knowing I'd need it to thaw out after going out to try and clear off some of the snow that had accumulated. I'd have to do it all over again later whenever it stopped, but at least if I got started now there wouldn't be as much to do later on.

Sookie joined me in the living room just as I was finishing up and I grabbed the cordless phone, handing it to her before she could ask about the clothes, and said, "I'll be outside for a bit trying to get ahead of the snow, but feel free to help yourself to anything in the house."

Her lips formed the question I knew she wanted to ask, but when she looked into my eyes, whatever she found there made her purse them instead and say, "Thank you Eric," for what felt like the hundredth time. I knew she was grateful I'd helped her out of the spot she was in, but I couldn't help but be bothered feeling like she felt like she was a burden. I could only nod my head in response, not sure of what would come out of my mouth if I dared to open it, and headed into the bedroom to get changed into something warmer.

I'd been outside for a couple of hours without making much headway and it was coming down even harder than before when I finally gave up and headed inside. Once I peeled off my outer

layers, I'd planned on jumping in the shower to warm up a bit, but finding Sookie crying on the couch halted my steps.

"What's wrong?" I asked softly, hoping she hadn't called the gomey boyfriend and gotten another earful from him, especially considering where she'd spent the night.

"I can't...I don't..." Her ragged breaths increased to the point I thought she might hyperventilate and I wrapped my arms around her rubbing up and down her back while gently shushing her hoping she'd calm down.

When her breathing got back to normal, I pulled back and asked, "Care to try again doll?"

She looked completely broken as her eyes dropped to her lap and she whispered, "I have nowhere to go."

"Your friends won't help?" I asked a little louder than I'd meant to.

Did she have nothing but gobshites in her life?

Her head was already shaking no when she replied, "I can't get a hold of them," and then she took another deep breath, adding, "I haven't talked to them in a long time, but I've known Tara and Sam for most of my life. I was sure they would help me, but both of their numbers have been disconnected. I have no way of contacting them or know if they're even in Louisiana anymore."

Her eyes welled up again making me attempt to keep them at bay with nothing more than awkward pets to her arms, saying, "You're having a poxy time of it lately, aren't you."

It seemed to work because where her lip had been trembling, it stopped as it pulled into a small smile with her sniffing out, "Poxy? That doesn't have anything to do with balls, does it?"

I couldn't help smiling hearing her say 'balls' that sounded like 'bawls' and tried to hide the true extent of my amusement, answering, "No, more like shitty."

She smiled back and took another deep breath, clearing away some of the gloom from her face, and announced, "Well, on the bright side, I'm learning something new every day."

"There's Miss Sunshine," I said with relief. She deserved to throw herself a giant pity party, but that didn't mean I had to like seeing her suffer. I'd much rather keep her smiling and was rewarded with another one when she said, "Actually, it's Miss Stackhouse. Sookie Stackhouse."

It seemed weird to not have known her last name before now considering what I was about to say, but feck it.

"Well, Miss Stackhouse, since it seems you'll be needing a place to stay to get back on your feet and I'm needing a new waitress, what do you say to us helping each other out a bit?" Hearing myself basically asking her to move in with me should've made my palms sweat. We hadn't done

anything more torrid than hold hands with suggestive spooning in our sleep, but for whatever reason, I knew I couldn't let her leave with nowhere to go.

My ego was a bit bruised when her head violently shook no while she said, "No Eric. I couldn't impose on you like that." Her eyes dropped back down to her lap where her hands were wringing themselves and my gut twisted when she added, "I'll just...I'll call Bill and apologize. I'm sure he's probably looking for me right now. He probably came back last night and I was already gone."

My fists clenched automatically hoping I would run into the fucking fiend at some point soon, while she continued to mumble to herself, "Of course I don't know what I'll tell him about where I've been. He'll be so upset if he knows I was here with you. Maybe I can tell him you let me stay in your bar overnight. Alone."

"Is that what you want?" I asked incredulously and at a volume that made her jump. How could some sweet little beour like her think so little of herself as to put up with an asshole like him?

She didn't answer right away and instead stared down at her hands some more until her head finally started shaking no again, only this time much more subdued as she confirmed in a whisper, "No."

Thank feck for that.

Before I could get too excited though, she continued, "But Eric, I can't impose on you like that."

"You're not imposing," I interrupted her. "If anythin', you'd be helpin' me out. I've been tryin' to find a waitress for a while now, but there's been no takers. None of the kids that want it are old enough to work in a bar and I happen to know for a fact that the other two that put in for it would likely drink the place dry, so really, you'd be doing *me* the favor."

"But..." she started to say, but I again cut her off. It was rude of me, but I couldn't help it.

"But nothin'. You need a job. I need a waitress. You need a place to stay. I need a..." I scrambled about trying to think of something to insert there, but came up with nothing. I didn't want to lie and say I needed a roommate when I didn't. My former life funded my current life, so money wasn't an issue.

When I didn't finish my sentence, she asked, "You need a...?"

Her skin had such a healthy glow to it and if I didn't know better, I might've wondered if she glowed in the dark. She was pretty, and while I'd been with women that were considered drop dead gorgeous, there was something about Sookie that put them to shame. I just couldn't figure out what it was, but whether or not I ever did, didn't really matter. What mattered was I wouldn't let her leave knowing she had nowhere to go. There was a time in my life where I firmly believed the world, if not the entire universe, revolved around me and even though I paid a hefty price for it, I knew my karmic points were still in arrears and I offered, "I need a good deed."

When she looked at me questioningly, I added, "You know, for when I get to the pearly gates and Saint Peter asks me 'What's the story?' I can say, 'Once upon a time I gave shelter to an angel on earth.'"

It was probably a bit over the top, but her eyes misted up just the same and it wasn't all that much of a lie. Granted, I didn't know her very well and she might very well go mental on me at some point later on, but at the moment, she seemed pretty angelic to me. I didn't really know what I expected her to say, but I shouldn't have been as surprised as I was when she asked, "Whose clothes are these?" and pointed to the sweater and jeans she had on.

Well feck...

I slumped back on the couch preparing myself to talk about my former life for the first time in six years. After I left it all behind, I hadn't spoken about it to anyone. No one there knew about my old life and, had the bar not been up for sale on that fateful day when I'd pulled into town on my motorcycle needing gas, I doubt I would've ever thought to put down any roots here. The little Wyoming town I now called home was nothing like where I'd last lived, which made it close to perfect, but only *close* because it was nothing like where I'd grown up in Cork. I missed it more than I ever thought I could, but I still couldn't bring myself to go back, even after all of the time that had passed. However, her question could be answered without revealing all of that and I answered truthfully, "They were my wife's."

Her eyes glanced down to my bare left hand where the tan line had faded away a long time ago as her lips quirked to one side, but before she could ask, I offered, "She died a little over six years ago."

She looked at me apologetically as she said, "Oh Eric, I'm so sorry."

I just shrugged in response and since she'd been so open with me the night before, I began telling Sookie all about it. It was what it was and as far as I was concerned that was a whole other lifetime, one I didn't look back on fondly, and if I had the chance to do it all over again, I wouldn't. Sophie and I married for all of the wrong reasons and love was never in the equation for either one of us, so her death, while tragic, only haunted me in the fact that my indifference to our relationship blinded me to what was going on right in front of my eyes. If nothing else, as her husband, I should've cared enough to do something to try to help her; to save her from herself, but I was too consumed with my career to pay attention.

Back then I was the golden child on Wall Street. I'd left the small village in Cork I'd called home to come to the States where I busted my arse to put myself through school and was recruited into one of the most prestigious investment firms in New York City. Sophie's father was the founder and CEO of the firm, so by marrying her I cemented my status in that world and guaranteed my future. Sophie had a bit of a wild streak and she only married me at her father's insistence, knowing otherwise she wouldn't be able to touch her sizeable trust fund. Sophie liked to party; she liked the city life and mostly she liked that I didn't care what she did as long as she put on the pageantry required whenever I needed her to attend any business functions with me. In the beginning, I liked the power, the money, and the adulation I got for my success on Wall Street

and marrying Sophie was really nothing more than another necessary bullet point on my resume. We both cheated and neither one of us hid it. We both preferred busty blondes, but it wasn't until I came across evidence that the asset management unit of LeClerq Investment Securities was nothing more than a massive Ponzi scheme that it all began to fall apart.

Sophie's father Andre and I had a massive falling out over it. He demanded my fealty to him and to his financial empire, but ultimately, I couldn't go along with it. I'd given up everything, alienating my family and friends back in Cork to pursue a life I thought I wanted; a life I thought would be better than what I would have had if I'd stayed back in Ireland; a life I thought I deserved after working so hard to attain it, but the further I immersed myself in it, the less I liked myself. I had already begun to question my choices in not just my career, but my life in general and that had been the tipping point for me, so I turned Andre in to the U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission and just like that, LeClerq Investment Securities was no more. The subsequent scandal made Sophie a pariah in her social circles, but I had no idea of how badly she was affected until I found her lying nude in the bathtub of our penthouse. I knew she liked to dabble in drugs recreationally, but I never thought she would've overdosed on purpose. She didn't even leave a note, but then I didn't really think I deserved one.

I didn't regret turning Andre in, but I did regret not looking out for Sophie. I didn't love her, nor did she love me, but I should've looked out for her. I should've tried to protect her from the shit storm we'd found ourselves in after Andre's arrest. Her father had indulged her for her entire life, as did the world she surrounded herself in, so I should've known how badly it would've affected her. I should've known she was hurting and done something about it. I should've protected her somehow, but all I could do was bury her next to her mother and as soon as the trial was over, I had our penthouse packed up with everything put into storage. I bought a motorcycle and took off with no destination in mind, sticking mostly to the back roads, and just mindlessly traveling through town after town. I indulged in the little things I'd always wanted to do but never did and grew my hair long along with getting the tattoos I'd always secretly wanted, but would've been career suicide before then. By the time I pulled into a sleepy little Wyoming town needing gas eight months later and saw the for sale sign on the bar, it struck a chord somewhere deep inside of me. While I wasn't the arrogant jackass that left his estranged family back in Cork so many years ago, I sure as hell wasn't the same man that left New York City eight months earlier either. By then I was ready for another change and my personal portfolio was well diversified and I'd inherited Sophie's trust fund when she died, so my own personal fortune wasn't badly affected by the LeClerq scandal and I decided then and there to set up shop and call this nowhere-town home for now.

Sookie had listened silently, riveted to every word I'd said over the last hour or so and when I finally finished, I asked, "So, does any of that change your mind about stayin'?" I wouldn't blame her if she wanted to take off as soon as the snow let up now that she knew I was a bigger tool than the one that left her there, but if she left I'd insist she at least let me give her enough money to get back home safely.

Wherever that would end up being.

She was silent for so long that I started to get nervous thinking I'd said too much too soon. She had enough of her own problems to deal with and there I was unloading my own baggage onto her shoulders, not that I was looking for her to do something about it, but still. She must have thought I'd gone mental and I suddenly wished I hadn't said anything at all. For some strange reason I felt like her reaction, either good or bad, would affect me more than I cared to admit, but I bated on, warily asking, "Sookie?" and held my breath waiting to see what she would say.

Chapter 5: Chapter Five

Chapter Five

SPOV

I'd been completely unprepared for everything Eric had just told me and felt so bad about his life's circumstances and everything he'd been through. The hurt he felt clearly still haunted him and I now knew the happy-go-lucky guy I'd met the night before had depths I couldn't even begin to fathom and, if anything, I felt even more insecure in his presence.

And why was he offering to help me?

No matter where he hung his hat now, in my mind he was still some big shot Wall Street broker and I was only a high school educated waitress. Clearly we were from two very different worlds; our accents alone were proof of that and while he seemed so sincere I still had to ask; I had to know.

"Why?"

"Why what, doll?" he asked with his eyebrow quirking up.

"Why are you offering to help me? I don't get it. I have nothing to offer you in return; literally, nothing. I have less than four dollars to my name and I just don't know why you would want the hassle." Looking around at his sparse furnishings I never would've guessed he had money out the wazoo, but I believed everything he'd said. If he'd been lying, it had been an Oscar worthy performance, but besides that, I recognized some of the designer labels on the clothing I'd found and the attached price tags made my eyes bug out. His wife had had more brand new clothing than I'd ever owned in my entire lifetime and while most of it wasn't really my style and they felt a bit tight on me, I still appreciated Eric allowing me borrow them.

His eyes softened and his hand reached out towards mine with his fingertip barely brushing across the top of my knuckles before he pulled back again and said, "I've already given you one reason. Do I have to have another one?"

I thought about it for a moment before responding, really thought about it and decided I had to know, so I admitted, "If I'm going to stay, I need to hear something more than you needing a pass into the pearly gates."

He'd melted my insides earlier talking about needing to do a good deed, but this seemed like too much. I would be too much of a burden. Ironically I came with too much baggage and not one suitcase to call my own, but even so it had felt nice being able to talk to him this way. It had been so long since I'd spoken so openly to someone, not filtering my words or my wants in any way that I felt a little thrill run through me and thought maybe sticking around for a while wouldn't be so bad because the old me felt like she was slowly coming out of hiding. Maybe the old me was starting to feel safe enough to show her face again.

I hoped so because I couldn't wait to see her again.

Eric sighed and leaned back, running his fingers through his hair, and I was again distracted a little by his good looks. I knew it was shallow of me, especially after listening to him telling me about how his life had crumbled around him a few short years ago, but I couldn't really help it. He was visually stunning and his sincerity and charismatic personality, coupled with his accent, made him almost surreal. No one person should have that much going for them, but then again, I knew now his life hadn't always been so great.

His voice broke through my reverie as he said, "I guess, maybe...it would be nice to have some company for a bit?" He'd said it as more of a question than a statement, so I wasn't sure if he was being completely honest or not and when I responded with my own raised eyebrow, he smiled threw me for a loop by saying, "I thought about getting a dog but then I'd have to shovel out a spot for him to piss in and you're already toilet trained, aren't ya?" I wasn't used to being around someone who was so forward; so jovial and uncensored; so alive.

I could easily become addicted to it.

When my only reply was in the form of my reddened cheeks, he laughed hard enough that the whole couch shook and lifted me up a few inches off of the cushions, saying, "Well, let me check first so you don't make a liar outta me." He did quick swipe with his hand of the seat I had just occupied before dropping me back down onto it, adding, "Yep, all dry, so you're good."

It turned out his laughter was addictive too because I found myself laughing right along with him, but I forced myself to wiggle out of his grasp and tried to look at him seriously as I entreated, "Really Eric, I appreciate everything you've done for me. I really do, but I feel like I'd be taking advantage of you if I stayed. If nothing else, I can always call Bill and demand he send me the money from selling my Gran's house and from my paychecks and then go back to Louisiana." Of course, I knew getting that money back from him was a whole other story that would likely involve a nasty fight and I'd still have nowhere to live once I got back home, but I was hoping I could track down Tara or Sam eventually.

He looked like he wanted to argue the point with me, but after a long moment he finally said, "Well, you'll be needin' a place to stay in the meantime, so here it'll be." He made it all sound so

final, but it didn't feel the same way as when Bill had said anything to me in a similar way in the past. I also knew I had issues I needed to work through and could've very well been trying to gloss over any highhandedness from Eric like I'd done with Bill in the beginning, but I hoped that wasn't the case just the same. I wouldn't delude myself into thinking Eric thought of me in a romantic sense, but I could always use a friend, no matter how many or how little I had, and I watched as he got up and headed into the bedroom, so I couldn't have argued back if I'd wanted to.

But I didn't want to.

The snow never stopped, but the novelty had yet to wear off with Eric and me using that time to get to know each other better over the next few days. I'd helped him move a few things around in the spare room so we could make room for the mattress and box spring on the floor with me insisting he go back to using his own bed on my second night there. We filled our days and nights just talking with him telling me stories of his childhood and me doing the same and while I liked that he seemed genuinely interested in what I had to say, I always hated it when it was my turn to talk. I could listen to his voice for hours and would if I had my say, but it was more so because he always managed to at least make me smile, if not laugh outright and selfishly I didn't want our time together to end even though I knew we'd have to emerge sometime.

I taught him how to make Gran's secret fried chicken recipe and he taught me how to make corned beef and cabbage and when we were still snowed in on Thanksgiving and there was no turkey to be had because Eric hadn't bought one ahead of time since it wasn't an Irish holiday, we made do with something called the Dublin Coddle. It was some sort of ham and sausage cooked with onions and potatoes, served in a bowl and was delicious. I'd forgotten how flavorful food could be and almost enjoyed the time Eric and I spent in the kitchen as much as I did our talks.

The snow had let up as we woke up on day four of our seclusion and while I was disappointed our uninterrupted time together was coming to an end, I was excited to be going back to his bar again. I really had loved the look of it and was looking forward to going back to work, if nothing else because I would still get to be around Eric. I knew I was developing a crush on him, but I figured it was normal considering how nice he'd been to me. It wasn't something I'd been used to anymore and it had taken a full two days before I stopped expecting him to be angry with me at some point. I knew he had those emotions in him; I'd seen them rise to the surface whenever Bill's name had come up in conversation, but Eric had never once directed his anger at me and was just his normal sweet self. And for all of my inner dialogue on how I should just be by myself for a while before I could even consider entering into another relationship, a part of me was still disappointed he hadn't given me any indication he thought of me as anything more than a friend.

A pathetic homeless uneducated friend.

It took the two of us a couple of hours to dig our way out of his house and I'd barely even warmed up by the time we walked into his bar. We were the first two in, but it wasn't long before both of his cooks showed up and I got to meet Terry and Lafayette. They seemed real nice while I helped them clear out the food that had been sitting too long and after that Eric showed me

around the rest of the bar while promising to train me to help out as a bartender. I was bouncing on the balls of my feet when he finally opened up for business and since I hadn't noticed anyone else's name on the schedule he had posted in the break room, I asked, "Am I your only waitress?"

I hadn't seen any other servers on my only other night there and Eric looked uncomfortable as he replied, "Yeah. I...uh...had to let the other one go."

"Why is that?" I asked off the cuff and immediately regretted it seeing the look on his face. I'd gotten so used to just blurting out whatever was on my mind that I hadn't even thought about the fact Eric was my boss now and quickly apologized, saying, "I'm sorry. That was rude. It's none of my business."

I could feel the heat in my cheeks as I tried to busy myself filling salt and pepper shakers, but Eric stilled my hands with his own, saying, "You apologize too much."

"I'm sorry," I said automatically and while I was sorry, I couldn't stop my lips quirking up into a smile while my eyes still refused to meet his, but his laughter beat out my stubborn refusal because I couldn't not look over to see it for myself.

"Well thanks for provin' my point, but you can ask me anything you know." He wagged his eyebrows at me and joked, "I mean, you've seen my underwear for God's sake!"

As a way to at least feel like I was somewhat earning my keep, I had done a few loads of laundry in the last few days, but I looked up at him completely confused and said, "I have not! I only washed your jeans and t-shirts! There was no underwear in there."

There hadn't been a boxer or brief in the whole lot, not that I was looking, but he just smiled wider and winked back at me saying, "That's 'cause I don't wear any."

My jaw fell open at his candid statement, but before I could do or say anything the first customers of the day started filing in and he turned me around by my shoulders towards them, giving me a little swat on my backside and said, "Now quit yer yammerin' and get to work missy."

I really didn't know what to make of this new development, what with the wink and playful smack to my butt, but I didn't have much time to think about it anyway. Eric had said the town was small and if that was the case, it appeared every last citizen had come into the bar. I shuttled food and drinks for hours, only taking enough time to grab a sip of water or a bite of the sandwich Lafayette had made me while my customers weren't flagging me down. It was tiring, but I'd needed it after being sedentary for so long. It didn't surprise me that everyone knew Eric or that he knew everyone and they all had a joke or story to share about him that made me feel at home there. I loved every minute, but I was truly exhausted by the time we made our way back to Eric's house however now that I had a few extra dollars in my pocket I felt it was time to bring up the elephant in the room.

"I really do appreciate you letting me stay with you and giving me a job," I started off slowly, so when he turned to face me I finally bit the bullet and added, "but I'd feel much better about it if you'd let me pay you rent."

I knew him well enough by then that I could tell he wanted to argue with me, but he remained silent until we pulled into his garage when he turned to me and said, "The house you grew up in, your Gran's, it was big, wasn't it?"

"Big enough," I answered hesitantly while feeling the pang over it no longer belonging to a Stackhouse. "What does that have to do with anything?"

He ignored my question and kept on with, "And if someone turned up on your doorstep, as it were, down on their luck, would you offer them a helpin' hand only if they gave you something in return?"

"No!" I replied immediately and then realized where he was going with this. "But that's different," I argued. "You gave me a job, so I'm earning money now. I should pay my own way!"

"Doll," he sighed while running his hands through his hair. Using the nickname he had for me was really unfair because my heart did a little pitter patter every time I heard it and it was only reinforced when I hadn't heard him use it once with any of the other women who had come into the bar. Up until then, I'd tried to convince myself it was just his way of speaking to every female he came across, but apparently that wasn't the case.

And I really shouldn't like that fact so much.

"The house is paid for," he said, pulling me from my thoughts. "I told you before, money isn't an issue for me and I don't suspect it ever will be unless I get knocked in the head and try to outdo Bill Gate's lifestyle. I'd gladly give you the money to get home and get back on yer feet, but I suspect you'd hit me if I tried, so I'd rather you just keep yer money and squirrel it away for a rainy day."

What was wrong with me that all I got out of everything he'd just said was that he'd pay me to leave?

"So, you want me to go?" I asked, unable to stop myself. I'd thought we were getting along pretty well and I'd certainly enjoyed his company, but maybe it had been one sided all along. It wasn't like he was used to living with someone else, so maybe I was cramping his space.

"What? No!" he said loud enough to startle me, but seeing my reaction he added in a softer tone, "I mean...you're a great waitress...and I had a hell of a time getting that spot filled...so, you know...really, you're doin' me the favor."

Of course.

He'd told me how difficult it had been for him to find someone, but it only reminded me that he'd never actually told me why he'd had to get rid of my predecessor. Since he said I could ask him anything, I started off with the obvious given our current conversation. "So then, I take it, your previous waitress lived with you rent free too?" I asked with a tiny bit of sarcasm infused into my voice.

"No," he answered unsurprisingly.

"But you would have let her if she didn't have anywhere else to go?" I badgered on.

He hesitated in answering that one, but his eyes finally narrowed back at me as he hissed out another, "No."

I didn't know if it was my foolish disappointment over his admission that he only wanted me to stick around for my waitressing skills or if it was leftover Bill baggage that got my temper going, but I sensed this was a hot topic for him and I hadn't had the chance to let my temper get the better of me in a long time, so I pushed him with, "Well why not? If you're so willing to let me live here rent free, why not her?"

I ignored the way my heart panged at just the thought.

"Because she was a nutter!" he exclaimed. "We messed around *one time* at the bar one night and suddenly she's pickin' out china patterns and namin' our imaginary kids! It was my own damn fault for doin' anythin' with an employee, but I've learned my lesson. Never again!"

Of course. All of it made more sense now and even if I still saw him as a friend, I was just as much his employee. I needed that job. I needed a friend. I didn't need any more headaches.

So why was I so disappointed with my heart hurting even more?

Chapter 6: Chapter Six

Chapter Six

EPOV

My eyes, as usual, were zeroed in on Sookie as she went from table to table taking or delivering orders of food and drinks to the usual crowd that came in every Saturday night. It had been close to four months since she'd first arrived with the wanker; four months since she'd begun working at the bar full time, and four months minus ten hours since I'd shoved my foot so far into my mouth I should've shat out Doc Martens the next morning. I blamed my fatigue at the time for letting my mouth get away from me and wanted to take it back the moment the words fell from my lips, but Sookie had jumped out of the car with a quick, "Of course," thrown over her shoulder and scampered into the house. While I hadn't planned on keeping the truth from her of

why I'd let Felicia go, if she'd really wanted to know, I hadn't meant for it to sound the way it did.

As though the phrase 'never again' had included her.

At the time I hadn't even been sure if it did include her, so I'd kept my gob shut. She'd literally just gotten out of a poxy relationship and we barely knew one another, never mind the fact that I'd never really been in a real relationship, but I knew she wasn't a one night stand kinda gal, so I'd left it alone. It didn't take long after that for me to figure out I did want something more from her, but now that I'd said it, she'd taken it as though God himself had come down and delivered it to her personally on a stone tablet. She hadn't really treated me any differently afterward, but there was an underlying 'hands off' vibe about her that hadn't been there before and if I was being honest, I feckin' hated it. But it was my own damn fault for being feckin' honest and while it took some doing, I'd managed to talk her out of trying to pay me any rent, but it seemed I'd been relegated into the doomed 'friend zone' from then on and to really rub salt into the wound, for the last few weeks or so she'd been trying to talk me into asking out one of the gals who'd been coming into the bar and makin' eyes at me. A bit of flirting never hurt anyone and I'd learned it was good for business a long time ago, but I hadn't done any of it at all since she started working there and while I might've been game for a little fun with Dawn four months ago, now I only seemed to have eyes for Sookie.

Who only saw me as her friend/roommate/boss.

She'd even made it a point to call me boss whenever we were at the bar and only ever called me Eric when we were at home. It almost made me want to fire her only so I could rehire her without that stupid 'never again' rule included. Of course that was only assuming she might see me as anything besides her boss or friend, but a part of me wondered if maybe she just didn't trust me enough to be anything else more to her. I couldn't say that I blamed her considering everything the eejit ex had put her through, but that didn't mean I couldn't at least try and help her see that not every man out there was a gobshite.

Or maybe she already thought I was a gobshite thanks to me being honest about my own past.

That was another thing. I was sure if I looked hard enough, I could find Sookie's picture underneath the heading for 'Damsel in Distress' from when we'd met that very first night, so I'd initially questioned my own growing feelings towards her wondering if maybe I was subconsciously wanting to make amends for how I'd treated Sophie; wondering if I feel any differently towards her if she'd just walked in off the street needing a job. I would never know for sure, but I had my doubts I'd feel anything but what I felt for her now. Watching her move around the bar now, I couldn't imagine anyone not wanting to have her as their own nor could I imagine anyone finding any fault with her which only made the eejit ex even more of an arsehole. She was smart, funny, beautiful, sexy as hell, and nothing but sweet goodness from the inside out. Perfect was the only word I could come up with to describe her, but I was so far from perfect myself it made sense she didn't feel the same way about me.

I might've still given it a go, but what held me back the most was knowing how much she wanted to return home and while I knew she liked me well enough, it obviously wasn't enough for her to want to stay, so I put a lot of effort in ignoring the part of me that didn't want her to go. Early on I'd suggested she try finding her friends through Facebook since it seemed everyone (other than me that is) was on it and sure enough they were too. It turned out that her friends Sam and Tara had ended up getting married to one another and Sam had joined the army. He'd gotten stationed in Germany, but they were due to return home the following year when his enlistment ended and they offered her a place to stay with them there or when they got back, but thankfully she wanted to wait until they returned home to the States so she could save some more money. She'd been saving her paychecks and was building a nice little nest egg for herself, but it wasn't enough to move back home on her own yet, so I had some comfort in knowing she'd at least be around for a little while longer.

When she hadn't heard a feckin' word from the dick after a couple of weeks, I'd offered to hire an attorney for her to try and get her money back from the wanker, but she wouldn't hear of it. Said she didn't want anything to do with him and if it took letting him have everything she'd owned, that it was worth the price and while I strongly disagreed, it obviously pained her whenever I brought it up, so I eventually just dropped it. Sookie didn't have a materialistic bone in her body and while I knew she was probably okay with letting the tool keep her money, she couldn't hide the fact that what she wanted most of all were the things she'd saved that were her Gran's. Her wedding dress; quilts she'd sewn with her own two hands; her jewelry that Sookie said wasn't worth nothing at all, but was priceless to her. No amount of money could replace the sentimental value of those things and I'd offered more than once to fly out to Seattle and retrieve them for her, but again, she'd said no.

I even had a fist or two with Bill's name on them I'd be more than happy to let him have and I still might fly out there and give them to him after she returned home.

Everyone who came into the bar loved Sookie straight away. With her southern grace and bright smile, it was hard not to and the only one who didn't was Felicia when she'd skulked into the bar one night a couple of weeks after Sookie had started working there. Daggers were thrown by each of them once Sookie learned who she was and while I wanted to read more into her reaction, I knew it was probably just because she was looking out for me.

Her friend/boss.

And while I'd been honest in that I hadn't needed a roommate for financial reasons, I couldn't deny having her around was just as much of a good thing for me as it was for her. It was nice having someone to talk to at home, to laugh with watching stupid movies together, or just waking up to the smell of breakfast cooking. She was a sweet gal – a bit timid at first – but over time she'd blossomed into a vibrant woman, both inside and out, who could light up a whole room as soon as she walked in. It had only taken about a month after she'd first arrived for me to figure out that I was falling hard for her – hell, I probably knew it before the snow had ever let up those first few days she'd stayed with me – but I knew she didn't see me that way. At first I was confused myself over the feelings I had for her and had done my best to just try and be there for her like a friend because I knew that was what she needed at the time. The last thing I wanted

was to take advantage of her vulnerable state. It took some time and a lot of talking on my part to convince her that she was worth so much more than she gave herself credit for – more than the gobshite deserved – but my efforts weren't wasted. I could see the difference in her with her self-confidence growing every day and it made me proud of her, but it stirred up feelings of more than pride – or even lust – seeing the real her shine through. But whenever I'd test the waters with a little bit of flirting on my part, she would always just blush a bit and then wave me off for being a git like I'd been joking around. We joked and laughed together all of the time – it was one of the things I loved about being around her – and since she seemed immune to my charm I was pathetic enough to try and get her attention in different ways, like leaving my wet towels on the bathroom floor just so I could hear her southern twang-filled rant at me about it while she dramatically picked them up to hang on the towel rod asking what would I do if she weren't there to make it right, although that ended up backfiring on me as well.

Because I hated thinking about when the actual day would come that she wouldn't be there to do it.

The more I got to know her, the more time we spent together, the harder I seemed to fall. I couldn't say for sure that I loved her because it wasn't an emotion I'd ever known in that sense, but what I did know was whatever it was I felt for her was more than I'd ever felt for anyone else – all-consuming to the point she was all I could think about anymore. It was an odd place for me to be in. I'd changed a lot since I left New York and my former life behind me, but I knew I still held onto a little bit of that part of my personality that had, for lack of a better term, swagger. It had always been a part of me – at times my ego knew no bounds – and I knew it and while I'd dropped the superiority complex I'd had back then and let the blue collar me come out, I couldn't seem to muster up any swagger whenever it was just me and Sookie. With her I couldn't be anything but just plain old me and – even better – that seemed to suit her just fine.

I'd had more women in my lifetime than I'd cared to admit and never had any issues trying to seduce one into my bed, but my mind drew a blank when it came to trying to get Sookie there. I wanted her there, but the problem was I knew I wanted more than just sex from her and the fact I knew she just didn't see me that way was the hang up. I often found myself just staring at her; watching the way she'd absentmindedly twist a strand of hair around her finger whenever she was deep in thought; the way her eyes would light up hearing me tell yet another embarrassing story about my childhood; how her lips would pucker with her whole face scrunched up whenever I'd use any Irish slang she didn't understand and I'd even made up a few just to see it happen. There were so many times in the past few months where I'd just wanted to reach out and touch her, pull her into my arms and press my body against hers just for the sake of wanting to feel her next to me, and while we'd shared a hug or two in the past those had been born out of friendship.

I was the only one who wanted more.

But I kept telling myself it was probably for the best. Sookie deserved to have a good man in her life – someone who didn't come with massive amounts of baggage like me – so I tried to squelch my own desires knowing she'd never be mine. I was the arse who chose to lead a less than honorable life, so I didn't deserve to find happiness with the likes of someone as good as her. Of

course Sookie would have none of that talk whenever I'd make any off the cuff remarks about my own worth, but a part of me still believed it to be true for the sheer fact she kept that little wall up in between us. Somewhere inside of herself she knew I wasn't the one for her – wasn't good enough for her – no matter how much I wanted to be, so my question had already been answered without it ever being asked.

The only bright side, for me at least, was that the wanker never came back. I would never understand how he could have left anyone – much less Sookie – stranded in a strange place with nothing to their name. The town was so small there was only a one man police force and Andy Bellefleur was a regular patron, so I was sure he would've said something had the arse called the station looking for her.

After all, how many people could possibly be named Sookie?

I'd thought of hiring a private investigator to find the fiend just so I could exact my own brand of justice on him, but I knew I wouldn't be able to hide it from Sookie. Even lying by omission felt wrong with her, so instead I just hoped and prayed he would come back looking for her just so I could just beat his arse for even trying to get her back.

I already had his burial plot picked out.

That night wasn't just a regular old Saturday night, it was Saint Patrick's Day to boot, so there was a sea of green with a lot more cheer being spread around that night than any other. The bar was packed and after watching Sookie disappear back into the kitchen, my eyes automatically went back to what I was doing behind the bar, so I didn't notice the stranger that had wandered in until she'd bellied up in front of me, saying, "Excuse me."

"What can I get for ya?" I asked with my eyes lifting up to see a woman who looked a little out of sorts. She definitely wasn't from around there and by the looks of her, was likely from one of the larger cities considering her outfit would've fit right into one of Sophie's closets. She wasn't hideous to look at, but this brunette – like every other woman it seemed – couldn't hold a candle to the blond I could hear laughing at whatever Lafayette had said to her in the kitchen.

"Actually," she hesitated nervously, "I'm looking for someone. Do you by chance know a Sookie Stackhouse?"

My hands stilled hearing her say Sookie's name with them clenching around the bar towel I'd been holding. I'd seen pictures of her friend Tara from Facebook so I knew it wasn't her standing across from me and Sookie would've mentioned finding any other of her long lost friends, so I had to wonder if maybe she was a private investigator the wanker had hired and asked with an edge to my voice, "Well who might be asking?"

She didn't look like a private investigator and she looked too nervous for me to feel good about whoever she was or whatever reason she had to be asking about Sookie, but just as she opened her mouth to answer, I heard Sookie's voice coming from my left, asking, "Lorena?"

My eyes, like always, were drawn right to her and saw she seemed just as shocked as her voice had sounded, but I looked back at this Lorena woman just in time for her to say, "Sookie, I'm glad I finally found you."

My feet carried me to Sookie's side before I even knew that I'd moved and when my hand automatically reached out for her, this time I didn't stop myself from taking her trembling hand into my own.

After all, it was the least a friend could do.

Her blue eyes looked up into my own and I was sure she could see the question in them, so she explained, "This is Bill's boss, Lorena Ball." Looking back at the woman, she added, "Lorena, this is Eric. My boss."

Not even her friend?

My hand let go of hers hearing her words while my eyes temporarily lifted looking for the wanker, but I didn't see him anywhere in the bar and when I looked across from us I noticed Lorena's eyes had gotten glassy with unshed tears hearing his name as she said, "Actually, there's more to it than that. Is there somewhere we can talk privately?"

She hadn't even been talking to me and yet my stomach dropped hearing the phrase, 'Can we talk', knowing no good could come from whatever it was she had to say.

Chapter 7: Chapter Seven

Chapter Seven

SPOV

What in the hell was Lorena doing here?

My eyes darted around the room wondering if Bill was there too, but only because I'd never seen her without him there as well, even if it didn't make any sense for her to be there at all. I'd only ever met her once, early on in our relationship, at a holiday party for Bill's work and, honestly, I was almost just as surprised that she remembered me at all. I'd long ago given up on the thought he might come back, even if a little part of me was still afraid that he would, but whatever her reason was for being there, I wanted nothing to do with him at all. I wasn't the same person he'd left stranded four months ago. I'd grown stronger; I knew I was worth a hell of a lot more than the crappy way Bill had treated me; I knew it was Bill who was the lesser of the two of us and while I hated having wasted so much time on a relationship that was toxic, a big part of me was grateful because it had brought me to Eric. He was the one to show me what a true gentleman was; he was the one to convince the old me to come out of hiding and I would forever be in his debt because of it; he was the one who saw all of the good in me and, if he saw my faults, he

seemed okay with them too. Around him I could be myself knowing he liked me for me and didn't have to worry about what I said or did in fear of being berated. And while I'd known Bill leaving me there would be freeing in every sense of the word, Eric was the one who just made me feel free because I knew, no matter what, he'd always be there for me.

Because he was my friend.

What I hadn't counted on was falling in love with him and for a long time I tried to convince myself that I wasn't; convince myself that I was confusing his kindness for love because of the way Bill had treated me, but no matter how many times I tried to ignore my growing feelings, he'd do or say something that would make my heart skip a beat. I often found myself just watching him when he wasn't looking and my insides warmed every time I heard his voice. There were many times I'd simply find myself in a trance-like state imagining what it would be like to be held in his arms – how his lips would feel on mine – and it got to the point that he was pretty much all I could think about. I knew he didn't see me that way – I was just his friend and employee – and he'd said so himself that he'd never become romantically involved with one again, so I did my best to not let on how I really felt about him and had even briefly considered taking Tara and Sam up on their offer of going to Germany to live with them, but the thought of not seeing Eric every day made my chest ache, so I selfishly gave myself one year. One year to enjoy his company; one year to try and get over my feelings for him before I would have to leave him behind and since I didn't have enough money to move back home and live on my own, I had the perfect excuse not to go just yet.

I may have even secretly hoped Sam would reenlist in the Army for four more years.

But, I knew ultimately, I couldn't stay with Eric forever. I was sure I was cramping his style and while I didn't want him to go out on any dates with anyone, I knew that wasn't fair to him. He probably would've felt weird bringing another woman home with him – I know it would've been more than just weird for me to see it happen – but it was just as obvious that nearly every woman that walked into the bar had eyes for him. He could fill up the whole room with just his presence alone, so it would've been impossible for anyone to not notice him; to not be drawn in by his smile; to not let their eyes roam over his broad shoulders, watching the way his tattoos seemed to come to life as he used his arms; to not marvel over how many shades of blue his eyes contained; to not fall head over heels in love with him.

The tricky part, it seemed, was getting him to notice you.

"Doll?" I heard at my side with Eric's voice drawing me out of my thoughts.

Thank God he wasn't telepathic.

"You can use my office to talk, if you'd like," he continued on hesitantly.

Oh yeah...Lorena.

"Uh...sure, that would be great," I replied just as hesitantly. I had no idea of what she could possibly want to talk to me about, but knowing it probably had to do with Bill, I didn't want to talk where everyone else could hear us. "I'll try to be quick," I added with my eyes looking around the bar. It was much busier than usual and I didn't want to leave for too long knowing Eric would have to pick up my slack, but as I started walking towards the back and motioned for Lorena to follow me, it wasn't until we reached his office door that I noticed Eric had come along too.

I figured he was just being careful in case Bill was hiding somewhere in the crowd, so I showed Lorena into the office and turned back to face Eric, saying, "I promise I won't be too long," but before I could shut the door, he stopped it with his hand and said, "Do you...uh...want me to come in? You know, like for moral support or something?"

He really was a good friend, but seeing the concern on his face and the warmth in his eyes, I knew I would have my work cut out for me over the next year trying to work through my unrequited feelings.

If only he was gay.

"No Eric," I smiled back reassuringly. "I'll be fine and besides, the bar is packed so someone needs to be on the floor." He still didn't seem to want to go, but I could already hear Andy Bellefleur calling his name, so I gave him a quick pat on his chest to let him know that I'd be okay (and I may have let my fingers linger there for an extra second or two) and then shut the door before my hand took it upon itself to wander anywhere else on his body.

EPOV

I stood there staring at the closed door – not knowing why – but just as unable to walk away. It wasn't like I could hear what they were talking about – not that I was even trying – but something told me that when Sookie came out of that room, everything was going to change.

And it scared the shit out of me.

It was only thanks to Andy's bellowing that got my feet to eventually move at all, but the whole time I served drinks at the bar one eye was on the back hallway waiting for Sookie to emerge while the other kept looking for the arse. Apprehension and anger fought their way through me, both worried about whatever it was Sookie was being told by that Lorena woman and anger at the thought of him sending someone, his boss no less, to try and talk her into going back to him. That was the only thing I could think as to why she was there. Maybe his work was suffering; maybe he finally pulled his head out of his arse and realized just what he'd given up – what he'd done to her by leaving her stranded with nothing – and had gone off the deep end.

Maybe it was just too feckin' late for that!

But that was what worried me the most. Maybe it *wasn't* too late; maybe Sookie would forgive him; maybe she hadn't really gotten over him at all; maybe she wanted him back.

Maybe she still loved him.

That thought alone threatened to send *me* off the deep end. It was one thing for her to not want me because the likes of me didn't deserve someone like her, but it was something else altogether if she thought *he* did. Imagining his filthy hands on her – holding her the way I longed to – kissing her like I'd been dreaming of for months was quickly making my blood pressure skyrocket, but it came back down just as quickly when I saw the two of them finally come back into the bar. It was obvious the two of them had been crying and I was shocked seeing Sookie walk her to the door where she gave her a hug before they exchanged a few more words with Lorena leaving on her own.

I felt better seeing that Sookie didn't leave with her, but instead of coming to tell me what had happened, she went straight back to work checking on her tables. What bothered me the most was that she refused to make any eye contact with me and it was only then that I realized we always did. If our attention wasn't being directed at someone else in the bar, our eyes always met each other's whether we were standing side by side or from across the crowded room, but now she wasn't looking at me at all and I didn't know what to make of it.

But it couldn't have been good.

I was too afraid of what she might say if I tried to force the issue – for all I knew she'd made plans to go to Seattle with Lorena and was putting off telling me – so I let her be and when she finally had to come up to me to order another round for one of her tables, I asked, "Everything okay?"

My heart dropped when she forced a smile – something she'd never had to force before – and replied, "Yep. We can talk about it at home."

That was a little too close to 'We need to talk' for comfort.

I was tempted to yell out 'last call' just so we could get out of there, but it was still early yet so I tried to not think about whatever it was she was going to tell me and instead tormented myself with thoughts of her going back to *him* and therefore leaving *me*. I decided then and there I wouldn't try and stop her if she wanted to leave, but she would damn well be going, knowing how I felt about her. I might not deserve her but he sure as hell didn't and if that was unfair of me to do, then feck it.

We both knew all too well life wasn't always feckin' fair.

The night seemed to drag on, but eventually it was time to go. Of course my eyes had stayed on Sookie the whole night – easily accomplished since she wouldn't look at me – so I knew she hadn't shed another tear since Lorena had left. She fidgeted at my side the whole way home, but didn't say a word and when we walked into the house she went straight into her room and shut the door. I almost went after her, but I was too afraid of what she might say if I did, so instead I grabbed a bottle of tequila I hadn't drank from since before she'd come to stay with me and fell

down onto the couch taking a nice big swig of it knowing I'd need it if she ever decided to come back out and face me.

And face me she did.

She came out of her room wearing one of my t-shirts that she'd commandeered weeks earlier that she wore as pajamas. I was tall enough and she was small enough that it felt to her knees, but it showed enough that I always had to watch myself around her when she was in it because it would be too easy to access everything I wanted underneath it.

So I took another swig of tequila.

Her eyebrow arched watching me as I swallowed and she sat down next to me – taking the bottle from my hand and swallowing a good bit of it herself – saying, "Bill's dead."

Would it be crass of me to say, 'Cheers!'?

Probably, however I remembered seeing her tear stained face when she'd come back into the bar, but – even though I hadn't cried when Sophie died – I couldn't fault her for being upset over the prick being dead. Unlike me, she'd actually loved him once upon a time (or maybe she still did?), but at any rate, I offered, "Sorry."

She didn't say anything right away and instead took another long draw from the bottle before I took it back to take another drink of my own, but I nearly spat it out when she said, "I'm not, sorry that is, but I should be, shouldn't I?"

"Well I didn't really mean it," I half snorted from the fatigue, relief, and liquor working its way through me, but remembering her tears, I couldn't stop myself from saying, "But you were crying earlier."

"Well," she huffed, "*she* was crying and I felt bad for her." She went on to tell me that Bill had apparently been cheating on Sookie with Lorena and while they'd met the one time, Bill had told Lorena that they'd broken up not long after that. She'd just thought Bill was afraid of commitment and she was fine with that until she'd turned up pregnant. Sookie said he'd often had out of town work trips, but he was really staying with Lorena on those nights, so when Bill wouldn't man up, Lorena put in for a transfer to Seattle and ended things with him. Bill hadn't been promoted and instead had gone behind her back to get his own transfer to Seattle, but he'd called her before the move telling her that he wanted to try and make things work out between them. How in the hell he planned on doing that by bringing Sookie along I'll never know, but he'd already proven himself to be an eejit, so that's all I had to work with. He'd gotten as far as Snoqualmie Pass in Washington State when he ran off the road in a snow storm and died in the crash. The state police had called Lorena when they found him because hers was the last number called on his cell phone. For the next few weeks she'd gone through everything in the moving truck and she knew right away he'd still been with Sookie all along.

"She only looked for me here because he'd called her just after he left and told her where he was and that he'd be there in a couple of days. She found his bank statements along with the paperwork from when I'd sold Gran's house and put two and two together. Their daughter Jessica was born a couple of weeks before we left Shreveport, but I guess maybe he was going to try and at least do right by her because he'd had a will drawn up leaving her everything. Lorena said it's still all tied up with Bill's parents trying to contest the will, but..." She paused and reached into her purse where she'd left it next to the couch, pulling out a cashier's check, and continued on with, "she doesn't want her daughter having money that wasn't his to begin with. She knows she'll win in court, but this money is from her own account. It's *everything* he'd saved up, not just my money. I tried to tell her no – that I would only take what was mine – but she wouldn't hear of it, especially after I told her how he'd left me here. She doesn't want anything of his either, but she's fighting Bill's parents on principle alone. She had all of my things put into storage in Seattle and told me to just call her with an address and she'll have it all shipped to me whenever I want it."

I wanted to jump up and down – happy that God saw fit to smite the fucker – and now she'd have her things back, but my elation quickly died when she took another swig and added, "So, I guess I'll be getting out of your hair."

She was clearly drinking too much so I snatched the bottle back and took another swig myself, saying, "No."

Maybe I was drinking too much too?

She snorted and slapped my arm, saying, "What do you mean 'no'? Aren't you sick of me by now? Don't you want get back to whatever it is you used to do before I was here to pick up your towels?"

Her voice had steadily lowered with every word she'd spoken until she finally ended in a whisper. Her eyes had dropped to her lap, but there was no missing the newly formed unshed tears and while Sookie wouldn't be leaving me to go back to the arse, she could very well leave me whenever she wanted to now that money was no longer an issue. I didn't have a year to work with anymore. For all I knew, I had hours, so I knew I had to make them count.

I set the bottle down and pulled her chin up so that she'd look at me and answered all of her questions one by one. "No," and I kissed the tears away from her right eye. "No," I repeated, both my answer and my actions on her left eye, and lastly another, "No," before I finally found out what it felt like to press my lips against hers.

Chapter 8: Chapter Eight

Chapter Eight

SPOV

I'd dreamt of kissing Eric so many times that I was sure – if my dreams ever came true – my overactive imagination would leave me disappointed by the real thing, but that couldn't be further from the truth. The man was literally making my toes curl, not to mention what else he was stirring up in between my lips and toes. It had been a *long* time since Bill and I had last had sex, at least a couple of months before we'd left Shreveport, but I now suspected that had more to do with Lorena than with me. I felt like I should be sad or feel betrayed now that I knew the extent of his lies, but I didn't. It was what let me know that I was well and truly over everything that had to do with Bill Compton and really, the tears I'd shed earlier had more to do with the fact I no longer had any excuse to stay with Eric. I didn't want to leave him – ever – and by the way he was kissing me now, he wasn't too eager for me to go just yet either, but tasting the tequila in both of our mouths made little alarm bells ring in my head. I knew he'd messed around with his last waitress after having one too many and while I knew our relationship was a bit different than theirs – as much as I *wanted* to kiss him – I didn't want alcohol to be his only motivation. I wasn't the type of girl that could do a friends-with-benefits type of relationship, especially not with Eric, because it was already too late for that.

I was already in love with him.

At some point as our kiss wore on we'd somehow managed to move simultaneously so that he was lying on top of me on the couch and I let myself enjoy the feeling of his weight and warmth for just a few seconds longer – memorized his touch, taste, and scent – before I finally pulled away, saying, "Eric, wait. We can't."

Because I couldn't bear to know what I would be losing when we were through.

His eyes were a shade of blue I'd never seen before – like a darkening sky just before the first clap of thunder boomed across the sky – but I would've never guessed what was brewing behind them when he said, "Doll, I know I don't deserve someone like you, but I just...I can't...just give me a chance to try and show you – prove to you that I can be worthy of you. I'll do whatever you ask – whatever you need – if you'll just stay."

My head was suddenly spinning and he looked so serious, but I questioned the amount of alcohol we must have drunk because surely I'd heard him wrong, or he'd said it wrong, because there was no way what I thought I'd heard could be true and I heard myself whisper, "What?"

"Stay," he whispered back. "Here, with me. I want you to stay. I want you to give me a chance – to give *us* a chance. I know you've been hurt before and my track record ain't the greatest, but I swear to you Doll, if you give *me* your heart, I'll cherish it always."

"You...you...you *like* me that way?" I stammered in disbelief over the impossibility of it all.

His eyes warmed as he trailed his fingers down the side of my face and said, "I more than *like* you Doll. When you were in the office tonight and I thought there was the possibility you might be leaving me to go back to...him, it made me realize how I really felt about you and I decided then and there if you were gonna leave, then you'd be going knowing how I felt about you." He

took a deep breath and steeled himself as he admitted, "I don't know if you still plan on leaving, but I love you Sookie."

EPOV

I don't know that I would've been able to tell her if it hadn't been for my liquid courage and I'd never felt so scared in all my life as I watched her eyes fill with tears, not yet knowing if that was a good sign or a bad one, until she finally ended the suspense saying, "I love you too."

Any other time, hearing those words from someone would've sent me fleeing from the room like my head was in flames, but now I only felt the fire inside of me burning bright with the love I had for her. I could see the truth of it in her eyes as well and all I wanted to do was get as close to her as I possibly could, but I didn't know if she was ready for anything physical to happen between us. I'd give her all the time she needed – I'd managed to behave for the last four months, so a little while longer would be nothing, but I was pretty sure my heart stopped with her next words.

Her eyes darkened as she pulled me closer and nibbled on my bottom lip, saying, "You've already proven your kisses are better than any of my fantasies, now how about you let me see if you can put the rest of them to shame."

At some point we would be coming back to that little nugget of information because I wanted to know *exactly* what each and every one of her fantasies of me entailed, but that would have to wait because right now I had do my woman's bidding.

My woman.

I felt the growl rumble through my chest and into her mouth as I took her lips in another kiss and I refused to let them go as I scooped her up off of the couch and carried her into my bedroom. She'd ruined it for me from her very first night there because after she'd been in it the one time, I was never as comfortable in it without her there and if I had my way she would never be leaving it again. Her legs had wrapped around my waist, but I managed to settle us both in the middle of the bed and feeling her hands start to wander, I felt okay in letting my own do the same. For weeks I'd been tormented by watching her wander around the house in nothing but my t-shirt, knowing I could only look but not touch, so I relished in finally running my hands over the fabric, ghosting around the sides of her breasts, before letting them move down even further. Thanks to her legs having been wrapped around my body the hem had ridden up, so I pushed it up even further until I finally took it off of her altogether leaving her in nothing more than her panties.

"Beautiful," I whispered looking down at her with my eyes drinking in every swell and curve of her perfect body. I remembered her telling me how the git had kept on her about her weight and it only proved how big of gomer he was because she was the type of woman men would wage wars for. I would certainly have been willing to kill him myself if God hadn't already gotten to him first, but I forced him from my thoughts for good because I was more than willing to spend the rest of my life letting her know just how perfect she was.

I'd make sure she would always know how much I loved her.

SPOV

No one had ever looked at me like Eric was looking at me now and I felt so stupid for not seeing it sooner. Now that I knew he loved me I could see it had been right in front of my eyes the whole time. I just hadn't let myself see it, but before I could think about it anymore he took my lips in another kiss and left me a panting needy mess when he pulled away to kiss further down my body. Everywhere his lips touched sent electric jolts through my body and when they finally settled on top of one of my breasts, I couldn't help but to arch upwards with my hands holding his head in place. Eric was a multi-tasker because even as his lips and tongue were working my body into a frenzy his hands had never stopped moving as well, and when he licked his way across my chest to pay equal attention to my other breast, one of his hands took over where his mouth had left off on the first one. Eric was definitely putting my fantasies to shame and when his other hand slid further down my body, slipping into my panties, his responding growl against my skin almost threw me over the edge.

"You're already so wet lover," he murmured as he started kissing and licking his way down my body, but I tensed when he settled himself in between my legs. Bill had been my only other lover and he'd never done *that* before, but feeling Eric's mouth press against the outside of my panties as he kissed me through the drenched fabric made me forget all about my nervousness. Instead I found myself pressing down against his lips with my hands still holding onto the back of his head, so when I felt him tug on the sides of my panties I didn't hesitate to lift my hips up so he could pull them off. It had been so long since I'd been so worked up and truth be told, I could never find my release when I'd been with Bill. I thought there had to be something wrong with me – just one more thing I couldn't get right – if I needed to be the one to take care of my own needs, but I was quickly learning with Eric that wasn't going to be a problem anymore. His tongue made one swipe through my folds when his lips wrapped around my clit and with one flick, I was seeing stars. My hips bucked so wildly that he had to hold them down, but he never stopped what his mouth was doing and his free hand slid up my inner thigh before I felt his finger slip inside of me. I'd never felt anything like it – all of the stimulation from his mouth and hand was almost more than I could bear and yet I knew I would die if he stopped, but when he slipped a second finger inside of me with both of them curling up on his downward stroke he touched a spot inside of me that hadn't ever been touched before.

I definitely would have remembered.

I'm pretty sure I screamed out his name – and maybe ripped out two handfuls of his hair – as it felt like a supernova had detonated inside of my body. My limbs went rigid right before every bone in my body became disconnected as everything inside of me turned to jelly and all I could do was shake uncontrollably while I waited for my eyesight to return.

I couldn't even say that I'd regret anything if it didn't.

It felt like hours but couldn't have been more than a few minutes when I could finally see again and the sight that greeted me was better than anything else I had ever seen before. Eric was lying

at my side with a mad case of sex hair that only made him sexier and a grin on his face like he'd just won the lottery, but hearing him say, "I love you," again, I knew out of the two of us, *I* was the winner.

EPOV

I couldn't believe Sookie loved me – that she'd not only said the words and let me worship her body – but that she was actually there in my bed and her taste was still on my tongue. I'd dreamt of it for months and finally my dreams had come true, but before I could ask how I'd measured up with her fantasies, she rolled over and straddled my body, with her hands pulling my shirt off, and silenced my unasked question with another kiss. Now that I knew what it was like to have her lips on mine, I didn't think I could ever have enough, so I gently fought against her trying to break our kiss, but she distracted me by grinding her hips down onto my own. My hands went to her sides and we both moaned as she pressed down on me again with my jeans growing damp from both of us, but I resisted the urge to just rip them open so I could be inside of her that much quicker and let her move at her own pace. I still wasn't sure just how far we were going tonight, but when she leaned down and started kissing her way down my bare chest, I couldn't help but to wrap my arms around her body and hold her against me. It was so much better than all of our previous hugs combined, but when her lips and tongue played across my nipple and she bit down, I nearly lost my control. I nearly lost her too considering I practically bucked her off of my body and she giggled before she righted herself and did it all over again on my other side. It was the sweetest torture I'd ever felt, that is until she kept kissing down my body and her hands quickly worked my jeans open, but when my cock sprang free she hesitated for a second, now seeing the effect she had on me, before finally pulling them off.

All of me was big and that part of my body was no different, but having felt how tight Sookie was, I might have guessed she was a virgin if I hadn't already known better. I didn't want her think we had to keep going if she was afraid I might hurt her, but before I could even open my mouth, she beat me to it.

By opening her mouth and taking me into it.

I may have cursed – or taken the Lord's name in vain – or maybe I'd only done all of that in my head because I couldn't seem to breathe any air into my lungs to speak with which was kind of ironic considering she was blowing me. My hands fisted the sheets at my side so I wouldn't be tempted to hold onto her head knowing I was having a hard enough time just trying to lie still. It had been close to two years since I'd been with anyone and even with all of my previous encounters, no one had ever compared to the way she was making me feel. She licked and sucked and moaned, slowly but surely killing me in the best way possible, using her hand where her mouth couldn't reach, and it took all of my willpower to not give in to my body's urges to just cum down her throat. The only thing working in my favor there was the liquor in my system because just the sight of her alone with her lips wrapped around me was enough to do me in, but I wanted to cum inside of her the first time if she was willing, so I panted out her name adding, "Can I...I want to be inside of you."

She smiled around my cock before humming out what I hoped was her agreement, so as soon as she released me I pulled her back up my body and rolled her underneath me as I claimed her lips again with my own. Feeling her naked body and being so close to finally being inside of her was the only thing that would make me end that kiss, so I leaned over to get a condom out of my nightstand and quickly rolled it on before positioning myself on top of her with a part of me still not really believing this was actually going to happen.

SPOV

"Fuuuck," he groaned as he slowly slid inside of me and had it not been for the fact his shillelagh stick was slowly splitting me in two, I would've giggled that Eric reverted to the more American version during sexy times instead of using his beloved 'feck'.

There'd been times I thought it was the only word he knew.

He was huge – much bigger than Bill, but he was going painfully slow so my body could adjust to his size and when he was finally fully sheathed within me, we both sighed out with relief. Everything about Eric had been better than my imagination had dared to hope for – only made better by the fact that I knew he loved me too – and knowing there was more to be had I wiggled my hips in an attempt to get him to move.

Oh boy did he move.

Once he knew he wasn't hurting me he slowly started to thrust into me, gradually increasing his speed, and soon the room was filled with nothing but the sound of his grunts and my whimpers with skin slapping against skin. Never had anything ever felt as good as when he was inside of me and the thought repeated itself in my head when he changed angles and started hitting *that spot* over and over again. My vision started fading out yet again as my hands couldn't decide where on his body to grip, moving from his arms to his shoulders and then to his back before settling on what had to have been the best butt in the whole world. Feeling him like that with his muscles taut as he drove into me was enough to drive me over the edge and I felt a little thrill run through me hearing him yell out my name as he came with me.

He managed to fall mostly to my side and while I knew he'd have to get rid of the condom I didn't want him to leave me just yet so I wrapped my still rubbery arms and legs around him as best I could. We were both still trying to catch our breath, so he wasn't putting up too much of a fight anyway – nor did I put up a fight when he kissed me again, stealing a few of those much needed breaths from my lungs, but my mind wandered to wondering where we went from there and in my orgasm-induced delirium, I joked, "So, does this mean I'm fired?"

Eric looked panicked for a second before he realized I was kidding and he playfully growled again while scraping his lips and teeth along my collarbone, saying, "Well, I've thought about it."

"What?" I gasped in mock outrage. "I'm the best waitress you have!"

I was the only waitress he had, but that was just semantics.

"True," he admitted with a smile, but he quickly got serious and added, "But then you're my *only* one. You do know that, don'tcha?"

I knew we were no longer talking about his staffing requirements and my heart swelled knowing this was just the beginning. While we each had our own heartaches and struggles in our lifetime, everything that happened is what led to us to being together now and I wouldn't trade any of it, so long as I found him at the end of it all. I knew *I* was his one and only just as much as he was mine and as our lips met yet again, we both ended up being grateful that hadn't been the one and only condom in the drawer.