

Title: **Tales of the Dead**

Category: Books » Sookie Stackhouse/Southern Vampire Mysteries

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Language: English, Rating: Rated: M

Genre: Crime/Romance

Published: 11-05-11, Updated: 05-15-13

Chapters: 25, Words: 96,344

Chapter 1: Chapter 1

Chapter 1

EPOV

I stood in front of my locker and changed into my scrubs, one of the few things I considered a perk in my choice of careers, although I wouldn't really call my career a *choice*, but that was neither here nor there. I'd chosen the slate grey set and topped it off with a black scrub cap covered with dancing skeletons, complete with top hats and canes. It wasn't anywhere near Halloween, but I had an admittedly dark sense of humor. I had to or else I'd go crazy. It wasn't like I saw a lot of civilian traffic working the late shift at the coroner's office, but, again, that was merely another *perk*.

I'd already been briefed by Chow that there was a body in the autopsy room in need of my attention. Victor Madden was Shreveport's official Coroner, but truth be told, he rarely got his own hands dirty anymore and was more interested in building a name for himself. He was the textbook definition of *narcissistic* and these days would only pull on a pair of latex glove if it meant he'd be getting his name in the paper. Chow was the only other forensic pathologist in our small office, but since he specialized in adult and forensic psychiatry we'd agreed a long time ago that he would handle all of the calls needing emergency psychiatric evaluations and orders of protective custody while I tended to the actual dead bodies. Louisiana was one of the few states where the Coroner's Office dealt the living as well and since I didn't (do well with the living, that is), I was more than happy to work with the dead.

It was my forte.

I entered the autopsy room and went straight to work. Waiting on me was a male, roughly forty years in age, and by the looks of it had been out in the elements when he'd been found. His clothing had already been removed and bagged as evidence, but there were still traces of dirt on his face and arms, as well as leaves in his hair. I could see the trail of dried blood coming down his neck from the back of his head and when I turned it to get a better look I found what appeared to be blunt force trauma of some sort.

"What happened to you?" I asked.

"Looks like he was hit over the head," I heard from behind me.

I didn't bother to turn around, having recognized the voice, and instead asked, "Do you know what happened to him?"

"Not a clue," he said whimsically and when I turned to look over at him I saw a rarely seen bright smile on his face. He pointed at my scrubs cap and said, "I like your hat."

I'd met Detective Corbett Stackhouse eight years earlier, there at the Coroner's Office, and couldn't help smiling back as I asked, "What's got you all chipper this evening?"

He'd become a regular of sorts since that time and often hung out with me in the evenings while I worked when he had nothing better to do. He smiled even wider and answered coyly, "Oh nothing..."

"Bullshit," I declared, but turned to ignore him in favor of getting my work done. Corbett was a talker and I had no doubt he'd eventually spill his not so well kept secret.

He must've been really excited because without any more prompting from me, he said, "Alright, you forced it outta me. You know my daughter? Sookie?"

She was his pride and joy and there was rarely a night when he was there that he didn't mention her in one way or another. The day she'd joined the Shreveport PD I thought he was going to have a coronary because his chest was about to burst with pride and I'd joked that he was lucky that I knew how to cut his chest open. I'd never actually met her though and said, "Well, yeah, sort of through you."

His responding chuckle made me look back up at him as he said, "Well that's about to change. She's on her way here now."

"What?" I asked. He'd been going on and on for years that I was perfect for her and should ask her out, but it seemed more than a little illogical that he'd somehow managed to get her to come to the Coroner's Office for that reason. Since he was so damn happy I doubted she was being transported inside of a body bag, so I asked, "Why?"

"She got bumped up to Detective and this poor stiff is the first case she picked up!" he said as though she'd won the National Spelling Bee.

Interacting with people in the line of my work was one thing, but I didn't really do too well in social situations. Corbett knew this, but, even so, I told him, "You know I have *issues*, so don't expect to be making any love connections."

I certainly wasn't a saint. I was a man and had needs, but I mostly filled those needs with the occasional one night stand. My *issues* negated the possibility of having a long term relationship because I'd never come across a living soul that didn't look at me like a freak when I'd tried to tell them about it; my own parents included.

I was a little worried that he might take my stance the wrong way thinking I thought that his daughter wouldn't be good enough for me. I'd grown fond of him and it was nice to have a familiar face to talk to on a regular basis, so I'd hate to lose his friendship, but my worries were for nothing because he smiled again, saying, "You've been hanging around dead people too much. Just wait until you meet her. Sookie is pure life."

I turned back to the body in front of me and tried to lose myself in my work, saying more to myself than to Corbett, "Dead people don't judge me or look at me like I'm a freak of nature."

He moved to stand across from me and leaned over the dead body until I looked up into his eyes. "Sookie won't judge you either." He smiled affably again and said, "I don't!"

I could only raise my eyebrow at him and silently went back to work while he paced around the room regaling me with stories about his daughter that I'd heard a hundred times before, but I let him talk nonstop while trying to talk myself out of the idea that he could possibly be right. I'd given up on the fantasy of living a normal life a long time ago and learned early on to hide my freakishness from others. Even my own parents hadn't been able to understand and it changed how they looked at me. *I* changed how I acted around them because of it and even though I pretended all was well, they were *still* wary of me on the rare occasion when we were in the same room. Although they only lived twenty minutes away from my apartment, I hadn't seen them in over a year. It was just easier on everyone if I stayed away.

If only everyone would stay away from me.

I kept one ear on Corbett's *This Is Sookie's Life* dissertation while I continued working on the body in front of me. The cause of death was the blunt force trauma to the back of his skull, but since I had no idea of how or where he was found, I couldn't yet rule it either an accidental death or a homicide. Conceivably he could've fallen and hit his head or he could've been bashed in the back of the head with what appeared to be a rock. I'd need to talk to the detective to find out more details before making my decision and when Corbett stopped talking mid sentence and turned to stare at the door, my whole body stiffened.

I could hear the telltale footfalls of people approaching and heard Corbett say, "I don't want to make you nervous by hanging around, so I'll stop back by later to see how it went."

I didn't turn to watch him leave because a moment later, seeing the curvy blonde walk through the door, something *else* stiffened and I was thankful he was gone.

I recognized the wall of man walking next to her. Detective James Flood had been Corbett's partner back in the day and was a former Air Force Colonel. He still carried the air of a military man and I nodded my head at him saying, "Detective."

I knew he'd heard the rumors about me and that I still made him uncomfortable. I could see it in the way his shoulders tensed as he nodded in return and turned to the blonde at his side, motioning to her and saying, "Doctor Northman. This is Detective Stackhouse."

When she smiled at me I could see exactly what Corbett had been talking about. She practically radiated sunshine and it only made me feel even darker inside knowing I would never have a shot at getting to know her better. She held out her hand to shake mine as she said, "Please Doctor Northman, call me Sookie."

I was still struck dumbfounded by her beauty until I saw Detective Flood shift his body a bit, breaking the spell I'd been under, and I pulled off my latex gloves with a snap, shaking her hand while unable to stop looking into her blue eyes as I said, "Nice to meet you Sookie. You can just call me Eric."

Flood cleared his throat making us break apart and said, "Well now that introductions are over," he pointed at the table and asked, "What can you tell us about our guy?"

"Aside from the gaping hole in the back of his head he was the picture of perfect health," I answered. Looking back and forth between the two of them, I asked, "Can you give me any info on how he was found? Were there any witnesses?"

They both shook their heads, but it was Sookie that pulled a file folder from the large bag over her shoulder and said, "He was found by a runner jogging on one of the trails in Lakeside Park." She opened the file and walked over to the desk, spreading out pictures all across the top of it, as she said, "Steve Newlin. Thirty-eight years of age. He's a preacher by trade and according to his wife he never came home last night." She looked up at me and raised her eyebrow as she added, "Apparently that wasn't uncommon."

I looked over the notes and saw that his liver temperature had been 94 degrees when he'd been found a little after noon earlier that day and given the agreeable temperatures we'd had that day, that put his time of death around three hours earlier and said, "Well he was alive up until around nine o'clock this morning." I had no way to know beforehand how he'd been dressed, but seeing in the pictures he'd been wearing a suit, it was obvious he hadn't been there jogging.

I walked back to the body and turned his head, shining the light down on the back of it to show them, as I said, "From the shape of the wound, I'd say it was caused by a large rock. I can't tell you if he fell or if he was hit though." My eyes were drawn back to Sookie as I asked, "Did you find anything like that at the scene? A wound of this size would've left noticeable trace evidence on the item."

Everything from blood to hair and tissue would've transferred, but the way she chewed on her bottom lip was a little distracting and I had to force myself to pay attention when she answered, "No, but there was nothing like that around the body." She flipped through photo after photo to reassure herself no one had missed it the first time around, but my eyes never left her.

Corbett hadn't been exaggerating about her beauty.

When her eyes met mine again I was nearly left dumbstruck again and quickly averted them while mentally berating myself. Corbett aside, if Sookie was a detective with the Shreveport PD, having a one night stand with her wasn't an option. It would make working together all too

awkward afterward and I had no desire to go through that. Clearing my throat, I said, "Well the lack of anything at the scene that could cause that type of trauma would lead me to believe that he didn't die accidentally, so I guess you have a homicide on your hands."

Flood excused himself to make a phone call while Sookie gathered up the photos she'd strewn across the desk and when she was done, she turned to look at me and said, "Well, thanks Eric. I guess I'll be seeing you around now that I'm on the detective squad."

I should've just nodded silently so she'd leave, but I wanted to keep her there for just a few minutes longer, if only so I could see her beautiful face and said, "How do you like it so far?"

Her smile was practically blinding with a hint of a blush on her cheeks as she said, "I love it. I mean, today is my only first day and we already caught a case. I feel like I've known the Colonel, Detective Flood, for my whole life so I couldn't ask for a better partner." Still smiling, she looked me over and asked, "Have you worked here long?"

"Eight years," I replied without thought and my stomach twisted a little when her eyebrows furrowed and sadness filled her eyes.

"Did you ever meet my father? He was the Colonel's partner back then. Corbett Stackhouse?"

My eyes fell to my feet for a moment before they looked back into hers and my reasons for not being able to try and get to know her better like any normal man were crystal clear, to me at least, as I nodded and admitted, "He was my first. I was the one that did his autopsy."

Chapter 2: Chapter 2

Chapter 2

"Oh," Sookie replied with sadness filling her voice. Her eyes welled with tears even though he'd been dead for eight years and I had to stop myself from reaching out to wipe them away. She swallowed hard and asked, "So I guess you didn't know him before then? While he was still alive?"

I shook my head answering, "No, but I know he was a good man." He was *still* a good man. I was just the only one that knew that. When she looked at me quizzically I realized I'd said too much, which was one of the reasons why people thought I was strange, and I quickly covered myself, saying, "I remember hearing everything about him in the news after he'd been killed. It seemed like he was friends with the entire parish so he couldn't have been a bad guy."

Sookie nodded, with the wispy blond strands trailing down her neck that had fallen loose from her pinned up hair sliding along her skin, and I had to focus my concentration away from the movement as she said, "He *was* a good man; a *very* good man. His death is why I joined the force."

While Corbett had been proud she'd decided to follow in his footsteps, he'd been afraid that was Sookie's reason for becoming a police officer. Up until his death he'd said she'd been a happy-go-lucky teenager and, like many of the spirits that refused to move on for whatever reason, he'd kept an eye on his family and saw how his death had changed her. Her carefree spirit turned into dogged determination in her quest to become a police officer and while she mourned the loss of her father, he mourned the loss of his daughter's untroubled childhood. He wanted her to regain the spark in her eyes that went out with his death and stupidly thought that I could help put it back there. It was one of the reasons why he refused to stop visiting me even though, up until that night, I had never even met her.

If I hadn't done his toxicology tests at the time of his death myself, I might've thought he'd died while inebriated and blamed that.

I didn't always talk to the dead people I came across and they didn't always talk to me, but Corbett showed up in the autopsy room before I'd made my first cut telling me exactly where I'd find the bullet that killed him. He and Flood had walked in unaware on a robbery in progress at a convenience store and in the ensuing gun battle he'd been caught in the crossfire of both the robber's and Flood's bullets as he leapt in front of a little girl who'd happened to be in the store at the time. His actions saved her life but had cost him his own. Flood froze when he saw his partner go down and the robber had gotten away when he moved to try and save him. Even though there was conclusive evidence that it was the bullet fired from the robber's gun that had been the one to kill Corbett, Flood turned to booze in his grief over losing his partner and allowing his killer to get away. It was thanks to Corbett's own dogged determination (I'd since been informed it was a Stackhouse trait) and his persistent hounding of me that I finally went to see Flood myself. I sidled up next to him at the bar one night and relayed the message from Corbett on where he could find the murder weapon, which had been dropped into a storm drain several blocks away, and thanks to the killer's fingerprints already being in the system he was arrested and found guilty, sentenced to life without the possibility of parole. It was also the reason why I made Flood's skin crawl and Corbett later told me that he'd convinced himself our encounter at the bar was a figment of his alcohol induced imagination, but he'd cleaned himself up and hadn't touched a drop of liquor since, so I thought it was a small price to pay.

Realizing there was an awkward silence building between Sookie and me, I smiled at her and said, "I'm sure he would be very proud." He was so damn proud I'd warned him that the sutures from the Y incision I had made on his chest might break open and I wouldn't be able to fix it if it did.

"Damn skippy I'm proud."

Thanks to my lifelong curse, I didn't startle easily, so it wasn't difficult to not turn around at the sound of Corbett's voice behind me.

"I'd like to think so," Sookie smiled back at me with the sadness lifting from her eyes.

"Didn't I tell ya she was beautiful? Are you sure you don't want to rethink your decision and just ask her out already?" Corbett asked as he came to stand next to me.

"I'm sure of it," I answered them both. This was the exact reason why I couldn't date. My closest friend was a dead guy and I was the only one in the room that could participate in the whole conversation.

"Look who I found wandering around," Corbett said. Sookie's phone chimed in the next second so I was able to discreetly glance to my right and saw Steve Newlin standing beside Corbett.

"Tell her it was my bitch of a wife Sara that killed me," he said with venom. "She found out that I'd been cheating on her and lured me out to the park this morning saying she would finally give me the divorce I've been asking for, for months. The frigid bitch hit me over the head with a souvenir rock we'd brought back from our honeymoon in Bethlehem."

I had to stifle the chuckle building in my chest at the irony as well as quell the urge to ask if they'd honeymooned in the West Bank or Pennsylvania, but when Sookie looked up at me from her phone and I saw that she still saw me as a normal human being, there was no way I was about to give her any reasons to think otherwise.

"Well, I should get going," she smiled. "The Colonel and I still need to talk to the widow. She was too upset to talk to us earlier."

"Upset my ass," Steve proclaimed. "More like making a list of the ways she's going to spend the insurance payout. Tell her!"

"Ask her out!" Corbett protested. "Before she leaves."

It was still difficult at times to pretend I was only hearing the conversation taking place amongst the living so I hoped my smile was a normal one and said to Sookie, "Well it was nice to meet you Sookie. Unfortunately, I'm sure we'll be seeing one another again." When her eyebrows quirked I realized how I might've sounded like an ass and followed up with, "Not that I don't want to see you again because I do. Not that I'm asking you out or anything."

"You should," Corbett interjected.

"I meant because of the dead bodies. Not that you're not pretty because you are. I meant, you know, seeing you professionally. Here. With the dead bodies. Because there's always going to be more dead bodies and, you know, you'll have to investigate their deaths."

For fuck's sake. I hadn't floundered so hard since my dead grandmother wandered into my bedroom when I was fifteen and caught me looking at my father's Playboy magazine.

My eyes had dropped to my feet again in embarrassment and I'm sure my face reddened hearing Sookie's chuckle that sounded like a feminine version of her father's. I knew that not only from experience, but because he was chuckling beside me at the same time she was.

"It was nice meeting you too Eric," she said and I looked up to see her smiling back at me. My eyes followed her to the door where she turned around and said, "By the way, I like your hat."

Dancing skeletons when you're surrounded by death is kind of uplifting; like even though their physical body is gone their spirits are still capable of having a good time."

She had no idea. Her father was in stitches beside me. Literally.

With those parting words she was gone and I turned to Corbett, making sure to keep my voice low in case Sookie could still hear me, and said, "Jesus Christ. You couldn't keep your mouth shut for five more minutes until she left before you had to start your shit?"

He grinned back at me asking, "Now where would the fun in that be? I'm dead son. I need to find a way to entertain myself."

Corbett's jovial personality was the reason why I didn't mind talking to him. Most of the spirits I'd come across were sad or angry over their deaths, but he seemed to shake it off rather easily and instead found ways to be full of life in spite of his death. Even though I wasn't really angry at him I shot a glare his way and pointed at my hat, saying, "Why don't you go and find Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers to keep you company? Learn how to ballroom dance for entertainment and leave my love life to me."

I turned to start readying Newlin's body to be picked up by the funeral home, but Corbett followed along beside me, snickering, "Your love life is deader than me."

I glanced up and saw Newlin's spirit was gone and hoping to change the subject, I asked, "Speaking of the dead, where did he go?"

Corbett shrugged his shoulders, saying, "He probably went to go and haunt his wife. He's pissed."

"No shit," I said. I didn't think death was a suitable punishment for adultery, but it wasn't like I could stop it from happening.

I continued to bag up the body while Corbett stood there staring at me until I couldn't take it anymore and looked up at him, asking, "What?" even though I knew what he was likely to say.

"So what did you think of Sookie?" he asked.

Why was I cursed with seeing and hearing dead people? Why couldn't I see into the future instead, so I could pick winning lottery numbers and retire to a tropical island paradise?

I glared at him saying, "You were there. You heard *exactly* what I thought of your daughter when I couldn't stop the verbal diarrhea from spilling out of my mouth."

He chuckled again, saying, "It's been a while since I've been in a drugstore. Do they make Imodium AD for getting the oral shits?"

My earlier embarrassment came back and I lashed out, asking, "What the hell? You're her father. Shouldn't you be warning me away from your daughter?"

He was protective as hell about her and I'd asked the same question a hundred other times before then, so I wasn't surprised when he replied with his stock answer of, "It's because I *am* her father you dipshit. She's a grown woman and I want her to find a good man. *You* are a good man." His face turned serious when he added something new, saying, "I don't want her career to become her life. If she doesn't find some balance, the job will be her life and I don't want that for her. She's going to see a lot of bad in her line of work and she needs to be able to counter that with the good that's out there or it's going to eat her alive."

I knew exactly what it was like when your career became your life. I didn't have any *real* friends thanks to my curse because the dead never failed to interfere in my life whenever I tried to live normally. Without fail I would be out with someone when a spirit would somehow interject them self by talking to me or, even worse, showing me how they'd met their violent end. It was hard to sit in a restaurant with someone talking about movies or politics when a ghost came over to me showing me that they'd been strangled to death by the guy sitting at the table across from me. Sometimes their appearance was opaque, so I knew without a doubt what they were, but other times they appeared as solid as any other living person so it was hard to separate what was 'real' and what wasn't. I'd been accused of being rude more than once for ignoring a living person thinking they were dead while acknowledging the dead ones with the live people around me looking at me like I was crazy. They only wanted justice to be served, but I would just be locked up in the psych ward if I tried to tell anyone what I knew, so I was more or less a recluse. Working alone in the morgue, I didn't have to hide what I could see and hear and instead had friends like Corbett to keep me company.

He was a blessing and a curse all rolled into one.

"What makes you think that she'd be willing to overlook my curse? Why do you think that she would believe me when my own parents think I'm a nut job?" I asked, both hoping he might be right while trying to convince myself it was nothing more than a pipe dream. I couldn't afford to get my hopes up no matter how much I liked her.

Corbett knew me well enough to probably sense the direction of my thoughts and I both hated and appreciated that about him when he smiled, answering, "Because I know my little girl. Just give her a chance Eric. You won't be disappointed."

I watched him head towards the door and just like his daughter had before him, he turned and added, "Now I'm gonna go and watch my baby's first interrogation while you think of a way to ask her out." Even though Corbett appeared as a solid form to me, he passed right through the closed door as if it wasn't there and left me doing exactly what his parting words had bade me to do and as I made my way home later on that night, I found myself left with a conundrum.

If Sookie Stackhouse showed up again, would I have the nerve to ask her out?

Chapter 3: Chapter 3

Chapter 3

Knowing Newlin's wife was his murderer is what made me decide that going for a run in Lakeside Park the following morning would be as safe as it ever was. I often ran there to clear my head and after meeting Sookie the night before, my head was chock full and needed to be emptied. With my earbuds firmly in place, I took off on my favorite running trail and just concentrated on my breathing, taking in the visual smorgasbord of the autumn leaves which had turned into vibrant shades of reds and yellows. I was steadily huffing away, but my thoughts were still firmly locked on Sookie which is why I was startled for the first time in a long time when I rounded a grove of trees and ran right into her.

We both tumbled to the ground and my earbuds came loose in time to hear the air leave her lungs with an 'oomph' sound on impact, but at least I'd been able to grab onto her in time for my body to cushion her fall. My mouth opened to apologize, embarrassment and regret filling my veins...

But another vein quickly filled as well.

It all happened too fast for me to figure out how, but somehow Sookie had landed on top of me; her legs straddling my hips and her face hovering inches above mine and with the way she was positioned, there was no hiding my body's reaction to it. I struggled to find something to say, but I struggled even more to not grind my body against hers and remained silent with me wondering if she was having any struggles of her own.

I still had a tight hold of her hips, with my fingertips tracing over where her gun was holstered at her side underneath her shirt, when she finally smiled, saying, "Gee Doc, you certainly have a way of knocking a girl off of her feet."

A joke. Joking was a good idea. Almost as good as grinding against her.

It was impossible to not return her smile as I said sheepishly, "Just call me Casanova."

Or just call me...

"I'm all for somebody getting a little action, but can you tell her to arrest my wife already? The bitch put the murder weapon back on the fucking mantle at home next to our wedding photo."

"Jesus, son...couldn't you at least buy her dinner first?"

I cringed hearing the voices of Newlin and Corbett behind me, but Sookie merely laughed at me; I hoped assuming I was cringing out of embarrassment, which was actually quite accurate at the moment.

"Funny," she chuckled, "I could've sworn your name was Eric."

My ego did a little happy dance that she'd remembered my name, but it was short-lived when Corbett spoke up again, saying, "You got company."

"No shit," I mumbled, but when Sookie's eyes went wide and looked up, I realized my mistake in inadvertently answering Corbett and I opened my mouth again to apologize when I heard the sound of a twig snapping followed by, "Gimme all your cash."

What. In. The. Fuck? Could this morning get any worse?

Since it appeared that Sookie had heard the new voice as well, I took a chance and turned my head to see a guy standing there holding a knife in one hand and realized the answer to my question was yes; this morning *could*, in fact, get worse.

"We don't want any trouble mister," Sookie said in a frightened voice as she slowly moved to stand up, but I noticed the contradiction wherein no part of her body trembled. Her profession and holstered weapon temporarily forgotten, I scrambled to my feet ready to try to protect her, but as he took a step towards us Sookie lunged at him and grabbed onto his extended arm, bending it back until he had no choice but to drop the knife, and delivered a swift kick to his abdomen. She landed on top of his prone body on the ground and wrangled his arms behind his back at what looked like an uncomfortable angle, chastising, "You're lucky I was already dirty or this would *really* hurt." Sookie punctuated her statement by pushing his face into the dirt and seeing her like that was just a tiny bit of a turn on.

Who was I kidding?

It was a *huge* fucking turn on and I was jealous that he was the one underneath her now in my spot.

"*THAT'S* my girl!" Corbett hooted from behind me. I'd forgotten all about our *other* company and shot them a quick glance hoping they'd understand my request for them to shut the fuck up.

"Did you *see* that?" he asked, still jumping around like his favorite team had just won the pennant.

I wasn't about to answer him, again, and Newlin merely wandered off mumbling, "Great! Now she's *never* going to arrest that bitch..."

I ignored them both and watched Sookie give our would be mugger a halfhearted slap to his head when he tried to squirm out from underneath her. He was nearly twice her size, but he couldn't get loose from the hold she had on him and I moved closer in case she needed my help, admitting, "Sookie, I'm impressed."

And jealous.

And turned on.

She smiled wide again, saying, "Aww, this was nothing. It's a technique I perfected as a child on my older brother and his threat of wet willies."

"That's a true statement there," Corbett chuckled, with me chuckling along with him. "Those two damn near destroyed the living room on many occasions."

"I'll keep that in mind," I smiled while trying to force away all thoughts of how I'd like to see how much damage we could do to a bedroom.

Her eyebrow cocked up and her grin turned into something more torrid as she licked her lips and asked, "Why Eric, are you *packing* something more threatening than a *wet willy*?"

Fuck. Me.

Don't say that! Don't say that! Don't say that!

"Sweet baby Jesus...why did my sweet baby have to go and say that?"

I could see Corbett pacing in my peripheral vision with his hands covering his eyes as though seeing his daughter flirt (?) with me was burning out his retinas. It served his ass right for not going the fuck away so I could figure out if she actually *was* flirting with me. I quelled the urge to mock him with his statements from the night before of how she was a *grown woman*, but my mouth took the opportunity to answer her without my brain's consent, saying, "Would you like to frisk me and find out?"

"Fuck, man...that's my *daughter*!"

My face flooded with embarrassment and I would've given anything to be able to tell Corbett to get the hell out of there, but I couldn't, knowing Sookie would hear it. However, I managed to block him out completely when she smiled at me, saying, "Maybe later. I'm a little tied up at the moment." Glancing down at her latest arrest, she said, "Well, at least *one* of us is, right?"

I couldn't take my eyes off of her; they appreciated every inch of her and my face flushed again when she caught my eye and said, "Uh...Eric? Do you mind?"

"Umm...sorry..." I sputtered out with my eyes dropping back to my feet.

She chuckled again, saying, "I don't mind if you look." When I looked up at her, she grinned, adding, "I'll even let you *touch*."

"Where did I go wrong?" Corbett asked the air around him.

"Umm...excuse me?" I asked hesitantly even though my feet took another step closer, prepared to take her up on her offer; Corbett be damned.

She jerked her head for me to step closer and grinned coyly, asking, "Would you mind?" She turned her head with her eyes glancing down at the small of her back and I reached down, willing myself to not reach down further, but my fingertips grazed the top of her ass anyway before I found where her handcuffs were housed and pulled them out, handing them to her. Her fingertips slid across mine before she took hold of them and said, "Thanks."

No... Thank YOU.

"Why did I think this was a good idea?" Corbett muttered from nearby. I wished I could've answered him, for once, because I thought the idea of me and Sookie together in some way was a *great* idea, but I kept quiet so she wouldn't think I was a nut job.

"Stay there," she ordered the mugger after getting him cuffed and she stood up, brushing the dirt off of her pants.

I wasn't sure if he would actually stay put now that she wasn't physically holding him down, so I asked, "Do you need help?"

I was a smart guy. I went to medical school and everything and yet I still always managed to put my foot in my mouth in one way or another in any given conversation, and this time was no different. I didn't think about how my question might sound when put into context with what Sookie was doing at that very moment, but I realized it a second too late when I saw the surprised look on her face.

I was just about to sputter out another apology when her surprise turned back into a grin seeing me blush and she turned her back to me, saying, "Sure." She peeked over her shoulder to catch my eye before glancing down at her ass, asking, "Did I miss a spot?"

Corbett had it right when he'd said, 'Sweet baby Jesus.'

She was giving me permission to touch her ass; her ass that I'd looked at more times than I was comfortable admitting; that I'd admire from afar but was now up close and could be personal with.

"Don't. You. Dare. Northman."

Her ass that her father would be watching me touch.

God damn it!

I blew out a deep breath and reined my urges in, saying, "I...uh...think you got it all."

Sookie looked almost as disappointed as I felt, but it was quickly replaced with a grin as she fell ass down into the dirt and sprung back up onto her feet, asking, "How about now?"

"Sookie!" Corbett chided even though she couldn't hear him, but I could and my face flushed yet again, only this time in frustration.

She giggled seeing my reaction and said, "You're cute when you blush."

After the cluster fuck our morning had been, I figured I didn't have much left to lose and said truthfully, "If you keep it up, you'll be the death of me. How will you get your autopsies done then?"

If my heart didn't give out from her teasing, her father would figure out a way to have me join him on the dark side.

Her grin never faded as she stared into my eyes, saying, "Well, we can't have that." A more wicked expression appeared on her face as she added, "I can think of much better ways to die." Sookie gave me a wink that made my heart stop and whipped out her cell phone to call the station, telling them she needed a patrol car to respond out at the park, while I watched Corbett continue to pace and mutter to himself. It sounded like he was praying, but I wasn't paying too much attention to him since Sookie seemed to draw every ounce of attention I had.

While I'd never had what I would call a 'girlfriend', I'd been with my fair share of women in the past, but none of them affected me the way she seemed to. I was embarrassed seeing her watching me stare at her and yet I couldn't take my eyes from her. Maybe I'd subconsciously taken to heart all of the times Corbett said we'd be good for one another or maybe it was because she was a kick ass pinup girl like a blond haired blue eyed Lara Croft, but whatever it was; I wanted more.

Corbett had finally disappeared into the woods and after Sookie ended her call, she pulled the perp to his feet and gave him a quick pat down before sticking the handle of his knife into her back pocket. At least it would deter me from touching her there now that her unseen chaperone was MIA and as we walked the rest of the trail towards the parking lot, I asked, "What were you doing out here anyway?" She wasn't dressed to go running; she was dressed for work although she was a little worse for the wear now.

"Getting knocked off my feet by Casanova," she grinned.

"Before that," I chuckled, loving her playful personality. It was such a stark contrast to my normal everyday life and I wanted to revel in it while I could.

Her eyes darted to the guy in her grasp walking a step ahead of us before looking back at me, saying, "Well, I couldn't talk to the widow yesterday because she was still too upset, so I was just taking another look see before meeting up with her this afternoon."

I debated on telling her where she could find the rock that murdered Newlin, but there wasn't any way to do that without revealing my curse. Seeing her looking up at me like I was a normal man, I wasn't willing to let that end so soon, so I kept my mouth shut and just nodded.

The patrol car was waiting for us by the time we got to the parking lot and Sookie handed him over, along with the knife, and told them she'd meet them at the station. I followed her blindly to her car, not wanting her to go just yet, but had no reason for her to stay and ended up blurting out, "Have dinner with me."

She turned to face me with another smile, asking, "Was that an invitation or an order?"

It was a good thing she thought I was cute when I blushed because I could feel the heat in my cheeks and forced out my question with the rest of the air from my lungs, asking, "Which one will get you to say yes?"

She took a step closer and stole whatever air was left in my lungs, as she said, "I'll tell you what...I'll say yes as long as we can take turns on who's the dominant and who's the submissive."

Yep...she would definitely be the death of me.

Chapter 4: Chapter 4

Chapter 4

Sookie gave me her phone number before leaving for the station and we had plans to make plans for dinner that weekend. I smiled all the way home; all the way through my shower and all the way to work that afternoon with my thoughts never straying far from her.

The experts were right; exercising WAS good for you.

If I hadn't gone for a run that morning, who knows when I would've seen her again and just being near her was enough to get my heart racing more than any amount of running could do for me. Even Chow noticed my uncharacteristically good mood when I walked into the office and asked in disbelief, "What's that on your face? A smile?" He leaned forward across his desk, adding, "What? Did you come across the Holy Grail; Action Comics Number 1 with the first appearance of Superman?"

Asshole.

Thanks to my curse, I didn't have a lot of luck making friends as a kid, so I'd taken to collecting comic books. It was fun to lose myself in the make believe world of superheroes and I felt a kinship towards many of the characters. They too were hiding the real them and what they could do and I often wished I could be one of them. I just couldn't see how my curse could help to rid the world of evil.

The smile never left my face though because Sookie's phone number was currently burning a hole into my cell phone and I just looked back at him, saying, "Fuck off Mr. I'm-a-wanna-be-bad-ass-with-my-Japanese-Yakuza-tattoos-doing-a-beginners-level-Sudoku-puzzle."

Chow and I were more like work friends than anything else and while he too was a little wary of me and my quirks, we got along okay for the most part. He just waved me off with a grin, looking back down at his puzzle book, and said with a shrug, "Whatever Thor. Just make sure you give me a call if Wonder Woman shows up so I can talk her into letting me play with her and her lasso of truth."

Like I said...asshole.

No amount of ribbing from Chow or anyone else could rid me of my good mood and it was a few hours later that I was sitting at my desk finishing up some reports when the one person who might do some damage to it waltzed in. The building had long since emptied out, so I knew I wouldn't be overheard talking to him and just sat back and waited. Corbett wasted no time in asking, "So what happened after I left this morning?"

I could tell it was eating away at him after witnessing my interaction with his daughter and grinned, asking, "Do you *really* want to know?"

"Fuck you Northman. My baby girl was just joking around, so don't go getting any squirrely ideas in that head of yours."

Too late.

I masked my fantasy fueled sigh with a chuckle and decided to let him off the hook, admitting, "Nothing happened," while omitting the part of how something *might* have happened had he not been there.

I would've gotten to touch her ass at the very least.

When he breathed a sigh of relief, I leaned forward and wondered out loud, asking, "Wasn't it *your* idea in the first place that Sookie and I would be good together?" He nodded curtly, as though he wasn't quite sure if he still felt that way, so I asked, "Then what's your problem?"

His eyes dropped to his feet as he began pacing back and forth in front of my desk for a few minutes until he finally halted and looked up at me, answering, "I don't have a problem. I guess it's just because she was barely seventeen when I died and I've made it a point to not hang around whenever she's met up with any of them other fellas, so it was a bit of a shock seeing my little girl acting so...so...*flirty*."

He'd said '*flirty*' like it was a ghastly sexually transmitted disease, but my brain was caught on what he'd said just prior to that. "What other *fellas*?" I asked, just as guilty as him when I'd said the word in the same fashion.

Sensing he now had the upper hand, his grin was firmly back in place as he asked, "What's wrong Doc? Are you afraid of a little competition?"

Yes.

"I have *competition*?"

Apparently the word 'competition' was just as disgusting as the words 'flirty' and 'fellas'.

"I don't know," he said, with a mock puzzled look on his face. "You'd have to be in the running first. I think you'd have to actually ask her out for them to be considered your competition."

Them?

"I did!" I exclaimed a bit louder than necessary, but after I thought about it, I added, "Sort of."

"What do you mean 'sort of'?" he mocked. "Either ya did or ya didn't. Ain't no 'sort of' about it."

Why was I humoring this man who did nothing but try to make me look like an idiot in front of her earlier?

Oh yeah...because I'm a loser with a dead guy for a best friend.

I rubbed my eyes as though it would help clear my head of the ghost who had just taken a seat across from me and explained our plans-to-make-plans conversation. Corbett just shook his head like I was the ultimate dumbass, an eternal teenager doomed to pass notes in study hall, but his smile gave him away and he left me to my reports after wishing me good luck and telling me to keep my hands to myself.

Maybe I could find a voodoo practitioner that could make me up a Gris-gris to keep away nosey spirits of the cock blocking variety? This was Louisiana, after all...

Since I'd literally run into Sookie on Tuesday, I decided I would call her on Thursday to make plans for the upcoming weekend, so I wouldn't look like the overeager and desperate for her attention ass that I actually felt like. She was all I could think about anymore and I was pretty sure I knew now why Corbett had been so adamant about how good we would be together. He'd taken over the role of a father figure of sorts for me over the last eight years and he worried that I'd end up spending the rest of my life alone. It was something I'd already resigned myself to, but after having lived the life that he had, he wanted me to have the same happiness he'd experienced and tried to convince me that Sookie, or someone as full of life as she was, would be the key.

My life had devolved to nothing more than my work. My curse had made me a loner beforehand and working in the morgue left me with an even greater invisible cloud that always hovered over me; always keeping me in a shroud of darkness. All of my time spent away from there was spent in virtual solitude and even though it wasn't something I tried to maintain, I didn't exactly do much to change it either. I'd been disappointed enough for one lifetime.

It had been well over a year since my last 'fling', if you could call it that, and had been nothing more than a one night stand during a conference I attended in New Orleans. We wouldn't have worked out anyway due to the distance of her living in California and the fact it was nothing more than a drunken hook up, but it certainly didn't help matters when we'd gone out together the

following morning for breakfast and she came back from the restroom to find me talking to the empty chair beside me.

Octavia Fant looked like a nice enough woman to me and it would've been rude to not answer her question about how good the beignets were.

How was I supposed to know she'd been dead for over twenty years until she told me?

I would be taking a big risk in putting myself out there, but Sookie had such a hold on me already that I knew I wouldn't be able to live with myself if I didn't at least try. She could be the light to my dark and if she was anything like her father, I hoped she would be able to at least forgive me my odd episodes and overlook it to see the man underneath.

And with any luck, I'd be underneath HER at some point in the future.

It was that thought (and not wanting a repeat of the fuckery in the park) that had me sitting at my desk Googling 'voodoo talismans' on Wednesday evening, in preparation for my date with Sookie, when my office phone rang telling me I was needed at one of the local no-name motels. I gathered my things and headed over, with the flashing strobe lights of the police cars telling me I was in the right place, and I grabbed my bag and headed towards the two patrolmen standing like bookends, with an open motel room door in between them.

"What have you got?" I asked as I got near.

The one on the left just shrugged and looked away as if he couldn't be bothered with the details, saying, "A dead body."

Yeah, I never would've guessed that one in a million years. Thanks asshole.

I ignored him and walked through the door, but came up short at the sight in front of me. On the other side of the bed, beyond the bloated and distorted naked body of the deceased man that separated us, was the object of my every thought lately. Sookie was rooting through a duffel bag sitting on top of the dresser pulling out all sorts of what appeared to be illegal drugs, with her hand over her nose and her eyes scrunched, I assumed from the less than pleasant smell, but she was still just as beautiful as I remembered her to be.

"Detective," I said to announce my arrival.

Her head snapped up and her eyes smiled back at me, but I had no idea of what her mouth was doing, since it was still covered by her hand, until she said, "Doctor Casanova, fancy meeting you here."

Did that mean she was still feeling 'flirty'?

The word sounded much better when I used it and I swatted away the flies that were buzzing near my head and played along as I smiled back, saying, "Who else would you expect to meet up

with at such a fine establishment as this? Is my choice of venues for our date not to your liking?" It was a disgusting roach motel and even without the dead body lying on the bed, I was sure the other rooms were just as nasty.

Her eyebrow shot up and she dropped her hand from her face as she took a step closer, saying, "Is that your way of telling me you like to meet up in dirty little motels with hourly rates?" I floundered thinking she didn't realize I'd just been teasing until she grinned, saying, "That just makes it...*dirtier*." I lost the grip on my bag and it fell to the floor with a thud when she purred, "*I like it.*"

The body had to have been lying there for days and the fact that the heat had been left on high didn't help matters as far as the sight and smell of him were concerned, but I was *still* turned on despite it all.

"That's embarrassing."

"What?" I asked, wondering if I'd said it out loud and hoping I *hadn't* as I turned around, expecting to see the not so helpful patrolman.

Instead I saw a naked guy.

Talk about embarrassing.

"I said that I liked it," Sookie said, drawing my attention to her again. When her eyes didn't stray from mine, I realized she couldn't see the naked Zack Galifianakis lookalike now standing next to me and cursed myself for almost giving away, well...my curse. Sookie seemed to dismiss my faux pas and decided to test just how healthy my heart was by asking, "Should we see if they have any vacancies?"

Was she serious?

Was she kidding?

I just couldn't tell and the naked ghost choking out, "Duuuuudde," next to me was no help in figuring it out whatsoever, so, like a dumbass, I forced out a questioning chuckle and hoped my own tears wouldn't accompany them if she decided I was just too weird for her. Thankfully she smiled and let me off of the hook by getting to the actual reason we were both standing there, saying, "Bluto here checked in on Saturday and paid upfront for the week in full. I guess their maid service is slacking on the job because the only reason we were called was because of the smell." Her lips quirked up and she jerked her head to the side, indicating the neighboring wall, as she added, "I guess even shit'ems have standards and they couldn't take it anymore."

"I can't believe I died buck ass naked," the buck ass naked guy next to me said. "Why do I look like Jabba the Hut?"

I kept my eyes on Sookie, but tried to answer them both, saying, "The heat didn't help any," and picked up my bag before wandering over to the bed. Sookie was already wearing a pair of latex gloves (and a silky blue blouse over fitted gray slacks that accentuated the perfect heart shape of her ass that I hadn't yet gotten personal with; not that I noticed, or anything), so I pulled on a pair myself and did a quick cursory check of the backside of his body since he was lying face down.

There was nothing glaringly wrong, so I lifted his head and saw Sookie cover her mouth and nose again just as an "Eewww..." came from her lips. I'd been on the job for long enough that I was pretty much desensitized to the sights and smells anymore, so when she asked, "How can you stand it?" I answered honestly.

"I've been around worse." It was true, even if the guy's face was completely distorted beyond recognition. His ghostly form had a substantial beer baby, making him top heavy, and since he'd died face down, most of his bodily fluids had pooled in his face and neck area. When I rolled him over completely and his ghost shouted, "DUDE!" I wasn't really expecting it, but I managed to not jump while he added, "There's a chick standing right there! Cover my junk!"

Bodies release lots of things when they die and the fact that he was more embarrassed over Sookie seeing his distorted dick instead of the dried shit he was covered in said a lot about him. It brought up the whole 'chicken or the egg' conundrum; did he knowingly shit himself and *then* die or die and then shit himself, but I ignored him completely when I looked up to see her eyes dancing back at me as she said, "Good! Then if this works out," she motioned a gloved hand between us, "you're in charge of diaper duty when we have our own little rugrats one day."

Huh?

Does that put me ahead of the competition?

I knew she had to be kidding and tried to not picture just what would have to occur for the two of us to produce any rugrats and thankfully I didn't have to respond because the body did it for me. Shifting him had caused the gas in his body to shift as well and the resulting sound of it escaping made Sookie jump in surprise. I laughed at her mortified look, and even more so at the now humiliated ghost, gesturing to his gassy physical self, crying "DUDE!", but the green tinge that colored Sookie's cheeks had me motioning for her to follow me outside. She gasped heaving breaths of fresh air into her lungs, mumbling, "And I thought Jason was bad," before she swallowed hard and asked, "Got any ideas on when he died?"

I stilled my hand before I could reach out and touch her, especially since I was still wearing my now soiled latex gloves, and answered, "It's hard to say, but I'll have a better idea after I get him back to the morgue."

Even with the greenish hue, she was still as pretty as ever and she seemed a little out of sorts, but tried to lighten the mood by saying, "So, I think getting a room is probably out of the question now..."

Damn it! Had it really been an option?

Unprofessional? Absolutely.

Did I care? No fucking way.

"Tease," I grumbled without thinking first.

What? It had been well over a year!

She laughed and we looked up seeing Flood headed our way when he'd called out her name, so she bumped her hip against mine to get my attention and smiled saying, "I can think of more appropriate words than 'tease'. Certain; inevitable; inescapable...they're all much better choices." She gave me one last sultry smile, saying, "But you have to actually call me first," before making her way towards her partner.

She'd left me in a daze and I eventually shook off my stupor and wandered back into the motel room, greeted by another chorus of "DUDE!" that only I could hear, with a goofy grin plastered onto my face. It was due to a feeling I had thanks to another word Sookie could have chosen to use...

Unavoidable.

Sookie looked at me like I was any other normal man; a man she found something in that made her want something more. Hypothetical rugrats aside, I wasn't quite sure what that was, but I was determined to find out. It was with that thought in mind that I pulled off my gloves and took out my cell phone. Scrolling through my contacts, I found her name and hit the send button and just a few seconds later I heard her tinkling laughter in my ear making my heart leap again as I asked, "What are you doing tomorrow night?"

Chapter 5: Chapter 5

Chapter 5

I held my breath while Sookie left me dangling on the other end of the line until she finally said, "Hmm...tomorrow night?"

"Umm...yeah, or...if that's not good for you, then...you know...whenever is fine," I stuttered, grateful I'd thought to remove my latex gloves since I'd just smacked myself in the forehead over being a bumbling idiot. After everything Corbett had spilled to me in the office the day before, it didn't surprise me that she'd have to think about it. Sookie was a beautiful fun loving woman. She probably had a ton of guys beating down her door, so it made sense that she had to think over whether or not she already had another date lined up. Meanwhile, I'd just admitted that *any* night was fine with me because, work aside, it was true.

Loser...

My heart sank when she admitted, "Actually, tomorrow I already have plans."

Of course she does.

Before my pity party could really take hold, she continued, "But you're more than welcome to join me."

"Umm..." I started, wondering if she was actually inviting me to go out on one of her dates.

Maybe I could get pointers and take notes since I'd never actually gone out on a REAL date before, but witnessing their end of the night kiss might get awkward.

"DUDE!" the naked guy I'd dubbed 'Zack' in my head shouted while jumping around and gesturing frantically at his still naked body on the bed, but I just shot him a pointed look and ignored him.

There were just TOO many parts of him jiggling for me to want to look anywhere but his eyes.

"Well?" I jumped hearing Sookie's voice because I didn't hear it through the ear piece and instead was coming from right behind me. I spun around to see her smiling face as she giggled, "You sure are a jumpy thing."

Yeah, well...I've got NOTHING on Zack.

"I just wasn't expecting you to be there...here..." She just stared at me still smiling, so I kept rambling on with, "I thought you'd be *here*," and pointed to my cell phone which was still against my ear before slowly lowering it to my side.

We were already standing pretty close to one another, but Sookie closed the distance even more so. With our bodies a hair's breadth apart from one another she slowly shook her head, allowing mine to be filled with the scent of her shampoo and perfume, drowning out Zack's smell, and said, "No, I'm right *here*."

My brain emptied; all of my thoughts and blood ran southward in my body like they were being chased by their worst nightmare, only the woman in front of me that was the cause of it all was more like a dream come true.

And if I didn't get a rein on things, it would turn out to be a WET dream come true.

"I can see that," I said, barely above a whisper.

"The FUCK, man? You just gonna leave me hangin' there for the world to see?"

Unfortunately, I could see Zack too.

"So, how about it?" she asked.

"I'll get to him in a minute," I answered, still lost in her. I would swear I could feel the heat radiating off of her body.

Or maybe it was the radiator still pumping heat into the already sweltering room, but...whatever.

When her eyebrows furrowed, I realized I'd answered the wrong question, but being that close to her made me lose any grip I'd previously had on keeping my wits about me. Thankfully, she once again seemed to overlook my slip-up and said, "I'm not interested in *him* at the moment..."

"Why *would* she be when I look like a melted marshmallow peep? COVER ME UP DUDE!"

Shut UP Zack!

Sookie took that fateful step closer so that I could actually feel every contraction of her lungs as she breathed, lightly pressing herself against the front of my body, and I regretfully twitched backwards hoping she wouldn't feel the effect it was having on my lower half. I could hear the other officers talking near the still open doorway, but I couldn't take my eyes off of her and I blamed the heat for my next lapse in judgment as I asked, "What *are* you interested in at the moment?"

I was out of my element. Never had I been more affected by a woman; a beautiful woman to be sure, but it wasn't just her looks; a woman that I only *really* knew anything about thanks to her father; who was dead; and my best friend. But none of that mattered at the moment with logic failing me completely; she owned me.

I was fucked on SO many different levels.

"Stackhouse!"

The sound of a man's voice calling out Sookie's name from somewhere on the other side of the door broke the spell we'd been under and we both turned to face the door where Detective Alcide Herveaux stood. I'd worked with him before and had always been intimidated by his size. While I was a couple inches taller than him, he easily had thirty pounds on me and all of it was muscle. He was big; brawny.

His picture should be on the side of a roll of paper towels.

I sensed, more than saw, Sookie taking a step back from me and looked down to see her smiling in his direction as she said, "Really Alcide, if I didn't know any better I'd swear you were raised by wolves. *Must* you howl my name?"

I really wished I hadn't looked over at him because then I wouldn't have seen his wolfish grin directed back at her before he sized me up, his eyes taking in the lack of physical distance between us. He appeared to dismiss my presence just as quickly, like most people who knew of

me did, and looked back at her saying, "Aww, Stackhouse...you *know* I love the way you make me *howl*."

So this must be one of my competitors...I might as well just forfeit now.

My eyes dropped to the floor, not wanting to see any flirting between them, and wished I could somehow mute my hearing as well, but that would've been a mistake on my part because Sookie's next words surprised the hell out of me. She subconsciously took a step even closer to me, so that her side was pressed against my own, and her hands landed on her hips as she said, "Alcide Herveaux! What have I told you about talking nasty to me? I'm a *lady* and I'm *armed*, but if that's not enough to cool your heels then I'll be sure to mention your behavior to Debbie the next time she wanders into the station to do her daily dick check on you."

So...he's NOT my competitor?

He'd been amused by her rant until she'd mentioned 'Debbie', causing the color to drain from his face and I stood a little taller, visualizing myself now at the head of the imaginary pack, as he mumbled apologetically, "I was just kidding."

Sookie was having none of it, but it only confused me more. While she'd been friendly with him at first, it was glaringly apparent she wanted no part in engaging in any flirty banter with *him*.

The glare she was giving him confirmed it.

But what left me confused was why she acted so differently with me. She didn't know me; not like I knew her. She obviously knew Herveaux well enough to know his dick was checked daily by this Debbie woman, so it would stand to reason that she must not *kid around* as often as Corbett had led me to believe.

So why did she do so with me?

I didn't consider myself hideous looking, but I didn't think I was anything special either. My six foot four inch height was the only reason I attracted any attention at all, unless, of course, I was talking to thin air.

THAT got me A LOT of attention.

All of my previous sexual experiences, as limited as they were, had come about with the help of anonymity and a little alcohol, so that didn't explain Sookie's behavior either, but the question was; did I *really* want to question it? The jury came back quickly.

No.

The sound of Sookie's voice pulled me from my thoughts as she told Herveaux, "Yeah, well, why don't you go joke around with the dirt bag next door and see what he knows about stinky over there?" Once he was gone she turned to me and smiled, saying, "Sorry. He's the definition of

why cops are called 'pigs'. Now, where were we?" She licked her lips, which were much closer now that she was once again standing in my personal space, and said, "Oh yes, you wanted to know what I *was* interested in."

Her smile had yet to leave her face and my questions about *why* were long gone with my control quickly slipping. I'd never been aggressive in any facet of my life, but Sookie brought out animalistic instincts in me I never knew I had and I was afraid if she continued to push my buttons I just might push *her* up against the nearest flat surface. Perhaps Sookie had sensed my internal struggles, as her eyes took in the tension in my shoulders and the blood pulsing rapidly through my carotid artery thanks to the pounding in my chest, because she took a step back. The flirty banter was gone from her voice and replaced with a much more G-rated friendly tone as she said, "Among other things, an answer. I promised my Gran I'd have dinner with her tomorrow night at her house in Bon Temps, but you're more than welcome to join us."

What was the question again?

It took a moment for me to sift through the lust in my head to go back to our previous conversation, but I eventually recalled it, while wondering if I'd somehow frightened her for her to change her tone so quickly. I hoped that wasn't the case and relaxed my shoulders and smiled, asking, "Are you sure she won't mind?"

I'd practiced the question three times in my head so I wouldn't fuck it up and end up asking her to marry me instead.

Sookie was confusing the hell out of me, but I couldn't say that I didn't enjoy it and being invited to meet her family could just mean exactly what she'd said; an invitation to dinner, but my brain sped along at a mile a minute making leaps and bounds that Superman wouldn't be able to keep up with.

Was I still in the running? Did that put me ahead of the competition?

Her smile brightened as she answered, "No, Gran's motto is 'The more, the merrier'."

There was definitely some sort of chemistry between me and Sookie, at least I *hoped* I wasn't misjudging things, but after Corbett's warning about her just kidding around, I couldn't be too sure. After seeing her interaction with Herveaux, I just knew that she didn't kid around with everybody and at least if we were having dinner with her Grandmother then I'd be less likely to make a fool of myself by silently drooling while staring at her.

Speaking of which...

I swallowed the drool that had formed in my mouth and nodded, saying, "Sure, I'd love to."

"Great!" Sookie beamed. "I'll call you tomorrow and we can ride up together."

"Okay," I replied, happy at the thought of seeing her again so soon and on a more personal level, and watched her bounce merrily out the door with my eyes lingering for a long moment afterward.

"Dude!"

I turned around and got busy bagging the body to appease Zack's modesty, but even the stench of his decaying corpse couldn't wipe the smile from my face.

I got Chow to switch shifts with me the next day, so I could go with Sookie to her Gran's. It was something I'd never asked of him before and he badgered me relentlessly wanting to know why, but when I told him I had a date he just acted incensed, saying, "Fine! Don't tell me!" I imagined a normal reaction would be to brag about how beautiful my date was, but I already knew I wasn't normal. I didn't want to share what little I knew of her with anyone else, not that I had a lot of people to tell, but I liked having a connection with her and wanted to keep it all to myself. It only made the thought of *my competition* all the harder to bear, but I couldn't hold it against her.

This was just a date.

Hopefully our first wouldn't end up being our last as well and all day long I practiced reinforcing my mental shields just in case it became necessary later on. I successfully ignored Zack, much to his dismay, but he eventually tired of talking to himself and left me alone, so when Sookie called I felt ready to take on the world.

"Hey Eric," she said dejectedly.

My heart dropped wondering if this would be when she told me I was just too weird and she'd changed her mind about our date; that she'd heard the rumors and now wanted nothing to do with me. I was already mourning the loss of her, even though she was never mine to begin with, and could only manage to mumble out, "Sookie?"

"Yeah, it's me." I knew that, not only by the caller ID, but because no other women ever called me before. *No one* ever called me unless it was work related and I struggled to pay attention as she said, "I have some bad news."

I held my breath waiting for the blow to be delivered, but when I started feeling light headed and she didn't say anything else, I asked, "Really?"

"I'm afraid so. You see, Gran called me this morning because she was having car trouble and since she knew it was my day off, she asked if I could swing by early to take her to run her errands. We only just now got back and there isn't enough time for me to run all the way back to Shreveport to pick you up and be back in time. I'd beg off, but it's sort of a tradition with us and I don't want to upset her."

I analyzed every word she said and wondered if she was just making up an excuse to get out of our date, but she shot that theory to hell when she asked, "Can I get a rain check? Tomorrow night maybe?"

My insides were back to doing a happy dance with me blurting out, "Well, I could just drive there on my own."

I hoped I hadn't sounded desperate, even though that was exactly how I felt. I didn't want to wait a whole day to see her again, so I was happy when she exclaimed, "You wouldn't mind? It's about an hour's drive."

"No, I don't mind." And I didn't. In fact, I couldn't think of anything that would stop me from being with her, so I jotted down the directions she gave me off the top of her head and took off. For the hour it took me to get there I kept telling myself to be normal; *act normal* and everything would be fine. If I played my cards right, Sookie would still see me as a regular guy and, if all went well, she'd want to see me again.

I pulled up the pitted gravel driveway hoping I hadn't taken a wrong turn, but I was greeted by Sookie throwing open the front door as soon as I parked my car. A smile was lit up on her face that mirrored my own and as I approached the front porch, she said, "You made it!"

"You gave great directions," I said, still smiling like an idiot.

I couldn't imagine ever getting tired of looking at her, but my smile faltered as I got closer and her eyes filled with lust as she whispered, "That's not all I'm great at giving."

Kidding?

My imagination ran wild and where my smile had fallen in shock, another part of my body began rising up to take its place, so I took several deep breaths trying to calm myself so I wouldn't have to meet her grandmother with a hard on.

THAT wouldn't be NORMAL.

Sookie chuckled seeing my face enflame, saying, "There it is...I was worried I was losing my ability to get you to blush."

No, but I was losing my ability to keep my hands off of her.

She gestured for me to follow her inside, but I stopped short as we rounded the corner heading into the living room and saw Corbett lounging in a chair by the fireplace with a shit eating grin on his face.

"Fuck me..."

Sookie turned, making me realize I'd said that out loud, but when she leaned closer to me and whispered with a smile, "Maybe later, but first we have to get through dinner with Gran," Corbett stopped smiling.

But I didn't...

Chapter 6: Chapter 6

Chapter 6

I doubted a sand blaster could've removed the smile from my face, but I still internally cursed Corbett's presence more in that one moment than I ever had before and that was saying a lot since he liked to jump out at me at inopportune moments; like when I was standing at the urinal. Had he not been there, I doubted I would've been able to stop myself from sweeping Sookie up into my arms and kissing her with everything I had. As it was I could barely restrain myself and I wondered if Sookie could tell because she stood there staring at me with a challenging look in her eyes as if she was waiting on me to make a move.

And if fucking Corbett hadn't been sitting there with the same challenging look in his eyes, I could have!

All of my muscles were locked down into place. Well...*almost* all of my muscles, but the one that wasn't, was pretty rigid as well and I just thanked God I'd thought to wear a light pullover sweater that covered it. If it hadn't been for the slight chill of the cool autumn air I'd just come in from, I was sure there would've been beads of sweat on my forehead, but I was saved from having to decide what I should do, one way or the other, and instead was forced to retreat as we both heard, "Supper's ready!"

I was sure my smile probably looked more like Heath Ledger's version of The Joker and tried to force myself to try and appear somewhat normal again, before Sookie finally caught on that I was nowhere near normal, but she took the opportunity to shock the hell out of me again. Corbett had already gotten up mumbling, "Thank God," and walked into the next room, but when I took a step forward, assuming we'd be heading into the kitchen or dining room, Sookie took a step back towards me and placed both of her hands on my chest. I resisted the urge to shiver from her touch, but it certainly wasn't from any chill in the air. If anything I felt even hotter and her blue eyes held mine hostage while her hand slowly blazed a trail to the back of my neck and when she began pulling my head down to meet hers, I couldn't have resisted her if I'd wanted to.

But I didn't want to.

When her eyes closed my own were finally released and darted down to where her naturally pink full lips were waiting, but before I could close the distance I heard the distinct sound of someone clearing their voice. Had I thought it was Corbett, I wouldn't have stopped; he'd just have to get

over it and go haunt some other room, but when Sookie's eyes flew open and her body tensed, I knew she'd heard it too.

"Young lady, I know you think you're grown, but when you're in *my* house you will mind your manners. Now get your butt in here and introduce me properly to your beau before I make you go and pick out your own switch."

Was I Sookie's beau?

I heard, I assumed, Sookie's grandmother go back into the next room and could feel my cheeks flare up again, but my eyes never left Sookie's, which now held a healthy dose of mischief. She ran her hands appreciatively over my chest one more time before sighing and pulling away as she said, "I'm sorry."

"For what?" I asked incredulously. She had nothing to apologize for because there was *nothing* wrong with what she'd been aiming to do.

Noth. Ing.

Her own cheeks took on a pinkish hue and her eyes sparkled as she admitted, "For acting like such a wanton hussy around you."

So, I WASN'T misjudging things? Not that I thought she was acting like a wanton hussy, but that she actually LIKED me? Like in a potential boyfriend sort of way?

She chuckled at my shocked expression and added, "I'm not normally like this; brash; bold; shameless, but for some reason, whenever I'm around *you*, I can't seem to help myself. My brain/mouth filter goes on the fritz and to be honest, I was hoping that by having dinner with Gran it would stop me from trying to rape you over appetizers."

"Really?" I asked, still shocked by her confession. I'd thought I was the only one with a case of verbal diarrhea and she certainly didn't have to worry about rape charges.

It would most definitely be consensual.

She shrugged her shoulders and her lips formed into a smirk as she faked a mock saddened expression while she nodded and said, "You'd have been lucky to get your order placed before I would've thrown myself at you like a twelve year old on Justin Bieber." When all I could do was gape back at her she blushed, adding, "See? No filter."

I laughed. I just couldn't help myself or the decibel it came out at, but all of the tension I'd been feeling; the nervousness about whether or not I'd misjudged her actions leading up to tonight, left me reeling in relief. Everything about the woman in front of me made me glad, for the very first time, that I *could* see dead people. I would've met Sookie regardless, but if I hadn't befriended Corbett, I never would've had the confidence to even approach her on a personal level, no matter how much slipped through her faulty filter around me. In all likelihood, I probably would've

assumed she'd heard the rumors that I was weird and was making fun of me; chumming the waters only to reject me if I took the bait. I couldn't recall a time where I'd ever smiled as much as I had since the first time I'd met her and she chuckled along, asking worriedly, "I haven't scared you away yet, have I?"

"Not in the least," I answered honestly.

I didn't scare easily.

We both stood there, silently staring at one another, and when her eyes darted to my lips it was as if there was a physical pull for me to kiss her.

Who was I to defy the laws of gravity? I was no superhero.

Knowing now that I hadn't been misreading her; that she really *did* like me in the same way that I liked her gave me a little more confidence and my hands moved to rest lightly on her hips, while my heart nearly pounded out of my chest, as my head descended towards her. The scent of her perfume surrounded me and I hesitated for the briefest moment, still not really believing what was about to happen, when my lips finally touched hers.

Our first kiss, hopefully the first of many, was a chaste one, or at least it had started out that way, but when her hands flew into my hair and her tongue licked along my bottom lip, it took every ounce of resolve I had to pull away knowing her grandmother was waiting on us. She was a lot stronger than she looked and it took a little effort on my part to pry her hands from my head, but when she looked back at me, both confused and annoyed, I explained, "Your grandmother?"

Her shoulders dropped in defeat, but she never let go of my hands and pulled me along behind her, grumbling, "*Now* who's the tease?"

Her annoyance over stopping was a huge shot to my ego and I reveled in it as we stepped into the dining room just as Sookie's grandmother appeared through another doorway with a green bean casserole in her hands, along with a look that said she knew *exactly* what we'd been doing. Her silver hair was pulled into a loose bun on the back of her head and while her movements were slowed by age, her blue eyes sparkled with life just as much as Sookie's did.

Corbett was sitting in a chair that was pushed up against the wall by a china hutch and his look said he knew exactly what we'd been up to as well and it only made my already hot skin redden even more, but Sookie just smiled widely at her grandmother, saying, "Gran, I'd like to introduce Eric." Turning to me, she added, "Eric, this is my Gran, Adele Stackhouse."

"It's a pleasure to meet you ma'am," I said and extended my hand.

She placed her hand in mine and clasped it firmly with her other, saying to Sookie, "So *this* is *your* Eric."

Her Eric?

Her eyes came back to mine as she said, "It's a pleasure to *finally* meet you."

Finally?

I'd be more than happy to be Sookie's Eric, but felt a little confused wondering if maybe moving fast was a Stackhouse trait, like stubbornness, and perhaps Corbett just never mentioned it, even though I couldn't really blame him since he *was* her father. I glanced over at him hoping to read something from his expression, but only saw that his eyes were bugged out as they darted back and forth between Sookie and his mother, and it only egged on my curiosity. I was missing something and wanted to ask him what, but couldn't.

Sookie looked appalled by her grandmother's words and her own cheeks reddened as she spoke up, changing the subject by asking, "Gran? Is there anything else you need for me to bring in from the kitchen?"

"A chastity belt?" Corbett asked, seeming to have gotten over the shock of hearing his daughter's words from a few minutes earlier, and added, "That would come in handy right about now."

No it wouldn't.

My curiosity only deepened as we sat down to dinner. After I'd answered several questions about me, which only gave evidence to how lame my life had been before Sookie came along, Mrs. Stackhouse asked, "So, tell me Eric, how's Hoyt doing these days?"

The only Hoyt I knew of was my neighbor, Hoyt Fortenberry, but I didn't know how *she* would know that and clarified, "Hoyt Fortenberry?"

Sookie's fork dropped to her plate making a loud clanging noise and Corbett shot out of his chair, making me jump when he zoomed to my side, asking, "Did I ever tell you about the time I was in the talent show for the PBA fundraiser?"

"Yes," Mrs. Stackhouse answered, overlooking my sudden jumpiness and adding, "I worry about him and I haven't seen much of him now that his momma has passed away, God rest her soul."

Corbett stuck his head right in my ear and began talking over her as loud as he could, saying, "It was *horrible!* I got grief for it for weeks from the fellas, but what in the hell did I care? It was for charity." When all I could do was gape in confusion, both over how she knew I knew Hoyt and Corbett's sudden chattiness, Corbett kept going, saying, "Let me see if I can remember my routine," and started marching around the table singing, 'I'm a Yankee Doodle Dandy' as loud as he could.

I couldn't help but to cringe over his god-awful singing and had to restrain myself from covering my ears with my hands. I could only imagine what my expression was when Mrs. Stackhouse looked concerned, but I couldn't even think, much less answer her, and felt my face heating up with my anger at Corbett for making me look like an idiot in front of them. My eyes involuntarily looked towards Sookie, certain I would see her looking back at me with nothing but

disdain now that I couldn't hide just how abnormal I was, but her eyes were closed with her chin resting against her chest.

I must have already missed the revulsion and now she was trying to come up with a way to get me to leave.

I barely heard the sound of the doorbell over Corbett's singing, but he must have heard it too because he stopped just as Mrs. Stackhouse's head turned towards the foyer. Pushing away from the table, she said, "Now who would drop by unannounced at suppertime?"

My eyes watched her make her way out of the room and I continued to stare at the empty doorway, afraid to look at Sookie now that we were alone and could care less, at the moment, where in the hell Corbett was. I saw her shift in her seat next to me, but still couldn't look at her until I heard her whisper, "Eric?"

Here it comes...

I released a soft sigh and forced my eyes to my side only to see her own eyes staring back at me full of distress. All of the happiness and relief I'd felt only a few short moments earlier was replaced with hatred and dread. I'd actually begun to believe I might've had a chance at having *something* with Sookie, but I should've known better; I should've known my curse would rear its ugly head; I should've known no one with a heartbeat would ever understand.

She opened her mouth to break my heart, but stopped when Mrs. Stackhouse entered the room, saying, "Sookie, you have a visitor."

"Who?" she asked completely surprised and we both turned towards doorway.

My competition?

Oh, wait. I wasn't in the running anymore.

He stood about five foot ten, or so, and had dark brown hair and eyes; eyes that were trained on me with barely concealed contempt.

Don't worry. I'm too much of a freak to be any concern.

"Bill? What are you doing here?" Sookie asked.

Maybe he sensed my chances with you going up in smoke.

He took another step into the room, replying, "Well, I saw your car in the driveway and thought we could visit. I didn't mean to interrupt your dinner."

"Bill, would you care to join us?" Mrs. Stackhouse asked. "There's plenty."

His eyes came back to me speculatively before turning back to Mrs. Stackhouse with a smile, saying, "I'd love to. Thank you."

I heard Sookie sigh next to me as Mrs. Stackhouse went back into the kitchen to get another place setting, but before anyone could say anything, the sound of the front door opening and closing could be heard, along with, "Am I too late for supper?"

Corbett's voice came from behind me, where he must've taken refuge from me, saying, "Uh oh, here we go," and seconds later a man, who was no doubt Corbett's son Jason, came strolling into the room. He looked at me first with nothing more than curiosity before glancing at Sookie and then resting on Bill.

"What are *you* doing here?" he asked him, clearly not appreciating his presence.

Bill's body tensed and he stood tall, answering, "I stopped by to visit with Sookie when I noticed her car out front."

Jason threw himself down in the chair next to Mrs. Stackhouse's as he grumbled, "You mean you were *lurking* around like the creepy little fuck that you are and decided to get shot down by my sister *again*." He leaned back in the chair, balancing it on two legs, and smiled cockily at him, adding, "I guess it's lucky for me that she won't give you the time a day since she's the only one I couldn't lure away from you and into my bed."

If she wasn't about to dump me, I think I might've enjoyed the fact that he wasn't my competition.

I wasn't even my competition.

"Jason!" Sookie chided while trying not to smile.

I just sat there confused; confused about *everything* and remained a quiet spectator as Bill said snidely, "You're *quite* uncivilized."

Jason didn't miss a beat, saying, "You're *quite* blue-balled by my best guess, unless of course you ordered yourself one a them blowup dolls on the internet." Bill's face locked up and reddened, making me wonder if he was just angry or the blowup doll comment had actually been true, but Jason was unfazed and he stood up with enough force to make the chair he'd been sitting in fly backwards, adding, "Now why don't you just go on and git."

Mrs. Stackhouse entered the room then with two place settings in hand and she must have felt the tension between them because her eyes darted back and forth worriedly, but Bill finally took a step backwards, saying, "I'm terribly sorry Mrs. Stackhouse. I've just remembered that I have a prior engagement, so I'm afraid I won't be able to stay."

Jason sat back down like nothing had happened and Bill eyed me contemptuously before looking at Sookie and adding, "Perhaps we'll have a chance to catch up on your next visit."

I couldn't see the expression on Sookie's face as she looked back at him, but she'd remained silent and whatever it was had him nodding uncomfortably before making his apologies once more and leaving.

Mrs. Stackhouse put a plate in front of Jason, saying to him, "I hope you minded your manners to Bill."

Jason turned to his grandmother with a big smile, replying, "Course I did," and began filling his plate. When it was piled high, he swallowed his first bite before winking at Sookie and saying, "You're a good woman Gran, I don't care what Sookie says," and then wincing from where she must have kicked him under the table by the sounds of it.

My appetite was long gone knowing dinner was only prolonging the inevitable, when Sookie would tell me she didn't want to see me again, but I pushed the food around on my plate and tried not to let my sorrow show when Jason turned to me asking, "Who are you?"

I opened my mouth to respond, but Mrs. Stackhouse beat me to the punch, saying, "Oh, I'm sorry. This is Sookie's beau, Eric Northman."

Was. WAS Sookie's beau.

My pity party was paused and my confusion only grew when he looked back at me, asking, "*THE* Eric Northman?" while Sookie's fork dropped back to her plate with another clang.

Chapter 7: Chapter 7

Chapter 7

THE Eric Northman?

Did my reputation really travel all the fucking way to Bon Temps?

I'd never even been to this town until today and up until I'd met Sookie, my only other connection to here had been Corbett.

And...apparently, Hoyt Fortenberry.

His apartment was directly across from mine and while we'd never exchanged more than a polite nod hello to one another, his mother was another story entirely. I remembered the day he'd moved in three years earlier and how she'd wept loudly at his door while he carried his moving boxes inside. She kept saying over and over again that he was too young to move out of his family home and, while he *looked* about my age, I only knew how old he really was when I'd made the mistake of leaving my apartment mid-weep and she'd grabbed onto my shoulders,

saying, "Tell him! He's only twenty-eight! That's much too young to move away from home, don't you think? How old are you?"

She quit talking to me and went back to weeping when I mumbled twenty-seven.

Over the years I'd interacted with her more than I had Hoyt since she stopped by on a daily basis making sure he had food to eat and even to do his laundry. Since she tended to stop by during the day, while he was at work, and I didn't leave for work until later in the day, I tended to run into her a lot. Every time, she would quiz me like she was writing a thesis on my life and I'd found out early on it was just easier to answer her questions. She'd invited herself into my apartment more times than I could count and she didn't even stop quizzing me after catching me 'talking to myself' down in the laundry room when I'd run into the former maintenance man.

He'd died two years earlier and the upkeep on the building had suffered ever since.

And even though she looked at me funny for it, it seemed her quest for information about my nonexistent love life and estranged parents superseded it, but it wasn't until I found her in the hallway in a panic that she realized just how different I was.

Because she was dead and I could still see her.

After she got over her initial shock (and told me she always knew I was special) she was so frantic about not wanting Hoyt to be the one to find her dead in his living room that I ended up having to go into his apartment and loosen the gas line attached to his stove. I knew my other neighbors were out at work (which was why I was the only one to bear the brunt of her visits) and I called the fire department complaining that I could smell gas coming from the door. They were the ones to find her instead of Hoyt and he'd been guilt ridden until her autopsy results came back with her cause of death being a heart attack.

An autopsy I couldn't finish quickly enough thanks to her yelling at me that she wanted a female pathologist and for me to quit staring at her naked body.

I was still haunted by the images from that day and it wasn't from her ghostly image either.

"Eric? Can I speak to you for a moment in private please?" Sookie asked timidly.

It felt like a punch to my gut knowing she couldn't even bear the thought of getting through dinner before giving me the heave ho, but I really couldn't blame her and tried to look unaffected as I agreed, "Sure."

We'd already eaten a fair portion of our meals before everything went to shit and I stood up when Sookie did, but as I followed her out of the room Corbett got right up next to me whispering, which would have made me laugh if I wasn't about to be crushed by his daughter, at the absurdity of it since I was the only one that could hear him. "Tell her you have to go to the bathroom first."

Fuck him. It was all HIS fault that she couldn't stand to be around me anymore.

After the performance he'd put on making me look like an insane asshole, I wanted absolutely nothing to do with him and I was sure my look said exactly that because he added, "If you don't, I'll sing The Star Spangled Banner the whole time and you won't hear a word she says. The. Whole. Time."

If only I could punch him...

I didn't doubt him either. It had been one of his torture techniques that made me eventually agree to talk to Flood after he'd been murdered, so I stopped walking and said, "Sookie? Do you mind if I use the restroom first?"

I really just wanted to get it over with; all of it. I wanted to go back home and sulk in private, but I knew I had to hear them both out before I'd get to do that and when she turned to me looking more nervous than I'd ever seen her before, I guessed she wanted me to be gone too, but was too nice to say so and agreed, "Sure. It's through that door," gesturing to a door on the right, adding, "I'll just wait for you out on the porch."

Sookie turned on her heels and practically ran out the front door while I walked into the bathroom. Corbett walked in through the closed door as soon I'd shut it, saying, "I'm sorry."

"You're *sorry*?" I whispered harshly. "What in the fuck were you doing? Why would you do that to me when all you've talked about for years was how good she'd be for me? How good *I'd* be for *her*?"

He ran his hands through his hair, saying, "I *know* and I *still* think that, but momma was about to spill something that you should hear from *Sookie*."

"What?" I asked a little louder than I'd meant to. "What are you talking about? All she's about to tell me is that I'm a weird fucker and to get the hell out thanks to *you*."

Maybe Hoyt had heard from his mother how strange I was and he'd told Mrs. Stackhouse who then told her grandchildren and Sookie had forgotten about it until she'd heard Hoyt's name mentioned...

"No she's *not*!" he practically shouted. "I know my baby girl and I guaran-damn-tee you that she's out there chewing through her bottom over what she's about to say to you. All's I'm asking is that you hear her out. I know you see dead people and all, but I want you to keep in mind that everybody grieves differently when they lose someone they loved, so I don't want you to think badly of her. She's a good girl." His eyes were both apologetic and stern at the same time, but I couldn't make sense of anything he'd just said.

"What are you talking about?" I asked more confused than ever. I had no idea of what she could possibly tell me that could make me think any differently of her.

Had she been born a male?

"That's for her to tell you," he said in a much softer tone. "Now get on out there before she loses her nerve."

Corbett left before I could argue anymore with him, so I had no choice but to do what he'd said and I hesitantly stepped out onto the porch a minute later. Sookie was sitting on the porch swing doing just what Corbett said she'd be doing; chewing through her bottom lip, but when she saw me, she tried to smile and patted the space next to her on the swing.

It appeared, for once, that we were completely alone and I took the seat next to her and forced myself to not look away when she began, "I have a confession to make."

All I could do was stare back at her. The conversations from that evening, both among the living and the dead, were running riot in my mind and my hands gripped the cushion underneath me trying to keep myself from falling over from their dizzying pace.

When I didn't say anything, Sookie took a deep breath and said, "I guess I should start at the beginning." Her eyes finally found mine and she continued, "When we first met at the morgue earlier this week, it wasn't the first time I'd ever seen you. I've known who you were for years."

What? While I knew cops liked to gossip more than little old ladies at the beauty parlor and wasn't all that surprised that she'd heard the rumors about me, I was positive I would've remembered seeing Sookie at any one of the crime scenes over the years before she'd become a detective.

Even now, she practically glowed in the dark. Or it was the way the moonlight was shining down on her, but that was just semantics.

My look must have begged the question because she asked, "Do you remember going to the memorial service they held for my father?"

Of course I remembered. It had been my first attempt at trying to talk to Flood, at Corbett's insistence, to tell him where he could find the murder weapon. I'd gotten a couple of dirty looks when I'd been caught humming 'The Star Spangled Banner', but I never got the opportunity to catch him alone and gave up when the service was over.

I could feel my head nodding, so she softly admitted, "I saw you there." Her head dropped down again and she spoke so low that I could barely hear her, as she whispered, "I was in a real bad way; we *all* were. We were a close knit family and daddy was my hero. I knew what he did for a living was dangerous, but I never once thought that we would lose him like that and my momma...well, *none* of us were coping very well. I didn't want to be there. I didn't want to admit to myself that I would never see him again, so when they started eulogizing him, I tuned everything out and prayed. I prayed for God to send an angel down so daddy wouldn't have to make the journey up to heaven alone and as I looked around taking in the crowd, that's when I saw you. I knew every face there, but I didn't know you. You were standing all alone and the sun

was shining down on you almost making it look like you had a halo. You were so handsome; perfect like I imagined an angel would be and I questioned if you were real; that maybe I was imagining you, but I didn't care. I stared at you through the entire service and it was because I believed you'd come there to help my father that I was able to get through the service without falling apart."

I sat there in stunned silence. While I was certainly no angel, Sookie had no idea of how closely she'd hit the mark about my reason for being there that day. It *was* to help her father, but I was still confused. I'd never seen her that day, but I'd made it a point to not look over at his family. I didn't want to witness their grief over losing him when I knew he was just fine and I couldn't make the correlation of where Sookie's confession was leading to, so in my silence, she continued, "Because of momma..." She shook her head before finally looking up at me, saying, "When it was over the colonel caught me staring at you and he told me who you were. He'd said that you were the one that did daddy's autopsy, so even though I knew then that you weren't really an angel, I was still grateful that you'd helped daddy in some way and from that day forward, you were always included in my nightly prayers. I thought about you a lot over the years; wondered about you and how you were doing, but it wasn't until Mrs. Fortenberry mentioned your name to Gran one day that I really started *thinking* about you." I could tell that she was uncomfortable, but she tried to smile, saying, "Google had nothing on that woman and it didn't take a rocket scientist to figure out that I'd developed a crush on you when I pumped her for information about you every time she came over. Gran and Jason caught on pretty quickly and I had to explain how I knew who you were. Jason has taken to teasing me about it over the years; every time I'd break up with a boyfriend he'd say, 'Well he's no *Eric Northman*' and I'm sure Gran thinks I'd already told you about it, so that's why I freaked out when she brought up Hoyt's name. It wasn't like I'd planned on keeping it from you, but we haven't really had the chance to talk much. I would've told you eventually. I haven't been stalking you or anything. I just had a crush and when you seemed interested in me...well, I guess I just really wanted to see if it could lead anywhere."

As soon as she was done speaking, her bottom lip was sucked back in between her teeth while I figuratively chewed over her confession.

Sookie had known about me for years.

She'd thought I was handsome; perfect.

Even after being told God knows what about me by Mrs. Fortenberry (weird; no love life; even my parents want nothing to do with me and I talk to myself) she STILL had a crush on me.

HAD a crush on me...

"*Had* a crush on me?" I asked timidly.

Her eyes dropped back down to her lap as she blew out with a sigh, "*Have...*"

Was *that* why Corbett had been so adamant that Sookie and I would be good for one another over the past few years? Was it because he'd known about Sookie's crush on me? Or was it because he knew that I really was lonely in my self-made prison of solitude and he didn't want me to live the rest of my life that way?

Both?

Did it really matter?

Even if I was normal; if I never had my curse, would I feel any differently? Didn't regular people initially pursue new relationships based on a physical attraction to one another? Would it be any different had I seen Sookie years ago and had admired her from afar? Wouldn't I have been interested in any information about her that was available to me?

I was drawn to her from the moment I saw her, so could I really think any less of her for feeling the same way?

No.

I found myself left reeling once more. I'd already prepared myself for Sookie to tell me that she didn't want to see me anymore, but instead I learned that she's had a crush on me for years. She wasn't telling me to leave. She wasn't telling me I was a freak.

She was telling me that she liked me.

But, my silence must have told her something else entirely because she started twisting her hands in her lap, saying, "I'm sorry. This must be weird for you and I understand if you're too uncomfortable to want to see me anymore." Her eyes looked up at me, glassier than they had been a minute earlier and her shoulders dropped down as she forced a smile, saying, "You probably think I'm a freak or something, so...you know...no hard feelings."

HER, a freak. As if...

I didn't care if Corbett's only reason for wanting me to meet Sookie was just to make his daughter happy. I didn't care that Sookie had been getting second hand knowledge about me for years since I too knew more about her than I could let on. All I cared about at the moment was that Sookie liked me just as much as I liked her and nothing else mattered.

So I kissed her.

Chapter 8: Chapter 8

I hadn't given any thought to my actions; I'd just *reacted*, which seemed to be a common occurrence around her, and while Sookie seemed shocked at first, she got over it just as quickly. I'd almost reared back thinking I may have crossed the line when her hands found my hair keeping me in place as she took over not only the kiss, but every last thought I had and I willingly gave in to her. I was consumed by her; her taste; her touch; just her and when I felt her moving to straddle my lap I couldn't help groaning into her mouth when she slid her body against mine.

My arms wrapped around her with my hands landing firmly on her ass finally getting the touch I'd been denied days earlier and I was making up for it now, both pushing and pulling against her wanting more contact than our clothing would allow. When I was forced to suck in a heaping breath of air, she merely nibbled on my lower lip before kissing her way across my jaw line, asking, "I take it that I haven't scared you away yet?"

I wouldn't have imagined my hands ever wanting to leave her ass now that they had a hold of her, but they were just as incensed as I was over her question and did just that by grasping onto her hair and pulling her mouth back to mine as I growled, "No."

It seemed my answer and the way it came out didn't do much to scare her away either. If anything, she seemed even more turned on because she moaned into our kiss and her hands slid underneath my sweater with her fingernails raking down my abs. I briefly recalled our earlier conversation when she'd admitted that she couldn't control herself around me and, as it turned out, I must've been the male equivalent of a 'wanton hussy' because I didn't want to stop. I gave no thought to where we were or who might catch us because I could only think about her until I heard Corbett clearing his throat and, without thinking, I barked out, "Go away!"

Of course Sookie pulled away because *I* was the freak in this coupling, not her, and as I tried to come up with a way to explain myself, I heard, "Come on now, I might be able to overlook you groping my sister a little since she seems to like ya a lot, but I gotta draw the line on you two fuckin' on Gran's porch."

Not Corbett...

I was still floundering when Sookie started giggling and thankfully stayed put so I could try and will my third hard on of the day away as she turned to him, saying, "Well, who knew big brother? *You* actually have a line that can be crossed."

I chanced a look at him hoping it would help with my not so little problem and saw him put his hand on his chest as he mockingly declared, "I'm a man of many depths little sister. You'd be wise to remember that."

Sookie just laughed harder and replied, "Just because you've been to the bottom of most of the *holes* in the parish, it doesn't make you *deep* and you'd be wise to remember that I can kick your ass every day of the week and twice on Sunday." She held up both of her hands, adding, "Lethal weapons."

I'll say...they'd certainly been doing a good job of killing me before he came out to ruin it.

Jason merely waved his hand at her unafraid and said, "Yeah, but I'm faster than you, so I ain't gotta worry about that."

Watching their little sibling exchange made me envious since I was an only child. Growing up, I'd often wondered if I'd had a sibling, if they would have the same curse. It would've been nice to not have been the only one, but even if they didn't, I'd like to think my own brother or sister wouldn't have ostracized me. I quickly put that back into the 'woul'da/coul'da/shoul'da' file and locked it up tight. Now wasn't the time for me to become maudlin over my lonely childhood when I had Sookie still sitting in my lap.

And my hands on her ass.

I slowly shifted them to her hips, hoping I wouldn't draw Jason's attention to them, when he said, "Saw that," and grinned. I looked away hoping he wouldn't be able to see my enflamed cheeks in the moonlight and he chuckled, but continued on saying, "I stopped by and saw momma today. She wanted to know if you were coming by this weekend."

Sookie's body tensed on top of mine, but I had no idea why. Corbett hadn't mentioned much about his wife other than the fact that she was still living. He mostly talked about Sookie and when he did bring up anyone else, it was only to tell me stories from years earlier. I knew nothing about her life now and had guessed that she'd remarried at some point which was why he never brought her up. It would've been hard for him, knowing how much he loved her, but I also knew him well enough that he wouldn't hold it against her if she had.

"Of course I am," Sookie replied. "I haven't missed out on a visit yet." She seemed to have gotten her bearings back because her tone changed as she asked, "Now did you actually have a reason to come out here and bother us or were you just itchin' for a sister whoopin'?"

Looking affronted, Jason replied, "I came out here to tell you Gran's got dessert on the table, but I'm glad I did or else God knows what you two mighta left behind on that cushion that woul'da left me itchin' the next time I sat on it."

Sookie shrieked his name and threw her shoe at him, but he'd managed to dodge it in time and took off back into the house laughing his ass off. She turned back to me, smiling shyly, and said, "Sorry. He can be a pain in the ass, but Gran would be really pissed if I shot him." I laughed along with her, so I wouldn't cry as she moved off of my lap, when she turned to me and asked hesitantly, "So, are we good?"

We were *great* as far as I was concerned, but I still wondered why she didn't seem bothered by the rumors floating around me. I reached for her hand and said, "*I* think so, but what about you?"

I wanted to ask, '*How are you okay with us; with me?*' but I was too chicken shit. I could only imagine what she must have heard about me around the station and from Mrs. Fortenberry. I knew people talked about me, sometimes not even giving me the courtesy of doing it behind my

back, but I had no idea of how I would explain my curse. It was something I hadn't talked about with anyone, alive that is, since I was a child. I wanted to know without having to ask because I wouldn't know what to say if she actually *did* ask me why I was so weird, but at the same time I was afraid of getting any deeper with her without knowing whether or not she'd run away from me later on. I needed to have something tangible to hold on to; some sort of reassurance from *her*, not *her father*. Corbett claimed she wouldn't be freaked out and I didn't think he would lie to me about something like that, but I also knew he wasn't a telepath, so he couldn't possibly know what was going on inside of her mind.

Sookie had no way of knowing where my thoughts had led because she wasn't a telepath either, at least I sure as fuck hoped she wasn't, and she smiled brightly at me saying, "I think we're great!"

While I tried to muster up the courage to say something, anything that would clue me in to what else she knew about me and how she felt about it, she stared at me for another long moment before she finally patted my knee with her free hand and saying, "Gran's waiting, so we should probably head inside."

I couldn't do anything but nod in agreement and stood to follow Sookie back into the house feeling like I'd missed out on an opportunity, but I felt better when she grabbed onto my hand and held it all the way into the dining room. There was a homemade pecan pie sitting in the middle of the table with slices already sitting on our plates, but Jason's was already eaten and he'd been eying the remainder of the pie as we walked into the room. "Hurry up and take a bite because Gran said I can't have any more until everyone's had some." Looking at Mrs. Stackhouse, he added, "A *bite* is *some*."

Mrs. Stackhouse just shook her head at him amused and turned to Sookie and me, asking, "Is everything alright?"

Sookie and I had already sat down and she'd just taken a bite of pie, so Jason took the opportunity to answer her, while pulling the entire pie plate in front of him, saying, "You shoulda seen it Gran. They was so 'alright' out there, if daddy were alive he'd a been standing over them with his shotgun while the justice of the peace married them."

My gaze automatically met Corbett's, who'd been back to sitting in his chair, and I reddened again the harsh look he was giving me as well as Jason's descriptive skills, but the sounds of him yelping distracted us both. Once from the kick Sookie gave him under the table and another from Mrs. Stackhouse smacking the back of his head as she leaned towards him, saying, "You hush! With the way you cat around this town, I make it a point to study the face of every new blond haired baby I come across knowing *one day* it'll be my great-grandbaby."

Jason jokingly shivered at the mere thought, but chuckled, "Nah...not from me, but at least with the blond Goliath over there, you might get one a them outta Sookie."

His joke got him another smack from Mrs. Stackhouse and the rest of the pie being taken away from him, and when no amount of pleading would get her to relent, he finally said his goodbyes

and left. Mrs. Stackhouse excused herself saying she needed to get some rest, so I figured that was my cue to go as well.

Sookie followed me out onto the porch and we both stood there awkwardly staring at one another. I wanted to kiss her again, but knowing now how easily we got lost in each other, I was afraid to. Not afraid of going farther; I *definitely* wanted things to go farther, but I didn't want our first time together to be on her grandmother's front porch either. Sookie was special to me and deserved better than a quick fuck.

Although, so much time had passed since the last time I'd been with a woman, she might end up getting a quick fuck regardless of how I wanted it to go.

"So..." I began, intent on telling her I'd had a good time; maybe work up the nerve to see if she wanted to get together again, but Sookie apparently had other ideas.

Without warning she wrapped her arms around my neck and hoisted herself up, wrapping her legs around my waist, and kissed me. My hands went straight back to her ass and held her there as I spun around and pressed her against one of the wooden pillars next to the porch steps. She was so soft and warm and she still tasted of the pie's sweet filling, but it was only making me hard and hot. I knew we should stop, but I couldn't pull away; I didn't *want* to pull away and when her lips moved across my face to whisper in my ear, "I want you," my knees nearly buckled.

The small part of my brain that was still somewhat functioning started mapping out our options; porch swing; lawn; woodshed; backseat of my car; right the fuck here with her up against this pillar. Sookie's grip on my body was so tight, I probably could've gone for a jog with my arms at my sides and she never would've slipped free and my hands decided to test that theory by sliding up her body to the hem of her shirt. I could feel her hardened nipples pressed against my chest, but my hands were jealous and wanted to feel them too, and just as they found the bare skin of her midsection she pulled back.

"Shit," she whispered.

I thought I had misread something; I thought I had gone too far; I thought I had been the only one to see the light flashing in my eyes from her kiss until she said, "If Gran's flipping the porch light on and off, that's my signal to get inside."

Oh, I guess I'd thought wrong; on all accounts.

We reluctantly pried ourselves off of one another with me blurting out, "Do you want to follow one another back to Shreveport?" As much as I didn't want to stop our make-out session, I was even more reluctant to be away from her completely and hoped I didn't sound as desperate as I felt.

A small frown came onto her face as she said, "I promised Gran I'd stay the night here. She needs me to take her back into town in the morning to pick up her car from the garage."

"Oh, okay," I muttered, running my hands through my hair trying not to let on that I already missed her when I hadn't even left yet.

I wasn't sure what the proper etiquette was at the end of a date. We'd definitely already taken care of the kissing portion, but I didn't know if I could just ask her now for another date or if I should wait a day or two and then call to ask her out again. I didn't want to appear needy and lame. I wanted to be cool and confident because surely, at some point, if I didn't man up she would move on to someone more self-assured like that prick Herveaux.

My picture would be more likely to adorn the side of a milk toast box than paper towels and while I owned many plaid shirts, none of them were flannel.

"Do you want to get together this weekend?" Sookie asked, breaking me out of my downward spiraling train of thought.

"Sure!" I agreed too readily and too brightly, hoping the underlying desperation wafting from me didn't actually have a scent, when something else occurred to me. "But don't you have to visit your mother?" I asked. For all I knew she lived in New Orleans or Dallas and it could be an overnight trip.

As aggressive as Sookie could be at times, it only made her uncertainty all the more noticeable because her eyes darted around to nothing in particular while she started chewing on her bottom lip again. I wasn't sure what was wrong and tried to alleviate the anxiety I could see building in her by saying, "I understand if you're busy. We can get together when you get back...from...wherever."

When her eyes finally met mine, she blew out a deep breath and said, "Well, if you want, you could come with me and then we can do something afterwards. She lives in Monroe now and they have a huge mall with a movie theater in it."

"Are you sure she wouldn't mind me tagging along? Or, let me guess, her motto is 'the more the merrier' too?" I smiled.

Sookie smiled in return, but it was more bittersweet than anything else and I didn't understand why. "Something like that," she answered.

I left her on the front porch after one last goodnight kiss without any awkwardness involved. Scorching heat and a testament to how well made my Levi's were as they held up against the strain I put on them, but no awkwardness at all. Even with her uncertainty I wasn't going to turn down the opportunity to see her again and felt a little better knowing she *wanted* to see me again. It wasn't an out and out declaration that she didn't care if I talked to walls or empty chairs, but it was enough for now.

I was probably a little too happy when Sookie called me the following day to make plans to meet up so we could drive over together to Monroe where her mother lived. She was vague on the details, but I didn't ask and was just happy that she hadn't decided to claim temporary insanity

the night before and change her mind. I was also glad I hadn't seen Corbett since our dinner at the farmhouse. I'd since forgiven him for his impromptu song and dance routine, but I didn't know what I would say about us going to visit his wife.

When Sookie pulled up to the curb Saturday morning, I was already waiting out in front of my apartment building wearing one of my favorite plaid shirts.

I was no Brawny Man, but hopefully she would continue to prefer Milk Toast Man.

I felt my whole face light up just seeing her and as I got into the passenger's side, I said, "Hi!" and left that one word hanging there while I smiled like an idiot, only it dropped when I noticed she wasn't smiling back.

She was chewing her bottom lip.

I wanted to be chewing on her bottom lip.

"Is something wrong?" I asked, hoping her answer would be 'no'.

"No..." she said unconvincingly.

Her hands were wringing together in her lap and I wanted to reach over and pull them apart, lace my fingers through hers and tell her whatever it was, it would be okay, but I couldn't. One, I wasn't confident enough yet to just arbitrarily touch her whenever I wanted to, and two, because I didn't know what was wrong.

But, something was wrong.

"What is it Sookie?"

She blew out a deep breath and said, "There's something I need to tell you, something I *should* have told you before asking you to come along to meet my mom. I didn't want you to be blindsided walking in, so I need to tell you now in case you'd rather not go."

I had no idea of what she could possibly say that would make me not want to go, but tried to sound reassuring when I said, "You can tell me whatever you need to, but I doubt it'll change my mind."

She looked like she was afraid to believe me, but blurted out anyway, "After daddy died, my mom had a nervous breakdown. She already had some...issues before then, but they were controllable with medication. When he died, she just lost it. She went off of her meds and refused to take them, so we had no choice but to put her into an assisted care facility. *That's* where she lives now."

I felt so bad for all of them and no longer wondered why Corbett never talked about his wife's life now. I couldn't imagine how hard it was on all of them and this time I didn't stop myself

from reaching out and cupping the side of her face, saying, "I'm so sorry. That must have been really rough on you; all of you."

She leaned into my hand and closed her eyes for a moment before opening them again and smiled a little, saying, "It was and it wasn't. She's not at risk of harming herself or anyone else, so she doesn't have to actually take her meds as long as she lives there and I think she's happier that way."

I could only assume whatever her mother's issues were had to do with a mental disorder, but I didn't want to pry, and said truthfully, "I would be honored to meet your mother if you're still willing to have me tag along." The fact that she'd been married to Corbett for so many years would've made me curious about her anyway while pushing her close to sainthood at the same time.

Sookie's eyes watered, but thankfully no tears actually fell and she put the car into drive, explaining on the way there that none of their friends knew where her mother was now. It had been no secret (apparently thanks to one Maxine Fortenberry) that she'd had a nervous breakdown over Corbett's death, but all they ever told anyone was that she'd moved away and that she was happy now. They didn't want her to be the center of any gossip around town and I felt even more honored that Sookie chose to share that closely guarded secret with me.

She held onto my hand as we walked into the care facility. It was bright and cheery looking with a huge center atrium and large windows throughout the bottom floor to let the sunshine in and there were several patients and visitors wandering around the well manicured lawns. We found Sookie's mother in one of the many dayrooms where she was reading a newspaper and I had to keep my surprise in check seeing Corbett sitting next to her. His look was one of relief mixed with a little anxiety, but I had no time to try and decipher it as Sookie said, "Momma, I'd like for you to meet my...friend, Eric Northman. Eric, this is my mom, Michelle Stackhouse."

She folded the paper and placed it down on the table in front of her before standing with a big smile on her face as she hugged me, saying, "Oh, Sookie's had a crush on you *forever!*"

"Momma!" Sookie gasped, completely embarrassed.

I chuckled now that I could see the entire family seemed to speak their mind whenever it suited them and I liked it. Not wanting Sookie to be the only one laid bare, I offered, "Well, I can honestly say, the feeling is mutual. It's a pleasure to meet you Mrs. Stackhouse."

Sookie just got ten shades darker, but Mrs. Stackhouse giggled like a schoolgirl, saying, "You can call me Michelle." She glanced at the chair next to her, where Corbett was still watching my every reaction, and my mouth fell open, while his expression turned wistful, when she said, "Aren't you going to say hello, Corbett?"

Chapter 9

What?

My eyes darted from Corbett to Michelle and then eventually back to Sookie wondering what in the hell was going on. Had I been wrong all along? Had this just been some elaborate mindfuck from the get go? An all new way to make fun of the freak that could see dead people? All I could guess from Sookie's expression was that she was worried, but I had no idea about what.

Or, could Michelle really see Corbett? Was that why he thought Sookie wouldn't freak out if she knew about me? Had she already accepted her mother's ability, so he assumed she would accept mine? But that couldn't be right because why would they have had Michelle put into an assisted care facility if they believed her?

Would Sookie think I was just as crazy and try to have me committed as well if I told her the truth?

And why had he never told me about his wife? He'd known all along how alone I felt in my curse. It would've been a relief to have had someone *alive* to talk to about it all, but was it because he was trying to shelter me from the truth of what would happen to me if people found out?

Like I didn't already know?

My head was spinning with everything and it felt like time had stopped, at least for a moment, but my eyes went back to Sookie when she said softly, "Momma, you know Daddy only talks to you."

Michelle turned back and smiled at me like she didn't have a care in the world, saying, "Well, it was worth a shot. I figured he'd a been worked up enough seeing his baby girl finally bringing a boyfriend to meet the parents that he'd make himself be heard."

"You can see him?" I asked more harshly than I'd intended. "*Hear* him?" I added incredulously.

I felt Sookie's hand rub soothingly up and down my back and registered the sound of her sighing while Michelle nodded affably, but it was Corbett that I *heard*.

"She can't." His eyes fell lovingly to his wife at his side before going to Sookie and adding, "I'm guessing she didn't explain *everything*, but if she doesn't, I'll tell you the next time I see you." As if to prove his point, he walked out of the room without another word while Michelle spoke up saying he'd just asked me what my intentions were with his daughter, but her eyes didn't move to watch him go.

How could I possibly answer that question when I had so many questions myself?

"Umm..." I began, not able to form a coherent thought from the whirlwind blowing around in my brain.

Sookie saved me by saying softly, "Momma, you and daddy need to just stop right now. Eric and I have only known each other for a week, so that question is a little early, don'tcha think?"

Had it really only been a week? It felt like I'd known Sookie for much longer, but I guessed that could be attributed to Corbett's never ending stories about her. As Sookie and I took a seat at the table, while she and Michelle continued to catch up since their last visit, I could barely maintain the appearance that I was paying attention because my mind was still whirling.

What did all of this mean for Sookie and me?

She obviously still loved her mother regardless of her mental state, but I couldn't compare that to our own situation. She may have *liked* me, but she couldn't possibly *love* me and if she was okay with having her own mother committed for *seeing* dead people, it made sense that she'd think the same should be done with me if I ever told her. After sorting through all of my thoughts and feelings, I was left feeling nothing but dejected. I could never tell her my secret if I wanted to be in a relationship with her unless I was willing to only see her every Saturday when she came to visit her mother since I'd be living there too.

I don't know how much time had passed, but I certainly wasn't good company since my mind was only brought back to the present when Sookie and Michelle stood, hugging each other with Sookie saying, "I'll try and stop by again during the week."

I stood as well and tried to smile through my melancholy when I was again taken aback when Michelle hugged me just as tightly, saying, "You take care of my little girl and pay no mind to what her daddy has to say about it. He'd be happy if she stayed ten years old forever." Looking back at the empty chair he'd been sitting in earlier, she added, "Isn't that right, Doodlebug?"

Doodlebug?

Even feeling morose over the impossibility of me never being able to confide in Sookie, I wished Corbett had actually been there so I could enjoy what I was sure would be the look of horror on his face knowing I'd never let him live, as it were, down that nickname.

"I'll do my best," I replied, smiling at the thought of telling *Doodlebug* to go to hell.

After saying our goodbyes, Sookie and I returned to her car and headed out. There was an awkward silence between us, but I couldn't do anything about it because I didn't know what to say. She was the first woman I'd ever met that I'd allowed myself to imagine actually having a relationship with; that I actually *wanted* a relationship with, but I was sure a lot of that had to do with Corbett's constant testimonials of how Sookie wouldn't judge me for my curse; that she'd understand. Seeing for myself that she was okay with having her mother put into a mental health facility, I had no idea of how he came to that conclusion, but now that I knew better, I didn't know what to do. I was already invested in her; in the possibility of there being an 'us' and didn't

want to go back to how things were before I'd met her. But, at the same time, I knew when the time came (*because no matter what, the time ALWAYS came when anyone close to me figured out I was a freak*) and she pushed me away, I knew it would crush me because I already felt crushed at just the thought of her walking away.

"I'm sorry." Sookie's soft spoken apology pulled me from my thoughts and I looked over at her, wondering what I may have missed that she would be apologizing for.

Was it because she already knew I was a freak like her mother and she was sorry we wouldn't work out? I was certainly sorry for it...

My mouth opened, but my brain couldn't find anything to say, so after a moment she continued on, saying, "I should've explained more about my mother's condition before letting you walk in there, but you don't know how difficult it is to find a way to say, 'By the way, my mother sees and talks to my dead father,' you know?"

I could only nod because I didn't want to say that I knew all too well how hard saying that particular phrase would be to get out.

She seemed to study me for a moment before looking back at the road, admitting, "When I was eight, momma got caught up in a flash flood driving home from the store. Her car was swept out into the creek and if daddy hadn't been on his way home to see her car go over the embankment, well...I'm sure she wouldn't have made it. But he did see it and he dove right in after her. By the time he was able to get her out of the car, it had already been submerged for a while and she wasn't breathing when he pulled her out. He did CPR on her for close to thirty minutes before she came back, but after that...she wasn't quite the same. The doctors couldn't tell if it was from the lack of oxygen to her brain or if the accident just coincided with when she would've shown signs of schizophrenia anyway, but momma started seeing and talking to people that no one else could see or hear. It scared us all at first, but honestly, I was just happy she was still alive. Whoever it was that she saw and spoke to seemed to keep her in good spirits and she'd tell me stories about them that were better than having any bedtime tale read to me from a book. But, Daddy and Gran were afraid, so they convinced her to take start taking meds that made her stop seeing her imaginary friends, but they killed off my fun loving and happy mother too. She was a shell of the woman she had been, even before the accident, but when daddy died, she lost it and went off of her meds." Sookie got quiet again and didn't say anything else until we pulled into the parking lot at the mall. She took the key out of the ignition and turned to face me, saying, "It was on the morning of the memorial service when she first saw daddy again. She'd been off of her meds for days by then; she hadn't eaten, hardly slept, or spoken to a soul since she'd found out he'd died, but *that* morning she smiled and asked him what took so long for him to come home and it was that night that we decided as a family that no one would ever make her take those meds again knowing they'd take *him* away from her too. She's happy so we're happy and, who knows, maybe she really can see him." Her eyes dropped from my mine as she admitted, "It's because of momma that I wasn't sure you were real when I first saw you that day; like maybe I had her quirk too."

Quirk? I understood more about why their family seemed okay with Michelle's condition, but hearing Sookie's acceptance that perhaps her mother *could* see dead people made me ask, "If you believe that maybe your mother actually *can* see your father, why did you have her placed in an assisted care facility?"

Her eyes returned to mine and she smiled ruefully as she said, "Well, sometimes momma gets caught up in her conversations with daddy. She'd been cooking breakfast one morning when 'they' got into a heated debate over which one of them actually fell in love with the other first and the house nearly burned down. We don't have to worry about that where she's at and she likes it there. She said she feels like a princess because she gets to kick back and put her feet up without having to do much else. They have day trips and classes that she enjoys and nobody judges her or looks at her funny. She understands that no one else can see or hear the same people that she does, but she has friends there, both visible and invisible. She's happy."

I was left completely stunned. They didn't have Michelle put away because they thought she was crazy. They moved her there so she could happily talk to her dead husband, that only I knew she couldn't really see, so they wouldn't have to worry about her. Sookie called it a quirk and almost seemed happy at the thought that maybe her mother did have my curse and said it as though she'd view it as a blessing if she did. I didn't know what to say...but I should've said *something*.

Sookie seemed to shrink back into herself and huffed out a breath of air as she started the car again and began rambling, "So, I really am sorry for not telling you everything before we left and I understand if this is a deal breaker. I don't know what in the hell I was thinking by bringing you there after we've only just met and we haven't even been out on a real date yet, but I just feel so differently around you and it wasn't fair of me to dump so much on you so soon, so I'll just take you home and you can forget..."

She didn't get to finish her sentence because I reached out and turned her car back off with one hand while the other pulled her head to meet mine in the middle as I silenced her with a kiss. The despair I'd been feeling had been replaced with hope once again and while I wasn't quite ready to admit to my own 'quirk', I didn't feel like it was an impossibility anymore either. I couldn't help feeling that Sookie might actually be *the one* for me and I was so lost in my euphoric gratitude that I didn't realize she was crying until I tasted her tears. I pulled back horrified, and said, "I'm sorry. I didn't think...I was just..." only to see that Sookie looked happy which only made me more confused. "What is it?"

Before then I would've thought Sookie would look good in anything, but I would've been wrong. I hated seeing tears on her face and I wiped them away as quickly as they appeared while she explained, "You seem like you're okay...with everything? You don't mind that my mother talks to my dead father and that I imagined you were an angel the first time I saw you and have been dreaming of you ever since?"

Dreaming?

Sookie didn't realize her impromptu slip up until I grinned, saying, "I'm fine with it all, but...it seems there's more you have to tell me. You've been *dreaming* of me?"

I should've known better or maybe my subconscious self knew exactly what would happen when I teased her because instead of becoming bashful or embarrassed, her eyes became heated as she said, "Oohhh...yeah..." She maneuvered over the center console like it wasn't even there, making my thoughts run to wondering what other ways her body could contort, when she was suddenly straddling my lap, asking, "Wanna act one of them out?"

Yes please.

Maybe I'd said it out loud. Maybe she really was a telepath and read my mind, but whichever one it was Sookie's mouth was back on mine as her hips grinded against my own. She'd given me no script to act out her dream, so I improvised and put my hands back on her ass to help her along in her quest to make me cum in my jeans.

I could always buy more since we were at the mall.

I swore I could hear my heart pounding loudly in my chest and my hands started to trail up underneath her shirt, wondering if her heartbeats were just as loud, when she cried, "Fuck!"

Yes please.

My lips chased after hers as she pulled away from me and when I opened my eyes again I saw her rolling the window down and trying to calm her breathing, asking agitatedly, "Is there a problem?"

Not that I could see, but I was about to suggest moving into the backseat so we'd have a little more room when I heard through the window, "You two need to break it up or leave before I'm forced to call the police. This here's a *family* establishment."

I hadn't noticed the security guard now standing right next to the window, but Sookie was proving herself to be quite a distraction, not that I was complaining any. She put on a mock scared face and snickered, "Oh no! Not the po-po!"

He didn't seem to get her sarcasm because he adjusted his leather belt which was weighed down with a giant key ring on one side and a Mag light on the other, saying, "That's right, so unless you wanna have to call your daddy to come get you at the station, you'd best straighten up."

Sookie looked young, but certainly not *that* young and I frowned as she giggled while he walked away. I understood better when he got far enough away that I could finally see his face. He had to be pushing ninety years old and I rolled my eyes, grinning back at her, when she asked, "Do you think he's got a red Bat Phone that connects to heaven so he can get a hold of my dad?"

If not, I could always pass along a message...

We were both still grinning when we peeled ourselves out of the car, but what I really wanted to do was continue making whatever her dream had been into a reality. All of my focus was on that

and I wasn't paying attention to where we were going, with Sookie pulling me along by my hand, but even if she hadn't been, I was sure my body would have followed hers regardless.

"Two please," I heard her say, but I was too busy imagining what she'd look like with less clothing on and wondering just how bendy she could be. My earlier theory was put to the test since she'd let go of my hand to fish around in her purse and when she started walking again, my feet followed in her footsteps with me attached to her by an invisible leash. I could see her footsteps since she'd been walking a step ahead of me and I don't think my eyes had left her ass since we'd walked into the mall, but as the lighting dimmed I was forced to look up and saw we'd entered a movie theater.

We hadn't really discussed what we'd be doing for our date, but I certainly didn't care and I followed Sookie and took the seat next to hers in the back row, asking, "What are we seeing?"

The lighting dimmed a moment later and the screen lit up as she turned to me with a wicked smile, whispering, "We're seeing how quiet we can be while we act out one of my teenage dreams starring you."

Her lips were back on mine a second later and as I felt her hand sliding up my thigh, coming to rest on my seemingly everlasting erection, I grunted into her mouth in approval while sincerely hoping it was an action movie knowing I'd need the loud explosions to drown out what was sure to be my own explosive climax if things worked out the way I wanted them to.

Chapter 10: Chapter 10

Chapter 10

I'd been in Sookie's company for close to two hours by then and I hadn't seen her eat or drink a thing and yet there was something in the way she tasted that had me moaning into her mouth in appreciation. My hands slid up her sides underneath her shirt as my hips slid down in my seat when she climbed on top of me and all I could think was I wanted more of her. More skin. More contact. More everything and my wish was granted when I felt her open each button of my button-fly jeans with her hand dipping into the front of my boxers and her fingertips teasing along the underside of my shaft. A violent shiver worked its way through my body and, I'm guessing, a loud noise because she gripped me firmly in her hand and giggled while shushing me, whispering, "You're hung like a horse, but keep the neighing down before we get kicked out. I doubt I could get Seabiscuit back into his stall now that he's through the gate."

Huh? Isn't that movie already on DVD?

I hadn't been able to focus on what she'd been saying, only catching the tail end of her comment, but I didn't care what was on the big screen feeling her hand start to pump up and down my dick. It had been so long since anything besides my own hand touched me down there that I couldn't help thrusting up into hers and probably would've bucked her right off my lap had I not been

holding onto her. She giggled again and shushed herself as she leaned down on top of me, kissing her way across my neck to my ear, and whispered, "*This*," punctuating the word with a firmer grip around me, "is better than anything I could've dreamed up as a teenager."

Me too...

I was thirty years old and on my first official date, so as a teenager this would've been classified as a *wet dream* come true.

Speaking of which...

Sookie had had me worked up since the night before; really, since that day at the park and now that she was actually *touching* me I knew I couldn't take much more before I wouldn't be able to stop myself from cumming. I wanted her too much and feeling her on top of me, kissing and licking and panting above me, was making it harder.

In every conceivable way...

"Sookie," I managed to choke out. "If you don't stop...I can't...I'm gonna..."

My brain wasn't working now that my entire blood supply was in her hand and I couldn't think of another word besides 'cum', but I didn't want to say it in case she thought it was crude. I quickly learned I didn't have to worry because she gripped me tighter and finished my statement by purring her question into my ear, asking, "Cum?"

I nodded against her and felt my two days' worth of whiskers scrape against her cheek for a split second before she slid off of me, but I didn't have time to wonder if we'd be stopping now because her head was suddenly hovering above my lap and her hand was quickly replaced with her mouth.

"Fuck!" I groaned out into the darkness.

I'd never had what could be called a 'proper' blowjob before and had only ever cum into my hand or a condom. A few of the women I'd been with in the past had ventured down there for a brief time, but had never really done much more than tease me with their lips before moving on. I figured it must be something most women didn't enjoy, but I was sure Sookie would all but call them lying bitches if her mouth wasn't full. My fingers wove into her hair as she dove down with vigor, taking as much of me into her mouth as she could and what she couldn't she used her hand to make up for. It didn't take long before I could feel my balls tightening, signaling my impending release, and my eyes rolled into the back of my head as I tried to warn her by gripping her hair tighter and only got as far as muttering, "Sook..." when her hands moved to grip the outer sides of my thighs hard and she forced herself farther down on my shaft humming.

For the love of God, I'm sorry...

White light exploded behind my closed eyelids as I exploded into her mouth, unable to stop the torrent of cum she'd hummed right out of me, and a strangled gasp made its way out of my chest. I tried to focus. I tried to calm my breathing so I could apologize for not warning her I was about to cum down her throat, but it was an impossible task. My entire body felt like every nerve ending I had was tingling and every muscle I had was locked down, so I couldn't even loosen my grip from her hair, but Sookie didn't stop. I couldn't tell if it was my own involuntary movements that still had her mouth sliding up and down my shaft until she hummed again and literally licked me clean, making even my toes twitch.

Marry me...

My upper head was making plans to buy her a ring at the first jewelry store we came across in the mall and then whisking her off to Vegas by nightfall while my lower head was purring in contentment under her ministrations. I barely had the wherewithal to remember my own name by the time she'd taken her seat beside me again and I looked down to see she'd already set me back to rights when she leaned over and whispered, "Sorry."

I'd forgotten I'd meant to apologize for cumming in her mouth until she reminded me and I looked back at her sheepishly, saying, "I'm sorry. I tried to warn you...but...I couldn't...you *hummed* and I..."

She giggled quietly and wrapped herself around my arm, leaning against my side and lacing her fingers through mine, saying, "Not *you* silly. *I'm* sorry."

"For what?" I asked incredulously and incredibly loud, only to be shushed by the other people in theater and only then realizing we weren't the only ones there.

No one was seated near us, but I felt my blood quickly work its way north to redden my cheeks anyway, when she said, "For not doing better. You're much bigger than I would've dared dreamed, so I'll need to practice before I can deep throat you."

For not doing better? Was she kidding?

Wait...was it a GOOD thing or a BAD thing that I was 'bigger'?

I'd seen more than my fair share of naked men thanks to my chosen profession and I'd never given much thought to comparing any of them to myself, but I set all of that aside for now needing her to understand. "Sookie," I said too loudly and then lowered my voice again when a chorus of loud shushes filled the air. "You were...that was..." I was still at a loss for words until I managed to find the only one I could think of to accurately describe her, everything, in a nutshell.

"Perfect."

She nuzzled her head against my shoulder, making me despise the armrest that separated us, and softly laughed, "Aww...honey, that was *far* from perfect, but don't worry. Practice makes perfect, so I'll get it right before long."

For the life of me I couldn't figure out where she thought she'd gone wrong. There was no mistaking my pleasure in what she'd done; after all, she'd swallowed it, but that made me realize that while I was completely sated, Sookie didn't get any kind of relief.

Should I touch her? Would she let me? Did she want me to? I wanted to...

Was I really fucking questioning this when she'd just had my dick in her mouth not five minutes ago?

Our fingers were still laced together, so I moved our hands to rest on her thigh and began slowly sliding them upward, hesitantly asking, "Sookie?"

"Hmm?" she hummed innocently while she not so innocently pulled her fingers from mine only to put her hand on top of them and increase their speed to their final destination right in between her thighs.

"Sookie," I growled lowly now feeling just how wet she was through the denim fabric of her jeans. It would seem I hadn't been the only one getting any enjoyment out of our earlier activities and I had a sudden juvenile urge to call up every one of the women I'd ever been with who had barely bothered to remember my name, or the guys who'd done nothing but ridicule and emasculate me my entire life for my weirdness, and shout 'Ha!' or stand up on my seat and claim 'I'm king of the world!'

But first I was going to return the favor and make Sookie cum...

The thought alone had me getting hard again and I turned in my seat and started nibbling my way across her jaw line while she arched into my hand, whimpering and rubbing herself against my fingers, making me wish she'd worn a skirt instead of pants. I wanted to touch her, feel her skin instead of the denim barrier that separated us, and I slowly pulled the button of her jeans open and lowered the zipper, giving her every opportunity to stop me.

But she didn't stop me.

"Fuck...me..." I muttered against her neck as my hand discovered that she wasn't wearing any underwear. Her skin was smooth and completely bare so when her hips bucked up into my hand again, my fingers met no resistance as they slid right between her wet folds.

"God, I *want* to," she gasped, "but we should probably stop."

Her body was giving me mixed signals since her hand pressed down even harder on mine and I managed to keep it still while letting her do as she pleased against it, wanting to cry as I asked, "Stop?"

"Oh...yeah..." she grunted, still writhing against my fingers, so I was still confused and not really sure what she wanted me to do until she explained, "because I doubt I can keep quiet if we keep going." She turned her head and kissed me, making me forget what we were even talking about and she bit down on my bottom lip hard, pulling another growl from my throat as she let go, adding, "Too bad these aren't bench seats. That way I could get some practice in and my mouth would be too full to scream."

The images her words brought to mind made me put the buttons of my jeans through my own quality assurance test as my dick strained against them and I sagged in my seat, practically begging, "Do you want to get out of here? We could go...somewhere else? My place?"

Your place? Any place? I don't give a shit where, just please just say yes!

Sookie's face changed to a look of pure innocence as she pouted, "But the movie isn't over yet."

What movie?

My eyes unwillingly left her to look up at the screen where I recognized the sparkly vampire and his teenage bride. I only knew who they were because despite my solitary lifestyle, I didn't live completely under a rock, and I turned back to her, asking, "Seriously?"

Sookie maintained her pout for another second before grinning widely, replying, "No, not *seriously*. Who would want glitter dick when there's a war horse to ride?" Her hand shot back to my crotch to let me know *exactly* what she was talking about and she stroked me once, whispering against my lips, "But feel free to bite me. I'd be willing to turn into a vampire if I got *this* for an eternity."

We were definitely getting married. Just as soon as I could convince myself to pull her out of my bed.

I could already picture her there and I regretfully pulled my hand out of her pants so she could close them again and we practically ran out of the theater hand in hand, straight into a couple that were standing just outside of the doorway in the lobby.

I barely had enough time to pull my hand from Sookie's to grab onto the guy I'd knocked into, saying, "Sorry," as I managed to keep us both from toppling over.

"Rene?" Sookie asked.

He looked over at her once he got his bearings again and took in our rumpled appearances and flushed faces as he barely smiled, saying, "Sookie? Fancy meeting you here."

He seemed agitated, so of course I immediately guessed he was one of her former boyfriends. His dark hair and eyes were the complete opposite of my own, but since my fingers were still sticky with her arousal, I was able to stand tall. She was *mine* now. I even had permission to keep her for an eternity just as soon as I could figure out how to turn us both into vampires.

"Yeah, well...we were just taking in a movie," she replied before turning to me. "Eric, this is one of Jason's good friends Rene Lenier. Rene, this is my...Eric. Eric Northman."

Hear that? I'm HER Eric!

Who knew a great orgasm and the promise of an eternity of them with Sookie could give me so much confidence?

He eyed us both again in a weird way and I wondered if he'd somehow heard of the rumors about me when he seemed to shake off his thoughts and said, "Nice to meet you." He turned to the girl at his side, saying, "You remember my sister Cindy, don'tcha?"

"Of course," Sookie smiled while the girl smiled bashfully at us. She couldn't have been but sixteen or so and Sookie continued, saying, "I haven't seen you since you were knee high to a junebug. Are you guys here to see the wedding of the year?" and gesturing to the closed doors we'd just burst out of like our asses were on fire.

There'd definitely been a fire blazing in that region...

Rene's face hardened as he looked at us suspiciously and said, "Well, we *were* watching the movie when I realized *someone* was getting up to no good in the back row, so I told Cindy we had to leave." I subconsciously straightened my clothes as I felt my face heat up again, when he added, "It was *shameful!*"

What-fucking-ever! It was Sookie's dream and I'd spend an eternity making every one of them come true.

Yep, orgasms worked wonders on confidence levels.

"Oh," Sookie squeaked out. We all stood there awkwardly for a moment when Sookie jumped as her pocket started vibrating and she pulled her phone out of her pocket, saying, "Oh look, I missed a call from Jason."

Rene managed to work his face into a friendlier expression and said, "Well, we'll let you all get on your way. Tell Jason I'll be seeing him soon," and with that he turned his sister by her shoulders and led her away from us.

The heathens.

I still felt like I was missing out on something and turned to Sookie, saying, "He seemed a little *tense*. Did you guys used to date or something?"

Her face crinkled up right as she said, "Eww...no. He's just known Jason forever. They like to compete for women when they go out."

It seemed odd that he'd get so bent out of shape over what Sookie and I had possibly been up to in the back row of the movie theater if they'd never dated, but I didn't have long to think on it because Sookie's phone started vibrating again in her hand. She stared down at it, muttering, "Weird. It's Jason again. He never calls me," and she answered it a second later, saying, "Hey big brother. What's wrong? Did you fall down one a them *holes*, since you're so *deep*, and can't find your way back out again? You shoulda left a trail of breadcrumbs Hansel."

I snickered at her side until I saw her face twist into concern as she exclaimed, "What? When?" She listened to whatever his response was and said, "If they come back, don't you say a word and tell them you're not talking without your lawyer present."

Lawyer?

She huffed into her phone at whatever he'd said, and added, "It doesn't make you *guilty* for wanting a lawyer with you. It makes you *smart*, so just shut your dumbass the hell up and do as I say! You stay right where you are and I'll be there soon and we can talk more about it." She ended the call and looked back at me worriedly, saying, "I've gotta go. I can run you home or you can come with me, but..."

Her whole body looked tensed up for a fight and I rubbed my hands up and down her arms attempting to sooth her, asking, "What's wrong? I don't think you should be driving. I'll go with you."

I'd go with her anywhere.

She sucked her bottom lip in between her teeth and her eyes filled up with tears as she said, "It's Jason. The sheriff just left his house. He's a suspect in a murder."

Chapter 11: Chapter 11

Chapter 11

Murder?

I could barely wrap my mind around the concept when applied towards Sookie's brother; ironic given my curse, but still. Granted, I didn't know Jason that well, but unless he'd murdered that Bill guy from the other night, I couldn't picture Sookie's carefree brother killing anything that didn't have antlers on its head.

"Was it that Bill guy?" I asked and immediately regretted it.

My question seemed to snap her out of her despair as she shouted, "No! That's just high school bullshit. Jason didn't murder *anyone!*"

"That's not what I meant," I quickly added, berating myself for not completing my thought out loud to begin with. "Of course I don't think he murdered anyone, it's just that they didn't seem to get along the other night and I can't imagine why the police would think he'd be capable of killing anyone."

...else, I added silently. Purposely silent that time.

"It's because he fucks too much," she huffed and started walking so fast towards the exit that even with my longer leg stride I practically had to run to keep up with her.

Had he been accused of fucking someone to death?

I'd been working at the coroner's office for eight years and had never been presented with *that* particular cause of death, but I wasn't about to ask the question out loud and risk Sookie's wrath again. It would seem our own 'fucking' plans were on the backburner now too, but I certainly didn't hold it against her and when we reached her car I took the chance to grab her keys from her hand eliciting a scathing look from her. I remembered all too well how easily she'd overpowered the would-be mugger in the park and held my hands up in surrender, saying, "You're upset. At least let me drive you there."

Her eyes were trained on her key ring still dangling from my fingers before she closed them and took a deep breath. When she opened them again, she sounded calmer, agreeing, "Fine, but first promise me that you won't drive like Miss Daisy is in the backseat."

Her tone had lightened and I felt confident enough to joke back at her, smiling, "Fine, so long as *you* promise to get me out of any speeding tickets."

It took a moment, but she finally smiled back at me, saying, "Deal."

I didn't try to talk to Sookie on our way to Bon Temps since she seemed to be having one hell of an argument going on inside of her head. It was in the way she muttered under her breath with her eyebrows narrowed and her fists sporadically clenching that clued me in, but as we were coming up to the exit off of the interstate, she finally spoke up out loud, saying, "I'm sorry."

"For what?" I asked. She was free to argue with whomever she wanted to inside of her head. I just didn't want to give her a reason to want to argue with *me* which was why I'd stayed quiet.

"For the worst date in history," she sighed.

My heart sank wondering if I'd somehow read her wrong earlier. Even with our reason for running to Bon Temps, I hadn't been able to stop myself from reliving everything that had happened between us at the theater during our silent drive. It was something I was sure I'd be thinking about often and fondly for years to come, but maybe Sookie hadn't had as good of a time as I had. Well, I knew she didn't have *as* good of a time as me, but we'd been on our way to rectify that when everything got put on hold.

Or had it just been turned off instead?

The wheels in my mind were spinning trying to work up the nerve to ask her if it had really been *that bad* for her when she spoke up, saying, "We should be halfway through the Triple Crown by now, but *nooo*...just because my brother's so *deep*, his fucking is getting in the way of ours."

On! Turned right the fuck back on!

I released the breath I'd been holding and quelled the urge to pull over onto the side of the road to try and get at least a *third* of the way towards that Triple Crown. Instead I chuckled in relief, saying, "If anyone should be apologizing, it's me. At least I got to cross the finish line."

Sookie giggled softly and reached out, lacing her fingers through mine. Just feeling her touch again was enough to make all of the tension leave my body when she replied, "Well...that's my fault too." When I turned to look at her questioningly, her own eyes darted towards my crotch and back to my eyes again as she added, "I was already too worked up to have stayed quiet and as much as you were bucking in your seat, I just might need to get myself a saddle if I'm gonna get in the race."

Did I?

Christ, I was surprised Sookie even still wanted me around given how spastic I must've seemed to her. I wasn't a *virgin*, but I certainly wasn't all that experienced either. Like she'd said earlier; *practice* makes perfect and to practice, you need someone to practice *with*. One or two women every eighteen months or so wouldn't come close to making me any kind of expert lover and I could already feel my face getting hotter at my faux pas.

Sookie must've noticed because she nudged my leg, asking, "Why are you blushing? Is my lack of a brain/mouth filter getting to be too much? I'm sorry..."

"No," I replied, wondering if *now* was really the time to out myself as an 'almost virgin' when we were on our way to see her brother who was a suspect in a murder. I obviously knew the mechanics of sex; I'd even participated in the mechanics several times, but they'd all been virtual strangers and while I'd done what I could to try and make it a pleasurable experience for them too, I couldn't know for sure if I'd succeeded. Sookie wasn't a stranger and now I was left worrying if I didn't please her as much I truly wanted to, give her as much pleasure as she'd dreamed of, she'd give up on me.

"Then what is it?" she asked. We'd just come to a stop at the only traffic light I'd seen in the small town and was about to deflect her question by asking which way I needed to go when she grunted angrily and got out of the car.

"Sookie?" I called after her, but I was sure she couldn't hear me through the now closed door.

Or through the steam coming out of her ears.

I pulled over onto the side of the road and scrambled out after her; right into the front door of the local police station she'd stomped into. I didn't have to call out for her though because I could hear her in the attached office and got there just in time to hear her say, "Are you getting *that* senile Bud that you can't see Jason's no murderer? You've known our family for our whole lives!"

There was another cop that put me in mind of a cross between Barney Fife and Mr. Bean, sitting at the front desk with a huge smile on his face listening to Sookie's tirade. A quick glance at his uniform told me his name and since I could see her through the door looming over the desk in front of her, I motioned towards her, telling him, "I'm with her, Officer Prior."

I couldn't tell if his shocked expression had to do with Sookie's outburst or the fact she was with someone like me, but I didn't waste any time thinking about it and strode into the office. According to Bud's uniform he was the sheriff and he looked none too pleased at Sookie's *senile* crack, but he just leaned back in his chair and laced his fingers across his chest, saying, "Now I know you're upset, but you need to watch yourself young lady."

"Or else *what* Bud?" Sookie taunted. "Are you gonna call me a silly little girl and *not* hire me again? Was it because I'm smarter than you? Because I'm a better shot than you? Or was it just because you're mad that I've got a bigger *dick* than you?"

NOW the lack of brain/mouth filter might become a problem.

The angry red line rose up on his face like a cartoon thermometer, but before anything could be said by either one of them, I wrapped my arms around Sookie's waist from behind, saying, "You're right; she's upset. Sorry," and carried her right out of the building before I ended up arranging to have her bailed out, but not before I heard Officer Prior yell out, "You tell him Sookie!"

I guessed she wasn't the only one that had an issue with the sheriff and was surprised that she hadn't fought me at all, but as soon as I set her on her feet she yelled, "God damnit!"

"I'm sorry!" I half-yelled back with adrenaline still pumping through my veins. "But it looked like you were about to get yourself thrown into a cell!" I couldn't believe I was actually almost yelling back at her, but I guessed that orgasm earlier had boosted more than just my confidence level where other men were concerned.

"I know!" she huffed out a lower decibel and kicked a rock into the street. "I'm sorry. I'm not mad at you. I didn't mean to lose my cool in there, but I just can't stand *Boss Hogg* with all of his caveman bullshit. I might *wear* Daisy Dukes on occasion, but that's not my god damn name and he was always jealous of daddy for being a cop where *actual* crimes occurred, so he was more than happy to choose that dipshit Rosco P. Coltrane doppelganger Andy Bellefleur over me when Kevin Prior got killed by a drunk driver a few years back. I applied for the job so I could be closer to Gran, but I wouldn't put it past him to just be trying to jam up Jason on spite alone. In a town this small, there's not much else to do besides hold a grudge."

At least now I knew why Officer Prior looked shocked that I'd addressed him and was just thankful they'd been too busy arguing to have heard me, but I still had no idea why they were questioning Jason about a murder and now seemed as good a time as any. "Who died and why do they think Jason might have done it?"

Sookie seemed to realize that there were a few people loitering nearby listening in on our conversation, so she motioned for us to get in the car and told me which way to go before saying, "Maudette Pickens. She worked the midnight shift out at the Grab-It Kwik and she was found strangled by a customer around four o'clock this morning."

"Why do they suspect Jason? Was he the one that found her?"

"No," she sighed, suddenly looking tired. "But everybody saw him leave the bar with her the night before. Jason said Bud was hinting around that maybe he'd gone in there to surprise her, found her with another guy, got jealous and killed her."

I pulled into the driveway of a typical ranch home a minute later, but asked my next question anyway. "Had they been seeing each other for very long?" I couldn't help putting myself into Jason's shoes and even with the benefit of my curse I could only imagine how devastated I would be if it had been...

Nope. Not going there.

"Knowing Jason?" she asked rhetorically as we got out of the car. "He probably saw her for about an hour. Ninety minutes, tops."

There wasn't much for me to say about that and I followed Sookie into the house where we found Jason sitting on the couch with a dazed expression and only seeming to come to when Sookie sat next to him, saying, "Tell me *everything*."

He shook off his stupor and said, "There's nothing to tell. We hooked up the night before. The end."

"Bullshit!" Sookie declared. She stared him down like she was counting each of his pores and said, "You're hiding something. Out with it."

Jason either didn't notice or didn't mind my presence, so I sat down in a chair across from them and watched him chew his bottom lip just like his sister did when she was nervous. His eyes stayed on his lap with him refusing to say another word until Sookie exclaimed, "Oh my God! You did it!"

"I DID NOT!" he roared, shooting to his feet.

Sookie and I both stood up in unison, but she was the one to shove him back down onto the couch, saying, "Then *tell me* what the fuck you're hiding. Bud must've had more of a reason to suspect you if all you did was fuck her the night before."

"That *is* all he has," he said dejectedly.

His eyes were back on his lap, but Sookie wasn't buying his protests and prodded him on with, "But..."

Jason buried his face into his hands and didn't bother to remove them as he mumbled out an incoherent response.

"Adipshitsayswhat?" Sookie asked softly, leaning in towards Jason.

"What?" he asked, as he finally let his hands drop so he could look back at her.

The corners of Sookie's mouth turned slightly upwards as she repeated, slower and louder this time, "A dipshit says '*what?*'"

Jason's eyes were the first to relax hearing her little joke and the rest of him quickly followed when Sookie wrapped her arms around him, saying, "I love you big brother. You can tell me anything and I'll *still* love you. I want to help you, but I can't unless you tell me what it is you're still hiding."

"She taped it," he admitted into her shoulder.

Sookie seemed reluctant to let go of him, but her eyes shot over to me as she asked, "Taped what?"

"It," he replied noncommittally.

By our expressions, we both know what *it* was and rather than dwell on it, Sookie moved on and asked, "Why does that matter? A lot of people record themselves." I could see Jason tense up again and Sookie no doubt felt it since they were still hugging, so she joked, "Are you worried someone's gonna see it and know you weren't on your game that night?"

I waited to see him relax again like he had with her earlier joke, but he only tensed up more which made her ask, "What is it? What's on that tape you're worried someone's gonna see?"

Sookie couldn't see Jason's face since they were hugging, but I could make out his expression and watched it change into resignation right before he pulled away from and said, "It was the first time we'd ever hooked up, but I knew from a couple of the guys that she was into some kinky shit." He paused for long enough that Sookie got antsy and started gesturing with her hands for him to continue. He sighed and looked at the wall away from Sookie, admitting, "She liked to get choked. Said it was like the fuckin' bees knees in gettin' off, so when they finish searchin' her place, they're gonna have video of me doing the same fuckin' thing to her that killed her."

I could understand his concern, but I really didn't see what the big deal was and offered, "But that doesn't mean anything. She was obviously still *alive* after that and had apparently shared her

desires with more than just *you* if you'd heard about it, so what would your motive be to kill her?"

I thought if anything they'd be grasping at straws if they tried to use that to convict Jason of any crime, but Sookie shook her head, saying, "It's not a slam dunk and I doubt any *respectable* prosecutor would jump on it, but if Bud manages to somehow get charges to stick and Jason has to go before a jury; if they *see* him doing the same thing that killed her it could be enough to sway them. Bud could go the other route and instead of Jason killing her in a jealous rage, he went to the Grab-it Kwik and just killed her to get off." She looked even more worried and leaned her head back on the couch, asking no one in particular, "How many times have you seen innocent people get out of prison years later when new evidence comes to light?"

Too many...

As if she'd read my mind, I heard her whisper, "One is too many."

I'd compared Sookie's presence to actual sunshine the very first day I'd met her, but looking at her now, worried for her brother's freedom, it had dimmed. Seeing her like that made my chest ache and it was all it took for me to vow to find some way to help her. The question was...

How?

Chapter 12: Chapter 12

Chapter 12

We sat there silently for a while with all of us lost in our own thoughts when the sound of Jason's stomach growling rumbled through the room. It was enough to pull Sookie from her thoughts and pull the corners of her lips upwards when her eyes darted to her brother as she snickered, which then made Jason chuckle and it only grew from there. Before long the two of them were laughing so uncontrollably that there were tears streaming down their faces and I couldn't help but smile watching their little sibling exchange. I figured they both needed it to blow off some of the stress of the day, but it also reminded me that Sookie and I hadn't eaten anything in hours either, so I asked, "Are you two up to going out and getting something to eat? Or I can go pick up a pizza or something?"

Sookie shrugged and looked over at Jason, saying, "It's up to you brother. You're the one that'll get stared at if we go to Merlotte's."

I'd remembered seeing the bar and grille when we passed by it earlier so my eyes turned to Jason as well waiting to see what his decision was. He reminded me a lot of his father at the moment because he physically shook off his earlier gloom and stood up smiling as he said confidently, "Fuck'em. I ain't done nothin' to be ashamed of and I ain't hidin'."

Corbett had had the same ability to shake off something as gloomy as his own death, so I wasn't too surprised by Jason's attitude, but that only made Sookie laugh again while telling him, "Just remember to tell that to Gran when she finds out her grandson is a porn star."

"Shit," he laughed while we all climbed into Sookie's car with me behind the wheel again, "I doubt there's much I can do anymore to surprise Gran. That woman knows I been up to no good before I even done it and besides, she always liked it when I was up on the stage back when we was kids, so who knows? Maybe it'll get me one a her batch a cookies 'cause she's so proud."

If her reaction that night over dessert to Jason's teasing of Sookie and I was any indication, I imagined she might bake those cookies only so she could dump them into the garbage disposal with him standing witness to their demise.

I knew they were probably still just releasing some of the built up tension and my own grandparents had already died before I'd ever been born, so I couldn't guess what they'd be feeling since I'd never met them. At least I don't *think* I've met them, but who the fuck knows. It's not like I handed out genealogy questionnaires to every ghost I'd ever come across, but after meeting Mrs. Stackhouse I couldn't imagine she'd be too pleased, so I asked, "Should we stop by her house to tell her everything? You know, before she finds out some other way?"

If she knew when Jason was 'up to no good' before he even acted on it then it stood to reason she'd find out about him being a murder suspect fairly quickly, but then I also didn't know if anyone else had stepped into the role of town crier once Mrs. Fortenberry had passed away. Sookie's hand found its way to my leg and even though it didn't stray any higher than the middle of my thigh, it was enough to make my short term memory take a hit and I struggled to remember what we'd been talking about when she answered, "No, Gran is away for the weekend on one of her trips with the Descendants of the Glorious Dead and she doesn't have a cell phone."

"The what?" I stuttered, while struggling with the urge to shimmy down in my seat only so her hand would slide up higher on my leg. With Jason in the backseat, now certainly wasn't the time for that, but Sookie had a way of making me want to act on nothing but pure instinct instead of logic.

It was scary and exciting all at the same time.

"It's a group she belongs to that's full of Civil War buffs," she explained. "They went to go visit some old battlefield."

I remembered visiting such a place as a child on a school field trip. I was only seven years old and still struggling with my curse at the time, so I'd thought I was watching an all too realistic Civil War reenactment. Well, I guess I *was*, I was just the only one that could *see* it and I'd since learned that when ghosts appeared to be opaque, they weren't like the rest I that could see. Those seemed caught up reliving the final moments of their deaths and didn't have any awareness of the living around them, and, for all I knew, they would be like that for all of eternity.

Things quickly went downhill when I'd refused to walk through the middle of the battlefield with the rest of my class. My teacher at the time eventually reached the end of his rope and had to physically drag me kicking and screaming along with him. And even though he was left unhurt, watching the ghostly apparition of a bayonet pass through his chest made me piss my pants, literally, with me screaming in terror and from that day on none of the other kids would come near me, much less talk to me, if they could help it, unless it was to taunt me.

And I never went on a field trip to another battlefield either.

"Eric?"

The sound of Sookie's voice brought me back from that horrible day and I tried to shake off the disturbing feelings as I turned to face her. I could see the concern there before she even asked, "Are you alright?"

"Yeah..." I answered, a little too softly. I took in another lung full of air and pushed away all of the bad memories out with my next exhale, trying to sound more normal as I answered, "I'm fine. Why do you ask?"

Her eyes darted out of the windows before coming back to mine, saying, "We've been sitting here for a couple of minutes now and you haven't moved."

My own eyes darted out the window and saw we were parked outside of Merlotte's Bar and Grille, and then to the backseat to see Jason must've already gone inside, so I smiled sheepishly, saying, "Sorry. Just lost in my thoughts I guess."

She didn't seem very convinced, so, like a coward, I hurried up and got out of the car. The last thing I wanted to do was admit to my pissy childhood, nor did I want her pity. It was my cross to bear and I'd accepted that fact a long time ago, so I was happy when she chose to make a joke by asking, "Are you worried about Jason trying to strangle you? Because I'm armed and I doubt he could reach all the way up to your neck anyway."

"Funny," I smiled down at her and was even happier when she took a hold of my hand as we made our way inside. It seemed like any other bar and grille I'd ever been in and it took Sookie only a second to spot her brother who was sitting in a booth off to one side.

It also seemed to only take a second for Jason to find his groove again since the waitress was giggling and practically undressing him with her eyes, but as we took a seat across from him, those eyes turned towards me; *all* of me. I could only assume that it was my height she seemed to be marveling over when her smile brightened as she said, "Hi! I've never seen *you* around here before. If you're new in town, I'd be happy to show you around."

Sookie made some sort of noise from her chest and before I could answer, her hand tightened on my own as she brought them to rest on my lap, in full view of the waitress since her eyes were looking down there, saying, "You haven't seen him because I rarely let him out of bed." I turned

to see her angry face staring up at the waitress as she added with a much harder edge to her voice, "I don't share either."

Did I miss the part when we'd been in bed?

I surely hoped not, but since I'd missed the drive over there, I supposed it could've happened and after a brief stare-off between them that Sookie won, she took our order for our drinks and walked away while Jason snickered and asked, "Damn Sook, why don't ya piss on him and be done with it?"

Sookie's chest made that same noise again as she said, "That girl's seen more mattresses than a Serta assembly line," before turning to me, looking slightly chagrined, and said, "Sorry. The word 'no' isn't in Dawn's vocabulary and if I didn't say something then she'd spend the rest of the afternoon trying to *show you around*; the bathroom; the back storeroom; her backseat out in the parking lot..."

What?

It appeared Sookie was under the impression that the waitress had been hitting on me, but I'd just thought it was just a friendly offer that could be found in any small town. I couldn't imagine they'd see a lot of new faces around there, but between Jason's question and Sookie's explanation, I could only come to one conclusion. And I liked it.

Sookie was jealous.

It was nice to not be the only one, but I shouldn't have pondered for so long because I felt Sookie trying to remove her hand from my mine as she said, "Unless I misspoke...and...you know...you *wanted*..."

I tightened my grasp on hers and smiled, leaning down to whisper in her ear, "I only *want* you." I would've thought that fact would've been obvious by then and couldn't stop myself from kissing the spot just beneath her ear and grinned again seeing the goose bumps rise up on her skin, but the sound of Jason clearing his throat made me pull away.

Only it wasn't Jason I'd heard.

"So, you can *see* me?"

Officer Kevin Prior was standing next to our booth and I was grateful Sookie had mentioned his death earlier otherwise I would have acknowledged him, and thereby my curse, without thinking twice about it. However, I couldn't stop my eyes from initially meeting his when he spoke which clued him in that I *could* see him, but both of us glanced down when Sookie's hand started trailing up my thigh. She seemed to be feeling better about us and was bound and determined to make me feel something else entirely. Officer Prior chuckled and my face enflamed knowing he could see what she was doing, so I gently tried to dissuade her without calling any more attention to her actions.

My pleading eyes met her mirth filled ones and then darted to Jason, who was thankfully staring down at his menu. She seemed to get the hint and she gave me one more deliberate *rub* before moving our hands back down my leg.

"Quit feelin' him up Sook or else I'm gonna use that as my get out of jail free card with Gran. She'll forget all about my video escapades and turn her rollin' pin on you. At least what I did was in *private*."

Jason's eyes never left his menu so I could only assume he had supernatural x-ray vision and I blushed ten times harder hearing, "Jesus Christ."

Corbett.

Again, my eyes were naturally drawn towards the sound of his voice and Officer Prior turned to him, saying, "Hey Stackhouse. Where ya been hidin' yourself these days?"

His somewhat angry eyes turned towards me as he answered, "Lately? Lately I've been trying to hide myself from what these two have been gettin' up to."

Thank God he wasn't into sparkly vampires and their teenage brides.

Corbett never talked much about what he did whenever he wasn't around me, but I shouldn't have been surprised that he had other friends. I was the only loser that didn't have other friends, until *now* that is, but I should've looked passed them to see the waitress returning with our drinks because Sookie saw me looking that way and must have assumed I was staring at her. I only knew because she made that sound again, which I now knew meant she wasn't happy, and pulled her hand from mine.

The waitress leaned over far enough that her breasts were coming dangerously close to my face, so I leaned back and over towards Sookie, resting my hand on her leg, and refused to look at anything but the menu. "So, what can I get you all?" she asked, a little too friendly and still a lot too close.

Officer Prior laughed, "Ooohhh...Sookie's *pissed!*" while Corbett added, "Why don't you order some kibble since it looks like you're in the doghouse?"

Sookie *was* pissed and it wasn't like I could explain the two laughing jackasses no one else could see, so out of my own frustration, I snapped, "How about a little breathing room? Would you mind backing up? Because the only breasts I see on the menu are made from chickens and I don't want *those* either. I'll have a burger."

The waitress huffed, but took a step back, but all I cared was that Sookie smiled into her menu and her hand found mine again as she gave it a reassuring squeeze. While they both placed their orders, I heard Officer Prior say, "So, you know he can see us?"

I knew better than to look over at them and heard Corbett answer, "Yeah, but I used to like him better when he wasn't trying to feel up my baby girl."

He didn't sound angry so I knew he was only trying to embarrass me which was why, when the waitress stormed away, I turned to Sookie, asking, "So, your dad's nickname was *Doodlebug*, huh?" My eyes flicked towards him and I smiled, adding, "Cute."

I heard Corbett mutter, "Shit," while Officer Prior howled, crooning, "Doodlebug?"

I did my best not to laugh hearing Corbett saying, "Shut the fuck up Kevin," only to get a snickering response out of Officer Prior, "Yes sir, Detective Doodlebug."

"Yeah," Sookie smiled wistfully, but Jason broke in, asking none too pleased, "You took him to see Momma?"

He dropped all friendly pretense and stared hard at me, but Sookie swatted him with her menu, answering, "Yes, and she loved him."

She was certainly affectionate with me with her hugs, but since I was still reeling at the time and not paying too much attention to what they'd been saying, I missed most of the visit. Jason paid no attention to Sookie's swat and studied my face, asking, "And what did *you* think of *her*?"

I didn't hesitate, replying truthfully, "I think she's a beautiful and friendly woman. I can see why your father would've wanted to marry her." My eyes automatically went to Sookie when I quietly added, "I could only hope to be so lucky."

My answer seemed to un-ruffle Jason's feathers while I heard Officer Prior tell Corbett, "He's a good one," but it was Sookie's response that I paid attention to.

I hadn't meant to be so candid, but her eyes got glassy and she appeared to melt a little before leaning in to put a soft kiss on my lips, saying, "You're very sweet." Her lips were very sweet as well, but before I could go back for seconds I felt someone come up to the table. I was afraid to look in case it was either the waitress or someone only I could see, but it turned out I was wrong on both counts.

"Hey Sookie. Long time no see."

I turned and saw man staring down at me. He appeared to be around my age, but had a much smaller almost wiry build and brownish/reddish hair. He also appeared more interested in my presence next to Sookie since he had yet to take his eyes off of me and I had to wonder if he was one of those competitors Corbett had alluded to.

"Hey Sam," Sookie replied. "How've you been?"

"I'm surprised it took him *this* long to come and sniff her out," Officer Prior chuckled.

What's THAT supposed to mean?

"Good," Sam responded still staring me down. "Who's your *friend*?"

I didn't care for his jealous tone and since Sookie had already declared me her frequent bed companion to the waitress, I decided that I didn't *share* either and felt no remorse when I answered, "*Boyfriend*, actually. Eric Northman."

I was hoping Sookie wouldn't correct me since we actually hadn't discussed much more about our relationship other than she wanted to practice deep throating me and I was more than happy to let her, so I was relieved when I felt her wrap her arm around mine and lean into me, saying, "Eric, this is Sam. He owns this place."

He actually seemed to puff his chest out, proud of his accomplishment of being a quasi-successful businessman, and asked me, "So, what is it *you* do for a living Eric? You *do* have a *job*, don't you?"

My muscles automatically tensed with my instincts overriding my logical side once again. Normally I didn't do posturing, but, then, normally I had nothing to posture over. In my mind he was challenging my place at Sookie's side and I felt her hands stroke soothingly up and down my bicep, but I sat back and squared my shoulders, forced a smile on my face and said, "I'm a doctor," silently adding, '*asshole*.'

There was so much snickering in the background I couldn't discern who was who when Jason slid an unfolded napkin on the table in front of us, saying, "You all need this? You know, to measure whose Johnson is bigger so Sook can make an informed decision?"

"Jason!" Sookie chided, poorly hiding her amusement with her giggling out loud, but it was enough to make us both stand down.

Sam finally turned away from me, saying, "I'm surprised to see you here Jase. I heard about Bud stoppin' by earlier to talk to you about Maudette's murder."

Maybe Maxine's love for spreading gossip actually superseded the finality of her death?

"What?" Corbett yelled.

"Yeah," Jason and Officer Prior replied in unison. Jason continued on with, "But I didn't *do it*, so there's no reason for me to not show my face."

His angry tone was enough to make Sam begin backpedalling, but I was too distracted listening to Officer Prior filling Corbett in on everything he'd missed. In my peripheral, I could see Corbett running his hand through his hair as he asked, "Well don't they have security cameras? What did the video show?"

That hadn't occurred to me, but then I wasn't a cop. Officer Prior was already shaking his head as he replied, "No. Well, they *have* them, but they haven't worked in over a year. The bastard that owns the place was too cheap to get them fixed and just hoped having them up on the walls would be enough of a deterrent."

"You been by to see if she's still hanging around the Grab-It Kwik or her place yet?" Corbett asked.

A sudden realization dawned on me that I could help Jason with my curse and I was so caught up with the conversation no one else at the table could hear that I replied, "No, but that's a great idea."

Very quickly another sudden realization dawned on me that I'd answered the dead while having no clue what was being said by the living at the same time and my eyes darted first to Jason and then to Sookie to see them staring back at me confused. I didn't bother to acknowledge Sam since I was sure he'd be proud of my fuck up, if only to further his chances with Sookie, and I heard Officer Prior whisper to Corbett, "Oh, that's got to be embarrassing."

Cue my eternal blush.

My head was spinning trying to come up with a way to explain my outburst when the waitress reappeared with our food, so everyone was thankfully distracted for the time being while Sam finally wandered off to be the quasi-successful businessman he was so fucking proud of. I knew better than to hope all was forgotten and was just waiting for the other shoe to drop, but God must've been smiling down on me because no sooner had the waitress walked away when Hoyt Fortenberry dropped down into our booth next to Jason, saying, "Here you are! I stopped by your place, but you weren't there."

"Eric!" I heard in an all too familiar voice and I then realized God wasn't smiling down on me. He was laughing his ass off.

Even in death, Maxine Fortenberry couldn't stray far from her one and only son.

Chapter 13: Chapter 13

Chapter 13

"Aww...hell. Here comes the Gab-inator," I heard Officer Prior chuckle and glanced to my side already knowing I'd be seeing Maxine walk up to our booth.

She acknowledged the all of us in turn with nothing more than a polite, "Corbett; Kevin; Eric," respectively, with the two of them saying hello to her before she sidled up right next to me. I didn't know what she was waiting for until she leaned down by my head and speaking quite

loudly, she asked, "HOW'VE YOU BEEN, ERIC? I'VE BEEN MEANING TO STOP BY, BUT I'VE BEEN BUSY KEEPING AN EYE ON MY POOR HOYT."

I couldn't stop my eyes from cringing and my head from leaning away from her loud voice, but over the sudden spiritual din I was still able to hear Corbett say, "Good Lord Maxine! The boy's not DEAF!"

Maxine thankfully took a step back and huffed, "Well then, why isn't he saying anything? He was never this rude when I was alive, so he must not be able to hear me that well." She leaned in again and I barely had time to brace myself as she yelled, "ERIC!"

"Woman!" Corbett yelled and moved himself in between Maxine and I. "What in the hell do you expect him to do? Say, 'Hey Maxine! How's it hanging?' when you know damn good and well no one else at the table can see us?"

It was nice to know at least they *knew* I was trying to look normal, despite their chattiness, and I tried to busy myself with removing the wrapper from the straw for my soda, but I damn near choked on my first sip when she answered, "Oh, he *knows* how it's hanging. You should've *seen* him leering over my naked body in that morgue of his. It was *scandalous!*"

She mumbled out an outraged, "Pervert!" in my direction and in my peripheral, I watched her stomp away to a nearby table, taking my appetite with her thanks to her reminder. She leaned down in between two patrons who were speaking quietly to one another and from the looks of it, I assumed it was so she could hear whatever it was they were saying, but all I could hear was Officer Prior chuckling and I glanced up to see them both shake off a shiver as he said, "You had to do *her* autopsy? You musta done somethin' pretty awful in a former life to have gotten punished so bad in this one."

His theory had merit. Maybe I'd been Christ's crucifier? It could also explain why I wasn't so handy with a hammer and nails.

Since it had quieted down now that Maxine was mostly gone, I looked up to see that everyone else was looking at me expectantly and I wondered what I'd missed when Corbett chimed in with, "Hoyt just said he didn't know you knew Sookie and Jason."

I was glad at least one of us could keep up with the multiple conversations, but before I could focus enough to formulate a reply, I felt Sookie's hand squeeze my leg as she answered for me saying, "We met a few days ago at work."

A few days...

A week ago I was sitting in my apartment with nothing better to do than watch a Star Wars marathon on TV while flipping through my comic books. A week ago I had no one else to hang out with other than my dead best, and only, friend. A week ago I was warming up a frozen TV dinner because although I could cook pretty well, I rarely bothered anymore since it was too depressing to prepare a meal just for one person.

But now...

Now I was out on a date with my incredibly beautiful maybe-girlfriend who seemed to like me just as much as I liked her, despite my frequent odd behavior. Now I was out in public sharing a meal, although without much conversation on my part, with an entire group just like any normal human being out on any given Saturday afternoon. Even with all of the headaches that came from my curse, I couldn't help but be grateful and I shot a pointed look at Corbett and Officer Prior to let them know I was done listening to them so I could concentrate on what was being said by those I could actually answer out loud without looking like a crazy person. It was a good thing too, or else I might've missed Hoyt's next words.

The waitress had just left again after taking Hoyt's order when he nudged Jason with a smile, saying, "Hey Sook, looks like you got yourself an admirer." I followed his gaze to the other side of the restaurant to see that Bill guy sitting there all alone and staring a hole into my head.

I hadn't asked Sookie yet who he was other than to clarify that he wasn't the one Jason was suspected of murdering, but I didn't have to when she replied, "Ugh... I wish he'd move away or something. You'd think he'd get the hint that I don't want anything to do with him after ten years of turning him down for a date."

Her explanation was another powerful shot to my ego knowing she hadn't turned *me* down when I'd asked her out, but before I could even gloat to myself I noticed who was sitting directly behind him, also staring a hole into my head. He at least had the decency to look back towards his sister, who was sitting directly across from him and as my eyes swept back across the room they registered Sam's cold stare too. Sookie seemed to have accumulated a whole gaggle of dark haired admirers, but I stood out, not only by my blond hair, but because I seemed to be the only one she admired back and I was suddenly feeling so much better about myself that I wondered if she'd be willing to handcuff herself to me, if only so I could feed my ego by her presence.

Sookie must've noticed Rene as well because she gestured towards him, saying, "I guess Rene wasn't lying when we saw him at the movies earlier. He told me to tell you that he'd be seeing you soon and there he is."

"Not if I see him first," Jason answered, hunching down into his seat. Hoyt nodded his agreement and I wondered if they thought he was too intense to, but Jason continued, explaining, "You know him and Arlene started seeing each other?" Sookie just shook her head, so he kept on, saying, "Well, they *are* and Arlene's found Jesus or somethin' and has condemned us as heathens, so now Rene's fallen for it hook, line, and sinker and he's been trying to *save* us ever since."

At least Sookie and I weren't the only heathens at the table, but I'd never been close to being a religious person either. With my curse I knew not everyone that died went to heaven or hell, but when I'd asked Corbett about it once the only thing he'd said was, "This ain't no Albert Brooks movie. It's not like I got a manual explaining the ins and outs of the afterworld. All's I know is I don't feel the need to leave just yet, but I suspect when I do, I will." His cryptic response was enough to make me back off figuring he had enough to deal with just being dead, but my

curiosity was still there. He was the only ghost I'd ever befriended and I didn't want to piss him off by harping on it.

Sookie's next question broke me from my reverie when she asked Jason, "Why are you heathens?"

We probably gave ourselves away when our eye met one another's briefly as he answered, "For gettin' up to no good with our lady friends." It was a similar accusation that Rene had made to us outside of the movie theater and we both blushed, but I was surprised I'd managed to since a fair amount of my blood was traveling south again just remembering it. It was completely selfish of me, considering everything Jason was going through, but all I really wanted to do was go somewhere where Sookie and I could be alone. We wouldn't even have to fool around; I just liked it best when it was just the two of us. No dark haired admirers; no Detective Doodlebugs; just me and Sookie.

Knowing that plan wasn't an option right now, I focused on the present. The conversation at our table became minimal while we all dug into our meals, so I was able to listen as Corbett and Officer Prior made their own plans. Corbett would be heading to the murder scene to look for Maudette while Officer Prior would go to her apartment to look for her with each of them becoming more excited by the minute now that they had a reason to do police work again. They even brought Maxine into their investigation by pumping her for anything she knew about the victim which, from the sounds of it, was nothing very flattering. It seemed Maudette wasn't very choosy over her lovers and, according to Maxine, had bedded most of the single men in Bon Temps. It was the first time I'd heard her give thanks for Hoyt's move to Shreveport, but she was also quick to add that her son had higher standards than most. I could tell her comment had rankled Corbett, given Jason's current predicament, and he and Officer Prior were quick to leave after that while Maxine went back to literally sticking her nose into everyone else's business. I knew I'd be hearing from Corbett if they'd found anything and I figured if they could get a name or description of the murderer from her, then I could always call in an anonymous tip to the Sheriff.

With the 'extra' people gone from the table and with those left behind busy eating their meals, my mind wandered back to my relationship with Sookie. I'd already declared myself as her boyfriend, in front of both her and her brother, and while she didn't contradict me, did that make my proclamation true? Was I her boyfriend? Was she my girlfriend? Did she want to be? Was it too soon? Were we too old for those types of labels? Should I ask her formally for her hand in...boyfriend/girlfriend-ship?

Could I be a bigger loser?

My own insecurities were making my ego take a nosedive and I wished we actually were handcuffed together so I could feel better having an actual physical tether to one another. I also wished I'd learn to take a moment and *think* before speaking because when Sookie leaned over and asked me, "What're you thinking?" I blurted out just that.

"Handcuffs."

I felt my face flush realizing what I'd said a minute too late and even though Sookie seemed to like my one word faux pas (at least that's what I assumed since she licked her lips and put her hand back on my thigh), I cringed hearing Maxine yell out to no one in particular, "See? Pervert!" while Hoyt and Jason stared back at us with their mouths open.

Since no one other than Maxine had said anything in response, I stumbled over my words trying to explain away my perceived deviant thoughts, stuttering, "Umm...you know...from an engineering point of view."

I'd give anything to have Harry Potter's Invisibility Cloak right about now.

"Uh huh," Jason uttered, clearly not buying my lame explanation, but thankfully he let the subject drop and I shoved a handful of fries into my mouth hoping I'd at least choke to death if my mouth decided to mutiny again.

Everything seemed to right itself after that, especially now that Maxine was the only ghost I had to ignore and she was too busy being a busybody to bother me, so I actually had fun over the next few hours we'd spent there. The four of us ended up playing several games of pool and I got to see firsthand just how popular the Stackhouses were. They seemed to know everyone and several rounds of drinks were bought for them with the general consensus of the townsfolk being that there was no way Jason could be guilty and the Sheriff was an ass. I volunteered to be the designated driver knowing they were the ones who needed to blow off some steam, but it wasn't a sacrifice since the more Sookie drank, the more she wanted to attach herself to me.

I wasn't complaining.

Rene was long gone, but Sam and Bill were still lurking about and shooting daggers in my direction at every opportunity, so it was just my luck that I rarely had a chance to see them thanks to Sookie's constant request for a kiss for good luck from me before every shot she made. It didn't seem to help her game at all, but it did wonders for me and since it looked like Jason would be going home with our waitress that night, who'd been all over him at every opportunity, it was just Sookie and I when we left. She wasn't anywhere close to being falling down drunk, but she was definitely buzzed and she giggled at everything on the way to the car. She was still giggling as we pulled onto the interstate and her hand found my thigh again as she asked, "So...are you going to take advantage of me now that I'm a bit tipsy?"

"What?" I asked. "No!" And I wouldn't. Ever.

Her hand squeezed my thigh before running farther up my leg as she said, "Damn it! Next time, *you're* the one getting drunk because I'm *so* gonna take advantage of *you*."

As if I'd need the alcohol to let her...

Her hand was doing very distracting things and even though we'd messed around earlier when she was perfectly sober, it somehow seemed wrong for me to let her do the things she was trying

to do now since she'd had a few drinks. I put my hand on her wrist and pushed it further down my leg, warning, "Sookie."

Completely undeterred, her hand ran right back up my leg as she tried to mimic the same warning, saying, "Eric."

"If you keep it up, we're going to run off the road." It was true because thanks to her wandering hand and my straining cock, if she actually managed to get my jeans open like she seemed hell bent on doing, there was a good chance of it getting caught in the steering wheel making us veer off into a ditch on the side of the road.

I pushed her hand back down while the rest of my body protested my own actions, but Sookie was nothing if not persistent and she leaned over the center console to lick the outer edge of my ear as she purred, "No we won't. All I'm doing is making sure *you* keep it up, so I can play with it when we get back to my place. You said I could practice..."

Fuck...would I really be taking advantage of her? Maybe I could make her do a field sobriety test before practice gets started?

My eyes tried to close feeling her nibble her way across my neck while her hand was doing its best to get my jeans open, but when the car drifted to the side and hit the rumble strips in the pavement, I sobered up and leaned away from her while placing her hand back on her own lap. My tone was no longer a warning and instead was pleading as I said, "Sookie..."

She giggled again saying, "I love it when say my name like that," and she took my hand, running it up her own leg.

"You're going to get us both killed," I said as I tried to extract my hand from her clutches with absolutely no conviction in my tone of voice. The more she kept at it, the more I was becoming on board with everything she was trying to do and to be honest, if there'd been anywhere for us to safely pull off the interstate, I was getting to the point where I would no longer question anything and instead would just let her have her way.

I'd get MY way just by having HER.

"I'm trying to get us both killed," she giggled again while struggling to keep a hold of my hand. "La petite mort might translate into 'The little death', but it just means an *orgasm*." She put her lips back to my ear and whispered, "You won't *really* die and I guarantee you'll *really* like it."

Denying her was doing a good job of killing me as it was and I may have pressed down on the accelerator a bit more trying to get to Shreveport that much sooner, but before I could take possession of my hand again, I felt the cool steel at my wrist right before I heard the click. I looked down just in time to see Sookie attaching the other cuff to her own wrist and then she held our arms up in triumph and giggled again, saying, "Ta da! Now you can't get away!"

I couldn't really be upset considering I'd been thinking the very same thing that afternoon and smiled back at her, asking, "Did you seriously just handcuff yourself to me?"

"Seriously," she nodded proudly. She put both of our hands back on her lap, but didn't do anything more than lean against my arm yawning, and saying, "Alcohol always gives me the giggle fits and then makes me sleepy."

She got quiet after that and while I tried to remain somewhere in the realm of noble by not allowing my hand to do any wandering of its own, it wasn't long until I heard her breathing even out. Glancing down I thought she was just as pretty when asleep and I enjoyed the comfort of having her so close to me, but as I took the exit for Shreveport I realized I didn't know where she lived. Sookie had picked me up that morning at my place, but seeing her sleeping so soundly now, I really didn't want to wake her until I had to, so I pulled over onto a side street where I opened up her glove box and found her car's registration to get her address. I was sure she'd told me that she lived in Shreveport, but the address on her registration was the same as her grandmother's house in Bon Temps, so I had no choice but to wake her, asking, "Sookie?" I gently shook her, but she barely stirred, so I tried again a little louder, asking, "Sookie? Where do you live?"

"Apartment," she mumbled before going right back to sleep.

"Where is your apartment?" I asked, trying to gently shake her awake again.

"Building," she eventually muttered.

Where was Corbett when I actually needed him?

Short of yelling at her to wake up, my options were limited. I could always drive us to the police station because someone there would probably know where she lived, but since we were handcuffed together, that might look strange.

And that Brawny bastard might be there.

That was enough of a reason to strike that from my list of options. My eyes flicked towards her purse on the floor by her feet, but I didn't feel right going through it to look for her driver's license either and for all I knew it would have the Bon Temps address too. It seemed my only viable option was to take her home with me.

Damn...

I pulled in front of my building a few minutes later, but it wasn't until I tried to get out of the car that I remembered we were handcuffed together. I searched through her key ring, but there was nothing resembling a handcuff key on it, so I tried to wake her up again, saying, "Sookie? Where's the key for the handcuffs?"

It took several shakes and several 'Sookies' before she finally woke up enough to answer me. Her hair was all pushed up from leaning against my arm and I could tell she wasn't quite lucid as she grinned, answering, "It's *somewhere* on my body. You just have to *find* it."

My eyes automatically traveled over her body with my brain compiling an extensive list of places to search. I was a doctor. I knew them all.

And I knew what tools I would need to use in order to be thorough.

My main tool was making wearing my jeans quite uncomfortable and seeing that she was about to nod off again, I said a little louder, "Sookie. Where's the key?"

She shrugged and snuggled up against me again, saying, "I'm not saying, but I guarantee I'll wake up when you find it."

Any other time I would've been more than willing to search her body for hours on end, but I really didn't want to do it under the streetlamp parked out in front of my building. Since Sookie literally held the key to my dilemma, I decided it was time for me gain back some ground in our lopsided arrangement, so I nudged her back against her seat earning me an unhappy glare from her until I put my lips on hers. My free hand came up to hold onto the back of her neck while my tongue searched every nook and cranny in her mouth and I waited until she was breathless before pulling back and whispering, "No key in there."

Sookie was wide awake now even if her eyelids were only halfway open, but she agreed by shaking her head and saying, "Nope, not there."

Her challenging eyes flicked down at her own body and then back up at mine, but knowing we were out where anyone could just wander by and see us made me apprehensive. If we were indeed going to go down this road, I didn't want to have to stop because the Brawny bastard or some random bum was banging on the car window. Besides that, even though I'd never been the typical teenager making out in the back of a car, it wasn't enough of a fantasy that I cared to try and make it come true when it would be our first time together.

She was more than likely still a little drunk, so I figured it wouldn't hurt to make her a little more drunk with another kiss, but when I pulled away with her lips still searching for mine, I said, "Wouldn't you rather I search you upstairs?"

It seemed my question was the only thing that made her realize we were still in the confines of the car, but it also seemed to tip the scales of logic over lust and she grinned as she quickly reached into the front of her pants where she pulled out the elusive key.

I definitely would've found it.

I watched as she unlocked the cuff at her wrist, but left mine in place only to grab her purse and then jump out of the car while laughing. In the time it took me to get out of the car and meet her

on the sidewalk, her back was facing me until she spun around with a smile and proclaiming, "I've hidden it again and *not* in the same spot."

Didn't matter...I would still be checking there.

A part of my psyche, a very *small* part, reasoned now that she was fully awake I could ask her where she lived and then drive her home. I may have even asked her if she wanted me to do that if she hadn't jumped, making me catch her, and wrapped her legs around my waist while her lips wrapped around mine.

Nope. Not asking her.

I don't know how long we stood there kissing, but she eventually pulled away to resume my death by a thousand kisses against my neck, asking, "Are you going to be starting the search any time soon? That key is poking me and I'm not enjoying it as much as when you do it."

Before I could contemplate when I'd ever poked her she illustrated her point by loosening her grip enough to slide down my front far enough to grind her crotch against the accused 'poker'.

Guilty. I couldn't deny it. I'd poked her plenty of times.

Her body seamlessly slid back up mine and my feet was the only part of me that answered her by carrying us into the building and up the flight of stairs. My mouth couldn't do it because Sookie had taken control of it again with her own, which was probably a good thing because my brain was busy marveling over how much upper and lower body strength she had. She was writhing against me like a seasoned exotic dancer and thoughts of Sookie, and a floor to ceiling pole, doing a striptease with me as her only audience made my head want to explode.

Both of them.

I swallowed the oomph she let out when her back hit the door to my apartment and I pulled away from her to try and get my keys out of my pocket so we could continue with the search of one Sookie Stackhouse. My hand got caught up when the handcuff dangling from my wrist got snagged on my jeans when suddenly my head wanted to explode for a whole other reason hearing, "Seriously?"

Sookie, of course, was oblivious to the whole thing, but my glare was matched with his own when I turned my head and saw Corbett leaning against the opposite wall in the hallway and all I could think was the same exact thing.

Seriously?

Chapter 14

I stood there completely frozen thinking I *must* have been Christ's crucifier because surely that could be the only reason why God had it out for me so bad and from the looks Corbett was giving me, I had to assume he'd be willing to do Him a favor right about now with the whole 'eye for an eye' thing.

At least I didn't see a hammer or nails in his hands.

"Eric..." Sookie whimpered into my ear. I was so busy having a stare down with her father that I'd temporarily forgotten she was attached to me, but I couldn't very well continue where I'd left off with her father standing right there and, tipsy or not, there was no way I was going to chance telling him to go the fuck away out loud.

Of course Sookie couldn't see him, so in her mind there was no reason for her to not continue dry humping my body and it seemed to temporarily blind Corbett since he smacked his fists into his eye sockets, yelling, "Ahhh!" I ignored him for the time being and was still trying to get my keys out of my pocket while hoping he wouldn't follow us inside. Corbett had never visited me at home before, so I had to assume he was there for Jason's sake, with news about Maudette's murder, and couldn't decide what was more important.

Clearing Jason's name or seeing just how flexible Sookie really was?

Sookie's persistent nibbles along my neck and her hand sliding down in between our bodies made the choice a simple one, but I knew Corbett wouldn't have been there if he hadn't wanted to tell me something important and I was at a loss as to how I could speak to him without making Sookie think I was batshit crazy. When I finally had my keys in my hand Sookie giggled, "Oh, thank God! While I'm dying to play Hungry Hungry Hippos with your cock, I really need to pee!"

I'll never know how I managed to turn bright red since I could've sworn all of my blood was still south of my waist, but hearing Corbett yell, "For fuck's sake! There goes *another* fond memory of my baby girl's childhood down the fuckin' drain," seemed to do the trick.

Sookie continued her attack on my neck while I struggled to get the key into the lock and as soon as the door swung open, I gave Corbett a look telling him to stay the fuck where he was and carried Sookie inside. I didn't think he'd stay out there forever, so as soon as I put her down on her feet in front of the bathroom door, I said, "Umm...I need to...uh...run out for a minute."

"No you don't," she argued back while her hands dove for the button on my jeans. "I pee really quick! You'll hardly notice I'm gone."

Knowing Corbett was just outside the door, I hoped he didn't have super stealth-like hearing and gave the only plausible reason I could come up with, saying, "I...uh...don't have any condoms." I hated lying to her because I actually had a brand new box. I blamed my high after coming back

from our first date at her Gran's house for the presumptuous purchase, but considering what was likely to happen tonight, I would guess my purchase was warranted.

When her eyes flicked down to her purse I wondered if she happened to be just as presumptuous as me and quickly forced away all thoughts of who else she might have purchased condoms for because the fact remained that she was here with *me*.

At least that was what I was chanting in my head.

I was coming up blank with any other excuses as to why I had to step out, but thankfully Sookie's bottom lip pouted out as she said, "I don't have any either."

Presumptions aside, I couldn't decide if that was a good thing or a bad thing, but I didn't have time to think about it and just said, "The bathroom is through there," I gestured to the door behind her and added, "I'll only be gone for a few minutes. Just make yourself at home and I'll be right back."

Even if her command of, "You'd better," wasn't enough, the kiss she gave me right after that would've made me come back to her no matter where she was and once the bathroom door was closed behind her, I beat feet back out into the hallway where Corbett was still waiting and still glaring at me.

"What?" I whisper shouted. "Not *once* in the eight years I've known you have you *ever* stopped by my place and you had to go and pick *tonight* to drop in?"

"*Well, excuse the fuck outta me!* I've been caught up trying to prove *my son* isn't a *murderer* while you've been busy trying to get into *my daughter's* pants!" he yelled back.

I envied his ability to yell without having to worry about who would hear him and I didn't think now was the time to point out that, technically speaking, it was Sookie that was trying to get into *my* pants, so I ignored his rant and started towards the stairs, saying, "Just tell me what you've got to say. You know I'll do what I can to help Jason, but whatever happens between me and Sookie is between *me* and *Sookie*."

Corbett stopped short of the stairwell, asking, "What are you intentions with my daughter?"

Presently? To fuck her until neither one of us can walk straight.

Corbett's expression didn't change so I knew I'd never again have to wonder if he could read my mind, but I omitted my immediate plans for his daughter and just said, "I like her. A lot. Isn't that the exact fucking thing you've been telling me would happen for *years*? I seem to make her happy and she sure as fuck does that for me, so if you've had a change of heart, then too fucking bad. I'm not going to fuck it up and I'm not giving her up, even if it means we won't be friends anymore."

I would miss him. He was well and truly my closest friend, but I already knew I would miss Sookie more, so this would have to be his call. My decision was already made.

He stared back at me for a moment or two when he finally smiled a little and sighed out, "Well, you better not break her heart or else I'll haunt you 'til your dying day."

"Well hell," I chuckled. "Aren't you doing that already?"

"Yeah," he agreed and then smiled wider, saying, "but I'll bring Maxine Fortenberry with me next time."

I'd rather be crucified...

"Deal," I shuddered. "Now, did you actually have something you wanted to tell me or did you just want to fuck up my date with Sookie?"

"Naw," he laughed. "*That* was just a bonus!" His face turned serious when he told me, "I found Maudette." He shivered, adding, "She's a *ghost*."

I stared back at him waiting for something I *didn't* already know and finally said, "Umm...duh? Just what in the fuck do you think *you* are?" I smiled feeling like I was Haley Joel Osment in *The Sixth Sense* and told my pseudo Bruce Willis, "I hate to be the one to break it to you, but Corbett...*you're dead. You're a ghost too.*"

"Not like *me* ya *shithead*! She's like one a them *other ghosts*. The ones that are milky shadows and don't know they're dead. I found her at the Grab It Kwik going about her nightly routine and from the looks of it, whoever did it came up behind her because she was actin' normal when all of a sudden her eyes bugged out and she was clutchin' at her neck. Even if she was like me, I doubt she woulda seen who done it and couldn't of told us anything anyway."

Well shit. I really thought we were onto something that could help out Jason, but given what he'd found, it was a dead end.

No pun intended.

"What about Maxine?" I asked. "She seemed to be up in everybody's faces tonight. Maybe she might hear something?"

Corbett looked at me like I was an idiot and said, "First off, I doubt whoever did it is dumb enough to go talking about it in public and second, she don't leave Hoyt's side. Poor guy..." he added shaking his head.

"I can sympathize," I answered dryly. He just smiled back at me completely unrepentant, so I offered, "Well, if something else comes up with Jason, let me know." I stared at him hard, adding, "At work."

Sookie had been alone for close to fifteen minutes by then, so rather than run out and buy another box of condoms to keep up my charade, I would just tell her that I remembered I had some when I got to the store and turned the car back around. As I started walking back towards my apartment, I looked back at Corbett who was eyeing me warily, so I asked, "You're not...uh...planning on just coming in, are you?"

"Why?" he asked smiling. "Are you inviting me into your home?"

"No!" I whisper shouted. "Seriously Corbett! I really like Sookie and if you're there I'm going to act weird and then she's going to figure out something is wrong with me. I don't want to scare her away, so stay the fuck out!" When he didn't answer me and I got tired of trying to read his blank expression, I pleaded, "Promise me!"

"Oh, hey! There you two are!"

Officer Prior turned into the hallway from the stairwell and I sighed exasperatedly, mimicking Corbett's words from earlier, "For fuck's sake!" adding, "How did you know where I live?"

I'd never been so fucking popular in my life.

He shrugged, answering, "I didn't, but I knew where *Hoyt* lives." He tapped his head, adding, "I pay attention."

"That's nice," I said not so nicely. "Well, you two have a good night doing whatever it is you do. I'm going inside now." I looked at Corbett in particular as I clarified, "Alone."

"That's what *you* think" he mocked.

"God damn it Corbett! *Promise me!*" One way or another it seemed I wouldn't be spending the night with Sookie because I'd either end up standing in the hallway all night long or Corbett would be following me in and making me have to turn Sookie down when she tried to resume what we'd started because there was no way I would be doing *that* with *him* there.

And he KNEW it.

Officer Prior watched our silent stare off with a grin on his face until he finally broke in, asking, "Promise you what?"

I finally looked away from Corbett, answering, "Sookie's inside and I don't want *him* to follow me in there."

"Oh," he grinned wider while Corbett's eyes shot to Officer Prior. Corbett attempted to shush him, but he ignored him, saying, "Well...did you know Corbett when he was alive? Did he ever stop by your place before?"

"No," I answered, wondering what that had to do with anything.

Corbett muttered, "Shut the fuck up Kevin," but he continued to ignore him and instead, asked, "Well, have you ever invited him over before? As he is *now*, you know, *dead* and all?"

"No," I repeated, still just as confused.

"Oh!" he exclaimed. "Well then you should be fine. Watch."

I watched Officer Prior walk over to my door and when he tried to step through it, he bounced right back and he looked at me and smiled, explaining, "We don't know why, but we can't go into folks' homes if we've never been there before. You know, like when we were still alive. We can go into any public places and it doesn't seem to apply to any of our family members. We can go into their homes no matter where they move to, but not other folks. See?" He walked across the hall and put his hand through Hoyt's front door all the way to his shoulder before pulling it back and saying, "I stopped in to visit him once not long after he moved in, but if Hoyt were to move to a new place, well then I wouldn't be able to go inside and I couldn't go in there anymore either once someone new moved in unless they were my family."

Halleluiah!

I grinned at the sounds of angels singing that only I could hear while Corbett looked pissed, but Officer Prior seemed nonplussed and kept rambling on, laughing out, "It's like we're still real live cops or somethin' needin' a search warrant to enter the premises. We always wondered if we could get in if we were actually invited, but how could we get anyone to ask us?"

I stared back triumphantly at Corbett and told them both, "Well, you two have a *wonderful* night. I know *I* will."

"Invite me in Eric," Corbett growled.

"Not on your life," I answered and then laughed, "Well, you know what I mean."

"Hey, why are you handcuffed?" Officer Prior asked when I lifted my arm to open the door.

I'd forgotten all about it and as I opened the door, I looked back at Corbett with a grin, answering, "You really don't want to know," and shut the door behind me. I stared at it waiting to see if Corbett would come storming in, but when all I heard was him yelling at Officer Prior for telling me their spirit secrets, I figured it was true.

And made a mental note that Sookie and I would NEVER be having sex at her place.

She wasn't in the living room or kitchen and the bathroom door was open with the light off, so as I walked down the hallway, knowing she could only be in the bedroom, I couldn't help grinning as I quietly called out, "Sookie? I'm back. When I got to the store I remembered that I..." The words died in my throat when I reached the doorway seeing she was asleep in my bed and while I was disappointed, I was still ridiculously happy seeing her there. She'd stripped out of her

clothes and seemed to have pulled on one of my t-shirts, leaving her in nothing else but a pair of panties.

Red lace panties.

It was a tossup on what I wanted to do more; go into the bathroom and take care of my *problem* or climb into bed with her. Seeing her lying there hugging my pillow, I decided I'd rather be beside her than without her for another second and stripped down to my boxers, tussling my shirt over the still attached handcuff, and climbed in next to her. As soon as I was in the bed, her body shuffled backwards until her back was pressed against my front and I wrapped my arm around her and buried my face into her hair, no longer disappointed at all.

Sleeping with Sookie Stackhouse was absolute perfection, even if all we did was sleep.

At first, I wasn't quite sure if I was awake or dreaming, but when I tried to rub my eyes, the previous night came back to me pretty quickly because I couldn't.

Both of my hands were cuffed to the headboard above my head.

"Sookie?" I asked, opening my eyes slowly only for them to roll back into my head as I moaned, "Sookie..." My eyes quickly righted themselves and I saw her mirth filled gaze staring back at me, but it was the wet heat of her mouth on my cock and her humming out, "Good morning," that had me moaning again. Fuck she was perfect and if I could've formed a coherent thought, I would've told her so, but as it was all I could do was lay there and let her blow me to death.

But apparently I'd need to visit her place at least once before I died so I could visit her again in the afterlife.

One of her hands was caressing my balls while the other trailed lightly over the V at my hips and it took all of my willpower to lie still and fight the urge to thrust up into her mouth. With every pass she took me deeper and her tongue swirled over my tip before she would dive down again. The steel cuffs were cutting into my wrists from me pulling on them and I didn't give a single fuck if I ended up breaking the bed because I'd be willing to buy a new bed every day if I woke up to this every morning, but when she started humming an all too familiar tune as she blew me is when I knew I'd never let her go.

Sookie was sucking me off while humming the theme song to Star Wars.

I didn't have the brain power to wonder if she'd noticed my Lego Death Star model out in the living room because she'd hit the climax of the song and so did I. My whole body arched upwards and convulsed as I came down her throat with a yell and a light sheen of sweat glistened over my skin. Shivers ran up my spine as she continued to lick me clean before she finally released me from her mouth and grinned up at me, saying, "I didn't know how you felt about Hungry Hungry Hippos, but I noticed your Star Wars collection last night, so I figured you wouldn't mind me playing with your light saber."

She mimicked the sound of a light saber and ran her tongue across my dick while I started making plans; plans to propose; plans to get married; plans to have a bunch of kids or dogs or whatever would make her happy because she made *me* happy and I sure as fuck would never ever let her go, but then she sat up and every thought fell out of my head.

Sookie was naked. Completely. Naked.

I heard the bed creak as the handcuffs strained against them and while I heard the growl rumble through the room, I didn't realize I was the one that made the sound until Sookie smiled, saying, "Oooh... I *like* that sound. Do it again."

"Sookie," I growled hoarsely. "Un-cuff me."

She slowly crawled up my body, running her hardened nipples across my skin, and purred, "What? You don't like being my prisoner?"

My torso was much longer than hers, but when she was finally high up enough and straddling my body, I sat up as far as I could and took one of those perfect pink nipples into my mouth, running my tongue across it and making her hips buck against me as she moaned out my name. My tongue blazed a trail across her chest where I paid equal attention to the other one before biting down lightly and with the unmistakable command in my voice, I said, "Un-cuff me."

"God, you're so fucking sexy when you talk like that," she breathed out and did as I'd ordered. As soon as my hands were free I jerked her head to mine by her hair with my tongue diving into her mouth and my free hand raking down her back, running over every inch of her skin that I could. She moaned even louder when I pulled her head back, still by her hair, and grazed my teeth down her neck. I'd never been like that before; I'd never felt such a passionate and powerful need like I did with her. I felt like I needed to consume her; every inch of her; cover her in everything that was nothing but me so all would know that she was fucking mine and I flipped her over so she was underneath me on the mattress making her giggle and moan at the same time.

Her giggle pissed me off so I bit down her shoulder to mark her as mine and to remind her who the fucking alpha was now. Not the Brawny bastard or any of the others in the squadron of brunettes beating down her door. It was fucking *me* and before the day was through she would know it.

If not, I could always handcuff her to my bed.

"Fuuuck..." she panted with her body arching up into my bite and her hands holding my head to her neck. She'd left her own telltale signs of arousal when she'd slid up my body and my hand slowly started sliding down hers, anticipating the wetness I knew I would find there, when my cell phone rang.

"Fuuuck..." she panted in an entirely different way. I would've ignored it, but I could tell by the ringtone that it was the office and I was on call. Because Chow had switched shifts with me, I was covering for him today, so I had to answer it.

"I'm sorry, it's the office. I have to answer it," I apologized to the breast that was in front of me, hoping Sookie would be as understanding as it seemed to be.

"It's okay," she said as she ran her fingers through my hair and making it even more difficult for me to extract myself from her. "I know what it's like to be on call."

When I finally lifted my head and saw her smiling down at me, I knew she was telling me the truth and it only made her even more perfect in my eyes which, after my wakeup call, was saying a lot.

She fucking hummed Star Wars while blowing me!

I grabbed the phone from the bedside table before it could go to voicemail and growled into the phone, "What?"

I missed everything that was being said through the receiver because Sookie purred out, "God, I love it when you get all growly. I hope that's your fucking voice," and she licked my chest which, unbeknownst to me, was the exact spot to cause my light saber to power up and my hips to thrust into hers.

Another inch to the left and the Empire would've been defeated.

I took a deep breath to try and clear my head while keeping my other one clear of Sookie, repeating much more calmly, "What?"

Once they'd relayed the message, I ended the call and dropped my head back down onto her chest, saying, "I've gotta go. There's a dead body near the interstate ramp just inside of the city limits." If it had been another hundred yards out, it wouldn't have been my problem, but when I looked up into Sookie's understanding eyes, I mentally said, 'Fuck it.'

I wasn't going to leave her hanging for a second time.

"Eric?" she asked as I shimmied down her body. "Don't you have to go?"

When I was settled in between her legs, I parted her folds with my tongue, making her gasp out loud and clutch my head with her hands, as I answered in that growly voice she claimed to love so much, "Yes, but first I'm going to make you cum and then you're going to wait here for me to come back and make you cum again."

"Yes!" she cried out, either in agreement with my orders or what my tongue was now doing to her, but either way it was all good to me. I didn't have much experience doing this either, but by Sookie's reactions, she seemed to like it which only fueled my desire. I'd happily stay there for hours if I could and I explored every part of her I could reach with my tongue before concentrating on her clit when that seemed to really get her going. Her hips were bucking up against my face while she chanted out my name and when I slid two fingers inside of her, I knew she was cumming before she screamed out that she was cumming.

When the vice like grip of her thighs eased and her legs fell to the side, I figured it was safe to emerge and I sat up, licking my fingers clean while staring down at her. She had her own light sheen of sweat across her still panting body and her hair was all over the place and her lips were swollen.

God, she was fucking gorgeous.

I gave her another quick kiss before I regrettably got out of bed and walked into the bathroom to freshen up before coming back out and pulling some clothes on. Sookie was still lying on the bed in a daze, but when I sat down at her side her gaze was drawn up to mine and a smile stretched across her face. I leaned down and kissed her, hoping she would understand how I felt about her even though I couldn't yet find the words and when she finally pulled back, I nipped her bottom lip with my teeth, and growled, "Stay," before softening my voice again and adding, "I shouldn't be gone for very long. I just need to get the body back to the morgue and then I can do the autopsy tomorrow."

She bit her bottom lip which made me worry for a split second before an even bigger smile stretched across her face as she agreed, "Okay, but only if you tell me you have coffee here."

I kissed her again and smiled saying, "It's in the cabinet above the coffeepot," but before I could stand up, she pulled me back down on top of her for another kiss which made me forget I was planning on leaving at all, until she said, "And when you get back, we're playing Hungry Hungry Hippos."

Well that was nothing but a win/win idea and I finally forced myself to get up and leave, telling Sookie that I'd call her when I was on my way back and walked out of the room, down the hallway, and out my front door; backwards, but I did leave and I smiled like a lunatic all the way to the crime scene. I smiled even wider when I got out of the van and saw the Brawny bastard waiting on me, but I squashed the urge to tell him what I'd left to be there. I didn't want to share any part of Sookie with anyone, aside from her family, so I kept quiet on that front and just asked, "What've we got?"

"Dead female. No ID. Looks to be in her early twenties and from the looks of it she was strangled," he replied.

I walked closer to the group surrounding the body and climbed down into the drainage ditch to get a better look. Her clothing didn't register right away, but as I turned her over, I knew immediately who she was. The white t-shirt with the green Merlotte's logo would've clued me in anyway and I heard Herveaux say from behind me, "I wonder where that place is at. Merlotte's."

Even if Sookie hadn't gone off on him at naked Zack Galifianakis' crime scene, the fact he didn't know Merlotte's was in Bon Temps was enough of a clue that Sookie had at the very least never taken him home. There was no missing the place on the way to her Gran's house, but knowing who our waitress may have gone home with made me keep quiet. I didn't want to keep it from Sookie though, so as soon as I could, I walked further away from everyone and called her cell phone.

"Hey!" she answered happily. "Are you already on your way back? Because I've got the tinfoil bikini made, but I only have half of my hair done up a la Princess Leah."

"Sookie," I said, while trying not to picture everything she was telling me. "The dead body I had to go and collect. It's our waitress Dawn from yesterday. The one that was all over Jason when we left."

Chapter 15: Chapter 15

Chapter 15

"WHAT?" she screamed into the phone.

It only made me lower my voice even more, whispering, "It's Dawn from Merlotte's." Wondering if Jason would've possibly gone home with her after having just slept with Maudette, I asked, "You don't think he actually left with her last night do you?"

I didn't want to come out and ask, *'Your brother isn't that much of a lothario, is he?'*

"Of course he fucking left with her last night!" she yelled, rambling on with, "Why wouldn't he? He'd just fucked Maudette Pickens who was then murdered the next night; a murder he's the *prime suspect* of, so of course he fucking put his dick into somebody else two nights later!"

I really didn't think she expected me to answer the one question posed in her tirade and she knew her brother better than I did, so I couldn't stick up for him and remained silent instead. When she seemed to finally calm down, she asked, "Was she strangled?"

"It appears that way. There are ligature marks on her neck and petechial hemorrhaging in her eyes, but I won't know for sure until I do the autopsy," I answered. I was pretty certain that would be the cause of death, but I now felt a sense of urgency to get the autopsy done, since we had no way of knowing if Jason would be suspected in this murder as well, and no longer wanted to put it off until the next day.

Sookie must have had the same train of thought because she said, "I know you said you were going to wait to do the autopsy, but would you mind doing it right away? I'm sorry; I know we had *other* plans, but I just know my boneheaded brother will be brought into this and I'm worried about him."

"Of course," I replied immediately. "Do you want to meet me at the morgue or should I just call you when I'm through and know what the cause of death is?"

I felt like an insecure little asshole wondering when I'd get to see her again, but I knew her brother's wellbeing was more important. I just wanted to know if I'd be able to see her again

anytime soon because the truth was I already missed her and doubted my new Princess Leia fantasy would be coming true any time in the very near future.

Selfishly, my heart plummeted hearing her ask, "Will you call me and let me know? I want to run back to Bon Temps so I can beat Jason's ass in person when he tells me he went home with her last night."

"Of course," I answered, trying to sound understanding, but Sookie must have heard my deflated tone because she said, "I'm sorry."

"You don't have to apologize, Sookie. I know you're just looking out for your brother and I'm not going anywhere," I added truthfully because I wasn't.

I'd wait forever if I had to.

Hopefully she heard the sincerity in my voice and with her promise of, "I'll make it up to you," before we ended the call, I actually felt a little better. I didn't know why I felt so insecure when Sookie hadn't done anything other than show me just how much she liked me, so I vowed I would stop acting like a pimply-faced little wallflower bitch standing all alone at the school dance from now on.

Once was enough.

I slowly walked back over towards the group of policemen and once they were done collecting their evidence, I put the body into a bag and loaded it into the van. I was just closing the doors when I felt a pair of arms snake around my waist and I turned around ready to push off whoever it was until I saw Sookie smiling up at me.

"What are you doing here?" I asked, unable to not smile back at her. I could still see the faint waves in her hair from where she must have had the Princess Leia braids in before she took them out and it was a race between the lust and disappointment running through my veins to see who would come out on top.

"Are you kidding?" she asked while slipping her hands into my back pockets and giving me a gentle squeeze. "Did you really think I could drive by without stopping when your ass in these jeans were calling out to me?"

It was more likely it was the front side of my jeans she'd heard.

It was just another reminder that I shouldn't feel so insecure about Sookie's feelings for me and I was grateful for it, but thoughts of which part of my body were screaming for her weren't helping any, so I pushed them away and asked, "Have you spoken to Jason yet?"

Herveaux had already left and there were only a couple of patrolmen still lingering nearby speaking to one another, so I felt safe enough in bringing it up. Sookie shook her head no,

saying, "I tried calling, but he didn't pick up. That doesn't mean anything though because Jason rarely sees the a.m. on a Sunday."

I couldn't help staring back at her still in awe of just how beautiful she was and the fact that she seemed set on spending time with *me* still boggled my mind. "So you're not worried then?" I asked once I realized neither one of us had said anything in a while since she seemed just as content to stare back at me with our arms still wrapped around each other.

"Not really," she replied and then one of her hands slid up the front my shirt and grasped a fistful of fabric so she could pull me down for a kiss.

I was only too happy to oblige her and could've easily gotten lost in her if it hadn't been for the obnoxious honking of the now passing patrol car with the driver yelling out, "Get a room Stackhouse!"

Sookie pulled away with a soft laugh, saying, "I'm sorry. I know you have work to do and I have to go kick my brother's ass, but I can't seem to help myself whenever I'm around you."

"I know the feeling," I smiled back at her and as I later watched her car pulling onto the interstate I knew without a doubt I was falling hard for Sookie Stackhouse.

The morgue was empty of the living since it was a Sunday and normally the autopsies for any dead bodies found over the weekend would be done the following week, but it wouldn't be the first time I'd worked on the weekend since normally I wouldn't have anything better to do. I wished I had a way of contacting Corbett so I could tell him the news, but since I didn't, I just got to work instead.

The scratches on the front of her neck were clearly visible and, from their angle and location, I assumed they were from when she'd tried to grab onto whatever it was she'd been strangled with. Hopefully they'd be able to find the killer's DNA on any skin samples they'd collected from underneath her fingernails and it would clear Jason, in this murder at least, but I didn't have access to Maudette's records to know if she'd had any similar marks. I continued my visual inspection of her body and then collected tissue and fluid samples from her lower cavities, which was standard on a homicide victim of this nature, but I didn't see any tearing or bruising that would indicate she'd been raped. However when I checked the inside of her mouth I could see a puncture mark on the inside of her lower lip that was consistent with having had her mouth forcefully covered which likely meant she was somewhere where her screams could've been overheard. It only led me to have more questions, like if she had in fact left with Jason the night before or if her car had been found since it wasn't on the side of the road where her body was left, but I had no way of getting any answers without at least speaking to Sookie.

Once the necessary pictures had been taken and the gathered evidence was set aside, I got to work on the actual autopsy. All through my examination I kept hoping she'd walk in like many other ghosts had done in the past, but I was just as alone at the end of it all as I had been when I started. Strangulation was the definite cause of death and while I'd expected it to be, I didn't feel

any better off knowing for sure. Two deaths that could possibly be linked to Jason seemed too coincidental and I felt like there was more I should be doing to help him out.

I'd called Sookie's cell phone and left her a voicemail message telling her my official findings; the mechanism of death was strangulation; the manner of death was homicide; and I fought the urge to head to Bon Temps all the while forcing myself to drive home. Sookie hadn't invited me to come along and I didn't want to look like a stalker, but I thought I might be able to possibly locate Dawn's ghost if she was still hanging around. If Corbett had still been hanging around my apartment hallway I would've had him do it, but Bon Temps was too small of a town for me to be there without being spotted. Sam would surely notice me if I'd tried to go back into Merlotte's and it would be very awkward if Herveaux was there too.

I didn't think it was possible to feel even more defeated until I'd walked into my apartment and went into the kitchen to grab a bottle of water when I spotted something shiny on my countertop.

It was a tinfoil bikini.

"Fuck!" I yelled out in frustration.

Frustrated there was nothing I could do to help Jason.

Frustrated that something inevitably got in the way every time Sookie and I were together.

Frustrated I wasn't with Sookie at that very moment.

I didn't hear back from her that day, so I sent her a text telling her I hoped she was doing okay before I went to bed that night. I was even more annoyed the following morning when I saw I'd missed a call from her while I'd been in the shower, but she'd at least left a message apologizing for missing my call the day before and that she would explain it all later because she was getting ready to go with Jason to get a lawyer which only made me more concerned.

I was dying to find out what was going on, but I was mostly dying to see Sookie again. Corbett hadn't come around at all so I didn't know if he even knew about the latest murder yet and when I hadn't heard anything from Sookie by the time I climbed into bed that night, my self-doubts about us started creeping back in.

Wouldn't she have called by now if she really missed me?

Couldn't she at least have sent a text?

Was she out with someone else and that was why she hadn't called?

Had she realized what a nutcase I was and that's why I hadn't heard from her?

The list just ran on and on with my mind running riot and I hadn't even felt myself falling asleep until I was startled awake by the loud banging on my door. The LED on my alarm clock told me

it was just after midnight and I stumbled down the hallway still half asleep, so I thought maybe I was still dreaming when I opened my door and saw Sookie standing there.

"Sookie?"

She wasn't dressed as Princess Leia, so I doubted I was dreaming but it couldn't hurt to make sure.

"I'm sorry," she said looking up at me. "Is it too late?"

"Too late for what?" I asked still confused and only partially coherent.

"To see you. My cell battery died not long after I left you that message this morning and I don't have my charger. I would've called from another phone, but I don't have your number memorized yet," she rambled out, speaking much too fast to someone who wasn't quite awake yet. I blamed my sleepy state for my next words.

"So you're not breaking up with me?"

"NO!" she exclaimed which worked wonders on my alertness. Before I could apologize for my verbal blunder, she smiled and said, "Wait. Are we in a relationship state where there's the possibility to be broken up?"

I was right back to being the pimply-faced wallflower bitch I'd sworn I'd seen the last of and my eyes dropped to the floor as I shrugged and mumbled, "I don't know. Are we? *I* don't want to see anyone else except you."

My eyes had yet to meet hers again and my stomach dropped hearing her say, "Well if that isn't the *lamest* girlfriend proposal I've ever heard..."

It was the only 'girlfriend proposal' I'd ever sort of made and even I knew it was lame, so all I wanted to do was slink away and lick my wounds, but that was impossible because she literally jumped on me a second later, saying, "I accept!"

"Really?" I asked, but she probably couldn't understand me with her tongue in my mouth. The fact that it was in there made my question redundant anyway, so I moved us back inside and kicked the door shut in case Corbett picked *right fucking now* to show up again.

Sookie continued her attack on my lips with her arms and legs wrapped around my body, but I still hesitated in carrying her to my bedroom in case that was too presumptuous. She was my first girlfriend, official or otherwise, and I didn't want to mess things up thirty seconds into our relationship, so I continued to stand there kissing her back until she finally pulled away, saying, "Take me to bed."

She didn't have to tell me twice.

As soon as her back hit the mattress she released her hold on me and started pulling my shirt up over my head, so when she was done I thought I'd return the favor only instead giving into the overwhelming urge I had to rip her clothes off to be inside of her that much sooner, I slowed down. I wanted to savor every moment. We hadn't known each other for very long, but I'd known early on there was something different about Sookie; that she was special and that was even truer now. I wanted to worship every part of her to show her how thankful I was that *she* chose *me*.

I knew I should've asked about Jason; I should've voiced my concern about everything I knew she was going through, but I felt selfish in that moment. I didn't want the outside world to intrude on us again now that I finally had her all to myself and as my lips slowly traveled along her velvety skin, while my hands removed every article of clothing in their way, every other thought disappeared from my mind. My hands closed over her breasts, both of which filled them completely, with my lips and tongue working over each of her perfectly pink peaks as she arched her body into me and moaned out my name with her hands in my hair.

I could never have my fill of them, but there were other places on her body I wanted to explore so I moved further down and pulled her jeans from her legs before I slowly kissed my way back up her left leg, only to repeat the process on her right one, when I'd once again reached the top of her thighs. Ever since I'd met her I'd dreamed of having her in my bed exactly as she was now. I'd fantasized about it even more and while I had no complaints about our morning wakeup session a couple of days earlier, it was nothing compared to the new reality of it now that she'd agreed to be mine and when I leaned forward and heard her cry out *my* name with the first pass of my tongue, I finally felt like I was where I was meant to be.

Well, not necessarily between her legs, but definitely with her. However I'd stay in between her legs for as long as she'd let me.

I'd been so intent on making sure Sookie was satisfied the first time I'd done this, I hadn't noticed just how much I enjoyed her taste. She was distinctively sweeter than I remembered anyone else being and I dove forward with relish wanting to lap up every drop I could find. I could tell by the cadence of my name leaving her lips that she was getting close, so I slid two fingers inside of her searching out the mythical G-spot. I twisted and turned them with every thrust of my hand, with my lips and tongue working her clit, but when my fingertips brushed over one spot in particular, Sookie's cries told me I'd hit pay dirt. It only took one more stroke for her to cum all over my hand and she pulled at my hair trying to get me to slide up her body which I was only too happy to do. When we were once again face to face I did my best to memorize every part of her chest and blink of her half-lidded lustful gaze, but feeling her pull my boxers down and wrap her hand around my dick broke my concentration and a low growl left my chest.

"Condom," she whispered with a small smile; part-order; part-question.

I nodded and had no choice but to slide off of her so I could kick off my boxers and reached into the bedside table where the open box had been mocking me for days now, but I wasted no time in ripping open the foil package and rolling one on. Sookie, however, must have felt I was taking too long because I was still lying precariously on the edge of the bed when she was suddenly

straddling my body and leaned down for a kiss that I quickly got lost in, but when I felt her hand guide my tip to her entrance, I held my breath as time suddenly stood still.

Seeing her naked body on top of me; watching her eyes widen as she slowly lowered herself down my shaft for the first time and hearing her moan out loud did nothing to drown out my own guttural moan and already threatened my control, but actually *feeling* her pulse throb tightly around me made me worried I wouldn't be able to last longer than a few seconds. Instead of thinking about how tight she was; how the heat of her surrounding me was like a beautiful torture; I tried to replace those thoughts with anything else my mind could grab onto.

I needed a haircut.

I wondered if there was enough cream for our coffee in the morning.

Maybe she'd want to go with me one night to see The Phantom Menace in 3D.

Sookie had no body hair whatsoever.

Sookie's golden skin was creamy in the moonlight shining through the window.

Sookie dressed as Princess Leia.

Nothing was working and watching her bounce on top of me while feeling her inner walls spasm around me, I felt my orgasm quickly building, but before I could warn her or try and stop it, I fell over the edge.

Of the bed.

I lay there on the floor next to the bed completely dumbfounded thinking this wasn't quite what I meant when I'd realized I'd fallen hard for her and knew it was only a matter of moments before Sookie realized her mistake in choosing *me* to be her boyfriend and stormed out of my apartment and out of my life forever, but when my eyes finally met hers, she flashed me a sexy grin panting out, "Three second rule!" and pounced on me.

Our unintentional break was enough to help me partially regain my senses and I pulled the comforter from the bed to the floor and held onto her as I turned us both so she was underneath me on top of it. Her giggles changed into another breathy moan when I slid back inside of her and her legs locked around my hips as my lips locked around hers. Never had anything felt as right as it did in that moment and I knew there could never be anyone else for me. I was ruined the moment I saw her face for the very first time and I'd never been happier in my life because of it.

When she pulled away from our kiss crying out, "Fuck Eric, I'm so close," I was glad for it because I knew I was too. I slipped one hand in between our two bodies and worked her clit as I continued to thrust into her which seemed to be the right move when seconds later her entire body seized underneath me. The force of her orgasm was so powerful I had no choice but to

follow along behind her and our cries echoed around the room. She didn't even seem to mind when I landed on top of her, not having the strength or inclination to pull away from her just yet. Instead her arms and legs wrapped around my body with her face nuzzling against my shoulder while we both caught our breath, but only a few minutes passed when I heard her say lightheartedly, "I was starting to think that was never going to happen."

I pushed up onto my elbows and stared down at her, *knowing* now what it was I felt for her, but too afraid to say it just yet, so instead I offered another truth and said, "*That* was amazing."

Everything about her was amazing and after we'd both had a chance to clean up and climb back into the bed, Sookie attached herself to my side, yawning and chuckling out, "You know, you would've been hard pressed to get rid of me before, but now you might need the combined help of the SWAT Team and the Navy Seals to get me to leave."

"I'll give you my spare key in the morning," I yawned back at her. In terms of 'fast', our relationship seemed to be moving along at warp speed, but I certainly wasn't going to fight it. I'd felt a connection to her from the moment I laid eyes on her and if she wanted me, I wasn't about to push her away.

I felt her lips press lightly against my chest as she whispered, "Okay," and while I was still curious about everything going on with Jason, I didn't want to burst our little bubble just yet. I was lying in bed with my first ever girlfriend after having had the best sex of my life and I just wanted to enjoy being normal for a little while longer, so I decided it could wait until the morning. If something really bad was going on, I doubted Sookie's first reaction when she saw me would be to jump on me like she did, but there was still something else inside of me that was screaming out to be heard and when I finally heard her breathing evening out in her sleep, I felt safe enough to voice it, albeit in a whisper.

"I love you."

Chapter 16: Chapter 16

Chapter 16

I didn't get much sleep that night, but the only thing I could attribute it to was finally realizing I'd fallen in love with Sookie and the fact that she was actually in my arms. I tried to pick apart my feelings to see if maybe it was the post-sex high that made me think it was love I felt instead of just the endorphins flooding through my system, but the more time that passed by, it didn't seem to lessen at all. I had nothing else to compare it to, but I couldn't think of what else it could possibly be either and eventually stopped trying to overanalyze it and just enjoyed it instead.

Sleep seemed like a waste of time when I'd much rather be looking at her, so that's what I did while trying to figure out how I would tell her about my curse. I wanted something so much more with her than to just be her boyfriend and while that was all well and good for now, I knew

it would be unfair to keep my secret from her if we were ever going to be something more in the long term. In my mind it would be the same thing as lying to her, but I was terrified of what she would say or how she would react to it all.

I was also terrified of us actually living together knowing Corbett would be able to walk in whenever he damn well pleased.

Maybe he'd still be unable to enter if the lease or deed was only in my name?

Officer Prior's full explanation of their ghostly rules replayed through my mind and, from what he'd said, they could go into anywhere their family lived, so I knew it was just wishful thinking however if Sookie knew about my curse, maybe she could convince him to stay out even if she couldn't actually see him. Hopefully that wasn't wishful thinking too; that Sookie would not only *believe* me but would *stay* with me too when I finally worked up the nerve to tell her, her dead father had been my best friend for the last eight years and we'd never met until his autopsy.

In keeping with my wishful thinking, my eyes glanced out the window hoping to see a shooting star go by I could wish on, but I couldn't see any stars at all. In fact, the sky was lightening and a look at my clock told me she'd have to get up soon to get ready for work. I wouldn't need to go in until later, but Sookie would probably have to leave extra early to go back to her place for a change of clothes and I was already longing for her at just the thought of not being able to spend the day together. However I wasn't worried anymore about whether or not I'd see her again.

Because she was my girlfriend. Of course I would see her again.

Of course I could also see her right now and the fact she was still naked and now my official girlfriend made me think she wouldn't mind me waking her up.

With my tongue. Since I was her official boyfriend and all.

I'd been semi-hard all night long thanks to having her at my side, but now I was raging hard at the thought of what I wanted and would do to her, so I reached over, grabbing one of the condoms I'd thrown onto the nightstand in my haste to get one on the night before, and quietly ripped it open before rolling it on. Sookie had barely stirred all night long and remained attached to the side of my body with her head still on my chest, so I held onto her and slowly rolled my body which made her roll over onto her back with me on top of her. My eyes had remained glued to her face to see if I'd woken her and my grin only got wider seeing I hadn't, but I couldn't stop myself from taking a quick taste of her pouty lower lip before pulling away.

The creaminess of her skin had taken on a more golden hue in the early morning light and I thrilled at watching the goose bumps rise up on her skin underneath the path my tongue was slowly trailing down her body. Her breasts were true masterpieces and I watched intently as they rose up and down with every breath of air she took into her lungs until I couldn't take it anymore and captured one in my mouth. My eyes went back to her face upon hearing her soft gasp and seconds later her hands slid up to hold the back of my head in place all while her eyes were still

closed, but seeing her lips forming a small 'O' followed by my name had me growling and biting down on her skin a little more forcefully.

Her eyes opened up right afterward and her lips formed into a smirk as she whispered, "I'm *not* dreaming..."

My only answer was to nip at her skin again and her answering moan told me she accepted that she wasn't in fact dreaming, so I continued mapping out every part of her body with my lips before flipping her over and doing it all over again on her back. Her breasts might be masterpieces, but her ass was true perfection and in my appreciation I bit down harder than I'd intended to and unintentionally caused Sookie to groan in approval.

Time really wasn't on our side, but then neither was my willpower and seeing the wetness coating the skin in between her thighs made me decide we'd had enough foreplay. My limited sexual experience included only ever having sex in either the missionary position or, rarely, with the woman on top of me, but seeing Sookie lying there with her ass arched up in the air, my caveman instincts took over and I pulled her up onto her knees while I slid through her folds, coating myself in the process, before placing myself at her entrance. I paused, not really waiting for some sort of approval since she seemed to be on board, but it made no difference anyway because Sookie thrust herself backwards and impaled herself on me while my eyes rolled back into my head and I growled, "Fuuuck..."

"Yep," she panted in agreement, but I couldn't be sure if she was about to add anything else onto that because, dare I say, I fucked the thoughts right out of her. There was something about seeing her like that, submissively prone underneath me, and feeling myself bottoming out against her ass that had me literally turning into an animal driven purely on instinct with nothing more eloquent to say than sporadic growls and groans. Sookie seemed to be just as far gone as me and when I let one hand trail down her spine from her neck down, I surprised us both when I ended up giving her a light smack on her ass.

It wasn't something I'd ever done before, but feeling her inner muscles clench around me and hearing her say, "Again," was whittling away at what little self control I still had. I gave her another smack, a little harder than the first one, and her muscles clenched down again as she cried out. I was close, too close to losing it to keep up with our little game, so instead of giving her another tap I slid my hand around her front and worked her clit with my fingers until she finally yelled out with her release and I gratefully let go and followed along behind her.

We were definitely doing it in that position again.

I would swear to fucking Christ himself that I saw stars swirling in front of my eyes and I'd somehow managed to fall to her side, but it didn't take Sookie long before she rolled over and crawled on top of me, saying with a smile, "Well, good morning to you too."

My arms automatically wrapped around her and I pulled her into a bone crushing hug, answering, "It's a *great* morning."

Really fucking great which was why I scowled, even though I knew it was coming, when she said, "I need to get going so I can go home and change before my shift."

"Nooo," I playfully pouted and hugged her tighter which earned me a string of giggles and had me readying for a round two that we didn't have time for.

"Well, I'd consider wearing your clothes to work if they wouldn't fall off of me," she chuckled and only burrowed herself deeper into my chest.

I liked the idea of her wearing my clothes so everyone would know she was mine. I attributed it to my newly released caveman persona, but I knew that wasn't really an option and suggested, "Well, why don't you bring a few extra things with you next time so you won't have to worry about it. There's plenty of room in my closet."

A few extra things, in my mind, did not constitute her living with me and therefore Corbett still wouldn't be able to come inside.

Win fucking win.

"Oh, *next time*, huh?" she asked. "Who says there'll be a *next time*?"

I'd heard her cries and felt her cum so hard that I could almost *still* feel her clenching around my shaft, but I wasn't worried and thought my newfound confidence truly came from just knowing she was mine now. I wasn't concerned anymore on where I stood with her or how she felt about me, which was why I felt confident enough to grab her by her hair and bring her lips to mine so I could kiss the argument right out of her. When I finally let her pull away she was panting with her lips forming into a grin, admitting, "Yeah...there'll be *lots* of next times."

That's what I thought...

Regrettably, I let go of her before *next time* was right fucking now and knowing there wasn't any time for it, with my scowl only deepening with every article of clothing she put on, so instead I tried to focus on the reasons that had been keeping us apart to begin with and asked, "What's going on with Jason."

She sighed and rolled her eyes, answering, "Well, he *did* leave with Dawn, but I guess he was so drunk, he passed out when they got back to his place before anything could happen. Hoyt showed up not long after because he didn't want to drive all the way back here and saw an angry Dawn leaving his house because my brother was too shitfaced to perform. Thank God for a longneck bottle limp dick!"

I snorted out my relief and she giggled, adding, "But we still went and got him an attorney and Gran came home in a tizzy, understandably, so now he's grounded. She's making him stay with her until the killer is caught or he kills himself from the forced celibacy. He's only allowed to go to work and then straight back home."

I wondered over the capacity to actually ground a man of his age, but remembering what Sookie's Gran was like, I was just thankful she hadn't saw fit to issue any decrees to me.

I wasn't THAT confident.

Sookie and I made plans to meet up for dinner, work permitting, since I worked the swing shift, but the smile on my face I strolled into work with took a hit when I saw a scowling Corbett waiting on me.

"You're lookin' awfully fuckin' chipper," he snarled.

Knowing this had the potential to possibly ruin whatever friendship we had and figuring he still needed a little more time accepting the fact his baby girl was a grown woman, I deflected and asked, "Did you know the waitress from Merlotte's, Dawn, was murdered on the same night we were there?"

I knew the answer by his expression alone before he said, "No! Christ! They don't think Jason did it, do they?"

"No."

I went on to explain everything that happened and when I was finally through, he said, "Well hell, maybe Kevin and I can find her. If she ain't like Maudette then maybe she saw who did it and can tell us and then we can clear Jason. You gonna be here all day?"

I shrugged noncommittally and was unable to keep my lips from curving upwards, answering, "Should be, but I might go out for dinner later."

Detective Doodlebug didn't miss much because his eyes narrowed back at me, asking, "Oh yeah? Alone?"

Any other time it would've been a ridiculous question because *of course* I would be fucking *alone*, but I figured now was as good a time as any to get it out of the way and said, "No. At least I don't think so, but Sookie might be busy working so we'll just have to wait and see." My eyes finally met his suspicious ones as I confirmed, "It's official. She's my girlfriend."

I couldn't stop my chest from swelling with pride or the grin from widening on my lips, but I was truly caught off guard when his grimace turned into a full on smile right before he laughed heartily, saying, "Oh boy, you got it *baaaddd*."

Yes, Detective Doodlebug didn't miss much.

There was no denying it, not that I wanted to, so he continued to bellow like a crazy person before snorting out, "You know, if you all move in together, then I'm in like Flynn."

I tried to keep the fact that that thought truly did terrify me from my face as I grinned back, saying, "You know the old saying 'be careful what you wish for'? Because you might just be traumatized if you walk in unannounced." Considering the levels of debauchery we'd explored in the span of five hours, it was a likely conclusion, but knowing he could only really announce himself to me made me remember that I wanted to figure out a way to tell Sookie about my curse, so I added, "You've always said that you didn't think Sookie would shun me for my...*abnormalities*, but why? Do you really think if I tell her I hang out with her pain in the ass dead father on a regular basis, she's not going to go running for the hills?"

I'd tried to inject some levity into my voice, but, like I said, Detective Doodlebug didn't miss much and he could tell how scared I was of that happening, so his expression softened as he said, "No, I don't think she'll take off. You've met her momma and I can tell you that, if anything, she'll be disappointed finding out that Michelle can't really see me. That's the reason why they moved her over to where she is now. I've heard some of her conversations with Jason and momma, so I know a part of Sookie wants to believe that her mother isn't ill and she's happier believing that we had such a strong connection in life, even my death couldn't sever it. I'm still hanging around, so I can't say that she's wrong."

Well shit...

While a part of me was still worried that Sookie would think I was batshit crazy, the other part was now worried about hurting her knowing I would have to tell her the truth that her mother couldn't really see Corbett if she actually believed me. Corbett must have read it on my face because he said, "Don't worry about it. She got over finding out Santa Claus wasn't real and she'll get over this too."

That was easy for him to say. A jolly fat guy in a red suit was nothing compared to taking away the comfort in thinking her mother wasn't alone in her illness and it was still on my mind hours after Corbett had left when Sookie called asking me to meet her at a diner I usually stopped in at, halfway in between the police station and the coroner's office. My smile returned seeing her face light up when I walked through the door and she leaned over the table giving me a kiss as I took a seat across from her.

"So," she began after the waitress took our orders, "I got my first collar today."

"Oh yeah?" I asked, happy for her. "Who?"

"The good reverend's wife," she smiled. "We finally got to interview her today back at her house and you'll never guess what I saw sitting up on the mantel next to their wedding photo."

"What?" I asked even though I already knew the answer and effectively killed the first real opportunity I'd had in divulging my secret. I might have taken it if I wasn't worried about the backlash I hadn't known existed until I'd spoken to Corbett earlier that day.

"The rock," she answered, "or should I say, the murder weapon. Would you believe it was a souvenir from their honeymoon? The crime lab guys confirmed there was blood on it even though she'd washed it off and it didn't take long to get her to spill her guts."

Would you believe I already knew that?

I felt so torn, wanting to tell her but not wanting to destroy the little fantasy she'd built up in order to deal with her mother's illness, so like a chicken shit I remained silent. Thankfully Sookie didn't seem to notice my internal dilemma and happily chatted all through our meal, telling me how they'd gotten the woman to confess. I was proud of her for doing her job well, but before I could say anything, I suddenly felt something other than pride.

It was her shoeless foot sliding up my leg underneath the table.

"Sookie," I warned, but she ignored me and continued to chatter about who the fuck knows what because all of my attention was focused on her foot sliding over my now straining crotch.

"Aww jeez.."

I jumped in my seat hearing Corbett's voice next to our booth, but Sookie giggled probably thinking it was due to her wandering foot and I shifted my body further down in my seat to try and hide both her foot and the effect it was having on me.

Seeing him standing there in my peripheral, hiding his eyes behind his hand, made me snicker too thinking if he couldn't handle seeing *that*, he might just rip his eyes out of their sockets seeing some of the other things his daughter did to me.

"So," he said while still shielding his eyes, "Dawn ain't at her place, or Jason's, or Merlotte's, but Kevin's goin' back and forth between them all to see if she shows up. He said her car was found about an hour ago back in the woods halfway between Jason's and her apartment and the back tire was flat, but there's no way of knowin' if that happened while she'd been driving it or if it happened when whoever drove it back there to hide it. Now, I'm gonna go before I find out if I can still vomit even though I ain't eaten anything in eight years."

At the same time he'd been speaking, Sookie was distracted by her ringing cell phone and answered it, jokingly saying, "Dog boy! What can I do for you?" Knowing what I did, thanks to Corbett's untimely update, and who the lead detective was on Dawn's murder, I had a pretty good idea of who 'Dog Boy' was, so I wasn't surprised when she hung up a few minutes later, saying, "That was Herveaux. With everything that's going on with Jason and the fact that I sorta knew Dawn, I asked him to keep me informed on any new leads they got in the case. They found her car back in the woods in Bon Temps and are dusting it for prints, but there were some footprints left behind in the mud right outside of the car that couldn't have been from Dawn based on the size. It looks like they might actually have a clue."

At least someone did because I still didn't have a clue on how I was going to tell Sookie about my curse.

She was nothing if not a multi-tasker because as she continued to torment me with her foot job, her face screwed up in thought as she said, "It's just too coincidental that two women in Bon Temps of all places were murdered within days of each other and both happened to have been seen with Jason just before."

Thinking about the murders was easier than thinking about my dilemmas, both revealing my secret as well as what her foot was doing to my control, so I asked, "Well, can you think of anyone that might want to paint him as a murder suspect?"

He was such an easygoing guy, I couldn't imagine him having very many enemies, but then Sookie seemed to read my mind right as I recalled all of her dark haired suitors and said, "Well from what he said the other night, I guess there's holier-than-thou Rene, which is pretty rich considering what I'm sure him and Arlene are gettin' up to. And then there's always Bill."

If Rene was so holy then one would think he wouldn't go around killing women, but then there wasn't always a valid reason for just plain old crazy. For all I knew he could think he was ridding the world of evil, but then you'd think he'd go after Jason too so it didn't really make sense to me. Bill, on the other hand, interested me much more, but only because Sookie had said that he'd been after her for a date for years, so I asked, "Why don't him and Bill get along? Does it have something to do with him wanting to date you?"

I remembered Jason's snide comments about Sookie being the only woman he couldn't entice away from Bill, so I paid attention when she answered, "That goes back to high school. They were in the same grade and Bill was always a know it all type, always serious and I guess he was jealous of Jason being so popular. He embarrassed Jason one day in class when Jason didn't know the answer to whatever question the teacher had posed, so emulating the asshole my brother was born with, he took that as a personal affront and made it his mission in life to use what skills he had going for him and went after any girl Bill showed the slightest interest in. School dances, proms, football games. If Bill so much as looked at another girl and Jason saw it, he'd turn on the charm and whisk the girl away whether he wanted her or not. Ten years later and he still hasn't let up."

She shook her head at her brother's antics, but it still seemed like a weak excuse to go on a serial killing spree, so I asked, "Do you think he's that warped in the head to start killing innocent women though? Why not just go after Jason if that's who he has the problem with?"

She shrugged, answering, "I don't really know Bill well enough to judge his mental state, but he always gave me the heebie jeebies and my instincts have never steered me wrong before." She punctuated her statement with an arched brow and another deliberate rub of her foot on my crotch, before adding, "As for going after Jason, puh leez. Jason would put a whoopin' on him he'd be lucky to live through."

I tried to concentrate, despite what her foot was doing to me, and thought about how if someone really was out to try and make Jason look like a murderer, then anyone he was with could be in danger of being the next target. Considering who the two victims were so far, it seemed any *woman* he'd been seen with were at risk.

But would they have to be his bed partners as well?

I felt the fear slowly creeping up my spine and I stilled Sookie's still wandering foot as I looked across the table at her, asking, "Sookie? What about your Gran?"

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"What about Gran?" she asked.

"Do you think she's in any danger?" I probed and then explained, "If someone is trying to set up Jason as a murderer, then what's to stop them from trying to do something to your Gran now that he's living with her? He'd be the prime suspect."

Again.

She didn't look as panicked on the outside as I felt on the inside and instead mentally chewed over my words along with a bite of her meal before finally shaking her head and saying, "No, I really don't. Wild ass theories of raging jealousy or kinky sex aside, Jason would have no motive to kill our Gran. If anything – God forbid if something *did* happen to her – I doubt even Bud would be able to deny that somebody was framing Jason. *Everyone* in that town loves her and her grandchildren are no different."

I didn't know any of them well enough to argue any differently. I barely knew Sookie well enough – a problem I planned on rectifying very soon, but I'd never been one to put much stock into coincidence.

Running into Sookie on the running trail in the park? Coincidence.

Running into Jason's friend Rene outside of the movie theater? Coincidence.

The last two women Jason had been seen with being murdered in the same way only hours later? No fucking way was THAT coincidence.

But I wasn't a cop. I was a doctor – albeit with a creepy yet sometimes useful curse – and unless Dawn's spirit suddenly made an appearance and told me who the real killer was, there wasn't much I could do to help out. I didn't think *every* spirit hung around after their body died – the world would be a hell of a lot more crowded with them if they did – but I had no way of knowing what ultimately happened to Dawn's at her death. So unless another *coincidental* murder occurred I had no choice but to accept there wasn't any more I could do.

However, that realization only allowed me to tick one item off of my to-do list. Pulling it up in my mind, I mentally read it off and found another item I could cross off right now. Reaching into

my pocket, I pulled my spare key out and slid it across the table towards Sookie, saying, "Um...here...you know...for whenever you want to stop by."

Hopefully she took 'whenever' to mean 'every night' which is what I meant.

Considering my *lame ass girlfriend proposal* from the night before had gone over well, I at least hadn't set the bar so high that I felt I needed to make a big production out of giving her a key. I would ask her to pack her stuff and move in tonight if I hadn't been afraid of scaring her away – or giving Corbett free reign to come into my apartment. Thankfully she just grinned at me, asking, "Are you sure? I know I said before that you'd need the SWAT team and the Navy SEALs to get rid of me, but if I have a key then you just might need Fathers Karras and Merrin to exorcise me from the apartment."

Just tell her...

Her joking about spirits, even evil ones, was the perfect opening for me to cross off the very big capital letter bold font item on my mental to-do list.

To tell her I could communicate with dead people.

As much as I wanted to just blurt it out, I couldn't. Not yet. It wasn't just my fear of her running away from me – as much as that thought did needle at me. I also had to consider I'd be destroying whatever hope she'd had in believing her mother could still see and hear her father. I couldn't do that to her. Not yet, at least, and certainly not here while we were both on our dinner break in a room full of strangers. No matter how I felt about her, the fact remained she'd only officially been my girlfriend for less than twenty-four hours. I may not have ever been in a relationship before, but I knew enough about them to know couples didn't share everything about themselves right off the bat. They learned about each other over time and we had plenty of it, so I closed my mouth and forced my lips into a smirk, saying, "While I'd definitely call what happened last night *and this morning* a religious experience, I'm not a religious man so no exorcisms are needed. But you might want to leave your handcuffs at home if you don't want to wake up one morning as my prisoner."

I didn't go to church, but apparently I was willing to go to jail on an unlawful imprisonment charge.

Her foot began moving once more in my lap as she smirked back at me before digging into her food, acting as though she wasn't causing me to fight off an orgasm underneath the table, and saying, "Who said you'd need handcuffs to keep me there?"

"Good to know, but just so *you* know, I was already looking forward to the conjugal visits," I smiled back at her. Bantering with her was easy. Everything about being with her was easy which was why I was forced to stop her foot from tormenting me to the point I'd get charged with breaking some sort of public orgasming law, while she giggled at the tortured look on my face.

Cumming with her was too easy.

As she slid her foot back down my leg to the floor I couldn't take my eyes off of her and was overcome with how happy I was. How happy she made me and all I could think was I hoped to Christ I wouldn't do something to fuck it all up.

Maybe there was some religion in me after all.

Once we left the diner her kiss goodbye left me both elated and deflated – one part of me visibly deflated watching her drive away – but my melancholy didn't last long. I'd barely been back at my desk when I got called to pick up a body. There was a fire at a storage facility across town where they stumbled upon a body, so I knew it could be a while before I would be able to get in and retrieve it. But knowing it could go past the time for my shift to end, I had half a mind to call Sookie to see if she was planning on stopping by my apartment. However considering we hadn't discussed what – if anything – we would be doing after work, I didn't. The last thing I wanted was to come across as clingy.

The smell of smoke was palpable before I got anywhere near the building and even if I hadn't just been there a few days earlier, the fire trucks would've given the crime scene away. The storage facility was located across the street from the no name motel where Sookie and I had met up again almost one week earlier. It was hard to believe so much had happened in the span of a week, but I was happy with the outcome so far.

I pulled up to park a little ways down from one of the trucks and seeing as how the building was still smoldering in some places, I pulled my fire retardant coat from the back of the van and put it on. It was similar to the ones the firemen wore, with reflective tape running along the cuffs and hem, only it had the word 'Coroner' stenciled on the back instead of my last name like theirs did.

I was standing by my van waiting to get the all-clear to go inside from the Fire Chief when one of the looky-loos fires always seemed to attract came up to me, asking, "What happened, bro?"

"A fire," I answered redundantly.

It was impossible to miss.

"A fire?" he repeated, looking back at the still burning section of the building.

It was impossible to miss.

"Duuude!"

Oh...Fuck. My. Life.

That's what I got for deciding life was finally good.

I couldn't stop myself from turning to see Naked Zack staring at the looky-loo, but what made my jaw drop open was when looky-loo acknowledged him, yelling out, "Bro!"

Well... THAT was possible to miss.

"Dude!"

"Bro!"

"Dude!"

Somebody just fucking shoot me now!

"Bro!" Finally breaking the Bill and Ted dialog, he added, "You're *naked* bro! I thought you were dead!"

"I *am* dead, dude! *You're* dead *too*!" he replied gleefully.

Looky-loo Dude looked down at himself in disbelief and asked, "I *am*?" After a moment he looked back at Zack and added, "Then how come I'm not naked like you?"

Because God only hates me a little bit?

I was considering crawling inside one of the body bags in the van, hoping they'd forget all about me and go off on an excellent adventure together, when something else got my attention.

Or rather...*someone*.

"Oh, you *so* need to wear that home." I turned to see Sookie's lustful gaze staring back at me and even though it hadn't been very long since I'd last seen her, looking at her now it felt much longer than that.

And looking at her now, something ELSE was feeling much longer in my pants.

"Hello *Detective*," I smiled back at her, ignoring Naked Zack and his long lost Bro beside me. "Do you *detect* something *you like*?" I added, unable to stop myself from flirting with her no matter who heard the innuendo.

It too was impossible to miss.

"Bro! She's *smokin'* hot!"

"Dude! *I know*...he's been tryin' to lay pipe to her since *I* died!"

Fine. *Everything* was impossible to miss.

I ignored the urge to confirm 'pipe' had in fact been laid because our fucking was none of their fucking business and instead just watched Sookie as she closed the distance between us. Smiling, she replied, "Mhmm...It's taking *a lot* of willpower for me to not go looking for your hose."

How about that? My hose was looking for her too.

There were people – living breathing ones – milling all about us, so I knew I couldn't just grab her and act like the horny teenager she had the power to turn me into. We were professionals and had to act like it.

So I opened the door at the back of the van and pulled her with me, pushing her body against it and thereby shielding her from view of anyone else – to include the annoying apparitions. She came willingly and if I had my way, she would be cumming again very soon. Giving her a preview of what I had in mind, I pulled the flaps of my jacket to the side so my ever-erection her presence caused could be felt against her stomach, saying, "Here's a clue. I'd even dare to wager you find it on your very first try."

Her arms had just snaked around my waist underneath my jacket, with her hands grabbing onto my ass and holding me there. She rubbed along the front of my body with hers and sighed out, "I love how confident you are in my detective skills," when I heard another voice intrude in on our little world when it asked, "What's going on?"

Isn't it impossible to miss?

Seeing Sookie's head turn, I knew she'd heard the voice too, which was my first clue it wasn't just another ghostly cockblocker. I reluctantly pulled away from her to at least try and act like the professional my degree claimed I was, but Sookie's face took on a harder edge, as did her voice when she said, "Sir, I need you step back behind the line."

Fuuuck...I loved seeing her badass side. It was hotter than the fire.

We were standing within the cordoned off area of the building that had been lined off with crime scene tape and I took a step back from her so she could do her job when he introduced himself as the owner of the storage facility. At her prompting, I listened as he explained the storage facility was accessible twenty-four hours a day to anyone who rented from him via a pin number they were assigned to open the outer gate. The office itself closed at seven and it was after eight now, but he'd come back after getting called about the fire. He had no idea of who would've been inside and had his office not burned down too, he would've been able to tell her who had come into the lot by checking his computer.

After a quick kiss and an, "I'll see ya later," from Sookie – that I hoped was literal – she took the owner aside to get a preliminary statement from him. While the fire was under control, there were still burning sections they were working on and knowing it could be a while, I decided to pass the time by inventorying the gear in the van. I wasn't the only one who used it and some assholes seemed to be under the impression there was a latex glove fairy who magically refilled the box whenever it was empty.

Chow, that fucking asshole.

It was why I always made sure my bag of gear was fully stocked, but there were times and cases when there were more bodies than my bag had supplies for. A bus accident right off the I-20 four years earlier was one such time and it was also the time I learned the glove fairies only worked their magic for Chow.

My head was stuck in a cabinet with me counting specimen jars when I sensed a presence in the van with me.

Please...PLEASE don't let this be the excellent adventure they chose to have.

But I couldn't have been more wrong.

Not only was she badass, but she was stealthy too. I hadn't heard her climb into the van. Nor had I felt it move with her added weight, but I definitely felt it when she slid her hand down my chest. And I heard her as she lightly pressed her mouth against my ear, whispering, "Boo..."

Only *she* was the one who squeaked in surprise when I pulled her legs out from underneath her so that she landed ass down on the gurney I was sitting on. A quick check let me see she'd barely pulled the door closed, so I took care of that, locking it at the same time, and moved to hover over her giggling body as she stretched out underneath me. All I could do was silently stare at her, still gobsmacked that someone as beautiful and fun as Sookie could want to be with someone like me. She was still laughing when she finally said, "I guess you don't scare so easily, huh?"

"No, I don't," I smiled back at her. And it was true. Not only did my curse keep me from being easily startled, but so did her father.

That fucker had been jumping out of lockers and dark closets for years. If him hiding in a crouched position underneath my desk and then sticking his head into my top drawer as I was sliding it open didn't scare me, I doubted much of anything would.

Her giggles died down with her smile changing into a coy one when she asked, "So...do you know what *today* is?"

"Tuesday," I replied, wondering what she was getting at.

And I was also wondering if we could have stealth sex in the van. It could be our little secret and everything.

I couldn't help it. She was drop dead fucking gorgeous. And she was my official girlfriend. And she was underneath me.

Wiggling around.

It was impossible to miss!

The only thing that stopped me from planting the idea in her head, or planting another part of my body in hers, was the fact I didn't have any condoms on me.

And the condom fairy hadn't visited the ME van either. I knew because I'd just inventoried the supplies.

And I smiled thinking Chow's fairies must know he has no need for those.

Sookie pulled me back from Fairy-Condom-Tale Land by gasping out loud. She also looked upset, but before I could ask her what was wrong, she blurted out, "Tuesday? *Tuesday*? Is *that* all this day is to you?"

"Uh...I uh..." I stuttered, while trying to figure out what I was missing. I knew from Corbett her birthday was in July, so that wasn't it. It wasn't the anniversary of his death or Christmas, but thinking of Christmas made me wonder what it would be like to spend it with her.

Sookie...naked...her wrists and ankles tied down with garland...sprawled out under a Christmas tree...

What were we talking about?

She reminded me by saying in a brokenhearted voice, "I can't believe you don't know." Pausing long enough to fight off the hitch in her breath and the tears welling in her eyes, she explained, "It's our one week anniversary. One week ago today you made me fall head over heels for you. Literally."

Fffuuuuuccckkk...

As much as my mind wanted to say, 'No way has it only been a week!' I knew she was right. So much had happened since I literally ran into her on the running trail. While she could never be a complete stranger to me thanks to Corbett, I never would've thought she'd actually be my girlfriend a week later.

And seeing how upset she was, if I didn't find a way to make up for forgetting our one week anniversary, there was a good possibility there wouldn't be a two week anniversary for me to forget either.

"Sookie, I'm so sorry. I'm not all that experienced with relationships," *at all*, "and it didn't occur to..."

Before I could continue on with Operation Beg and Plead, she stopped me by placing her finger over my lips to silence me. Her distraught expression disappeared as soon as my voice did and she smiled, saying, "We're not twelve, Eric. As far as I'm concerned *everyday* can be our anniversary just so we can fuck like it's a celebration."

I was all for that plan, but still confused, I asked, "Then why?"

Her grin only grew wider when she taunted, "Did. I. *Scare* you?"

I was the one who gasped then.

And turnabout was only fair play.

While I growled out loud, muttering about the injustices of Sookie's World, my fingers attacked her ticklish spots. It made no difference what I said really since I doubted she could hear anything over her own peals of laughter. Only when she threatened to pee on me did I stop and when she finally caught her breath, she asked, "Do you want to know the *real reason* why I was keeping track of how long it's been since you asked for my number?"

"Is it because I'm so awesome?" I playfully asked, not about to fall for another one of her tricks.

After all, she was stealthy and badass.

And Corbett's offspring.

Sookie grabbed onto my jacket lapels and pulled me down so that my lips were hovering just over hers. Smiling as she said, "Definitely. In fact, *you're so awesome* that before I even went back to the station to do the paperwork on that dumbass who interrupted us, I stopped by the doctor's office."

"Did I *hurt* you?" I asked feeling horrified. I was nearly twice her size and I'd run into her pretty hard.

I hoped to Christ she was kidding.

"Nope," she replied, giving an extra pop to her 'p'. Her free hand found my crotch just as she said, "I got a shot. *A birth control shot*. Now take a guess how long it takes for it to be effective."

I hoped to Christ she wasn't kidding.

"Seven days?" I whispered, with both of my heads now catching on.

"Yep."

Her answer gave an extra pop to my 'p' too.

"What are you saying?"

I needed to hear her say the words. And if I hadn't misread any of her words, Operation Beg and Plead would be back in effect.

We had an anniversary to celebrate.

"I'm saying that I got tested after my last relationship, so I know I'm clean. And if you're clean," she paused to grin at my automatically nodding head, "and you *feel* like it, we can *feel* what it's like to rub our clean parts together. All *naked* and latex free."

Chow could keep his glove fairies. Mine had a magic hypodermic needle wand!

She 'oomph'd' into my mouth while I growled into hers because the only barriers between us were our clothes.

And I was quickly trying to rectify that problem.

I had barely gotten her pants unbuttoned when she was startled by the sound of someone banging on the van door.

I was just annoyed.

"This van is a rockin', but I'm still a knockin'! Stackhouse! You in there?"

Herveaux.

"Fucking *asshole*!" Sookie snarled, not trying to keep her voice down while trying to button her shirt back up.

And I felt a small burst of pride watching her. My hands had moved quicker than I'd known.

When we were both fairly decent, her hand moved to grasp the door handle, but she turned to kiss me one last time and ask, "We'll finish this tonight after work?"

"You took the words right out of my mouth," I smiled.

She'd been in the process of opening the door while I was still speaking and since Herveaux was standing close enough for the door to hit his chest, Sookie turned to him and said, "And *you* took the *cock* right out of *my mouth*. Dick." She turned enough to wink at me as she said, "It's our anniversary," before turning back to see his sagging jaw. She jumped down onto the ground and used her hand to snap his mouth shut, saying, "His cock is all mine, so quit trying to lure him away. We all know you don't swallow anyway."

I simultaneously turned bright red while laughing out loud.

First she stroked my cock and now my ego. She really was perfect.

Herveaux was still looking at me like he was seeing a unicorn before he finally laughed and turned to face Sookie, saying, "If I swallow then they'll never make an honest woman outta me. What in the hell are you doing here anyway? I caught this case, not you."

"What?" she asked, looking virgin white innocent. "I was packing my shit up when I heard about the fire and the body." Darting her eyes towards me, she licked her lips and added, "So I wanted to come and see the *hot body* for myself."

"Sweet fuckin' ten pound baby Jesus," he groaned. "Is this what we have to look forward to now? Sister Sookie is finally getting some, so she's gonna corner the coroner every time somebody loses rock, paper, scissors with the Grim Reaper?"

It sounded like a sound plan to me.

I also like the way he'd made it sound like Sookie hadn't been 'getting any' in quite some time.

If I knew him better I might jokingly thank him for stroking my ego and tell him my cock was still off limits.

"If you're lucky," she nodded while pulling out a small notebook from her back pocket. Ripping the top page off, she handed it to him and said, "I did some of your work for you and got the particulars from the owner while you were too busy trying to convince Dawson to make you a June bride."

"Fuck you," he chuckled, taking the paper from her hand. "I'll be an autumn bride or else I'll sweat my gown off."

I was amused as hell watching their banter and could see for myself that I'd gotten it all wrong the first time I'd seen them together. They were acting more like brother and sister than anything else and instead of feeling any sort of jealousy over how close they were, it actually made me feel better.

He'd have her back in a heartbeat if she was in any danger.

How could I have a problem with that?

It was only a few minutes later when the Fire Chief finally signaled to me, so I kissed Sookie goodbye – while Herveaux made gagging noises in the background – and grabbed my gear before following him through the charred remains. Aside from the scent of the fire, the one thing I could smell just as strongly was ammonia.

"I thought this was a personal storage facility," I said with my hand over my nose. "I can smell a high concentration of ammonia."

Somebody must have stored a good quantity of it there and I was wondering if perhaps a HAZMAT team should be called when he said, "Yep," and came to a stop, pointing at the burnt remains of the body. "And I'd venture a guess that this here is the chef."

I wasn't sure what he was talking about until I took a good look around. Some of the items in the small room were undistinguishable from the fire, but others I could guess what they were based on their shape.

A propane tank.

Several upright room fans.

Now warped metal cans that I assumed held paint thinner or acetone.

Shriveled up rubber tubing, assorted glass jars and bottles, what had once been aerosol cans, and Sterno.

"A meth lab?" I asked, having come across them more than once.

"Yeah..."

Only it wasn't the Fire Chief. It was Looky-loo Bro.

"I just wanted a quick smoke while I waited for it to finish cooking."

Well, he got a quick smoke alright.

I set my bag down and got to work on bagging up the remains. It wouldn't take a rocket scientist – or even a meth chef – to figure out the cause of death. Especially when the ghost of the meth chef was telling me everything he could remember up until the time, "It like...went *BOOM* bro!"

My shift had officially ended an hour earlier and I had celebration plans with Sookie, so as soon as I got his body back to the morgue I planned on leaving.

He could wait.

Anniversary fucking could not.

"Dude!"

I was in the process of sliding the body into my van and didn't bother to turn around. I'd seen enough of his naked ass to last a lifetime, but I couldn't turn off my hearing so I was forced to listen until I could drive away.

Hopefully with the dead body as my only company.

"Bro?"

"Come on, dude. You don't want to see what he's gonna do to you. And I want to introduce you to my new girlfriend."

That got my attention. I was almost tempted to ask him to bring her by.

I'd never seen a unicorn in person.

"What girlfriend?" he asked, sounding just as disbelieving as I felt.

"Dude. She's hot! But she's playin' hard to get and won't tell me her name, so I just call her Merle."

Because...she's *haggard*?

I couldn't stop the snort I made at my own mental joke, but I nearly choked on it when he added, "I call her that cuz a what's on her shirt. Merlotte's."

Chapter 18: Chapter 18

Chapter 18

"Merlotte's Bar and Grille?" I asked, turning around to face him.

And his full Monty.

Ugh...The things I was willing to do for Sookie and her family...

"Dude? You know her too?" His face crinkled up, just like other parts of him I was forced to take in, when he added in a less lighthearted tone, "I saw her first, dude."

Technically, that wasn't true. But instead of arguing with him over someone I hadn't wanted when she was still alive – much less now that she was dead – I asked, "Where did you see her?"

If I could find her – *talk* to her – then maybe I could find out who the real killer was.

"Bro," the meth chef interjected. "That's *his* ho!"

"Thanks dude," he nodded, clearly appreciating the bro solidarity.

"Bros before ho lifters," he nodded back.

Frustrated with both of them, I growled out, "I have my own...*girlfriend*." Who was probably waiting for me. In my bed. Naked. With no latex in between us.

That thought made it even harder for me to decide which was more important.

Harder in more than one way.

Hoping to get him to see reason, I explained, "I just want to talk to her."

Quickly. Which was probably something I would be doing again, under very different circumstances, in the very near future.

Having sex without wearing a condom for the very first time would no doubt make me cum quickly.

He held up a single hand in a 'Stop In the Name of Love' pose and said, "Not fallin' for it, dude."

So I did the only thing I could think of.

I held up my own hand, pulled the latex glove off and clenched it into a fist, before throwing a punch right through his stupid Zack Galifianakis head.

"Dude!" he yelled, ducking too late even though my fist went right through him. "What. In. The. *Hell?*"

"Exactly," I growled and then snarled, "What in the hell would I want your...*girlfriend* for? Even if I didn't already have one of my own, what exactly would I do with one I couldn't touch?"

"Uh...you okay?"

My heart stopped along with my breathing hearing Herveaux's now familiar voice approaching right behind me.

He'd heard me.

Fuck! Fuck! Fuck! Fuck! *FFFUUUCK!*

I should have known better. I'd lived with my curse for my whole life. I *knew* better than to talk to dead people when there were living ones nearby.

I'd just fucked myself.

Latex free.

I held off on turning around to face him. Going over everything I'd just said and done moments earlier and trying to come up with a reasonable way to explain it all.

I came up with two things.

Jack and shit.

And while I floundered, the shit for brains jackholes took off into the night, laughing their dead asses off. I almost called out to them to stop when I remembered why I couldn't.

Small miracle there.

Knowing I was only making myself look even more deranged by not acknowledging him, I turned around to finally face Herveaux. He was wearing the all too familiar, 'You're a nut job,' look I'd seen on a thousand different faces a thousand times before and I knew.

He was going to tell Sookie.

She was going to ask me about it.

I was going to have to tell Sookie about my other job being a nut job.

And she was going to run off into the night, laughing her perfectly heart shaped undead ass off.

My heart sank and my stomach dropped when he stared for a second longer before bursting out into a full-on belly laugh that shook his whole body. It reminded me of grade school all over again, but just as my feet were preparing to skulk the rest of me away, he laughed out, "*Jesus* you must have it bad for Sook if you're still ate up about me cockblocking you earlier."

Huh?

"I can't believe you're still grumbling about not being able to touch her," he playfully taunted. "Were you picturing *me* when you took that swing?"

Jesus. Mary. Joseph. I thank you one and all for this blessing you have given to me.

I seriously wanted to kiss him. I couldn't come up with a reasonable explanation for what I had said and done, but I hadn't needed to. Herveaux did it for me.

Who knew he'd have my back too?

"I'll never confess," I chuckled, feeling more relieved than I'd ever felt before.

"Confess, what?"

Jesus. Mary. Joseph. I take it all back. And you're not funny either.

Corbett moved to stand alongside Herveaux with a shit eating grin on his face, knowing I couldn't answer him.

"Listen," Herveaux began. "I don't know what kind of bullshit Sook was trying to sell earlier about it being you all's anniversary." Corbett's eyebrow rose up just before it dawned on him what Herveaux might be talking about and he cringed, waiting for the rest. "But I know you two haven't been going at it for very long no matter what she said about your cock and her mouth."

"La la la la la la la..." Corbett sang out at the top of his lungs with his fingers now stuck in his ears.

The Jason apple hadn't fallen very far from the Corbett tree.

Unable to hear the sound of 'ignorance is bliss' song Corbett was singing, I had to strain to hear when Herveaux went on with, "So consider this the talk you would've gotten from her father if he'd still been alive."

Please...I couldn't get her father to shut the fuck up. Ever!

But I also couldn't tell him that.

"You seem like a nice enough guy. Weird, but nice. And she's been walking on a fuckin' cloud since last week, but if you do anything to hurt her." He took a step forward and put his face directly in mine, staring hard at me as he finished with, "I will hurt you."

If I hadn't seen their little verbal sparring session earlier that night, I might've been offended at the very least he would have to nerve to say anything about our relationship. But now I understood. So instead of trying to match his bravado with my own – I had a feeling mine would come across as considerably weaker anyway – I smiled and said, "Noted. But she's the best thing that ever happened to me and I don't plan on fucking things up."

Corbett had stopped with the 'La la la's' in time to hear Herveaux's warning and he smiled at both of our responses, but Herveaux was the only one to speak out loud when he smiled and repeated, "Noted. Now get out of here before she calls to yell at me again for keeping you here for so long." I was just about take a step when he put his hand on my arm and said, "Oh. And here's another warning for you. Your girlfriend likes to hit. Hard."

I laughed and made the slightest movement with my head so Corbett would know I wanted him to get into the van, but I waited until we were on the darkened street before saying anything.

Not bothering with any kind of build up or segue, I blurted out, "Zack knows where Dawn Green is."

"Zack?" he asked. "Who's Zack?"

"Naked Zack Galifianakis," I replied, while turning my head to look at him in the passenger's seat. "How could you have missed him? He's naked. And looks like Zack Galifianakis."

I couldn't remember what his real name was, but it wasn't necessary. Corbett had been a cop for his entire adult life. A naked Zack Galifianakis was clue enough.

"Who's Zack Galifianakis?" he asked, with a puzzled look on his face.

Maybe God hated me MORE than a little bit after all.

"Jesus Christ," I started and Corbett immediately jumped in with a grin, saying, "Now *Him*, I know!"

"For fuck's sake, Corbett! Don't you want to find her?" I asked, not giving in to my urge to smile.

Or take a swing at him, knowing I'd catch nothing but air anyway.

"Well sure I do," he grinned. "But that don't mean I can't fuck with *you* for the sake of *fucking with you*."

Speaking of fucking...

Sookie was waiting.

Where there would be fucking.

Celebratory anniversary fucking.

And not wanting to give Corbett any reason to follow me home, even if he couldn't get into my apartment, I shook my head while laying it on thick by saying in a disappointed tone, "I'm sure *Jason* would appreciate your humor while everyone is looking at *him* like he's a *murderer*. Sookie too. And I can't even *begin* to *imagine* how upset your *mom*..."

It was low. And I knew it. But desperate times called for desperate measures.

And I was desperate to be inside of Sookie.

Latex free.

I was wondering if it had even occurred to him he could just yell through the wall to ruin the mood when he rolled his eyes and interrupted my guilt trip with a chuckle and said, "Fuck you for raining on my parade. Now where can I find this naked guy who knows where Dawn is?"

"He ran off into the night with his brother in meth right before you showed up at the fire. He was worried I wanted to steal 'his girlfriend' and wouldn't tell me where he'd seen her." Recalling exactly what he'd said, I added, "And he said she was 'playing hard to get' and that she wouldn't tell him what her name was. He was calling her Merle thanks to her Merlotte's t-shirt."

Saying it all out loud made another thought occur to me and I turned to look at him, wondering out loud, "Maybe she's like Maudette. He's only been dead for a week, so he might not have come across anyone else like that."

Corbett thought about it for a minute before saying, "But if she's one a them milky whites, that would mean she wasn't killed where her car was found. They always hang around the last place they were alive."

True.

They even reenacted Civil War battles that made weird little kids piss their pants on field trips.

Instead of going into all of that, I responded, "So unless Naked Zack has some tie to Bon Temps that would've had him going back for a visit, Dawn was probably killed somewhere here in Shreveport. Her body was found in a ditch just off of the interstate, so maybe she was killed somewhere nearby. But if she's an opaque, it couldn't have been right there or else I would have seen her. And it had all of the markings of a body dump anyway."

"Kevin's been combing the whole damn town looking for her," he replied. "He would a told me if he'd a run across some naked dude."

"Don't say *dude*!" I groaned. When he looked at me questioningly, I only explained, "Find Naked Zack and you'll see why."

When I had nothing further to add to my explanation, he asked, "And where do you propose I go looking for Naked Zack? Shreveport's a big place."

"But how many ghosts are running around it naked? Afraid you're losing your Detective Doodlebug touch?" I snarked. At his responding glare, I chuckled and answered, "I've only ever seen him at the morgue and back at that seedy motel. That's where he bit the bullet and his friend smoked himself – literally – tonight across the street at the burned down storage facility. I would start by looking there."

We were pulling into the parking lot at the Coroner's Office by that point, so he waited for me to get out, hiding his curiosity poorly before asking, "Have any plans tonight?"

Yep. And they all involve your daughter and not a single piece of latex.

"Just gonna head home," I shrugged, trying to not give him any reason to suspect something was up.

Like what was coming up in my pants just thinking about it.

"Alone?" he asked, not buying my bullshit.

I don't know what he was so worried about. He'd find Naked Zack because even dead, he was still a good detective.

Pulling some indignation out of thin air, I turned to him and said, "Yes. *Alone*. Do you see anyone hanging around here waiting on me to get off?"

I already knew the answer was no. Because Sookie was waiting on me back at my place so we could get each other off.

Like Herveaux, he came up with his own reasons for why I sounded so put off and chuckled, "Don't get your panties in a twist because Sookie ain't following you around like a lost puppy. She's got a job and an early start in the morning."

It was more like she followed me around like a cat in heat than a lost puppy. And speaking of hot pussies...

"I know that," I fake yawned. "I'm just tired and I smell like fried meth lab. All I want to do is go home, take a shower and go to bed."

Home where Sookie was. The shower where I would get Sookie to take one with me. And the bed where she'd be lucky if she got a cat nap before the start of her next shift.

He studied me for a moment longer. The fried death/meth lab smell that came from the body bag I was pulling out of the van helped to make my eyes water, so he seemed to believe my excuse and said, "Alright. I'll go get Kevin to help me search for Dawn and let ya know if we find her."

"Good luck," I called out and turned to hide my grin from him.

Because *I* would be getting lucky as soon as I got home.

I practically ran through the halls with the body on the gurney and had him in a drawer in the morgue in under a minute.

I *actually* ran to my car before running back and grabbing my fireman's coat from the van just in case Sookie was serious about wanting me to wear it home.

I ran two yellow lights and one red one (after making sure there was no oncoming traffic) trying to get back to my place as quickly as possible.

And I ran up the flight of stairs with my keys already in my hand, throwing open the door and slamming it shut again, yelling out, "*Honey...I'm home!*"

I didn't wait to hear a response and seeing the kitchen and living room were Sookie-free, I ran back to the bedroom and stopped cold.

My bed was empty.

It looked exactly as I had left it, but before I could become maudlin I saw a ray of hope.

In the form of a ray of light peeking out from underneath the bathroom door.

As soon as I'd noticed it I registered the sound of water running in the shower and decided to see if I could sneak up on Sookie as well as she'd snuck up on me earlier.

And hopefully she wouldn't sweep my legs out from underneath me so that I landed on my ass on the floor of the tub.

That shit would hurt.

Stripping my clothes off like they were on fire, I said a silent 'amen' finding the bathroom door unlocked. I opened it slowly, just in case she was actually doing *something else* while the shower ran, to give her enough time to tell me to stop.

But she didn't.

Because she wasn't.

She was in the shower and according to my opaque shower curtain she was standing with her face directly under the water.

Perfect.

Calling on my own level of Jedi stealth, I crossed the small room in two strides. I paused for a split second, moving the curtain like a bomb might go off if I pulled it back too quickly, before looking over at Sookie to make sure she hadn't noticed me yet.

And she hadn't.

But then I noticed what her hands were doing.

One hand was massaging her breast and the other was massaging much lower than that, while small gasps and moans escaped her lips.

And just watching her made pre-cum escape my dick. No massaging necessary.

My feet carried me into the tub, but they did so silently because they didn't want to alert her to our presence any more than I did.

Not when just watching her threatened to make me cum.

She continued to stroke herself, working her body into a frenzy, and when her hips started to buck against her hand, I was torn between wanting to join in or just enjoying the show.

It was like being forced to choose between Sookie and Sookie.

What's a horny boyfriend to do?

When I couldn't take it any longer, I wrapped my hand around my aching cock and began stroking in time with her movements. While nothing could replace the feel of her hands on me, doing it myself while watching her came in a close second.

And I was about to cum in a second too.

But no longer caring about trying to sneak up on her, I didn't bother trying to stay quiet when my orgasm snuck up on me as soon as I watched her fall over hers.

My back hit the tiled wall while my eyes crossed and soon after I felt her wet hand take over where mine had stopped. The feel of her wet mouth placing kisses along my chest came next while she continued to stroke my cock back to life as she said, "I think *someone* enjoyed the show."

"I think *someone* needs a thesaurus," I chuckled, when I could finally speak again. "The word 'enjoy' doesn't come close. 'Mind blowing' is more like it."

My eyes finally uncrossed too, so when I looked down at her, she just smiled back and said, "Mind blowing. I'll show you *mind blowing*."

She dropped to her knees and had me in her mouth a second later, literally blowing my mind. It didn't take long for me to be hard again. Not when I had her mouth and naked wet body to work with, but wondering if she'd known I was watching her the whole time, I asked, "You knew I was there?"

"*Mmmhmmmm...*" she hummed around my cock.

I wasn't expecting it. I don't know why considering *I knew* her mouth was full, but that didn't stop my knees from buckling a little as I strained to remain upright.

She might laugh over needing to wear a C-collar because I fell over on top of her during a blow job, but I had a feeling it would fall into the Herveaux Beat Down category of hurting her. Even if I was sure that wasn't what he'd been referring to.

Never mind what Corbett would force me to endure.

Sookie seemed to realize my Achilles Heel was connected directly to her hum job and an evil glint appeared in her eyes right as she hummed again.

Minx.

Her going down on me might be able to bring me down, but I would be damned if I didn't take her down with me.

In a way that hopefully wouldn't involve a C-collar.

I wrapped my hand in her wet hair, groaning out loud in the next moment when she took that as a sign to force herself down far enough for me to hit the back of her throat. But when she pulled back, I pulled her up by her hair before letting go so I could grab onto her hips and lift her all the

way up. She laughed when her back hit the tile wall and our foreheads tipped together as we both moaned when I slowly pushed inside of her.

I needed a thesaurus too.

Mind blowing didn't come anywhere close to describing what it felt like to be inside of her without anything in between us.

I paused once I was all the way in, needing a moment to calm the fuck down, while marveling over how perfect she felt.

Inside and out.

In fact, I couldn't find any reason to move until Sookie pushed her heels against my ass and breathed out, "Ride me, cowboy."

"Yes ma'am," I whispered in return.

Slowly I pulled out of her until we were playing 'just the tip' before slamming back in. My lips clamped down over hers in the next moment, while her other lips clamped down over my cock. And I could only be thankful for her erotic show and my for-shit willpower to not masturbate right along with her. Otherwise I was sure our ride would've already cum to a premature end.

"Harder, Eric..." she panted when I finally released her upper set of lips.

"Yes ma'am," I gritted out through my teeth. Over and over my hips moved against hers as though they were possessed and wouldn't be satisfied until her back and ass were permanently marked by the ceramic tiles. Sookie seemed to be just as possessed and her cries of, "More," only spurred me on.

Our differences in height made it impossible for my mouth to reach anywhere lower than hers, but the same couldn't be said for Sookie. I was already fighting off the begging my balls were doing in wanting their release, but when I felt her lips close over my nipple and her teeth clamp down on the skin surrounding it...

It like...went BOOM bro...

Cum exploded from cock and into her while I yelled loud enough the cops might get called. But all I could be cognizant of – all that I *cared* about – was the telltale feeling I had taken Sookie down with me.

Take *that*, minx!

While I continued to thrust into her, still riding the shockwaves of the most powerful orgasm of my life, her inner muscles continued to clench around my shaft milking me of everything I had.

But there was no need for concern. I was sure I could make more.

I just needed a minute.

We were both gasping for air as I took her all the way down to the shower floor and we sat still joined together while the water pelted us from up above.

"That was..." she panted and paused.

Her eyes were unfocused and her heart was beating rapidly in her chest, all while a smile lurked around the corners of her mouth.

Fucking. Beautiful.

When she didn't say anything else, I chuckled and leaned down to kiss her forehead, agreeing, "Yes, it was."

When we could both use our legs again, we took turns getting each other clean. And all of the dirty ways we ended up using to get one another clean made us carry it over to the bed. We laughed and played with one another long into the night, proceeding to make each other dirty all over again. But it was all good.

In fact *everything* both with and about her was good and when she fell asleep in my arms for the second night in a row I knew.

Without question.

Without a single doubt.

I was in love with Sookie Stackhouse.

Chapter 19: Chapter 19

Chapter 19

Rabbits.

If one animal could be used to describe the way Sookie and I acted around each other, it was a rabbit.

Because we fucked just like them and it was *fantastic!*

I swear to God, she touched my dick more than I ever had. Every day was like I was coming home from fighting a war and no sooner was I through the door than she was on her knees,

thanking me for my service by servicing me. Instead of my norm of being taunted by the near full box of condoms still in my nightstand, our roles had been reversed. My new normal was that now *I* was the one taunting *them*.

Because we fucked all the time without them and it was fucking *fantastic*!

Literally.

By the end of our first official week as boyfriend and girlfriend Sookie was practically living with me. I marked the occasion with flowers – I wouldn't be caught short on *that* again – and then she marked my back with her fingernails when we celebrated on the kitchen counter while our dinner burned in the oven. If fucking each other had been a crime, we would've been convicted in a heartbeat. We left trace evidence everywhere.

And did I mention it was *fantastic*?

I was happy. She was happy. And we weren't the only ones who noticed we were happy.

Chow quizzed me left and right, wondering out loud why I was smiling all of the time. He didn't believe me when I finally told him I had a girlfriend. And when I insisted I wasn't joking, he asked if I'd met her on Facebook and started calling me Manti Te'ric.

His belief in latex glove fairies wasn't the only reason he could be called an asshole.

But *he* was the one who nearly died from heart failure when Sookie walked into my office later on that day and pounced on me, not realizing he was in there too. It marked the first time in our relationship where she had been the one wearing a blush while I wore a shit eating grin.

It too was *fantastic*.

Of course we didn't have sex *all* the time. We talked all of the time too. Sometimes even while having sex.

That was *really* hot.

But if we couldn't be in the same room, one of us either called or sent a text to let the other know we were thinking of them. It was a relationship dynamic I had always wondered about after seeing firsthand how Madden's wife had him on a very short leash. Rightfully so, considering he had a reputation for having a wandering eye, but even so I thought it would feel suffocating to have to be glued to my cell phone at all times. But it turned out it didn't feel smothering at all. I knew I didn't *have* to check my phone every five minutes and when work beckoned, I didn't. We each had jobs that meant we would be busy doing other things where it wasn't practical or even possible to answer a call or text. Which was why it always felt all the sweeter whenever I did get to hear her voice or read a text from her. And as much I loved reading about the dirty things that were on her mind at any given time, my favorite text had to have been when she told me what happened with Alcide.

The day after the fire he had gone back to the station and told everyone about Sookie and me. Only in his version of the events and how they unfolded that night, we had been sitting in a tree, G.

Sookie may have said *we* weren't twelve, but I wasn't so sure about Alcide.

She'd laughed along with him at first because she was a good sport. But when he wouldn't let it rest, by the end of the second week, Sookie decided she'd had enough. She repaid him by leaving a beer bong on his desk (to help facilitate him mastering the art of fast paced swallowing) along with a bunch of bridal magazines.

And she'd waited to do it right when she knew his girlfriend would be stopping by.

Apparently Debbie had seen the magazines before Alcide even had a chance to get back to his desk and she automatically assumed the beer bong was for his future bachelor party. Every day since then she had been stopping by the station and using her bare fingered left hand to gesture at everything at every opportunity.

But it wasn't his ring finger that Alcide had taken to showing Sookie whenever she snickered from her desk watching the two of them.

Sookie laughingly told me she actually feared for her life when she – accidentally-on-purpose – dropped a folder at his feet while he and Debbie were standing in the hallway. He automatically knelt down to pick it up and Debbie squealed out loud thinking he was about to propose.

And according to Sookie, his deer in the headlights look was *fantastic!*

The only thing that *wasn't* fantastic was, knowing I was still holding something back.

Not accidentally. It was absolutely on purpose.

I wanted to tell Sookie about my curse. I *really* did. Keeping it from her was the only thing about our relationship that felt wrong. I felt like a fraud for allowing either one of us to get in any deeper with each other without revealing my quirk, but I never found the right time. The right words. I'd hoped Corbett or Kevin would be able to track down Dawn. That Naked Zack or his trusty sidekick Bro would turn up again. To find out what had been done to her so it would give me the opening to tell Sookie about me, my curse, and I, but they hadn't been found.

And with every uneventful update from the paranormal pair, I didn't know what I felt more. Frustrated or relieved I'd been spared for at least one more day.

But it helped being able to go home to Sookie and work out my frustrations with her in my bed, so we both could find a different kind of relief. And as great as it was, sex on a daily basis with her wasn't the only perk that came with being in a relationship with Sookie.

My official boyfriend status came with my own official seat at the Stackhouse dining room table for their weekly family dinners. Not only was her Gran's cooking better than anything I'd ever tasted, but it was fun family entertainment all around watching Jason mope around like he was a dead man walking thanks to his forced grounding. Even Adele found it amusing and would flash us a wink and a smile when he wasn't looking, while using a stern edge to her voice telling him he should be grateful and maybe it was a sign from God that keeping his privates private was a good thing.

So Jason waited until she was in the kitchen to bitch privately that God didn't give him balls only so they would turn blue. Now that I was consistently worshipping at the altar of Sookie, I couldn't disagree with him.

I'd also been invited to tag along a few more times to visit Sookie's mother and I enjoyed those as well. But I could tell Sookie was still apprehensive, waiting for me to freak out whenever Michelle started to talking to an empty chair. Being the good husband he was, Corbett was usually there and would take a seat in it, actually answering her back even though I was the only one who could hear him. It was sweet, in a sad sort of way.

And while I could tell Michelle liked me, Sookie's Gran – dare I say – *loved* me. Maybe even more than Sookie whatever-she-felt about me, but I was okay with that. I was a patient man. A patient and petrified little bitch of a man. Because while I may have already figured out I was in love with her, I'd sure as hell kept that to myself too.

After all, it just seemed like one more thing that could possibly scare her off. I had enough to deal with as it was.

It was during the weekly family dinner at Adele's house on the day after our official one month anniversary (Sookie was still walking a little funny and I was still smiling about it), when another relationship perk made itself known.

"Are you both coming up on Saturday for the fair?" Adele asked.

Fair? There was going to be a fair? Where I could be tortured by Sookie, watching her do sinful things to a candied apple?

A cotton candy covered Sookie...

"Sure," I spoke up immediately and glanced over at Sookie's smiling face. "We don't have any other plans, do we?"

That was another relationship dynamic I was quick to fall in line with. Having to ask someone else for their opinion before I automatically made plans.

I was okay with that too.

"That depends," she replied before turning her suspicious eyes towards Adele. "Are you entering their annual bake-off?"

"I am," she smiled back. "I think my pecan pie has as good a shot as any this year."

"Oh. Well then." She let out a tinkling laugh and added, "I'll be there with bells on."

And if I had my way, not long after that my little Tinkerbelle would be wearing nothing but cotton candy.

That Saturday we got to Bon Temps a little after four in the afternoon. We planned on staying the night at Adele's house since Sookie was sure we'd both be beat by the time it was over. She was also sure her Gran would expect us to sleep separately, but that was okay with me.

Corbett could get into *that house* just fine and the cotton candy would keep until the next day when we got back to my place where he couldn't.

The fair looked to be in full swing, with the entire town in attendance, and Sookie seemed to know each and every one of them. Walking through the crowd hand in hand was like something out of a dream. A dream I'd never allowed myself to have because I never thought I'd find someone who would want to attach themselves to me.

Literally or figuratively.

Maybe Sookie was actually a unicorn.

I'd lucked out that she hadn't caught me talking to anyone who she couldn't see too, but I knew it was only a matter of time. I even had another reminder of that fact when we'd stopped for gas after getting off the interstate and I'd been forced to watch Maudette's final moments over and over again while I was waiting to pay for ten gallons of unleaded.

I wanted to tell her. I *needed* to tell her. Hoped to convince her I wasn't crazy and that I could actually see dead people, all the while hoping she wouldn't run off screaming into the night.

I'd gone running with her on more than one occasion. She was quick on her feet and didn't get winded easily. I'd never catch her.

But I also had to consider if she did believe me, I would also be forced to admit Michelle couldn't really see Corbett. I wouldn't outright lie to her, so I would be forced to destroy whatever hope she had that her mother wasn't ill.

And I wasn't looking forward to it. Any of it.

I was pulled from my inner debate by the sound of a gruff voice, huffing out, "Stackhouse. Come to see the little people? Shreveport not doing it for you anymore? Or are you just here to keep an eye on your violent offender of a brother?"

Given his uniform, I guessed him to be Kevin's replacement. He was big and burly, but not like Alcide was. Alcide's girth came from time spent on a weight bench. This guy's appeared to have come from one of the kegs at Merlotte's.

And I'd guess it to be sour beer given the look on his face.

"Roscoe," she nodded towards him with a glare of her own. "I've come to visit my hometown and spend time with my family. Unlike you, I don't need a gun strapped to my side to prove I can hang with the big boys. And since I don't want to give my brother any reason to *actually* commit a crime, I won't tell him what you said so he'll be forced to beat your ass like it's freshman year football tryouts all over again. Now why don't you just run along and go find Boss Hog. If you're lucky, he'll choke on a corn dog and you can finally be the big fish in this little pond."

She didn't wait for any kind of verbal reply, seemingly satisfied by his nonverbal cues she had gotten to him. His screwed up beet red face was response enough for her to pull me along with her when she started walking again. Sookie waited for us to get out of earshot from him before grumbling, "I always hated that asshole."

Recalling our second trip to Bon Temps together right after Maudette's murder, I finally put all of the pieces together and asked, "That's the guy who got hired over you?"

"Roscoe P. Coltrane," she nodded. "AKA Andy Bellefleur. His family history in Bon Temps goes back as far as ours does, but he's always been snooty. Him and his sister Portia. Like they're better than everyone else. I'm sure he danced a little jig when he got the job over me since he's still bitter about Jason beating him out for the first string quarterback spot back in high school. It didn't help his ego any that Jason was two years behind him, but it certainly helped their winning record. He gets his attitude from his grandmother Caroline, who he *still* lives with. She hides it better and is always polite when she speaks, but she carries an air of superiority around with her." Smiling wider, she added, "Apparently she's been blessed with unscented defecation."

"That's handy," I laughed, but before I could say anything more we ran into Jason.

Or rather, he ran into Sookie in a childish attempt to knock her down.

She'd let go of my hand and used his momentum to have him underneath her with his arms pinned behind his back before I could say cotton candy.

It was still at the forefront of my mind.

"When are you gonna learn?" she laughed.

"Never," he snorted, while struggling to free himself. "I'll never accept my baby sister can hand my ass to me."

Funnily enough, I accepted and even expected her hands to be on my ass.

"I'm surprised you're actually here, messing with me when you and your God given blue balls are finally out of lockdown," she huffed, trying to keep him underneath her.

"I'm out on work release," he huffed back before trying to free himself by bucking her off of him. "Geez Sook, you put on some weight?"

Only by a few ounces.

We were sure to try and get our fill of each other before heading to Bon Temps, so she was full of my cum.

It was, perhaps, the only downside to no latex.

He earned a punch to the back of his thigh for his snide remark, so he finally gave up struggling and said, "Gran said I might get an early parole if I behaved when I drove her over here."

Sookie released him and they were still getting up from the ground and brushing the dirt away when I felt another hand loop through my arm. Looking down I saw Adele glaring at the two of them as she said, "I wouldn't expect any calls from the governor any time soon," before she turned to me and whispered conspiratorially, "Maybe if we keep walking and act like we don't know them, no one will know we're actually *with* those two knuckleheads."

"We can try," I smiled and led her away. We both ignored the sounds of laughter, intermingled with slaps and punches being thrown behind us, while I escorted the eldest Stackhouse to the tent where the baking contest would be judged.

And her age wasn't the only reason why she was the most mature of the bunch.

But I actually liked Sookie's playful nature. Given what she was forced to deal with thanks to the nature of her job, I was impressed she didn't let it affect her all that much. She had her prim and proper side when it was warranted. And she definitely had her badass side which I liked *very much*, but I liked that she still had a childlike carefree spirit. It wasn't something I'd ever been able to have, but by being with her I finally got to experience what it was like. It was one of the things I loved most about her.

Not that she would know because I was still too chicken shit to say the words.

Once Adele was settled and became engrossed in a conversation with one of the members of her club, Sookie pulled me away. We ended up walking hand in hand, silently circling the fairgrounds, and I could tell she had something on her mind, so I waited for her to say it.

Like I said. I was patient.

On our first loop around I noticed Rene in the crowd. He was there with his sister along with whom I assumed must be his girlfriend Arlene and her two kids. When he caught me looking at

them, his eyes got just a fraction harder, but he still managed to smile and nod before looking away again.

Weirdo.

On our second loop around the crowd I saw Sam Merlotte. He'd set up a small tent selling sodas, beer, and sandwiches, but when he saw me with Sookie, the look on his face told me mayo wouldn't be the only thing coating my sandwich if I dared to order one from him.

Thanks. But no thanks.

On our third loop around I noticed Bill Compton talking to a dark haired woman I hadn't seen before when Jason seemed to appear out of thin air next to them. Seeing his flirtatious smile directed towards her and the grimace on Compton's face, I chuckled and nudged Sookie saying, "He's at it again."

I was certain Sookie would feel compelled to go and pull him away. Or at the very least, Justin Timberlake him and put his dick in a box.

A locked one.

So I was shocked when she stopped walking and turned to stand so that she was facing me with her back to them. The fear in her eyes made my mouth start to open so I could ask her what was wrong. Or offer to go and tackle Jason myself if that was what she was afraid of, when she halted my unspoken suggestion – that would likely only result in me needing medical attention – by blurting out, "I love you."

She...*what?*

She chewed on her lower lip while I chewed over her words, with my eyes darting around looking for the ghost of Ashton Kutcher thinking I must be getting punk'd, when she said, "I know we haven't been together for very long. It's only been a month and I know you've never been in a relationship before and I don't want to scare you off, but I've known for a while and I can't hold it in anymore. You're so great. A great person, not to mention great in bed, but you put up with my dipshit brother and you don't look at my mother like she's crazy. And you're sweet with my Gran who'd probably give me a run for my money if she were fifty years younger. You're kind and smart and sexy and you're not put off by my job or try and act like an overbearing ass like you have to prove something because I carry a gun. You're just perfect really and I just had to tell you."

I was still stunned silent. Silent for long enough that she looked even more nervous and dropped her gaze, adding, "I don't expect you to say..."

That's as far as she got because my lips landed on hers, cutting off what was sure to be her ridiculous notion that I didn't love her back. Ridiculous because I'd known I loved her an hour into our official relationship.

Not that we were keeping score.

When the catcalls from the passersby got loud enough to intrude on our in-lovely little world, I pulled back and looked her in the eye. Finally admitting out loud one of the many things that had been plaguing my thoughts where she was concerned by saying, "I love you too."

"Really?" she asked, still looking apprehensive. "It's okay if you don't. I mean I don't want you to feel like you have to say it back to me. I know it's early on and I'm your first girlfriend. I'd just be happy if you didn't leave me standing here in a cloud of dust and take off for the hills after I dumped that on you out of nowhere."

"I'm not just saying it to make you feel better," I softly smiled, hoping to reassure her. "I felt it on the night you agreed to be my girlfriend and that feeling has only gotten stronger with every passing day." Wrapping my arms around her, I tilted my forehead to rest on hers and looked into her eyes, saying, "I love you Sookie Stackhouse. Dipshit brother and all."

A happy, if not relieved, expression lit up on her face as she chuckled, "And *that* is one of the many reasons why you're so perfect." She rubbed her body against mine, tempting me into a public indecency charge, and said, "But I'm a dipshit too. I'm the one who told Gran we would be staying with her tonight and then waited until we were surrounded by a town full of people to tell you I love you. There's nowhere for us to go and celebrate."

She was right. Not about being a dipshit, but celebratory in-love-fucking would have to wait.

I wasn't so sure I was *that* patient.

It turned out Sookie wasn't feeling all that patient either. We managed to make it through the judging contest. Adele won first prize with her pecan pie and after having enjoyed it on more than one occasion, I wasn't at all surprised. But apparently everyone else was. Her win was considered a big upset because Roscoe's grandmother *always* won with her chocolate cake recipe and Sookie told me later on her Gran beating Caroline Bellefleur felt better than if she had won the job over Roscoe.

And then she tested my already proven for-shit willpower by furtively stroking the front of my pants and whispering about God's plan and how she never would've met me otherwise.

I couldn't say what God's plan was. Mine was finding a dark corner where we could make in-love all night long.

Jason had disappeared soon after the winners were announced, I assumed with the brunette I'd spotted him stealing from Compton earlier, but he'd at least left Adele's car behind so she wasn't stranded.

And we weren't forced into driving her home.

Sookie told her we still wanted to hang around for a bit, but as soon as Adele's tail lights had cleared the parking lot, she was pulling me back towards my car. We went at it in the front seat like a couple of teenagers until Roscoe hit the siren on his patrol car as he passed us by. I was guessing he didn't see the way Sookie chose to acknowledge his cockblock with her one finger salute, but she had me drive to a secluded spot on the other side of town where we could be alone.

And celebrate.

In my backseat.

Not quite *all* night long, but it was close enough.

And I was happy. So happy that I doubted there was anything that could take the smile from my face. Sookie loved me.

What more did I need?

It was hours later by the time we got back to the farmhouse, but seeing Adele outside pacing on the front porch, I suddenly felt like an asshole. She must have been worried about us being gone for so long if she was still up at that hour. Sookie didn't look too worried about it, so I thought maybe it was something Adele always did whenever she stayed over. But just as I was pulling to a stop to park on the side of the house, I stopped the question my lips were in the process of forming.

Because in that moment, Corbett walked out of the house. Not that it was unusual to see him there, but what *was* unusual was the fact Adele seemed to be able to see him too.

I only knew for sure when they hugged one another.

And seeing them, I then knew something else for sure.

Sookie was already climbing out of the car and it took a second for the shock to wear off, with the dread already building in the pit of my gut, when Corbett looked to me in a panic and yelled, "Stop her from going inside!"

"Sookie!" I called out automatically. "Wait!"

My feet had carried me forward and I grabbed onto her arm before she could reach the porch steps. Not knowing what was waiting for us both on the porch and inside the house, she smiled back at me saying, "You can't possibly want another round in the backseat. And you can't possibly think if we did I'd be quiet enough to not wake Gran. I'd probably wake up the entire cemetery."

Adele's eyes went wide, either from hearing her granddaughter's admission or the fact I knew they were there, while Corbett still looked horrified. But his next words told me it had nothing to do with what Sookie had said.

"Don't let Sookie go in there," he pleaded. Glancing back at Adele, he looked both loving and furious as he added, "Momma didn't die peacefully in her sleep."

Chapter 20: Chapter 20

Chapter 20

No.

No no no no no NOOOO!

The wall of guilt hit me just as quickly as the reality Adele was dead, knowing it was my fault. If I hadn't been so eager to go celebrate with Sookie, then we would've been there. We could've stopped whoever had done this to her.

Adele would still be alive.

"Take her back to Shreveport," Corbett begged. "Make up an excuse and put her back in the car right now. Call in an anonymous tip about Momma."

"Eric?" Sookie asked with growing concern. "What's wrong?"

I was frozen where I stood, not knowing what to do and could only imagine whatever it was she was seeing on my face while my shame and remorse ate away at me. I doubted I could convince her to go back to Shreveport out of the blue and really, I didn't want to. I didn't want to leave Adele's body for Jason to find. I didn't want Sookie to find out she was dead when we were back in the city. It wouldn't be fair to either one of them and she'd be ten times as upset finding out her grandmother had been murdered while we'd been gone. Thinking Adele had passed away in her sleep had been bad enough.

Knowing she hadn't was a thousand times worse.

"Sookie, I..."

I could only stare back at her, wondering what I was going to tell her. I didn't want her to see whatever it was that awaited us on the other side of the door. But how could I keep her from going inside without telling her why?

"Don't let her go in there, Eric," Corbett warned. "Momma's...she..." he started before he got too choked up to continue.

"Calm down Corbett," Adele soothed. "They're not going anywhere." And even in death she had the grace to smile at me with nothing but love in her eyes when my own met hers. "You can really see me..." she marveled and added, "I always knew there was something special about you, but this is just too wonderful for words."

Sure. Because they weren't the ones faced with having to tell Sookie she couldn't go inside because her grandmother's murdered body was in there.

"Sookie doesn't know, does she?" Adele asked and because she was also a smart woman, she looked to Corbett for the answer likely realizing I couldn't give her one. He only confirmed her suspicions with a shake of his head.

And all it did was make me feel even worse because I could then see the tears on his face.

"What is it Eric?" Sookie asked, sounding even more worried.

When I didn't say anything, Adele offered, "It's okay Eric. Corbett's just being overprotective. It's inevitable that she'll see me anyway and honestly, if I wasn't lying on the kitchen floor, it would probably look like I was just sleeping."

That got Corbett talking again when he yelled out, "SLEEPING? WITH SOME ASSHOLE'S HANDPRINTS ALL OVER YOUR NECK? SLEEPING?"

"*Now you watch your tone*, young man," she chastised him. And if the situation weren't so awful, I'd probably laugh. But knowing she had been strangled made it somewhat of an easier pill to swallow because I would hate for Sookie to see Adele covered in blood.

That picture would stain her memories for far longer than it would the floor.

Sookie was still staring at me looking more and more concerned, but I had to agree with Adele. Even if I blurted out that I could see dead people and she believed me that both her dead father and now dead grandmother were telling me what was inside, there still wouldn't be any way for me to stop her from going in.

She was going to see it no matter what.

But I couldn't let her go in and get blindsided. Even if it meant I would end up losing her in the end.

I loved her enough to put her wellbeing before my own.

I ended up pulling her with me and sat us down on the porch steps, hoping for once in my life the rumors about my weirdness had reached her ears. I started small by asking, "Sookie? Have you ever heard anything about me? Rumors back at the station?"

She stared back at me looking both amused and perplexed as she answered, "Well *rumor has it* you were spotted in a tree a few weeks back, gal that looked coincidentally *just like me*. It's not true is it? Because I seem to remember you being in the back of your van at the time of the allege incident. I alibied you out. There's a BOLO out on your doppelganger tree sitter though. He's still on the loose."

Christ, she was killing me. I loved her so fucking much and now I was moments away from losing her.

And it was *killing me*.

Her amusement changed back into concern when I didn't smile at her joke, but I cutoff her upcoming question by saying, "No, I meant *other* kinds of rumors. Ones about me being...*strange*. Maybe Flood said something to you about me?"

He was my one good shot. I'd gone to him and told him about Corbett's murderer and where both he and the weapon could be found. He may have convinced himself it had all been a drunken dream, but I hoped he would have at least said something to Sookie about it. After all, Corbett had been his partner and her father. She was his partner now and she was dating me, so he must have said something to her about it all.

At least, I hoped.

Realization dawned in her eyes and she stared back at me, seeming to brace herself as she said, "The Colonel...he...well, we were talking one day, not long after I joined the force. He was telling me how proud my dad would've been and we got to talking about his murder. I didn't know he'd been slowly drinking himself to death back then, but he said...well, *you did* come up in conversation."

When I didn't say anything or look confused as to why he would mention me, she swallowed hard and cut to the chase by asking, "Is it true?"

This was it.

This was the moment it could all come together or irrevocably fall apart.

While I was choking on the confirmation I was about to give Sookie, I heard Corbett in the background quickly filling Adele in on what was going on and then I heard her say, "Tell her Eric. It'll make things easier for you and she'll understand. I'm sure she will. And if she doesn't, then I'll figure out a way to whoop her tail from the grave."

Don't. Laugh.

I forced myself to keep my expression sedate while Corbett chuckled in the background, knowing Sookie would only think I was even crazier if I laughed now, when nothing about the situation we were in was funny.

"Is it true, Eric?" she repeated more forcefully, forcing my hand and forcing me to confirm, "Yes."

She silently stared back at me and it was deafening. The last time I'd outed myself it was to my parents and their only response was to put me in therapy and treat me like a pariah, counting down the days until I turned eighteen and left for college.

And her continued silence had me preparing for a similar response.

"You..." she finally began, "you went to the Colonel? You told him where the killer was hiding and where the murder weapon could be found?"

"Yes."

I'd also told Flood *how* I knew both of those things and only convinced him I wasn't batty by telling him what he and Corbett had been talking about in the car right before they'd gone into the store.

Sookie had been giving Corbett the silent treatment for a couple of days because he'd forbidden her from going to an un-chaperoned party the weekend before. He'd laughingly told Flood she was stubborn enough he might not hear a peep from her for a month and said he might have to get her that puppy she'd always wanted to get back in her good graces.

"*Because the ghost of my dead father told you,*" she said, with both her tone and eyes hard.

And there it was. The sound of disbelief. A prelude to the sound of silence when she left me sitting there on the porch because she thought I was batty. It was inevitable.

As was my answer.

Pulling back the hammer before I squeezed the trigger on my suicide by truth, I sighed, "Yes."

She still looked disbelieving and I knew her well enough by then I could tell she was going over the evidence in her mind, trying to make sense of it all. She hadn't bolted, which was a good sign, but I wasn't counting my chickens just yet.

"But...I thought...he...he knew about Momma. He was one of the *only ones* we trusted enough to tell. I...I thought he was just trying to make me feel better. Making up a story about you so I would think she wasn't the only one."

And there was my opening for suicide by truth, part two.

"Sookie," I said softly. "I'm afraid your mother can't really see or hear you father." Hoping to soften the blow, I added, "But if it makes you feel any better, he visits her all of the time. He's been there when we've gone to see her and he sits in the chair she thinks he's in and talks to her too. He still loves her and he's never left any of you."

"But," she argued. "You said you never met my father. How would you...how could you..."

Pulling the technicality out of thin air, I hedged, "I said I never met your father when he was on the force and that was the truth." Sighing again, I admitted, "I didn't meet him until *after* he died. He walked into the morgue while I was doing his autopsy."

"What?" she nearly shrieked. "Eric, if you're joking this isn't funny."

No. It *wasn't* funny. Nor was what I still had yet to tell her, so I said, "I'm not joking. I wouldn't joke about something like this. In fact I'm fucking terrified right now, but I've wanted to tell you for a while. Way back when you told me you had been keeping tabs on me through Maxine Fortenberry, I wanted to tell you because I'd known about you all along too. Your father never shuts up about you. And he *was proud* when you made the force and he's *still proud* of you now. He kept trying to get me to meet you, telling me we'd be perfect for each other. In fact, up until you came along, I'd say he was my best friend."

I could hear both Corbett and Adele aww'ing in the background, but my focus remained on Sookie as she asked, "So why are you telling me *now*? Is he *here*?"

By her suspicious tone of voice I could tell she still didn't believe me. It broke my fucking heart that she didn't believe me, but I wouldn't lie to her, so I answered, "Yes."

Her eyes snapped back to mine and it was then I could tell I was breaking her fucking heart too.

And it was killing me all over again.

Her blue eyes narrowed back at mine when she suddenly blurted out, "When we were little, daddy used to take me and Jason fishing every Sunday after church. One day Jason was grounded for egging old Jesse Compton's house, so daddy took me without him. Where did we *really* go?"

"That old man was *pissed!*" Corbett chuckled, while Adele chided, "*Language!*"

"Yes ma'am," he chuckled again, and said, "On the way to Wallace Lake, Sookie let it slip that she wanted to see a new movie that had just come out. But since we normally only went to that kind of thing as a family, she knew Jason would never want to go see it. So I took my baby girl to see *The Little Mermaid* and on our way home, we stopped by the market and I bought the biggest bass they had and told Jason she reeled it in all on her own. Talk. About. Pissed."

"Language!" Adele chuckled.

"Yes ma'am."

I couldn't help the small smile on my face when I repeated the story back to Sookie and I doubted she could help the tears that slowly trickled down her face.

"He's really here. You can see him. Hear him."

Even though her words didn't form a question, I knew they required an answer and replied, "Yes."

The dam on her tear ducts opened wide with the tears suddenly streaming down her face as she threw herself in my arms and cried, "I was being a *bitch* when he was killed. I hadn't talked to him for days because I was a snotty little shit. I hadn't told him I loved him that morning when he left for work. He said it to me, but I turned my nose up at him and didn't even bother to watch him walk out the door. I...I...I never got another chance." Turning her head fractionally, she sobbed softly into the night air, "I'm so sorry daddy. I'm so sorry."

Corbett appeared in my line of sight when he knelt down next to her and moved his face inches from hers, saying, "I know you loved me baby girl." Glancing at me, he added, "You tell her that I *always* knew she loved me and no matter how much of a little shit she could be, I always loved her too."

I whispered his words into her ear verbatim, adding to it what he'd told Flood that day in the car, and asked if a puppy would have helped his cause. It was enough to make her snort in between cries and when she calmed down some another realization seemed to dawn on her.

Her eyes grew wide and her cheeks flushed red as she pulled back and sputtered out, "Oh my god. He *heard* me, didn't he? What I said about you and me and...oh my god..."

Yes.

Oh my god.

I couldn't agree more, but for an entirely different reason, already knowing he'd heard worse from her on the night of the Hungry Hungry Hippo incident.

Sookie actually believed me.

I couldn't be sure until then. Everything about our conversation had been emotionally charged and I'd still been waiting for the other shoe to drop. For her sensibilities to kick in and call me a liar no matter how many things I knew about her that I couldn't possibly know. For her to at least look at me like I was a freak and run for those hills she was worried I might've headed to earlier that day when she told me she loved me.

And while it had been an unexpected declaration from her at the time, the bomb *I* just dropped was considerably bigger.

But she didn't run.

Because she still loved me.

"Is that why you told me? So I would shut up?" she asked through her hands, with her face now buried in them.

I was still reeling from the fact she believed me, but her questions made me sober up quickly. I still had another bomb waiting to drop, so I braced myself for what was to come and answered, "No. I told you because your dad isn't the only one here."

"Oh yeah?" she asked, finally looking up at me. "Did I just embarrass myself in front of my grandfather too?" Smiling and looking out over the porch and yard, she threw out a quick, "Sorry Peepaw!"

I didn't want to do it. God knows I didn't want to do it, but it *had* to be done, so I took her hand in my own and said softly, "No Sookie...I...I just didn't want you to be blindsided, but...*Adele* is out here too."

"What?" she asked with her face screwing up and her eyes darting around again before she put the pieces together and whispered, "But that would mean..."

Her eyes went wide as she bolted off of the steps and threw open the front door yelling out, "GRAN!"

I couldn't have caught her if I'd tried, so I followed behind her helplessly as she ran down the hallway to Adele's bedroom. Already knowing she would find the bed empty, I waited for her by the kitchen doorway and heard her yell out, "GRAN!" again as she checked the bathroom too. When she ran back moments later, I caught her by the shoulders and said, "She's in the kitchen."

"Gran!" she cried out as soon as we saw her and Sookie flung herself down onto the floor beside her body. Adele had been right when she'd said if she hadn't been lying on the kitchen floor it would've looked like she was asleep.

And I'd been to enough crime scenes to know this one was off.

I could see the handprints Corbett had yelled about surrounding Adele's throat, but the bruises formed by the killer's fingers were on the front of her neck. Indicating she'd been strangled from behind. Which made it all the more odd to find her body lying face up, with her eyes closed and her hands resting together over her stomach.

Her body had been staged. And given the peaceful appearance they had left her in and the fact she was strangled from behind, I would bet the house the killer knew her. Knew her and felt guilty about killing her.

I knelt down beside Sookie just as Corbett and Adele entered the kitchen through the closed back door. Even feeling horrible over Adele's murder and Sookie's reaction to it, I smiled a little when I heard Adele say, "Neat!" being able to pass through objects.

"Who?" Sookie sobbed. "Why? Why would anyone want to... Oh god... Eric. If we didn't stop and... if I hadn't wanted to... we would've been here. We could've stopped it!" She sank down and hugged Adele's body, crying out how sorry she was all over again.

And having already had the same thoughts, it was killing me all over again.

"Is she..." she stuttered through her hitched breathing. "Is Gran here? In the room with us?"

"Yes," I answered softly, while running my hand up and down her back.

"I'm so sorry Gran," she cried again, hugging her grandmother in the only way she could now.

Adele spoke up saying, "You tell Sookie I don't blame her one bit for what happened to me. It's my own fault for not locking the doors, but we're out in the middle of nowhere and I figured no one would want to bother with an old biddy like me. I lived a long and happy life. In fact, I barely had the time to be startled before everything went black. It didn't hurt at all and when I *came to* I was out on the porch. I never saw anybody else and I didn't know I could walk through walls to get back in the house. At least not until Corbett showed up. Tell her *that part is neat!*"

Once again, I repeated the words spoken to me verbatim. Sookie didn't seem to feel any better until I got to the part about it being 'Neat!' and she pulled away from Adele's body to look at me, saying, "She *would* think it's neat." Turning her swollen and red rimmed eyes onto the as-far-as-she-could-see empty room surrounding us, she added, "Pardon the rest of us for not feeling awed just yet by your new superpowers, Gran."

While she had her one-sided argument with her grandmother, something Adele had said struck a chord, so I ran outside to the car and got a pair of latex gloves from my bag. When I came back in I leaned down and checked her body, carefully lifting her head with one hand while running my other along her cervical column. I confirmed my suspicions out loud by saying, "It feels like her neck was broken at the C2 through C5 vertebrae where the spinal column is the most delicate. An x-ray could confirm it, but it's likely her spinal cord was severed completely." I gently placed her head back the way I had found it and looked at Sookie saying, "She would've died instantly."

And whoever had killed her had big hands.

Stray tears were still trickling down her cheeks, so I took my gloves off to wipe them away before pulling her back into my arms.

"We need to call 911," I softly reminded her, knowing it needed to be done.

"And Jason," she sniffled while more tears made their way down her cheeks.

"Do you want me to make the calls?" I asked, willing to do anything to make this night easier for her.

She nodded against my chest, but before I could pull my phone out of my pocket she looked up at me and whispered, "Thank you."

"You don't have to thank me," I replied automatically. "I'd do anything for you."

"No," she shook her head softly, while more tears welled in her eyes. "Not for that. *Thank you* for sharing your secret with me. *Thank you* for ending the guilt I still carried with me now that I know for sure my daddy knew I loved him. And *thank you* for being so amazing that because of you I know my Gran didn't suffer. That she wasn't scared in her final moments or blamed me for her death. Just like when my daddy died, the guilt would've eaten me alive. But now, *because of you*, instead of wondering about what was going through her mind when she was killed, *I know* she's wandering around through walls because *it's neat*."

She smiled gratefully through her tears before burying her head back against my shoulder and whispered, "I love you Eric."

I still couldn't believe she actually *believed* me. I was sure I had an 'I told you so' coming to me from Corbett, but I would take it. Gladly. Because now, as awful as the reasons were that I felt I *had* to tell Sookie about my curse, I knew *we* would be okay. If she could accept this part of me – knowing the *real* me – and even find a way to be grateful for what had mostly been the bane of my existence, then there was nothing we couldn't overcome.

Hugging her gently, I silently thanked God for the blond miracle in my arms and whispered in return, "I love you too Sookie."

I hoped it would be enough to see her through the long night we still had ahead of us. But no matter what happened, at least we both knew we would be facing it together.

Chapter 21: Chapter 21

Chapter 21

As soon as I was done placing the call to 911, I found Jason's number in my contacts and hit send. He didn't answer the first time I called. Or the second or third. And every time the ringing would switch over to his voicemail, I would end the call and hit send again. It wasn't until the fifth time that he finally answered, sounding out of breath and perturbed as he huffed out, "Somebody better be dead."

I cringed at his choice of words, but kept my voice calm and steady as I said, "Jason. It's Eric." Pausing for only a moment to allow it to sink in and adding a more somber tone to my voice, I said, "You need to come home."

I could hear a female's voice in the background asking him who was on the phone. And when he didn't say anything to either one of us, she asked him what was wrong. I could only imagine

what she was seeing on his face, but I could certainly guess. It wasn't like I was in the habit of calling Jason or giving him what amounted to marching orders, so it was likely the only reason why he ended up replying just as somberly, "I'll be there in five." His worried tone told me he suspected something was wrong, but I was grateful he didn't ask and just ended the call.

The news his grandmother had been murdered should be given face to face.

Only a few minutes had passed since I'd placed the call to 911 when I saw the red lights flashing through the windows and heard a car pulling up to the front of the house. Moments later the sound of a car door slamming and heavy footsteps coming up the porch steps followed. I hadn't bothered to shut the front door when I'd trailed Sookie into the house, so there was nothing to stop Andy Bellefleur from coming inside and appearing in the doorway to the kitchen.

"Uh..." he said with his eyes landing everywhere but Adele's body. "Bud's on his way Sookie," he finally offered. "We should uh...maybe go wait for him in the other room."

His demeanor was a lot more respectful than it had been at the fair and it was a good thing.

Because I would've likely been arrested for beating his ass if he'd dared to say anything to Sookie that had even the tiniest inkling of the shitty attitude he'd shown earlier.

Sookie didn't move away from my shoulder. She hadn't said a word after telling me she loved me and hadn't acknowledged him at all, so I was more than a little worried she was going into shock. A lot had been dumped on her in the span of mere minutes, from finding out I was friends with her dead father to finding out her grandmother had been murdered.

No matter how cute Adele was at that very moment, putting her hand into the closed refrigerator door all the way up to her elbow and saying with wonder, "Now will you look at that," I doubted Sookie would find it so endearing right now even if she could see and hear her.

Lifting her off of the kitchen floor, I carried her to the couch where I sat her down next to me. When she was settled, Bellefleur mumbled he would wait for Bud outside and left us alone, but seeing how green – literally – he appeared at seeing a dead body made me wonder just how well they'd do at solving the crime. The other two murders *could have* been coincidental, but I didn't believe they were. Both women could be linked to Jason and now with Adele being the next victim it was impossible to deny the Stackhouse family was the killer's target.

And I couldn't sit idly by hoping Boss Hog and Roscoe would get a clue, much less *find* one.

Since Sookie was still near catatonic, I reached for my phone once more and called another number I'd never needed to use before now. At least he picked up on the first ring, unsurprisingly sounding like I'd woken him since it was the middle of the night, but he perked up instantly when I said, "Herveaux. It's Eric Northman. Sookie's grandmother was murdered tonight. We found her body at their house. She was strangled in the kitchen."

I found out the hard way Sookie *was* paying attention because her body began to shake again while more tears formed as she cried softly against my shoulder. But over her soft sobs I was able to hear Herveaux say, "*Mother fu...*" He paused and then sounded wide awake when he added, "I'll get ahold of Flood. We'll be there in twenty." Bon Temps was an hour north of Shreveport, but knowing him like I now did, I didn't doubt him at all and could already hear him shuffling around in the background getting dressed. My respect for him only grew when he added in a softer tone, "You take of our girl and you tell her we're going to find the bastard who did this." And then switching to an oddly comforting scarier tone, he snarled out, "And we're going to make him pay."

I couldn't agree more and I'd be willing to help him hide the body.

He ended the call, but I didn't have time to think about his promise when I heard the sound of another engine tearing up the driveway followed by Bellefleur's voice calling out, "Stackhouse! Just hold your horses..." His words were cut off with an oomph and the sound of something heavy landing on the porch when a frantic looking Jason suddenly appeared in the doorway a second later.

He was half dressed and bare footed, but seeing Sookie's tear stained eyes as she turned to look up at him had him mimicking her earlier path as he tore down the hallway yelling out, "GRAN!"

I didn't think Sookie could have moved if she wanted to, but *I* didn't want her to, so I peeled her off of me and walked towards the kitchen to wait for Jason's search to inevitably come my way. My path had taken me past the front door where I could see Bellefleur pulling himself up from where I assumed Jason had knocked him down on the porch, but my focus was back on Jason when I heard him running my way.

His eyes landed on Adele's body through the kitchen doorway as he cried out her name in horror, with his own automatically moving towards hers. So I planted my feet and grabbed him around the waist before he could get to her, saying, "She's gone Jason."

"Gran!" he shouted again, struggling in my grasp, and snarled at me, "Let me go!"

"No Jason," I said as calmly as I could. It was harder than I thought it would be seeing him cry, but I held firm and added, "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry, but she's already gone. There's nothing we can do for her. And the killer could have left evidence on her body, so we need to leave her there for now."

He finally stopped struggling, but his eyes never left Adele's body and my arms never left his, which was how I ended up catching him when his knees gave out and he sagged against me whimpering in disbelief, "Why? Why would anyone..."

I'd been wondering the same thing, but now wasn't the time. Nothing I said at that moment could make it any easier on him and hearing Sookie's cries escalate into choking sobs had me dragging his limp body back into the living room. Another brunette, different than the one I'd spotted him trying to coax away from Bill Compton earlier that afternoon, was standing just outside the front

door next to a glaring Bellefleur. I had half a mind to slam the door in their faces, feeling like they were intruding on a very private family moment. But instead I ignored the both of them and simply put Jason next to Sookie on the couch where they immediately turned to each other for comfort in one another's arms.

Seeing them both trying to find solace from one another made me suddenly feel like *I* was the one who was intruding. Adele's death both shocked and saddened me. I was sure I would be playing the 'what if' scenarios and feeling the guilt of not following her home for a long time to come, but at least *I* could still see her. Talk to her.

And before tonight I would've paid any price to be rid of my curse. Gone to any lengths to just be normal, but now for the first time I was actually grateful for it. Because at least now, thanks to me and my affliction, Sookie would still be able to talk to her too.

Corbett and Adele had both moved into the living room by then and I could tell they felt just as helpless as I did. While I'd been surrounded by death for my entire life, both personal and professional, I had zero experience when it came to this side of it. But I knew enough to understand that their grief would have to run its course.

It wasn't long before I could hear another police cruiser screaming up the driveway, with both their lights and sirens on, so I walked to the still open front door to give Jason and Sookie a little privacy. He shut the sirens off as soon as he parked and I recognized the Sheriff, Bud Dearborn, from the one and only time I'd been in their police station, sitting in the driver's seat. He looked as though he'd dressed in a hurry, but while I was watching and waiting for him to get out of his car, I heard Bellefleur ask the girl beside him, "Why are *you* here?"

I couldn't decide what he sounded more – surprised or disgusted. But she didn't hide her affront over his tone when she answered, "I was with Jason when he got the call to come home. I'd driven him back to my place when we left the fair, so he didn't have any other way to get here."

"You've been with him?" he asked disbelievingly. "*The whole time?*"

"Yes," she snapped back and matching his tone. "*The whole time.*"

Dearborn was making his way up the steps by then and nodded at the girl, not looking nearly as surprised to see her there and only saying, "Amy," before he then turned to Bellefleur and asked, "What have we got Andy?"

Bellefleur still looked like he was chewing glass, but his tone was back to being professional when he answered, "Mrs. Stackhouse...she uh...well the call came in that they found her in the kitchen."

That's all he had to say?

I had *zero* confidence in Bon Temps' finest, so I turned to face Dearborn and interjected, "Adele Stackhouse was murdered. Strangled from behind given the bruising on her throat and my preliminary examination leads me to believe her neck was broken. She likely died instantly."

Both Dearborn and Bellefleur stared back at me with their mouths gaping open before Dearborn cleared his throat and said, "I heard you were a doctor, but..." when Bellefleur suddenly found his voice again.

He interrupted his superior, snapping out, "That there's a *crime scene* and *you* just contaminated evidence! I should arrest you right now!"

"I'm a medical examiner at the Shreveport Coroner's office," I snapped back and took a step forward to put me in his personal space. He was bigger than me, but with my sudden rage I felt infinitely larger at that moment and gave not a single fuck about *who* or *what* he was. As far as I was concerned he was just the asshole who already had one unsolved murder under his belt and I would be damned if he was going to blame anything other than his gross ineptness for having *two*.

But since I couldn't come out and say we already knew Adele was dead before we even walked into the house, I turned to Dearborn and lied, adding, "Once I determined she wasn't breathing and her body temperature was already dropping, I knew it was too late to try CPR." I actually knew because she'd been wandering in and out of the closed pantry saying, "Neat!" at the time. "But seeing the bruising on her neck and knowing Sookie was distraught over the possibility her grandmother had suffered in her final moments, I put gloves on and examined her neck. It felt like the C2 through C5 vertebrae had been snapped and probably severed her spinal cord completely. An x-ray would confirm it. And like I said, Sookie of course was distraught and she hugged Adele's body, so you might find trace evidence from her on the body. But since we spent the afternoon with her I can say I saw Adele get hugs from at least half of the town firsthand, so there's likely a lot of trace evidence left behind anyway."

And they could both fuck off if they didn't like it.

I'd have to ask Adele later on, but I would guess she was attacked not long after she'd gotten home. She was still dressed in the clothes she'd worn that afternoon and a good three hours had passed from the time she'd left the fair until we had gotten back to the house. Her skin *was* noticeably cooler when we first touched her, but even if we'd found her within minutes it would've done us no good if my suspicions about her cause of death were correct.

But knowing if we'd gone home with her, she would have probably still been alive, so my guilt continued to eat away at me anyway.

Dearborn just continued to stare at me while Bellefleur panted angry breaths through his nose like a bull waiting to charge.

I continued to not give a single fuck.

When Dearborn eventually seemed to physically shake off whatever his thoughts were, he looked somewhat appeased and nodded at me before turning to the others and saying, "Andy. Why don't you take Amy back to the cruiser and get a statement from her while we wait on Mike Spencer to get here."

I recognized the name as belonging to the medical examiner who had completed Maudette's autopsy. I'd had no official reason to request her case file before now, but with Dawn's body being found in Shreveport and another murder added on, at least now Herveaux would have one.

There were more than enough links in the three murders to make chain from Bon Temps all the way to Shreveport.

I had no working knowledge of the man. No idea of the caliber of doctor he was. And while I wouldn't – *couldn't* – be the one to do Adele's autopsy, I didn't want her left in the hands of an imbecile either. So while Bellefleur begrudgingly walked away to do as he was told and Dearborn went inside to see Adele's body for himself, I contemplated calling my boss, Victor Madden.

Bon Temps was well out of his jurisdiction, but he was also well connected. He'd been politicking for years and had more than enough clout to back up his egomaniacal personality. It was a trait I usually tried my best to ignore whenever I had to deal with him, but now I was just thankful I'd never burned that bridge by being disrespectful. I knew he liked me well enough and my stellar performance evaluations told me he was happy with my work. But I could only hope it was enough to do what I was about to ask him to do, knowing a call from him could move mountains.

Or, at the very least, move murdered bodies an hour south down to Shreveport.

He too picked up on the first ring, sounding more alert than my previous two callers, and shocked me even more by answering, "Eric? You're not on call."

He had my number stored in his caller ID and knew my work schedule?

I shouldn't have been surprised considering how meticulous the man was. It was the one trait of his that had allowed me to overlook all of his other more obvious flaws. He'd mentored me when I was first hired and by training under him, I was admittedly a better medical examiner because of it. The man missed nothing and it drove me to make sure I missed nothing as well.

After all, I couldn't *always* rely on the deceased's ghost to show up in the morgue and tell me what killed them.

"Victor," I acknowledged uncomfortably, but knew he would correct me if I called him Mr. Madden again. "I have a favor to ask."

I went on to explain everything that had happened, from Maudette's murder in Bon Temps to Dawn Green's body being dumped in Shreveport and ending with Adele's murder that night.

How they could be connected and how little faith I had in local law enforcement, which extended to their coroner by association. He listened to everything I had to say without interruption and when I was done he surprised me yet again by saying, "I knew Corbett Stackhouse when he was on the force. He was a good man and a fine detective. And I hear his daughter is following in his footsteps quite well. So if your suspicions are correct, then I'd hate to let some backwoods coroner used to only dealing with hunting accidents and heart attacks to impede on the this investigation. The bad guys already won one by taking Corbett before his time. If the rest of his family is in danger, I'll be damned if I let them win another one. I'll make some calls and get Chow on his way up there. You make sure nobody other than him leaves with that body and I'll personally do the autopsy when he gets back."

Stunned.

That's all there was to me at that moment. But I managed to breathe out a grateful thank you with my sigh of relief before he ended the call.

Just in time, too.

Their van had seen better days, as had the driveway it was forced to travel on, but seeing the man exit the vehicle wearing his mossy oak hunter's camouflage getup made me more thankful than ever for Victor's assurance he would be doing the autopsy.

I wouldn't trust that oaf to carve a Thanksgiving turkey.

He walked up the front porch steps looking like he was still half asleep without any equipment whatsoever, but when he got close enough I could smell the alcohol coming out of his pores.

Un-fucking-believable.

I'd never seen him before so I could only guess he was Mike Spencer, but when he tried to go inside without a word, I blocked his path.

"Excuse me," he huffed, finally looking a little more alert now that I was in his way.

I ignored what etiquette dictated I should do and continued to block him from going inside as I asked, "Are you Mike Spencer?"

"Yeah," he replied suspiciously, with his glassy eyes narrowing back at me. "Who are you?"

The mother fucker who'll be standing in your way from getting to Adele's body.

Instead of saying that, I only replied, "Eric Northman. I'm with the Shreveport Coroner's Office. You won't be needed. We're taking this case."

"The hell you are," he gruffed out, both trying and failing to get his beer baby to cooperate in bowing up on me. "This here's *Renard Parish*. Shreveport ain't got no jurisdiction up this way."

Maybe not, but we have better grammar.

"We'll just have to see about that," I replied, shifting slightly so that I filled the entire doorway, while I mentally shifted the boundaries of parish lines across the state on my mental map. Adopting a more derisive tone, I added, "But you have some time to sober up while we get that sorted out and until that happens? You're not getting anywhere near Adele Stackhouse's body."

If nothing else, I could at least depend on Chow's lead foot to get him there quickly, if only so he could go back to bed that much sooner.

His red eyes sized me up, but I had no doubts I could take him down easily. He must have had the same suspicions because he glared at me and then turned towards the police cruisers and yelled, "Andy! Get your ass over here and tell *this* ass to get the hell outta my way!"

With the two of them, I might need Jason's help to take them down.

Sensing he finally had the chance to take out his frustrations on me, Bellefleur lumbered towards us with his steely gaze trained on me, but stopped when we all heard footsteps approaching from the side of the house. We hadn't checked the house or the yard to look for anyone lurking, but I assumed Corbett or Adele would've mentioned it if they had been. Instead we all watched as Bill Compton came into view and asked, "What's going on? I heard the police sirens and saw the lights. Did something happen? Is Sookie alright?"

Even Bon Temps had looky-loos.

Before anyone could answer him, we all turned at the sound of another engine gunning down the road and the tires screeched as they turned onto the driveway. It turned out there were two instead of one, with a smaller pickup trailing behind an older larger one and they both came to a sliding halt behind Dearborn's car. Sam Merlotte threw the door open on the truck in front and ran towards us asking, "Did something happened to Adele? Is Sookie okay?"

Did Bon Temps' 911 system send out robo-calls to the entire town to alert them of every emergency?

Compton, I could understand. He only lived across the field, so he'd hear and see the police cars. But I couldn't even begin to imagine how Merlotte would know until he added, "When Mike left the bar he said he got a call to come out here."

Straight from the bar?

He'd gone to a crime scene *straight from the fucking bar?*

Victor would have to bail me out of jail because there was no way in hell I would be letting that drunken ass anywhere near Adele.

Before my impending arrest could be made, Jason's friend Rene Lanier climbed out of the second truck and said, "I heard on the scanner a body was found."

Nobody else said a word for a moment after that, with everyone's eyes taking in every other person there. I couldn't tell if I was the only one shocked that word had spread so quickly or that everyone and their brother seemed to feel as though they had a right to be there.

But it pissed me off to no end.

I wasn't a cop. I was a fucking medical examiner. Outside of my jurisdiction as the drunken ass had pointed out. I had no way and no authority to make them get the hell off of the Stackhouse's property.

But I didn't have to.

Because for once in my life God smiled down on me and the tension in my body eased just a little seeing the familiar patrol car take a hard left onto the driveway, spraying up gravel and dirt in its wake. Another one followed behind it along with two state trooper cars and a truck emblazoned with Shreveport PD Crime Scene Unit on the side. And now that my backup had arrived, for the first time since learning of Adele's death, I found a reason to smile.

Herveaux and Flood were standing like scary bookends on either side of me seconds later, with the state troopers bringing up the rear. Dearborn came out to see what the commotion was and only added to it as both he and Bellefleur started yelling about jurisdiction. Spencer joined in with them, while the rest of the civilians huddled to one side, but my eyes snapped back to Flood and relief flooded through me when his military background came out of hiding. In that moment he looked nothing like the broken man I'd come across in that bar years earlier and he silenced them all with a glare. Using a commanding voice that brokered no argument, he opened with, "This is how it's going to go."

And hearing it, I couldn't help smiling again, doubting even God Himself would've had the balls to argue with him, much less Bon Temps' finest.

Chapter 22: Chapter 22

Chapter 22

Once Flood was through telling Dearborn he could more or less kiss his ass per the Governor (I'd had no idea Victor was *that* well connected), he and Andy stood to the side while the '*reeeal poh-leese*' did *their* job. I might have felt bad for them if just once they made the argument that they'd known Adele for years. That *they* wanted to do right by her by bringing her killer to justice. But instead all of their complaints only amounted to a pissing match.

And all it got them was a drowning in the yellow sea of Shreveport's finest.

I knew both Sookie and Jason were in a bad way when they didn't come out to see what the fuss was about. Neither one had said a word and the only signs of life they'd shown were the death grip they maintained on one another's hands and the stray tears that continued to leave their eyes. I was worried enough that I was contemplating calling for an ambulance to come and check them out when Flood entered the room and knelt down in front of them. He spoke softly enough that I wasn't able to hear what he said, but whatever it was made Corbett smile and Sookie lean forward to hug him.

So I didn't care what he'd said. Whatever it was had my seal of approval if it got that reaction from her.

And my approval extended to Alcide as well when the sound of his voice drew my attention back outside and I heard him bark, "State your business." Turning to look back out over the yard, I saw his menacing stance in front of the three interlopers made him appear just as large as Compton, Merlotte, and Lanier were all put together. And none of them had the nerve to do anything more than take a step backwards while mumbling out their pitiful reasons for being there.

Herveaux wasn't impressed and once he'd heard their excuses, he wasn't interested either. All it took was him straightening his shoulders and turning his glare up a notch for them to continue on their trek back the way they'd come and I was grateful. Not just for his ability to do what I couldn't do by getting them to leave, but for never using that tactic on me.

Although it could have something to do with his fear of Sookie's reaction if he had. After all, she *did* hit hard.

When I noticed Chow's van finally pull up the driveway I went outside and directed him to park on the side of the house, so he could come and go through the backdoor that opened directly into the kitchen. Sookie and Jason had already seen enough and I didn't want them to have to see Adele's body leave in the bag she would be placed in, but at least there was a small saving grace now that the rest of the civilian hoard had left under Herveaux's harsh glare. Something about all of them showing up like that still tickled at the back of my mind, but I didn't have time to figure out what it was, so I dismissed it for the time being and concentrated on the task at hand.

The CSU team had just finished up in the kitchen and moved on to work on the rest of the house, taking pictures and fingerprinting around the door. Since the backdoor was still locked and there were no signs of forced entry, they assumed the killer had used the front door. Both mine and Sookie's fingerprints were already on file thanks the nature of our jobs and Jason's had been taken when he'd been questioned over Maudette's death. Adele kept her home as clean as a surgical operating room and Jason said the last visitor, who wasn't one of the three of us, he'd known about had been Bill Compton more than a month earlier on the night I'd first met everyone.

I'd expected to get a little bit of grief from Chow over being tasked to come all the way to Bon Temps for a case that rightfully shouldn't have been ours. I was sure Victor filled him in on who the victim was and possibly why he would be taking the case, but I still thought Chow would at

least *look* perturbed over the added chore and the added miles he'd been forced to put on the van. Instead he surprised me by giving me a half-guy hug as soon as I met him at the back of the van and offered sincerely, "I'm sorry for your loss, Eric. But at least you know if there's anything to find during the autopsy, *Victor* will find it."

All I could do was say, "Thanks," and stand there feeling stunned again.

As horrible as the reasons were for finding out I could depend on Victor and Chow to have my back, once again I could only attribute it to having Sookie in my life. Until her, I'd only ever felt any sort of camaraderie with Corbett. But now, both with and because of her, I was finding out I had more friends than I'd known about.

And given the circumstances, it was a bittersweet realization to have.

I needed to not feel useless. Both Herveaux and Flood were already doing what they could to help the Stackhouses and I needed to feel like I was doing something too. So I did the only thing I knew how to do and helped Chow carry his stuff into the kitchen, standing watch as he prepared Adele's body for transport, while using the care he would likely show his own grandmother. I'd worked with him at crime scenes before so I knew he was treating Adele's body differently. I was guilty of it too, having become jaded a long time ago when it came to dealing with dead bodies, so I was grateful he thought enough of me to not do the same with her. Once he was done I helped him load her onto the gurney and down the back steps to the van, but it wasn't until he turned to face me after shutting the doors that I realized I'd been crying.

Pulling a pack of tissues out of his pocket, he handed them to me and said, "I promise I'll take good care of her Eric."

I choked out a sincere, "Thanks," and stood there until I could no longer see his tail lights, trying to tell myself I was being ridiculous. *I* could still *see* Adele. Continue to have conversations with her like I'd been enjoying over the last month, but it didn't make me feel any better. It wasn't the same.

Nothing would ever be the same. Death was final no matter what.

I wiped the evidence away from my eyes and cheeks, trying to calm myself enough to go back into the house. I didn't want to upset Sookie and Jason even more with my own grief, so I took several deep breaths and looked around the yard hoping to find something else I could distract myself with. And I found my distraction in the form of Andy Bellefleur.

While Dearborn continued to bark at the nearest state trooper, ranting and raving about how this was *his* town and *Shreveport ain't got no business being here*, Bellefleur was pacing like a caged animal a few feet behind them. Even in the darkness of the yard I could tell his face was beet red and see him huffing air into his lungs, while clenching his fists until his knuckles were white as he wore a path into the lawn. He only stopped long enough to growl at Amy's car as she passed him by – maybe because she didn't seem too concerned about how close she'd come to hitting him – but I couldn't say that I blamed her after the way he'd acted towards her.

I know I wouldn't mind having him as my new hood ornament.

But watching the spectacle they were making of themselves was enough to get my mind off of other things. Spencer was the next to leave, drunkenly weaving his way down the driveway, and his departure seemed to be the catalyst for Dearborn to realize he wasn't going to win this fight now that a third of his army had surrendered. Looking at Bellefleur, he snarled out, "Come on Andy," before getting in his car and kicking up more gravel as he tore off down the driveway. And Bellefleur followed his boss's lead after taking a good long look at the house.

A look I couldn't quite describe.

He looked equal parts saddened and pissed off. I guessed it was because of Adele. I knew from our afternoon at the fair she looked to be about the same age as his grandmother Caroline and Adele really was loved by the entire town. Perhaps that included Bellefleur and it was why he was so angry. That she'd been murdered literally on his watch. And now he was being forced to stand down and let someone else investigate her death.

If he hadn't been such an asshole, I might have felt sorry for him.

But with nothing left to keep me distracted, I headed back into the house. Sookie and Jason were nowhere to be seen and the CSU Team were packing up their equipment, so I walked over to stand next to Flood and Herveaux so I wouldn't be in anyone's way.

"You did a good thing Northman."

My eyes met Flood's hearing his voice and I could see he was struggling with himself somewhat. He'd always avoided me like the plague after the whole ordeal with Corbett's murder and I had always acted like I didn't notice. I didn't get any enjoyment over making him uncomfortable with my presence and I understood why he felt the way he did. I couldn't really blame him considering the reasons why, so I always gave him a wide berth when I could.

It was the least I could do for someone both Corbett and Sookie thought so highly of.

"Calling Herveaux and Madden," he explained after a moment of staring back at me. "If your boss hadn't pulled some pretty powerful strings and we hadn't been brought in at the start, then valuable evidence could have been lost. Those yahoos don't know their ass from the hole I would've buried *theirs* in if they'd fucked up this case. I know Sookie cares about you a lot. She's been happier than I've seen her in a long time, so it's good to know you're worth her time."

"See?"

Corbett's jovial question hung in the air for a second before he added, "I told ya he'd like you once some time went by."

Eight years?

I guess when you had all of eternity eight years didn't seem so long.

"*Sookie* is worth it," I replied.

My admission earned me a nod and a pat on my shoulder before he turned to Herveaux and said, "Let's go. There's not much else we can do tonight. Hopefully the CSU Team got useable prints from the door and Madden said he'd be doing the autopsy first thing in the morning." Looking back at me he said, "Take care of our girl and you call me if either one of them need anything."

"I will," I agreed and shook both of their hands before watching them walk out the door.

I shut it behind them – and made sure to *lock* it too – before turning to face the almost empty room. Now that everyone else was gone, but not knowing where Sookie and Jason were, I asked in a whispered voice, "Did Adele say how long she'd been home before she was attacked?"

Corbett's expression became livid, but he reined it in and responded, "Yeah. She said she'd only been here for a few minutes. Long enough to carry everything into the house. So maybe five minutes tops."

"I can move so much faster now!" Adele gushed as she moved into the room through the wall.

She looked so elated I couldn't help but smile and say, "Well now that *drywall* is no longer a hindrance, I can see why."

"Oh you hush," she chuckled. "I was talking about my old lady aches and pains. They didn't make the trip over with me, but my favorite outfit did."

She twirled on the spot and ended in a 'Ta da' pose, making both Corbett and me smile again, before I said, "You should be happy about that. And keep in mind how lucky you are if you come across a naked guy running around who says 'dude' a lot. He wasn't so lucky and neither are we since *we* can see him." Wanting to get my point across so she wouldn't be blindsided by his buck nakedness, I added, "*All of him.*"

Adele's eyes went wide as she processed that little tidbit of information and when she was through she looked at me and asked, "How is it *you* can see us? Have you always had your gift or did it come to you by accident? A bump on the head or something like that?"

I wasn't surprised she'd called my curse a gift. I'd already learned Adele could find the silver lining in any situation. A habit she likely picked up having Corbett for a son and Jason as a grandson. And I couldn't argue with her over it now that I finally had a reason to appreciate it.

"I don't know how or why," I admitted. "I've always been able to see people other people couldn't see. But I didn't realize I was seeing ghosts until I was seven or so."

When I watched one of them impale my teacher with their bayonet.

"And your parents?" she asked innocently. "Do either of them have your gift too?"

The topic of my parents had only come up once during our weekly family dinners and my obvious discomfort over the topic allowed me to get away with answering noncommittally that we weren't all that close. I couldn't tell any of them the truth back then, but now that the body was out of the bag – so to speak – I replied truthfully, "No. And when I tried to tell them about it they put me in therapy and acted like I was a freak of nature they were afraid of rubbing off on them. I guess I am a freak, but it's not contagious."

God knows we'd rubbed on each other enough that Sookie would've caught it by now if it was.

"Bullshit!" Adele declared, making Corbett and me gape back at her. I'd never heard her say anything that couldn't be said to a priest in the middle of a sermon, so hearing her cuss like that was akin to hearing a cat bark. A dog meow.

The two just didn't go together.

"I'm sorry Eric, but your parents aren't fit to scrub my toilets," she snarled. "That they could ostracize their own child instead of acknowledging how unique and special you are is bullshit. God saw reason to bless you with a gift, but He certainly made you earn it by cursing you with assholes for parents."

"Gee Momma," Corbett chuckled. "Don't hold back on our account. Tell us how you *really* feel."

"Look at him!" she railed while pointing at me. "He's bright and kind and *exactly* what every *good parent* would hope for their child to grow up to be. He's *a doctor* for Christ's sake! And he's even better than I knew because he managed to do it in spite of being raised by wolves in Stepford clothes!"

She'd dismissed her own murder as being *her fault* for being so dense as to believe she would be safe in her own home of some fifty odd years without locking the door. Instead of mourning her untimely death and listing the things she'd never gotten around to doing, she'd done nothing but talk about all of the *benefits* her new state of being came with.

Her favorite outfit.

Minus her aches and pains.

Not even doors, drywall, and support beams could slow her down.

But hearing my parents didn't throw a tickertape parade to celebrate my curse had her ready to spit nails.

The Stackhouse family might as well be wearing Team Eric t-shirts.

It made me wonder how Jason would take the news if I shared my secret with him. It also made me wonder if Adele could whoop him from the grave if he didn't take it well. I decided I would leave that decision up to Sookie for now and tried to get us back on track before Adele somehow managed to have a ghostly heart attack.

She was *that* worked up.

"Speaking of clothes," I segued. "Adele, did you see anything? Shirt cuffs? A watch or gloves on the killer?" I knew he'd come up from behind her, but I still had hope she'd seen *something* we could use to identify him. When she calmed down enough to think about it, she eventually shook her head in the negative, so I asked, "What about sounds? Did he say anything? Did you hear a car door slamming? Anything?"

"No," she replied. "I guess I was lost in my own thoughts, but I can't remember hearing anything at all."

The farmhouse was quite a ways back from the road. Granted it didn't see a lot of traffic, but still the killer would've been taking a chance their car could be seen if they'd left it there and walked to the house. Any car parked on that road would stand out.

And that tickling in the back of mind came back with me asking, "Do you think it could've been Bill Compton?"

He lived right next door, so no car would be needed. And his footsteps across the field wouldn't make any sound at all. I couldn't imagine why he would want to kill Adele unless it was to hurt Jason. But seeing as how he still carried a torch for Sookie, it didn't make any sense to me that he would want to hurt her in the process.

But crazy, by definition, didn't always make sense.

"Bill?" she asked and added, "Why would he want to kill me?"

"To get back at Jason," I answered.

It was no secret there wasn't any love lost between them and Adele thought about it for another minute before she finally shook her head and said, "No."

"Momma," Corbett argued. "Just because he acts like he walked straight out of *Gone with the Wind* doesn't mean he's a gentleman."

"That's not why," she chastised. Looking back and forth between both of us, she explained, "It's his aftershave. Back when they were still in high school I overheard Jason and Hoyt laughing about how they'd fooled Bill into thinking Sookie's favorite scent on a man was Aqua Velva."

Before I could become concerned over *not* smelling like Aqua Velva, Corbett laughed out, "She *hates* that smell!"

"I know," Adele smiled ruefully. "But ever since then, no matter where I run into him and whether or not Sookie is expected to be around, Bill has always smelled like he bathed in it. He was wearing it earlier today when he stopped by to say hello to me at the fair." She chuckled softly and said, "It's so strong it's made my eyes water at times, but I know Sookie never liked him like that. And I didn't have the heart to tell him otherwise."

Even though he could have showered away the smell before coming over, I couldn't come up with any reason why he would if his intent was to kill Adele. And her sound reasoning ended a third of the tickling in the back of my mind. Compton was the only one in my opinion who would've had the easiest opportunity thanks to being their neighbor. But Merlotte's wasn't that far away. A ten minute jog at most. He could've left the bar and returned in plenty of time before Mike Spencer had gotten the call. Lanier could've been anywhere. But I couldn't come up with any reason why they would be the killer and talking it over with both Adele and Corbett didn't give me any more reason to believe either one of them could be responsible. But without any other suspects on the horizon I decided to send a quick text to Alcide along with my weak reasoning for them to be considered.

They just gave me a bad feeling.

And apparently it was enough for him because Alcide replied moments later with, "On it."

I could really get used to being taken seriously.

"Eric," Adele said once I read them his response out loud. "Forgive me for saying so, but you look like the walking dead."

Corbett laughed that I should be so lucky as to look as good as them, so he learned the hard way she could still at least wallop *him* before she added, "Why don't you go lie down and try and get some rest?"

Hearing her mention rest made me have the Pavlovian response of yawning and I was suddenly too tired to argue with anyone. My feet shuffled me towards the couch, with me assuming both Sookie and Jason were upstairs in their childhood beds. But I didn't want to assume I could just climb into bed with Sookie.

Not with her father and grandmother standing there and able to come in whenever they felt like it.

But I didn't get far before Adele said, "My room." I looked over at her, wondering if I heard her wrong and if not, preparing to tell her I didn't feel right sleeping in her bed. I imagined it would only upset either Sookie or Jason – or both. But before I could even open my mouth she added, "They're both in bed in my room. Jason was already asleep before I walked in here." She paused for a moment while her face lit up with pride as she added, "But as soon as he was Sookie whispered out that she wanted you to join them when we were done talking."

The fact Sookie knew about my curse had slipped my mind.

The fact she knew I would want to try and get answers as soon as I could said she knew me well.

And the fact that she accepted all of it was made clear by her whispered request into the darkness of her grandmother's bedroom.

Both Corbett and Adele remained in the living room as I made my way down the hallway. The bedroom door was ajar, as was the adjoining bathroom, so I was able to see with the light that had been left on inside to spill across the room.

Jason was lying on his side on one side of the bed facing Sookie. His left hand was still holding her right while she ran the fingers of her left through his hair, but when she noticed me she used it to pat the space on her other side.

I crawled in behind her and she moved enough so that we were pressed against each other before she whispered out, "The bed smells like Gran so we wanted to sleep in here before it faded away." My heart hurt a little hearing the sadness in her voice, but she sounded in better spirits when she asked, "How was the paranormal powwow?"

It still felt so weird for her to acknowledge my curse. And weirder still that she was okay with it.

Weird, but good.

"I wish you could've heard it," I whispered in return, meaning it in more ways than one.

"Me too," she sighed, pulling my arm over her body and hugging it against her chest. "So don't leave anything out and tell me everything."

And so I did. I told her everything we'd talked about. From Adele's twirling 'Ta da' to Aqua Velva man. Jason shifted a little when Sookie snorted out loud hearing why Compton made Adele's eyes water, but she probably would've woken him completely if my arm hadn't held her back from shooting upright in the middle of the bed when I told her about Adele's 'bullshit' declaration.

"Gran must've been *really* pissed," she surmised. "I've never heard her cuss. Not even when Jason set the yard on fire because *if the grass is burnt up we won't have to cut it every week.*"

I made a mental note to keep matches away from Jason and laughed softly, "From the look on Corbett's face, I would guess he hasn't heard her cuss either."

It looked like he'd managed to somehow shit his pants.

Sookie and I continued to whisper talk long into the night. There were more stories told and more tears were shed. Hearing how her father's new favorite pastime involved trying to scare the shit out of me made tears of a different kind leave her eyes as she nearly shook Jason awake with her silent laughter. It felt so good to finally be able to tell her things I'd wanted to share with her from the start. Adele's death was the only regret I had in the otherwise best day of my life. And

when I eventually heard her breathing even out as she finally fell asleep, it was only then – with her safe and sound in my arms – that I finally allowed sleep to take me too.

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Chapter 23

The bed was emptier by a third when I woke up the next morning. Sharing a bed with Sookie for the last month was long enough for me to know by her breathing she was awake. And it was a couple's ability we must have shared because even though I was still spooned behind her and hadn't moved more than my eyelids, she said, "Jason went home to shower and change, but... I don't think he'll be back for a while. He wants to avoid the hoard."

I assumed she meant whoever would be turning up to offer their condolences, but given the dread in her voice I could also assume she wanted to avoid them too.

"Do you want to leave for a little while?" I asked. "We could go back to Shreveport and just hang out for the day." I planned on taking the next several days – if not the entire week – off to help Sookie and Jason in any way I could. In the eight years I'd worked at the Coroner's Office, I'd never had a reason to use my vacation time, so I had more than enough of it banked away.

She turned in my arms so that she was facing me. And even though I'd known she'd shed a lot of tears the night before, I was still taken by surprise seeing how puffy her red eyes were. I could tell by the light coming through the window the sun was barely up, so I knew it was still early. And when she didn't answer me right away, I leaned forward and gently kissed each of her eyes in turn before saying, "We can do whatever you want, but I don't think it would hurt for you to get some more rest. We can stay here and I'll turn away the crowd that shows up."

After seeing so many people fawn over Adele like she was *their* grandmother the day before at the fair, I was already picturing a gathering that would require traffic cones and someone to direct traffic in the yard.

"I want..." she began and paused. I patiently waited for her to finish her thought, assuming again she was trying to figure out what it was she wanted to do. But instead of finishing her sentence she stared back at me, searching my face for the answer. And I guessed she had found it when she finally closed the distance between us and kissed me.

My little spitfire, who more often than not was playfully aggressive when it came to the intimacies we shared, kissed me like she was afraid I would break.

Or maybe that *she* would.

And maybe I was afraid of that too.

So I returned her kiss with equal care. Gently giving and letting her take whatever it was she needed from me in return. I didn't know what it was she wanted. How far she wanted things to go. So I let her take the lead and was simply there for her in whatever way she needed me to be.

For a while it seemed all she needed was our kiss and I was okay with that, despite the natural effect she had on my body. But it seemed Sookie was equally affected because her hands soon began to wander. First up the front of my shirt. Then they snaked across my ribs and down my back. When they dipped into the back of the jeans I was still wearing, she hooked her leg over my hip and pulled me down on top of her.

"Are we alone?" she asked, with her hands moving to the front of my pants and opening the fly before I could answer.

Stupidly, my first thought was Jason, even though she had been the one to tell me he'd left.

Because stupidly, I had momentarily forgotten she knew about my curse.

Sookie had gotten *a lot* of practice in getting me out of my clothes in the past several weeks, so her hand was already wrapped around my now painfully hard shaft by the time I thought to pull away and look around the room.

"Yes," I moaned, while she stroked her hand up and down. "I don't hear anyone, but that doesn't mean anything," I warned.

For all I knew Corbett was under the bed and about to spring up through the mattress. And if he did, I could be permanently scarred with erectile dysfunction forever.

Our couple's ability must have given Sookie the gift of telepathy where I was concerned because she pulled my lips back to hers and said, "Well then it'll be Daddy's own fault if he walks in to a closed bedroom. From what you told me last night it seems like he needs to be taught a lesson anyway."

She said that now. And I would be sure to remind her of it when she was picking up my prescription for Viagra.

"Are you sure you want to do this?" I asked, trying to hold on to some shred of my sanity. "I'm okay with stopping if you're not up for this to go any farther."

She held the evidence in her hand *I* was certainly *up* for this to go farther, but she released me from her grasp so she could hold my face in her hands. Looking into my eyes, I watched her own well up with tears as she said, "I need to. I need *you*. I need to feel as close to you as possible." Her lower lip began to wobble, taking whatever was left of my willpower with it when she added, "I love you Eric. And right now I need to feel how much you love me too."

I caught her bottom lip in between my teeth, unable to watch it tremble or plead for another second, and released it long enough to reassure her, "I love you too Sookie."

No more words were needed. I understood how she felt because I felt it too. Not just lust – although it was there – but the need to connect to someone. To reaffirm my connection to *her* and only her because I truly did love her. I could barely even bring myself to speculate on the thought of one day losing her.

Curse or no curse. It would destroy me.

I could feel the dark cloud trying to form already from my errant thoughts, so I pushed them and it away. Taking solace in the fact I still had her there in my arms. Knowing there was nothing I wouldn't do to keep her safe from harm. Feeling both the love I had for her and the love she had for me in return as we made love for the first time. We'd had sex more times than I could count, but that morning there was a marked difference and there was no other way to describe it.

There were no more obstacles in between us. No more secrets wedging their way in and keeping us apart – be it hiding our feelings or strange abilities from one another. For the first time we connected completely and by the time we were done, with the aftershocks still coursing through our bodies, I was more sure than ever Sookie Stackhouse would always be the only one for me.

Snapshots of a possible future flashed through my mind. A smiling Sookie walking down the aisle towards me in a white dress. My hands pressed against Sookie's body swollen with our first child. I had no idea if she even wanted kids, but I knew up until I'd met her I didn't. Not only had I been unable to picture a life where I would find a woman I would want to marry – or one who would want to marry *me* – I'd always assumed if I became a father it would be because of a one night stand coupled with birth control failure. It was why I'd always been so careful in the past using condoms. While I didn't know of anyone else in my family who'd been afflicted with my curse, I assumed the possibility existed I could pass it on to any biological child of mine. I'd been afraid of how that child's life would be affected, remembering all too well how difficult mine had been early on, and I didn't think being a weekend dad would be enough to help them get through it.

Because I'd never been able to imagine a life where I had both a wife and a child all at the same time.

But now – with Sookie – I couldn't imagine it any other way. And while she accepted my strange ability, I couldn't be sure she would want to inflict that on her own child, but I was firmly on the fence anyway. I knew I could be happy either way, as long as I had her, and I probably would've proposed right then and there if the day wasn't already marred by the fact we would be planning Adele's funeral.

We took turns showering, so once I was done and while Sookie took hers I made her a quick breakfast, knowing the last time she'd eaten any real food had been the morning before. While the eggs were cooking I glanced at the clock on the stove and seeing the time made me realize Victor was likely already at work doing Adele's autopsy. My mind wandered with me wondering what – if anything – he was able to find, but I was jarred from my thoughts by the sound of Sookie's voice as she entered the room, saying, "I've never had eggs flambé before. Are they any good?"

"Shit!" I moved the pan of eggs now burned beyond recognition from the burner and shut it off, adding, "I'm sorry. My mind wandered."

"It's okay," she said while walking over to the counter and cracking more eggs into the bowl to scramble them. "I couldn't tell if you were lost in thought or listening to Gran praising you for being able to cook. Jason's culinary expertise consists of having the pizza place's number memorized." Her eyes took a cursory glance around the empty room as she asked, "Are they here?"

"No." I hadn't seen either Adele or Corbett since the night before, but seeing Sookie so at ease talking about what I could do – what I'd been doing my best to pretend I *couldn't do* for my entire life – I couldn't help but ask, "Why are you so...*okay* with my...*thing*?"

Her eyes weren't as red or puffy as before, but she still didn't look like her usual self. But that didn't stop her from sounding like her usual self as she glanced down at my crotch and smirked, "I am *more than* okay with *your thing*."

"You know what I mean," I smiled in return and couldn't resist moving to stand behind her so I could wrap my arms around her. I suspected a big part of it had been me being able to pass her test the night before by answering questions I had no other way of knowing the answers to. But ironically, that didn't make her acceptance any less unbelievable to me.

She stopped what she was doing and hugged my arms to her body while leaning back against me and said, "I can't explain it. Maybe it's because of what I believed you to be the first time I saw you at daddy's funeral. You have no idea how much the thought of you being an angel sent down to help him comforted me that day. Even finding out later on that you weren't didn't take away from the fact your presence made me able to keep it together during the funeral. And then with my mom...I've always been on the fence. For years I've wanted to believe she could see and hear daddy and at the same time knowing the possibility existed he might only exist in her mind. Finding out now that he's still around, even if she can't really see him, is...*bittersweet*?"

Turning around so she could face me, she looked up into my eyes and explained, "But I'm okay with it all because as it turns out, *you* were everything I dreamed to be and more. You *did* help my dad by telling the colonel where to find his killer and you did it knowing all the while it would make you ostracized. You gave me the peace of mind knowing not only did my dad know that I still loved him despite being a shit to him on the day he died, but now I know my mom isn't really alone when she'd talking to him because he still visits her." Her eyes welled up with more tears as her hand reached up to cup my cheek when she added, "And you gave me back my Gran on the very same night she was taken from me. How could I *not* be okay with that?"

I wasn't used to being praised by anyone – much less for my freakiness – and I could feel my cheeks heating up, so all I could do was try and make a joke by saying, "Well...when you put it *that* way..."

Sookie wasn't having it and when my eyes couldn't take looking into hers any longer, she grabbed my face in both of her hands and ordered, "Look at me Eric." When blue met blue a split

second later, she said, "I get it. I get that you're not used to talking about it and honestly, now that I know I don't know how I'll ever be comfortable walking around buck naked again." Her lips formed a small smile, but her eyes were still intense when she said, "But get *this*. *You* aren't just the man of my dreams. *You* are all of that and more. You've given me things no other being on this planet could give me and I'm not just talking about with your gift. You've given me a reason to live again when before I was just going through the motions. You've given me a reason to smile all of the time even when you're not around. You've given me the courage to take down the barriers I'd built up after my father's death not wanting to let anyone get that close again so I wouldn't be subjected to the pain of losing them. You've given me a reason to say the words, 'I love you,' for the first time to someone whose last name wasn't Stackhouse. *You* are *it* for me, Eric Northman, so if you want to get rid of me you're going to have to come up with something more than the ability to give me back my dad and my Gran."

There we were, barely twelve hours after Adele's murder, and *she* was the one trying to comfort *me*. And as much as that thought needled at me, I couldn't help but be gladdened. With every word she uttered, she healed one of the many scars left behind from a lifetime of feeling alone. Isolated and ostracized by my curse. But her staunch conviction that I was *exactly* what she wanted and needed in her life made me grateful for every trauma I'd ever suffered. If it hadn't been for what I'd gone through, molding me into the man I was now, I wouldn't be the one standing before her. The first non-Stackhouse she'd ever said...

"Never?" I asked. "You've never told anyone you've dated you loved them?"

We'd touched on the subject of past relationships, but had never delved down into them too deeply. Honestly, I'd been afraid of hearing about anyone from her past knowing my own insecurities would get the better of me. But now...

"Why would I?" she asked with a small smile. "I've never been in love before now."

And because we weren't in Las Vegas where 24-hour chapels stood on every street corner, I did the only thing I could do.

I kissed her.

And breakfast ended up turning into brunch.

Thankfully Jason didn't return until the food was ready, but it wasn't long after that that the first of many sympathizers started showing up. I didn't really know any of them, so I stood off to the side, fetching the occasional drinks and finding room for the ridiculous amount of casserole dishes the remaining Stackhouse family members were besieged with. My skills as a Tetris ninja came in handy, but even so I contemplated ordering another freezer from Home Depot on my phone and having it delivered that day.

But even with all of the extra people in the house, I was still restless. My mind was back on Victor and the autopsy I knew he would be finishing up with – if he hadn't already – and I wanted to know the results. I was pacing in the kitchen going back and forth over calling him for

the umpteenth time when Sookie found me. Her arms wrapped around my waist as she leaned her head against my chest and it automatically stilled not just my body, but my mind as well.

"Aside from the obvious, what's wrong?" she asked.

The denial was on the tip of my tongue, but she knew me well because she added, "And don't say 'nothing'. You're pacing like you're waiting to hear if it's a boy or a girl." She pinched my side and joked, "You're *not*, are you?"

"The only babies I'll be making are with *you*," my mouth supplied before my brain could catch up.

I really hated when it did that.

We were already standing still, so I couldn't tell what she thought of my off the cuff remark until she hugged me tighter and said, "Good to know. I call the pee pee diapers. You can have the others."

Good to know.

The idea of a miniature Sookie had been appealing to me more and more with every family that stopped by to offer their condolences. I'd found myself trying to pick out the features of the parents in their children and wondered what ours would look like.

But she was off her rocker if she thought we wouldn't be sharing shitty diaper duty.

Considering we hadn't even discussed getting married – much less the first names of any potential future children – I figured negotiating diaper duty could wait and admitted, "I was thinking about calling Victor. I'm anxious to know if he found anything."

Her body tensed with my explanation, but she relaxed just as quickly and said, "Why don't you run to Shreveport? You can hear it from the horse's mouth and while you're there maybe you could pick up some more clothes for us? I only packed for..."

One day. We'd only packed an overnight bag thinking we'd only be in Bon Temps for one day.

"Of course," I agreed and hugged her tighter. Sookie kept a few casual outfits at my place along with her work clothes, but I'd have to stop by her place to get the dress she wanted to wear at Adele's funeral. I already had a key to her apartment, so once she'd given me a list of everything she wanted me to bring back, I left for Shreveport.

I took care of the mindless errands first. Stopping at her place and picking up her things, making sure to empty her refrigerator of what would spoil and taking out her trash. I then repeated the process, doing the same thing back at my place. By the time I reached the Coroner's Office a few hours had passed, so I figured Victor would be in his office working on the autopsy report and that was where I found him.

"Eric," he greeted with a sympathetic smile. "I didn't expect to see you today."

"I..." That was as far as I could get and his doorway was as far as my feet could get when my eyes landed on his desk. His notes from the autopsy were lying there, but what halted both my words and my progress were the photos that went with them.

Adele's eyes were closed, but she no longer looked asleep. Her skin had taken on the grayish pallor that every dead body had and even trying to recall her 'Ta da' performance from the night before did nothing to help ease the pain I felt in my chest seeing her that way.

Seeing where my eyes were glued to on top of his desk, he picked up the photos and shuffled them around. Breaking my eye contact with the image allowed my feet to resume their path while Victor said, "I was just getting ready to call Flood with the results." Placing a photo on his desk showing a close up shot of the bruising on Adele's neck, he said, "Do you see here?" He used the closed end of his Mont Blanc pen to trace the marks the killer's fingers had left behind and explained, "Whoever did this doesn't have the full use of the ring and pinky finger of their right hand. Either it was broken at some point and didn't heal properly or they have arthritis."

I'd missed it during my cursory check the night before, but looking at the photos I could see what he was talking about. The bruising was darker on all of the marks except for where those two fingers would've been placed with the killer standing behind Adele. It made me wonder if I had missed something on Dawn's autopsy and I realized Victor had had the same thoughts when he pulled her file from the stack of folders on his desk. My back stiffened when he prefaced his statement by saying, "It would've been difficult if not impossible to notice without having the knowledge beforehand." He pulled out the similar shots I'd taken of the bruising on Dawn's neck and showed me the now glaring mistake I'd made in not spotting it sooner by tracing his pen over the marks on the left side of her neck, saying, "But the similarity in size, length, and strength of the bruising tells me they were killed by the same person."

My teeth were grinding while my head reeled that I'd missed something so important. Granted, they didn't have any suspects, but if they had it could've been the key in getting a conviction, short of a full confession. I hated missing any detail, but on a case as important as this one was to me, it literally made me sick to my stomach.

And perhaps seeing my impending meltdown, Victor's voice took on a harder edge as he said, "Eric!" When my eyes met his, he placed the two photos side by side and his tone softened as he said, "Dawn Green was facing her killer when she was strangled. We're not in a primetime TV show working with state of the art equipment. Without the capability of taking a panoramic shot surrounding her entire neck, it would've been easy to miss. With Adele Stackhouse being strangled from behind, it was more noticeable with the bruising on the front of her neck."

He could tell me whatever he wanted, but the fact I'd missed something so crucial would always bother me. But there was nothing I could do to change it and could only console myself with the knowledge my fuck up had been caught before the killer was. The potential crisis had been averted, but it only deepened my desire to do better in the future.

It didn't make me feel any less of an incompetent ass though.

"Here," he offered, pulling me from my thoughts and pulling another folder from the stack. "I had the Pickens autopsy results messengered to me this morning. The same pattern of bruising was present and missed by their medical examiner."

At least Mike Spencer had being drunk as an excuse.

But Victor was right. Everything about the bruising on all three victims was the same.

Only one person could be responsible.

Victor was more gracious than I deserved, but I left his office feeling somewhat better. I got back on the interstate to head back to Bon Temps and knowing his first call would be to Flood, I thought I'd fill Alcide in myself and see if they found anything out in the meantime.

But they hadn't.

The only fingerprints they found were ours and Bellefleur's around the door. Herveaux went on a rant about his footsteps being the ones that had been left around Dawn's car back in the woods, with him making several remarks insinuating Bellefleur was the mentally challenged offspring of a female canine.

I couldn't blame him one bit.

So I spent the remainder of the drive with my mind running over every little thing I could remember. Something was back to prickling at the back of my mind with the answer to what it was on the tip of my tongue, but the more I tried to force it the more it retreated.

I was almost to the exit for Bon Temps when my phone rang and I answered seeing Sookie's name come up on the caller ID.

"Hey," she sighed. "Are you on your way back yet?"

"I am. I'm about ten minutes away."

"Did you learn anything useful?" she asked.

"Sort of," I hedged, reliving my own feelings of failure. But not wanting to get into it when I could do it face to face in a few more minutes, I said, "I'll tell you everything when I get there."

"Okay. Jason's gone home and so has everyone el...shit."

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"I just heard a...aw hell. Andy just showed up. I don't want to deal with him right now," she sighed again.

"So don't answer the door," I replied. "I'll run him off when I get there."

With my front bumper, if I had to.

"No. Maybe he's got news about Gran. He's knocking. I'll see you soon. I love you."

"Love you too," I replied, but I suspected she'd already hung up before she heard me.

I sped up a little knowing she didn't want to talk to him and knowing he couldn't stand me right about now, I hoped my presence would increase his desire to go the fuck away. I'd just taken the ramp for Bon Temps and made the left hand turn for Hummingbird Lane when a flash of white on the side of the road caught my eye.

A white Merlotte's shirt, I discovered.

And it was being worn by Dawn Green.

My car came to a screeching halt and I jumped out, running over to her and yelling out, "Dawn! Wait!"

She wasn't opaque like Maudette's ghost and she seemed to be just as excited I could see her as I was to see her.

"You?" she asked in disbelief. "You can *see* me? Wait! Does that mean you're dead too?"

"Yes," I replied and then clarified, "I mean no. I mean yes. Yes I can see you and no I'm not dead too."

"Oh," she answered, looking understandably confused given my convoluted reply and said, "Well then I guess Andy only gets off on killing women."

"What?"

My heart stopped before it started again in an attempt to pound its way out of my chest as she elaborated, "Andy. Andy Bellefleur, the deputy? My car got a flat that night I last saw y'all and I was about to call Jason's drunk ass to come and get me when he pulled up in his patrol car. Who'd a figured I woulda had to worry about being afraid of the police finding me on a deserted road?"

Suddenly it all clicked. Not his motives, but at least how he'd been able to get to his first two victims so easily. She was right.

Who would question their own safety in the presence of law enforcement? Someone who was sworn to protect the citizens.

He would've had access to the crime scenes. Been able to explain away any trace evidence left behind by him because he had a reason to be at the scene. And remembering Herveaux's rant on his footprints being left behind made me realize what hadn't been sitting right in my mind. What didn't occur to me until right now.

I'd left the door *open* when Sookie and I had entered the house. Wide open. There was no reason for Bellefleur to have touched the door at all in order to get into the house and yet his fingerprints were left behind.

I closed my eyes and recalled with perfect clarity the image of him clenching his fists over and over while he paced the yard, but only now did I see in my mind's eye his right hand not being able to form a complete fist. And only now did I realize his attitude and his cagey pacing from the night before hadn't been because he'd been upset over Adele's death or because his position had been usurped.

It was because he couldn't tamper with the evidence of the crime scene in order to point the suspicion away from himself.

And he was with Sookie right now.

I sprinted back to my car and jammed down on the accelerator while calling Herveaux at the same time. He barely answered the call when I yelled into the mouthpiece, "IT'S BELLEFLEUR! THE KILLER IS BELLEFLEUR AND HE'S ALONE IN THE HOUSE WITH SOOKIE RIGHT NOW!"

Chapter 24: Chapter 24

Chapter 24

"Calm the fuck down and tell me that again," Herveaux ordered, not sounding calm at all himself.

"The fingerprints on the door. I left it open, but his fingerprints were on the door. His footprints were by Dawn's car. God only knows what was missed at the gas station where the first victim was found. He was probably the first officer on the scene. Who the hell would question anything of his left behind anyway when he was the one doing the goddamn investigation?" I rambled out while fighting the steering wheel against the potholes on Hummingbird Lane.

"Eric," he began. "I want to believe you, but that could just be shitastic police work. Circumstantial at best, but no D.A. is going to hang their hat on that. What motive does he have?"

"I don't fucking know!" I yelled. It wasn't like I could tell him I just so happened to run into Dawn's ghost and she had filled me in on who her murderer was. He'd send backup alright.

For the guys in the white jackets who came to take me to my padded room.

I forced myself to calm down a little and tried to sound a bit more rational when I explained, "But his hand. *His right hand*. I saw him last night pacing in the yard, clenching his hands. He couldn't form a complete fist with his right hand."

"The bruising on all three victims indicates the killer doesn't have the full use of their ring and pinky finger on their right hand," he supplied, recalling what I'd told him less than thirty minutes earlier. Now sounding a bit more panicked himself, he asked, "How do you know he's with Sookie?"

"I was just on the phone with her when she said he was at the door. She didn't want to talk to him, but thought maybe he had news on Adele."

I was pulling into the driveway by that point. I had no idea of how much time had passed since I'd hung up with her, but it couldn't have been more than a few minutes.

I just hoped I wasn't too late.

"Why would she?" he asked. "She knows we've taken over the case."

I'd turned off my headlights as soon as I'd made the turn towards the house, so he wouldn't know I was there. The last thing I wanted to do was spook him into doing something to Sookie. Something I was hoping like hell he hadn't done already.

"I don't know," I whispered because I was already climbing out of the car. It hadn't occurred to me when she'd said it, but then I was tired. And knowing she got even less sleep than me, I assumed maybe she had the same excuse until I remembered we hadn't talked about *that* aspect of the investigation. Sookie had been inside with Jason at the time of the pissing match and still in shock over Adele's death. I had no idea of what she overheard so for all she knew they were working on the case together. She'd already left the room by the time I'd come back into the house and spoke to Flood about it. And the last time she'd interacted with Bellefleur, he'd been sympathetic to her. Kind. She wouldn't view him as a threat.

Just like any of this other victims.

And I couldn't let Sookie be his next victim.

"ERIC!"

I didn't hear what – if anything – Herveaux said after that, hearing Adele's frantic shout. She came running towards me and said, "It's Andy! He's got Sookie in the kitchen! He's gone crazy!" She attempted to grab onto my shoulders and maybe I imagined it, but I could've sworn I felt

something before her hands ended up passing right through me as she yelled, "He's got his gun pointed right at my baby!"

"Alcide," I whispered into the phone. "Bellefleur has Sookie at gunpoint in the kitchen. Send somebody over here right now."

"Oh fuck! Don't..."

I didn't hear anything after that because I shut my phone and jammed it back into my pocket. Running back to the car, I pulled everything out of the glove box looking for her gun. Sookie usually kept her service weapon in there whenever we went anywhere, but my heart dropped when I found it missing. She must have taken it inside with her at some point.

But I was still going inside, with or without a weapon.

"Eric," Adele cried. "Don't let him hurt my baby."

"I won't."

I wouldn't.

I had no idea of what I was going to do or how I was going to do it, but there was no way I wasn't going to do something. And it sure as hell wouldn't be waiting out in the yard for someone else with a gun to arrive. Knowing they were in the kitchen, I hoped to use surprise to my advantage by coming through the front door.

But it was locked.

I didn't have a key to the farmhouse, but Adele was already one step ahead of me and said, "Under the flower pot. There's a spare key."

She'd tried to kick it over in a panic and while she couldn't, we both hesitated for a moment watching it wobble.

"I didn't know I could do that," she said, staring wide eyed.

"I didn't either."

Corbett never mentioned being able to move anything before, but I didn't have time to dwell on it and quickly got the key to let myself into the house. I left the door open for the Calvary I hoped was on its way and could hear Sookie's voice asking, "Why Andy?"

Any fleeting thoughts I had on coming up with some sort of plan to burst into the room and overpower him flew out the window when I came up to the kitchen doorway and saw them. Sookie was standing with her back against the counter on the opposite side of the room, while Bellefleur sat in one of the kitchen chairs with his gun pointed right at Sookie. His back was to

me, but he was too far away for me to jump on him without a running start and giving him the opportunity of being able to get at least one shot off.

Corbett was there too, standing in front of his daughter in a way for him to take the bullet that could come her way at any moment. But he couldn't.

And I couldn't risk it.

I couldn't risk losing her.

When Sookie's eyes landed on me her own surprise gave me away and Bellefleur's expression darkened even further when he turned to see me standing there.

"Ah...ah," he said, waving his gun at Sookie because she'd taken a step forward the moment his eyes weren't on her. I prayed like hell she wouldn't do something that could get herself hurt. I'd been impressed when I watched her take down the mugger in the park on the day after we'd met, but I wasn't in love with her then.

And I couldn't stand the thought of her doing anything that could end up with her dying now.

"You stay right where you are Stackhouse," he ordered and thankfully she backed up again. Glancing at me, he added, "And you, *Mr. Medical Examiner*. You go stand over there beside her where I can keep an eye on you."

I walked towards her, but instead of standing beside her, I took Corbett's place in front of her and pressed her into the counter with my back. I had no way of knowing if the bullet would pass through me and into her, but it was the only thing I could think of doing to try and protect her.

His eyes narrowed at me while my eyes narrowed onto his right hand gripping the gun. I could easily see the weakness in his ring and pinky fingers and said, "It's over Andy. The police are already on their way. They know you're the killer."

"Bullshit," he declared and reached down below the table to his belt. Grabbing the handcuffs at his back, he threw them at me and said, "Now cuff your hands behind your back. I'll deal with you in a minute."

I caught them on reflex, but when I didn't do as he said right away, he moved his gun upwards to aim it at my head and said, "Do it or I'll shoot you first and take care of your girlfriend next."

Sookie's hands had been clutching my sides, but I felt her lean forward and press her lips against my back as she whispered, "I'm sorry. I don't know what I was thinking. I half expected him to have a casserole in his hand when I opened the door, but he had a Beretta instead." Leaning her entire body against my back, I could hear the sadness in her voice when she said, "I love you Eric. Don't ever forget how much I love you."

The sound of defeat in her voice made my heart sink, but I did nothing to stop her when she reached around and took the handcuffs from me, doing as Bellefleur had ordered. Once my hands were secured behind my back, she took a step to the side of me and repeated her earlier question of, "Why Andy? Why would you kill Gran? Why would you kill any of them?"

"You remember what you said to me at the fair?" he snarled. "About your brother beating me like it was freshman year football tryouts all over again?"

I remembered and could see her nod in my peripheral, but my eyes wouldn't leave the gun in his hand, while my ears strained to hear the sounds of sirens closing in. But there was nothing but silence, so he went on explaining, "It was *your brother* who cost me my spot on the team. He took a cheap shot during practice and broke my hand. It was my throwing arm and it's never been the same ever since. My life had been going good up until then when he ruined everything! I'm a goddamn *Bellefleur*! My ancestors *made* this town, but does anyone care? Does anyone show me any kind of *respect*? No! Nobody gives a *fuck*! Instead your white trash family gets all the praise. Your brother's on the goddamn *road crew* while I'm a *deputy sheriff*, but as soon as he walks into a room all eyes are on *him*. Everybody wants to hang around him and soak it up like he's the fuckin' sun. *Me*? Ain't nobody lookin' at me twice."

"You killed my Gran because *you're jealous*?" she shrieked and my body automatically leaned towards hers. She was losing it. I'd never seen her really lose it before, but I was undoubtedly seeing it now.

It was understandable, but it wasn't going to help matters.

"I killed *your Gran* because she took the prize that rightfully belonged to *my grandmother*!" he yelled back in return. He became eerily calm a split second later, only highlighting the level of crazy he'd descended to, and said, "Now I felt a little bad about it after because I liked Adele, but I felt worse for *my own grandmother*. She looks forward to that contest every year and every year she takes home the prize until *this* year. She's up there in years now, so who even knows if she'll be around next year to try again. Coming in second broke her fuckin' heart, so I broke Adele's fuckin' neck to keep her out of the running next time. Your whole fuckin' family just won't quit fuckin' with mine!"

The more I listened to him – the more I stared at him – the more regret filled my veins. I missed the bruising pattern on Dawn's body. I missed the signs he couldn't completely close his right hand while I watched him clenching his fists over and over. I'd been too focused on the wrong people the night before. Too focused on the men who – in my mind – all seemed a bit too fascinated with Sookie. I let it cloud my judgment. I let it make me overlook Andy Bellefleur as a possible suspect. If I hadn't done all of those things, I could've ended his killing spree last night when we had backup. We wouldn't be standing here right now, staring down the barrel of a gun.

And if Sookie died here tonight, it would be my fault.

He seemed to be on a roll now. Finally able to brag about his psychosis now that he had a literal captive audience and said, "The night I killed that trashy Pickens girl I'd stopped by the bar. As

soon as Jason saw me he started goin' on and on about how fuckin' great the football team did once *he* became the quarterback. Not *once* did he ever apologize for breaking my hand. Not *once* did he ever show any remorse for ruinin' my fuckin' life. And when everybody and their fuckin' brother in the bar agreed with him that night, it was the last fuckin' straw. There ain't no secrets in this town, so everybody knew Maudette was a whore that liked to be choked and it wasn't no secret your brother was with her. She was the one to tell me the cameras at the Grab-It Kwik were broke. She was the one who asked me to stop in and check on her from time to time when she worked the graveyard shift alone, so she didn't think twice when she saw me that night. I stared right into her eyes when I choked the life out of her and all I could do was smile, knowing Jason would be the prime suspect. Hell, *his name* was the first one I mentioned to Bud. I'd driven by his place beforehand so I knew he was home. I even got out and looked into his bedroom window, so I knew he was sleeping alone for once and there wouldn't be anyone who could say where he was that night. But it wasn't enough for the DA to charge him."

He paused in his rant long enough to seem as though he was trying to kill Sookie with nothing more than a look when he finally said, "You know, I was in the station that day when you came to see Bud. I heard *everything* you said. *Poor little Sookie Stackhouse* didn't get her way for once when *I* got the job *you* wanted. Well you know what? I ain't no fuckin' *Roscoe P. Coltrane* and payback is a bitch *Daisy Duke* because you did the same goddamn thing to me!"

"What?" she asked. "What are you talking about?"

"*I* applied for the academy in Shreveport the same time you did, but *you* got *my* slot. Do you think I *want* to work in some backwater bayou where the biggest crime is a bunch of teenagers drinking down by the lake? You think I enjoy having Jane Bodehouse's DUI's as my only collars? No! But because of some nepotism bullshit because your daddy was too dumb to stay alive on the job or some affirmative action women's rights bullshit, *you* got the job over *me*."

Corbett growled out loud and I could practically hear the ranting and raving going on in Sookie's head, but thankfully that was where it stayed. Instead she sounded incredibly calm, like she was talking to a frightened animal, when all she said was, "I didn't know. I had no power over who they would hire and I didn't pull any strings. I applied for the job just like you Andy."

"*Just like you*," he mocked. "Yeah? Well I'm a cop *just like you*, so I made sure to drop Dawn's body in *your jurisdiction* just to see if you were as good at being a detective as I would've been. I stopped by Merlotte's that night, so I knew your brother was sauced. I waited for him in the parking lot so I could nail him with a DUI, but then he had to go and leave with that slut Dawn. When I came up on her later on that night and she was all alone with a flat, it was like God was givin' me another chance. So I took it. Your brother's hound dog reputation made it too easy to find women he'd be linked to. And I knew you'd go stickin' your nose into the investigation on a count of him being your brother whether you got the case or not. Hell, I even made sure to stomp around on the ground when I ditched her car in the woods, but you almighty egotistical Shreveport PD dumbasses *still* didn't figure it out! Maybe I should a dug my heels in and carved my fuckin' name into the dirt so you all would finally get a clue!"

His face was beat red with his blood pressure likely at a dangerous level. I hoped like hell he would just drop of a heart attack right then and there, but instead he took a few deep breaths to calm himself and mumbled, "But then that fuckin' *Hoyt* had to go and be his alibi. You Stackhouses get all the fuckin' luck and I just can't catch a fuckin' break."

Were we supposed to feel bad for him?

When the silence only grew after his psychotic rant, Sookie finally broke it and asked, "So now what? What are you going to do, Andy? What do you think you'll accomplish by killing me? Opening a spot on the Shreveport police force?"

I couldn't stand hearing her talk about her death in any context. With my own emotions running so high, I couldn't tell if she sounded as though it was a certainty because she *felt* that way or if she was just stringing him along and trying to buy us some time by talking to him. In either case *I felt* the pain in my chest hearing her words, just as much as I felt the pain of the handcuffs digging into my wrists while I tried to force my hands free. But even if she'd only clicked them shut once – and she hadn't – my hands were too big to fit through the bracelets.

"It'll hurt your brother," he replied without hesitation. "Just like it hurt *me* to come home last night and find *my sister* in tears because *your brother* led her on at the fair. She said he sweet talked her away from Bill Compton and then ditched her because she's a good girl, so he could run off with that whore Amy."

Seriously?

If I murdered everyone I'd ever felt slighted by, the sheer number of bodies I left behind would've made the FBI dub me Vlad the Impaler.

"And then I'm gonna pin *all* of the murders on your boyfriend here," he added.

"What?" I asked, unable to stay quiet any longer now that he'd drawn me back into their conversation. "What motive would I have? I'd never even met Maudette Pickens and I was with Sookie when Dawn and Adele were killed."

As soon as the words left my lips, I realized my own error just as he answered, "Oh yeah? Is that on record somewhere? Did you ever have cause to give a statement? Do you remember using an ATM or your credit card the night Maudette was murdered to prove you weren't there? Because with Sookie dead I can't see how she'll be able to be your alibi."

The answer to all of those questions was no. And she'd only gone on record as my alibi for th in a tree incident.

"You see," he began in a tone of voice like he was telling a story.

It turned out to be a fucking fairytale and a nightmare all rolled into one.

"I was out on patrol tonight and seeing as how Mrs. Stackhouse was murdered here on the previous night, I decided to stop by the house to check on things and to offer my condolences, since I'd been too upset myself to do it the night before. But when I got outta my car I heard the most hellacious fight going on between the two of you. From what I could tell it seems Sookie here figured out you were the killer and she was trying to break things off with you right before I heard the gunshot. And when I ran inside it was just in time to see you put a bullet in your own head. The icing on the cake will be the fact, as far as I can tell, you're the only guy she's ever dated that her brother didn't have a bad thing to say about. He actually likes you, so it'll only hurt him even more to know he didn't spot the signs his baby sister was dating a serial killer. And I'll get to sit back and smile while I watch him die a little bit at a time when he's left to bury his sister and his grandmother all by himself. If I can't take his life away by sending him to prison, well then this is almost as good."

His eyes were positively crazy while he stared directly into mine. He actually believed everyone would buy that crock of shit. He didn't know about the forensic evidence Victor had found. He didn't know I'd already told Alcide he was there with a gun pointed at Sookie and I wasn't about to tell him. I didn't want to piss him off even more or make him become more erratic in his desperation. But I still had to stall for time because I couldn't hear any sirens in the distance, so I wracked my brain and spit out the first thing I could think of by saying, "Ballistics. They'll know it was your gun when they run ballistics."

"Will ya looky there," he mocked. "Looks like you snagged yourself a doctor *and* a part-time detective, Sookie." Turning his eyes back to me he said, "Well *Sherlock*, then I guess it's a good thing this here is *Sookie's* gun, huh? You all should learn to lock up your car. You of all people should know by now you can't take being out in the middle of nowhere for granted."

Fuck. Me.

And hearing Sookie's small gasp beside me told me *she* knew we were fucked too.

I wouldn't know Sookie's gun from any other. Hers was the same make and model as nearly everyone else's on Shreveport's police force, so I didn't think anything about the one in his hand looking identical to it.

And I couldn't think of a way for either one of us to get out of this mess if backup didn't arrive soon.

Our only backup for now was in the paranormal form. Both Corbett and Adele had been standing silently at our sides, but seeing the determination rise up on Bellefleur's face was enough to make me grasp at straws as he said, "Alright. Enough yappin'. It's time to get this show on the road. I don't want to be up all night doing the paperwork on y'all."

"What if I told you we're not alone?" I asked. "What if I told you both Sookie's father and Adele are here in the room with us right now and if you do anything to Sookie, they will haunt you until your dying day." Not only did I desperately hope *today* was his dying day, but it was true.

And if he managed to live beyond today, not only would he have Corbett stalking his every move, but he'd have me and Adele there too.

Because even with the two of us standing side by side and staring down the barrel of her gun – a gun we'd just been told would be murdering us both – I still couldn't fathom a world where Sookie didn't live.

"Are you seriously trying scare me off with *ghosts*?" he asked incredulously. "Because if you are, you're making my case for you being a whack job even easier."

"It's true!" I offered even though I had no way of proving it. Turning my eyes to look directly at Corbett, I ordered, "Show him. Move something on the table and show him you're really here."

"What?" Corbett asked. "How in the hell am I supposed to do *that*?"

"I did it!" Adele offered. "I kicked the flowerpot on the porch and made it wobble!"

She didn't waste another second and moved over to the table where she tried to slap the napkin holder from the tabletop, but only succeeded in making the paper napkins sway in the breeze.

"Did you see that?" I asked Bellefleur, hoping like hell he did. "The napkins moved."

Barely, but they did move.

"There's a cross breeze in here," he answered skeptically, with his eyes glued to the napkins. When nothing else happened he turned his hateful glare back onto me and snarled, "You're just *fuckin'* with me. Just like the rest of the *fuckin'* Stackhouses."

He stood up then and raised the gun chest level with Sookie as he said, "Bye bye Sookie. Tell your dad I said *fuck. You.*"

Everything after that happened quickly. Just as his finger was squeezing the trigger both Adele and Corbett ran towards him and made a combined attempt at shoving his raised arm, but I couldn't rely on them being able to succeed.

I couldn't breathe knowing I was about to lose Sookie.

I couldn't let her die.

So I acted on instinct and jumped in front of her just as I heard the shot being fired. And my eyes saw Bellefleur's go wide – just like his aim – when they'd succeeded in moving his arm just a little.

But it was just enough.

Just enough for me to take the bullet meant for Sookie.

I felt it enter the right side of my chest, but I couldn't tell if it made its way through me and in to her. The searing pain was like nothing I'd ever experienced before, but hearing Sookie scream out my name instead of in pain told me she was alright.

Told me she wasn't dead.

Told me she had a chance to make it out of there alive.

I landed on the floor in the exact same spot Adele's body had been the night before and the last thing I heard was another loud explosion right as the darkness took over my mind.

Chapter 25: Epilogue

Epilogue

The first of my senses to return was sight.

Sort of.

My eyes were being blinded by the white light in front of them and strangely enough, the memory of the weird little troll-looking woman from the Poltergeist movie popped into my head, crooning, "*Go into the light.*"

But I didn't want to. Not yet anyways because to me that could only mean one thing.

I would be dead.

Dead dead.

Whenever I'd asked Corbett about his experience when he died, he'd just said one minute he was alive and then next he wasn't. A small amount of time had been lost in the interim, but he couldn't say what had happened in between because by the time he 'came to,' his body was already on the way to the morgue. From what Adele had described on the night she'd been killed, her experience sounded similar. One minute she was standing in the kitchen and the next she was outside on the porch.

No one mentioned a white light.

But if I was seeing one – if I went *into* the light – according to that troll-ish woman and Shirley Maclaine, wouldn't that mean I would go on to wherever other souls went when their bodies died?

Was Sookie still alive?

Or had she been killed too?

What if I went into the light and she stayed behind with her father and grandmother?

Would I ever see her again?

Or would she go into the light with the hope I would too? Would I lose my only chance to be with her by fighting to remain in this world?

It seemed I'd lost my chance to make any choice when the light suddenly disappeared and everything plunged back into darkness. I was tired. Everything about me felt drained, but I struggled against it. I was afraid to give up. I'd spent nearly my entire lifetime being alone and I didn't want to spend eternity that way too.

And I sure as hell didn't want to spend an eternity without Sookie.

"Eric! *Eric!* Wake up!"

My eyes fluttered open only to see both Adele's and Corbett's concerned faces hovering over mine. I wasn't sure what was happening, but when Corbett pressed his hands against my shoulders to shake me – and I *felt* it – I had a clue.

I was dead.

But not *dead* dead.

"Sookie?" I mumbled, hoping like hell she'd made it out of there unscathed.

"Eric!"

It was Sookie's frantic voice I heard then and I didn't know whether or not I should be happy or sad when she appeared over me. There were tears in her eyes when she leaned down and I felt her lips press against mine while she said, "I love you. I'm here, baby. I'm right here."

Fuuck... was she dead too?

My eyes fell closed again with my exhaustion taking over. It was all too overwhelming. My failure at keeping her safe and unharmed made my chest feel like it had been torn wide open.

It was too much.

I couldn't deal with it right now. I didn't want to deal with any of it. Ever.

"ERIC!" she shouted, making my eyelids twitch. "You fight! Do you *hear* me! You *fight* to stay with me!"

I tried to open my eyes again. I didn't want to disappoint her again, but when I did they were once again filled with the blinding light. I could hear other voices too by then. Voices in the background I didn't recognize. But all I could see was the light. And I could suddenly feel my body moving even though I couldn't feel anything beneath my feet. It was a strange floating sensation and I wondered once again if the choice to go into the light had been made for me.

But hearing Sookie's sobbing voice right at my ear pleading, "Don't leave me Eric. *Please* don't leave me," made me fight against the exhaustion. Fight against going anywhere where she wouldn't be going with me.

But no matter how hard I tried to fight it, I just wasn't strong enough. And I only knew I had lost the battle when just as I was plunged back into total darkness, her last words to me sounded like she'd whispered them from the opposite end of a very long tunnel.

"I love you Eric. I love you."

~o~O~o~

"We're losing him."

"He's in tachycardia."

"ERIC!"

"CLEAR!"

"He's back. His pulse is steady, but weak. What's our ETA?"

"Trauma Two."

More blinding light accompanied the words, "His pupils are responsive," before the darkness filled me once again.

"There's no time. Prep him for surgery."

The foreign voices continued to filter in and out through the shadows of my mind and into my psyche. The snippets of phrases I overheard held little meaning to me, but seemed familiar at the same time. The only one to truly register had been the sound of Sookie's voice screaming out my name, but I didn't have the strength to acknowledge her. My eyes felt like iron weights had been placed on them and my limbs were just as useless.

I couldn't move them no matter how much I tried.

I felt like a failure all over again. I failed to protect Sookie. I failed to remain with her in our world. The bright light was back to blinding me and I could feel my body moving at a swift rate, even though I didn't seem to be getting any closer to it. But I still couldn't stop it.

I couldn't stop any of it.

And like the light, my consciousness faded away with it, carrying the bitter weight of knowing I wasn't strong enough to stay with her.

~o~O~o~

"He's dead."

Even in the blackness of my new world I would recognize her voice anywhere and everything ached inside of me hearing her sounding just as dead as her words.

"I killed him."

'No. No you didn't,' I silently argued. *'I would gladly die a thousand times to keep you safe.'*

I was just happy that I seemed to be able to at least stay in the same world where Sookie was. I didn't want to be without her. I never could figure out if she'd been killed too, but I hoped not – even if I felt horrible that physically, at least, she would have to be without me.

"Hey! Look whose back!"

Corbett's smiling face was hovering above mine just as my sight returned and he gave me a playful tap on the cheek as he said, "Bout time, son. We were getting worried."

"How are you doing, sweetheart?"

Adele's smiling face appeared next to Corbett's, but I still felt groggy. I couldn't yet form any words with my mouth, so I tried to convey my questions with my eyes.

Sookie?

"She's fine, Eric. Sookie is fine." Looking both grateful and proud, she added, "You saved her life."

Thank God...

I tried to get my body to move, but it wasn't cooperating at the moment. I wasn't sure how much time had passed from the time I died until now, but it seemed odd that my whole body was radiating pain.

Adele's twirling 'Ta da' performance had led me to believe I'd be feeling as good as new right about now.

But my silver lining was knowing I at least wouldn't have to spend all of eternity naked.

While I waited for whatever mystical mojo to get with the program and give me the power over my arms and legs again, I tried to ask another question with nothing more than my eyes.

Narrowed and filled with anger seemed to do the trick.

"That bastard Bellefleur?" Corbett snarled, now looking just as angry.

Detective Doodlebug hadn't lost his touch at all.

'Yes,' my eyes replied by way of rapid blinking.

His grin returned and grew impossibly wide before he nodded to his right and said, "Well quit yer yammerin' and just listen for yourself."

Great. An eternity with a smart ass would be my own kind of purgatory.

When he moved out of the way I could see Sookie sitting in a chair off to the side of the room with Jason, Flood, and Herveaux surrounding her. I couldn't tell if it was the way the light was shining through the window or if the halo effect around them was something all ghosts could see when looking at the living.

It looked like she was glowing.

But only her aura was bright. The rest of her looked more dismal than I'd ever seen her before. Her eyes were back to being puffy and red, and she didn't seem to notice the tears streaming down her face as I listened to her say, "He went on and on about how our family kept *fuckin' with his*. High school football. His career. His grandmother losing a fucking bake-off. He lost his goddamn mind. He said he was going to stage it to look like a murder-suicide and make Eric out to be the killer all along. If he hadn't...if Eric hadn't..."

She started sobbing then, so Jason kneeled down in front of her and hugged her to his chest while she cried. I was glad they at least had each other to get through the coming days. Sookie would still have me too, even if she wouldn't be able to see me.

But my chest ached even more while I silently hoped she would at least talk to me when she was alone – even if she couldn't hear me answer her in return.

When she seemed to gather herself again, she forced herself to explain, "His shot went wide and he seemed frozen when...when Eric..." Her breath hitched in her throat and she needed a few minutes and several deep breaths before she gave up and finished her statement with, "So I reached behind the water heater and grabbed the shotgun. I aimed it right at him and fired."

"It was a good kill," Flood said, patting her shoulder gently. "A *clean* kill."

"Good enough they'll have to have a closed casket at the funeral," Herveaux growled.

"Fuck that! They should just burn the son of a bitch," Jason joined in. "I'll dig a pit in my backyard and we can have a *pig* roast." He smiled and nudged Sookie's arm, adding, "But I'll do burgers and dogs on the grill for us to eat while we bid him *bon fuck off* on his way to hell."

Herveaux nodded in agreement and offered to bring the beer, while both Sookie and Flood ignored them as her partner tried to get everyone back on track by saying, "The prosecutor has already said he's not interested in coming after you and I doubt Internal Affairs will either once they're done with their investigation, so don't you worry about that."

"I'm not," she whispered, while a new batch of tears streamed down her face. "I'm just worried about..."

Her words trailed off while her eyes strayed in my direction and I barely had the time to realize she was holding my gaze when she literally sprung out of her seat and yelled, "Eric! You're awake!"

Wait. Did that mean...

She rushed towards me and when she leaned down over my body, I could feel something pulling at my arm. I looked down to see the wires running across my chest like an LA freeway and only then did I realize I was lying down in a bed. But Sookie didn't notice anything other than my open eyes as she gently cupped my face in her hands and softly sobbed out, "You're awake."

I discovered my arm *could* move if I had the incentive of wanting to comfort Sookie, so I gently wrapped it around her back as she lightly leaned down on top of me to cry against my shoulder. And for the first time, I couldn't even say that her tears bothered me.

Not when I could feel my own trailing down the sides of my face.

I was alive.

Sookie was alive.

I couldn't ask for anything more.

~o~O~o~

"I can't believe we're actually doing this," Sookie giggled, while her eyes glanced down at her dress. I could tell she was nervous and so was I, but I was more excited than anything.

"You're not getting cold feet, are you?" I asked, smoothing the wrinkles out of my own outfit.

She smiled coyly and responded, "*Maybe*," while automatically reaching for her declared favorite piece of jewelry, so she could twirl it with her fingers. It was a new habit of hers that could mean she was either nervous or just lost in thought. She hadn't taken it off since I'd put it on her six months earlier.

But knowing she was just giving me a hard time, I played into her game and stomped my foot on the sidewalk while whining, "But we're already dressed for it. We've been planning it for months. We sat on a plane for hours just so we could do this."

It was our first real trip together and I planned on making the most out of our alone time, but we had all week long to enjoy it. Sookie and I hadn't spent a single night apart after the Andy ordeal. She'd even stayed at the hospital with me, refusing to leave my side for longer than it took for her to shower. But I couldn't say that I minded.

We didn't even discuss living together. It just happened. All it took was us walking into my apartment right after I was discharged from the hospital. Looking around, I casually asked what furniture she thought we should keep of mine and what she wanted to bring over of hers. I knew it was a lame way to go about it, but I had already learned by then.

Lame usually worked out well for me when it came to Sookie.

If anything, it would've felt unnatural for us not to be together, no matter how many actual days it had been that we'd known each other. My place was bigger than hers, so with the help of Jason and our now close circle of friends, Sookie officially moved in.

Which was why Corbett could now enter the apartment at will. But it only took one day for him to learn to knock first.

He should've known Sookie and I would be in a celebratory mood.

Both he and Adele found if they were focused, they *could* move inanimate objects. But it took a lot of concentration and it seemed to zap their energy whenever they did it. We figured it was their fear and adrenaline on the night of Bellefleur's attack that helped them move his arm. And I later found out that when his spirit appeared in the kitchen a few moments after Sookie shot him, Bellefleur found out the hard way I hadn't been lying to him.

He also found out what a pissed off Corbett Stackhouse could do. No one had seen Bellefleur since.

But now that they had a new trick up their sleeve, there was a new little bell for them to use, hanging right outside our front door. Neither Corbett nor Adele would come in until we said the coast was clear.

And they were accustomed to waiting.

Sookie inherited the farmhouse and we spent every weekend possible there. We both would've loved to live there full time, but with our jobs it wasn't practical. The commute to Shreveport was too long and we both had nights when we were on call. One day, though. We both agreed one day we would call Bon Temps home for good.

Jason of all people had applied for and been hired as Bellefleur's replacement. I was skeptical at first, but being a cop really was in the Stackhouse genes because he took the job seriously and he was actually good at it. He still acted like the same goofball he always was when he was off duty, but as soon as he put on his uniform he was a different person.

His family couldn't have been prouder.

We hadn't told him about my quirky little secret yet though. Sookie was sure it would make his head cave in if we tried to explain it to him while he was still dealing with all of the other changes going on in his life. But one day – maybe – we would.

But that one day wasn't now. Now – today – I had Sookie *all* to myself.

Sort of.

And when I made the mistake of letting my eyes trail over her body, suddenly I wondered if maybe staying in the hotel all day long instead wouldn't be a better idea.

"No way, Northman," she chastised, either using her spot-on telepathy against me or seeing the lustful look on my face. It was one and the same, really.

"I didn't put this on just so you could rip it off of me before we even do this."

I bet I could get her to change her mind.

Perhaps sensing I was in a gambling mood, she licked her lips and gave me her *fuck-me eyes* while she promised, "You can do *that* when we get back."

As if I hadn't already planned to. Hell, we'd just done *that* before we'd gotten dressed and I was already ready to go again.

Sookie was my own personal Viagra.

She let go of the bullet-turned-pendant from between her fingertips and let it drop back down on its chain between her breasts, so she could grab onto my hand. Wearing the bullet around her neck that had nearly killed me but at the same time had saved her was maybe a bit macabre for some couples. But considering everything we'd been through together, it was a perfect representation of us.

Life and death.

Together we'd somehow managed to find the perfect balance between the two.

"Let's go...*Master*," she purred and placed another chain into my free hand.

I'd had no idea of just how perfect Sookie would be for me when we first met, but if I'd ever had any doubts, this moment would've taken them all away. She'd never looked more beautiful and her happiness made her look like she was glowing from the inside out. And I felt just as happy knowing she was about to make another dream of mine come true.

Never – in my entire life – would I have ever imagined doing what we were about to do. I never imagined having someone as beautiful and as loving as her who would make this day even possible.

And she was all mine.

And one day we would make that legal. But that day wasn't today either. I didn't know where she found the perfect replica of Princess Leia's slave costume, but I imagined a lot of light sabers would be powering up once we got inside. That was okay though because I had *zero* doubts on who she would be going home with.

I no longer had *any* doubts she would always be by my side.

So it was with a huge smile on my face that we walked hand in hand, together into our future.

Well...I guess it was sort of George Lucas's future too. Today they were one and the same.

Because today was the first day of Comic Con.

The End

...for now