

Title: **The Northman Identity**

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## **Chapter 1: Mission**

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### Mission

#### **EPOV**

I checked the room one last time to make sure I wasn't leaving anything behind. I *knew* I hadn't, but it was ingrained in me to check anyway. The room was rented for an additional night, but I wouldn't be coming back after I completed my mission later on tonight. I quickly sifted through my duffel bag and counted the five passports I'd brought along, all issued by a different country and each in a different identity, but all with my picture affixed to them.

There was a smaller drawstring bag inside the duffel bag that contained the contents of one of my safe deposit boxes which was one of several that were in banks scattered across the world. They were my fallback if I should ever be compromised and each contained at least \$100K in American currency and several passports. I'd chosen to empty the one here, in the Caribbean, because I wouldn't be coming back anytime soon, if ever, so I was going to relocate the contents to another bank in the States for now until I figured out a more permanent location.

I methodically wiped down the room to remove any fingerprints I may have left before placing the room key on the dresser and walking out a side entrance with my bag thrown over my shoulder. I kept pace with the tourists and locals alike all going about their normal lives. I tended to walk slightly hunched forward to blend in with the crowd more because my 6 foot 4 inch height tended to stand out. The sun was getting lower in the sky, but it would be several hours before it would finally be full dark and my gear had already been stashed by the agency so I would be retrieving it as soon as I got the boat I was on my way to acquire now.

I'd been to the Caribbean several times now, but each one was for another mission so I had yet to actually relax on a beach. Of course, with my profession, I never fully relaxed because my senses were always on high alert taking in every detail of my surroundings and the people nearby. My mind was constantly running; evaluating their motives while cataloging potential threats, assessing their weaknesses and strengths. Although I had never tried, I doubted I could turn off that part of my brain since it was drilled into me as a part of my training after I'd been recruited.

I lived in many different places all over the world growing up. My father was an officer in the United States Navy and eventually retired as an Admiral. I graduated from the Naval Academy, like my father, and was at the tail end of my SEAL training when I was called into the

Commander's office and told my parents had been killed. They were on their 'second honeymoon' traveling the world in an eight week long vacation when their plane was hijacked in Egypt. All of the Americans on board were immediately shot and killed by the terrorists, my parents included.

I funneled the anger I felt into my training and while I'd been good before, I quickly became unstoppable. No matter what they threw at me I pushed my body forward, sometimes beyond its limits, but *always* succeeding. I hadn't known it at the time, but *they* were watching me and no sooner had I graduated than I was approached by one of my SEAL instructors informing me that some people wanted to meet me.

I followed him to his office where I was introduced to the people that would later become my 'handlers', Bill Compton and Pamela de Beaufort. They explained what they did and why they wanted me. Two hours later I willingly got on a private plane to an undisclosed location where, for the next six months, I would be trained by the best hand to hand combat fighters, weapons specialists, and linguists the world had to offer. I left six months later as a black ops assassin working for a secret multi-government agency unofficially consisting of the United States and her allies. I was one of maybe a dozen located all over the world and we were called in to do what our countries needed done, but couldn't do themselves. In my mind, it gave me a way to avenge my parents' deaths on the terrorist scum of the world that would never abide by the Geneva Convention and therefore shouldn't be afforded its protections.

I happened to come across the man that had been responsible for my parents' death a year ago as he was leaving a nightclub in Paris. He had been the leader of the terrorists on the plane that day and had given the order to kill the Americans. When he saw there was no escape he released the remaining passengers and got lost in the crowd as bombs they had placed inside the plane detonated moments later. I followed him as he walked down the city streets and saw my opportunity to take him out when he cut through a park. I grabbed him from behind and held my knife to his throat as I told him why he was about to die. His cowardly protests were quickly cut off when my blade sliced into his flesh from ear to ear.

I made it to the marina within ten minutes on foot and walked into the boat rental shop I'd scoped out the day before. I could easily steal one, but it seemed an unnecessary risk to take on the off-chance the owner discovered it was missing while it was still in my possession. I'd chosen this particular shop because it wasn't as big or pretentious as some of the other ones on the island that catered to the wealthier tourists. Those kinds had camera which was something I avoided whenever possible.

This shop was small and my research found that it was owned by a local man and his life partner. The majority of their customers were locals and college kids, but they had what I needed without the bothersome cameras, so that was all that mattered to me at the moment.

A bell jingled as I pushed the door open and I was momentarily stunned at the sight before me. When I had walked by the day before, the owner had been at the counter, a flamboyant black man named Lafayette Reynolds along with his partner Jesus. According to my research, Jesus

Velazquez had been a doctor a few years back but his medical license was pulled by the AMA after he was found operating on a patient while drunk.

Today a stunningly beautiful girl with bright blue eyes and mostly blond hair was working alone in the shop. I say mostly blond because there were streaks of pink, purple and blue running through her hair as well. Somehow it worked for her.

She had curves that went on for days and the only things she wore were fitted cut-off jean shorts and a pale blue tank top. I could see the strings of her red bikini top tied around her neck and I had to swallow the drool that pooled in my mouth.

She looked up at the sound of the bell and a smile lit up her face as she said, "Hi! Welcome to Lafayette's. Can I help you?" Her cute little southern drawl, that I pegged her as being from Louisiana, coupled with her daisy dukes made my dick twitch and a part of my brain started calculating how much time I could spare to ravish her body without compromising my mission. Sadly, I soon calculated not enough time because I could tell by just looking at her that I wouldn't be able to stop after just once.

My romantic liaisons were never anything more than one-night stands. They never knew my real name and I didn't care to know theirs. I couldn't afford to get close to anyone, nor could I allow them to know my true identity, who I worked for, or what I did. It was strictly forbidden.

I put on my most charming smile and said, "I believe you *could* help me." I practically purred at her with my voice thick with innuendo. I could tell that her heart rate had increased as did the rise and fall of her chest, but those were my only indicators that she was affected by my words. Outwardly she rolled her eyes and made a "Pfft" noise saying, "You aren't the first guy to come in here using that line and you won't be the last so unless you're here to rent a boat there's *nothing* I can help you with."

I loved feisty ones. I put on a mock sincere face and said, "Of course I was talking about a boat. I have no idea what you *thought* I meant." I felt my eyebrow rise up towards my hairline with the corners of my lips twitching up as well and when she giggled my dick decided to join them rising up as well.

The soldier in me was screaming to knock it the hell off and to stop flirting with her. I was here on a mission. A mission that didn't include a romp in the back room of a shack no matter *how* much I wanted the girl in front of me. I shouldn't be flirting with her, spending more time than necessary with her, giving her more of an opportunity to remember details about me. I shouldn't and yet that was *exactly* what I continued to do.

She pulled out a form and asked to see my identification. I dug through my bag ready to give her one of my fake passports, but I ended up pulling out my driver's license instead. It didn't have my real address on it, but it did have my real name. Or, at least, my real name as far as my country was concerned. When I joined the black ops group I gave up my old life, as well as that identity, and became Eric Northman. That was who I identified myself with now.

I wasn't sure why I did it, but I wondered if a part of me just wanted her to know something *real* about me. Or as real as it could be anyway. I'd been living this life of lies and death for seven years now. I was in better shape than I'd ever been and I knew I could best any one of my former instructors now, but it was starting to wear on me mentally. I couldn't see myself doing this for another seven years, but at the same time I knew no other way of life. I killed people. I was good at it. But I was tired of it.

My reverie was broken when I was rewarded with Miss Daisy Duke repeating my name out loud as she filled out the paperwork. "Eric Northman, huh?" I nodded and she continued, "I see you're from New York. How do you like it?" She looked up from what she was doing and I was temporarily caught up in her blue eyes again. She seemed to be affected by my own blue eyes as well. I had to suppress the growl building in my chest when I watched her tongue dart out and lick her lips.

I mentally shook it off and answered, "Its okay. Have you ever been?" Maybe I could figure out a way to see her if she visited. I wasn't there often, but I'd make the time if I knew she was going to be there.

Her expression turned into one of longing when she replied, "No, but I do want to go there one day." I wondered what her story was and how she came to be here since she obviously wasn't from around here. Then I wondered why I was wondering about her at all. The women I bedded were virtual strangers with our coupling being nothing more than an opportunistic and convenient fuck. I didn't care about their life story and I doubted they cared about mine. But there was something about this odd girl with rainbow hair and a southern drawl that was pulling me in. Too bad I couldn't stay, but I supposed I could always come back once the dust settled.

I at least wanted to know her name and I found the perfect opportunity when she handed me back my license. Our hands brushed against each other as I took it from her and I felt a zing at the point of contact. Her eyes widened which made me wonder if she felt it too, but I said, "Well, now that you know my name isn't it only fair that you tell me yours?"

She eyed me for a long minute while the wheels in her head turned and I started to wonder if she was in a witness protection program. I was about to ask her if she was hiding out from the mob when she said, "Sookie Stackhouse."

"Sookie Stackhouse," I repeated back to her. It was different, but then so was she so it fit. She smiled again and said, "That's me. Now do you know what kind of boat you want?"

I followed her out to the dock and picked out a good sized fishing boat that would hold ten adults with plenty of room to spare and had a small cabin below deck. I told her that I was taking a few of my buddies night fishing as I followed her back inside and gave her the deposit in cash. I rented the boat for the whole night and Sookie showed me where the key drop box was in case I returned before their 6 a.m. opening, which I would use because if everything went according to plan I'd be on my way by midnight.

Our transaction was pretty much done and I found that I didn't want to walk away from her just yet, but I had no choice. I was working off of someone else's timetable and not my own. I gave her one more smile before I left and tipped my head towards her saying, "Until we meet again Sookie Stackhouse." I just caught the blush starting to bloom in her cheeks as I made my way out of the shop.

I walked down to the rented boat and hopped in, throwing my duffel bag down the stairs and started it up. I maneuvered the boat away from the dock and turned on the tracker locator that was currently tracking two devices. I headed towards the coordinates for the stationary device and was there less than ten minutes later. I dropped anchor and looked around noting that while there were a lot of boats out on the water none of them were close enough to see what I was doing, especially now that the sun was starting to set.

If I hadn't known it was there I never would've saw it. Bobbing up and down on top of the water was something similar to a fishing bobber but was the size of a tennis ball and the same color as the ocean water. Inside was a microchip that allowed it to be tracked via satellite and it was tethered to what I needed for tonight.

The water in the area was no more than twenty feet deep and so I stripped down to my shorts and dove in, following the tethered line down to the ocean floor. I could make out the large waterproof bag and as soon as I got close enough, I pulled the tab on the side and held onto it as air inflated into the sides of the bag pulling it, and me, back to the surface of the water. I climbed back into the boat and pulled the bag up and over the side.

I did another visual scan of the area surrounding me and once I was sure none of the other boats had wandered any closer I opened the bag and began pulling out the contents.

The custom made wetsuit was outfitted with sheaths along each of my outer thighs that held six inch dual edged daggers and a holster at the small of my back that would hold a 9 mm Beretta. The next item looked like a camelback water container, but in actuality it was akin to an underwater rebreather only smaller. It was a prototype that I'd used before and it worked well for me then. It reprocessed every exhaled breath removing the carbon dioxide buildup and replaced the oxygen used by the diver. They released little to no bubbles and the wearer can remain undetected underwater for a much longer time than if they were using a standard SCUBA tank. I hoped I wouldn't need either the wetsuit or the rebreather, but they were good to have just in case.

I started pulling out the rest of the items in the bag that would've given me trouble getting passed customs. One was forty six and a half inches long with the suppressor attached and weighed just over fifteen pounds. It was an M110 Semi-Automatic Sniper System, or and M110 SASS for short. Its pull could be adjusted manually without tools and the 30mm scope was a single piece instead of needing two separate scope rings. It used either a ten or twenty round magazine and I normally opted for the smaller of the two because I hadn't yet had the need to take out more than 10 targets at a single time and it was capable of taking out a target up to 1000 meters away so long as the shooter was skilled enough to make the shot. I was.

This was my weapon of choice because it was a quick and efficient means to an end, the target's death. The more complicated a plan was, the more ways it could get fucked up so I chose the most direct route from point A to point B whenever possible.

I removed the final item, the 9 mm Beretta and took everything down below before I began tracking the second device.

On the surface Felipe DeCastro was an upstanding business man. He owned casinos in Las Vegas and Atlantic City as well as a few smaller ventures. He was well known and could usually be seen with celebrities in clubs throughout the United States and Europe or attending gallery openings and movie premiers.

What the public didn't know was that DeCastro was also a terrorist without ever having declared a side. He supplied guns and mercenaries to whomever had the cash to pay for it and built his own personal military base in the jungles of South America. He had recently started selling his warfare training services to the highest bidders offering everything from infantry and guerilla warfare to ammunitions and explosives. The intelligence that had been gathered concluded that his training programs were solid and anyone coming out of there would be a deadly threat. He had recently started training groups of Al Qaeda and the Taliban which is what led me to be here now.

DeCastro paid off the government officials where his base is located and he had a group of loyalists surrounding him that kept his involvement far enough removed that there would never be enough evidence to charge him with any crime while in the United States and all of his legitimate businesses were above board so our government couldn't touch him.

If we dropped a bomb on his base it would be declaring war with that country so my job was to take out DeCastro believing that if you cut off the head of the monster, the rest of the body will eventually die. He had a strong second in Victor Madden, but he'd been under the radar for six months with some believing DeCastro had him killed for being overly ambitious.

DeCastro was in the Caribbean on his yacht celebrating his 50th birthday. Plan A was to give him a bullet delivered from my rifle as his gift from the US. However, I'd learned over the years that things rarely went as planned so I had Plans B and C as backups.

I tracked DeCastro's yacht, thanks to another microchip that had been embedded on the ship's hull before his departure, to within less than half a mile and dropped the anchor. There was a new moon out tonight so the only light that could be seen was coming from DeCastro's boat. He didn't have the normal amount of guards with him stupidly assuming he was safe out on the open ocean. Our intelligence said that he'd be having a party, but I didn't see any signs of activity other than the two guards on deck.

When the view didn't change through the night vision scope after four hours, I pulled on my wetsuit and rebreather before slipping into the water with both knives sheathed on my legs and the Beretta secured at my back. My SEAL training worked to my advantage and I was at DeCastro's boat in just a few minutes.

I silently pulled myself onto the stern of the boat while the guard's back was turned and quickly sliced his throat before he ever knew I was there. The slight gurgling noise he made as he died was heard by the guard patrolling at the bow and as he peered back to see what the noise was I threw the knife I was holding and watched as it sliced into the left side of his throat all the way to the hilt. The momentum of it brought his body backward and into the water.

My adrenalin was flowing and my senses were on hyper alert as I listened for the sounds of whether or not anyone had heard what happened, but everything was quiet. I took the gun from the holster and held it as I crept inside the cabin of the yacht listening at each closed door I came to.

I could hear the sound of a TV coming from what turned out to be a living room. DeCastro was sprawled along the length of the couch asleep, but what gave me pause was the young girl curled up asleep in his arms. I knew he had multiple children by multiple women, but I didn't expect any of them to be on the boat tonight.

She couldn't have been more than five years old and her features left no doubt that she was his daughter. She had a doll clutched in her arms and was wearing a nightgown and a paper birthday hat.

There was no way I could kill DeCastro only so his five year old daughter could wake up on top of her dead father. I would just have to tell the higher ups that it wasn't feasible tonight because while I believed DeCastro needed to be taken out, I didn't believe his daughter needed the added trauma. I was traumatized at my own parents' murders at twenty four years old so I knew what she would be going through. I was at the railing near the stern of the boat and reattaching the rebreather to my face, having already holstered my gun. I was about to slip back into the water when I heard the gunshot from behind.

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## **Chapter 2: Trouble**

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### Trouble

#### **SPOV**

I sat up and leaned back against my hands as I took in the sights around me. There were people soaking up the rays on the beach, like me, while others surfed and played in the ocean. My life wasn't so bad, but I couldn't help feeling like there was more to be had.

I was born and raised in a small town in Louisiana and I couldn't wait to leave as soon as I was old enough. My parents were killed in a car accident when I was a little girl so my brother and I were raised by our Gran. She was a sweet woman and I loved her very much, but I always had a wild streak in me that she just couldn't seem to tame. Gran ended up passing away in her sleep not long after we graduated from high school and while I was devastated losing her, I no longer

felt like I needed to stick around to help her out around the house so my best friend Amelia, my cohort in mischief, and I took off for New Orleans. That was where I met John Quinn.

My Gran had always said I was a magnet for trouble and I knew *he* would be trouble from the moment we met. I'm pretty sure that was what attracted me to him in the first place. He was a semi-professional surfer and we met at the Mardi gras parade. Our relationship started out at 100 mph and only got faster from there. I went with him to California, Hawaii, and then here to the Caribbean for him to compete in different surfing competitions.

The problem with relationships that start so fast is that they tend to burn out just as quickly. I caught him going at it with some random beach bunny and just like that we were through. On the pain scale it was barely a sting, but we'd been travelling on his dime so I was stuck here once we'd broken up.

Luckily I met Lafayette and Jesus that same night and we hit it off right away. They were kind enough to give me a job working at their shop and let me live rent free in a small apartment above their garage. They were like family to me now, like my two favorite aunts.

I could tell by where the sun was in the sky that I needed to get to the shop. I stood up and pulled my shorts and tank top over my bikini and walked through the door less than ten minutes later. I'd forgotten that I'd added a few pink streaks in my hair to go along with the blue and purple ones until Lafayette looked up at me and said, "Girl, if you add some orange and green to that head a yours I can wear YOU at the next Gay Pride Parade."

Jesus walked in from the back room at just that moment and said, "I'll be damned if you think you're gonna wear her because you're already pretty enough without adding to it. I'll have to fight all the men off with a stick as it is." I giggled while they made googly eyes at each other and hoped I would find someone that loved me as much as they loved each other.

They left hand in hand to go home for the day while I stayed to work at the shop and I pulled out a book I kept behind the counter to pass the time. After I broke up with Quinn I made a promise to myself that I wasn't going to fall for 'trouble' anymore. Quinn wasn't the first one, but I was bound and determined to make him the last. If I could find someone that was loving and normal, then maybe I could have a relationship like Lafayette and Jesus. It was certainly worth a shot.

I'd been saving as much money as I could while I'd been working there so I could one day have enough to go back to the States and live on for a while to try and figure out where it was I wanted to be and what I wanted to do. I really wanted to go to New York City. It seemed like the perfect place and was so big and busy I doubted I would ever get bored.

Once my brother Jason was old enough, he'd moved out of Gran's house and back to our parents' home and when Gran died she had left her farmhouse to me. It was currently being rented by my childhood friends Tara and JB duRone, but I knew they couldn't afford much since she'd stopped working when they had their baby so we had a deal that they paid the property taxes and utility bills and JB fixed up whatever he could in the old house. I didn't make any money off them living there so my only income came from my job. The last time I had talked to Tara she'd said



that they'd been saving up to buy their own place, so once they found something they liked and could afford they'd be moving out and I would need to find new renters or else I'd have to sell it. That house had been in the Stackhouse family for 150 years and I really didn't want to let it go, but I wouldn't be able to afford to keep it with what I made here.

I settled in reading my trashy romance novel of the week when the sound of the bell on the door jingling made me look up to find the sexiest man to ever walk this planet coming through the door. He had to be close to six and a half feet tall with broad shoulders that tapered to a narrow waist and legs that went on for days. His t-shirt was tight and I could see the outline of his pecs and washboard abs making me have to swallow the drool in my mouth. His blue eyes twinkled with mischief and, dare I say, lust and my trouble magnet alarm was ringing loudly in my head. Yes, this man would be trouble, but I really thought it might be worth it to see how much trouble we could get into.

*No Sookie!* I chastised myself. You need *nice* and *stable* my inner angel voice said. My inner devil voiced her own opinion saying *that* would be boring and *he* would be anything *but boring*. I mentally shook myself and smiled saying, "Hi! Welcome to Lafayette's. Can I help you?"

He eyed me like I was a big juicy steak and he was a hungry lion setting my off 'trouble' alarm even louder as he smiled and said, "I believe you *could* help me." I knew he was coming onto me and it was all I could do to not hop over the counter and climb him like a giant monkey bar, but I *did* make myself a promise so I tried my best to look unaffected and said, "You aren't the first guy to come in here using that line and you won't be the last so unless you're here to rent a boat there's *nothing* I can help you with."

I hoped like hell he would drop it because I felt my willpower leaving me faster than Lindsay Lohan getting her drink on once she was outta rehab. Thankfully he played along and backed off putting on a very sincere face while denying he had any idea of what I could be talking about. He tried to not smile but I saw the corners of his mouth twitch up and I giggled like the awestruck little girl he made me feel like.

I asked for his ID so I could fill out the rental application form and was envious when I saw he was from New York. He seemed unaffected by it, but I guess that was easy to do if you'd lived there for a while. When our skin touched as I gave him back his license I felt a zing where his hand touched mine. It was almost like a static charge, only inside my skin. I looked up at him and I was pretty sure he'd felt it too, but all he said was he thought it was only fair for him to know my name too.

This was where I should have just made up something or refused him outright because my intuition was telling me this man was trouble with a capital T. But it also was telling me that while he might be trouble he was also a good person on the inside. Quinn was too, but he was no Eric Northman. I could always tell the people that had black hearts or dead souls or whatever you wanted to call it...they were evil on the inside no matter how pleasant they seemed on the outside. My Gran said it was my gift. I didn't know what to call it, but I never questioned it.

I gave in and told him the truth and when he repeated my name back in his sexy baritone voice I felt it in my girly bits. In an attempt to ignore the throbbing he was causing between my thighs I smiled again and said, "That's me. Now do you know what kind of boat you want?"

I led him down the dock to where the boats were moored and watched him as he moved. While he'd been standing tall in the shop, outside he seemed to hunch forward a bit, but not in a bad posture sort of way. I didn't know what it was, but even hunched forward you could see his inner confidence in the way his body moved. It made me wonder how well he'd move naked on top of me, underneath me, behind me.

I hadn't been paying attention to what he'd been saying and thankfully he gestured toward the boat he wanted to rent so I didn't have to ask him to repeat himself. He followed me back to the shop and I showed him where the drop box was for the key in case he came back before 8 the next morning. He'd have to come back after that to get his deposit back and I had to admit that I was looking forward to seeing him again. My heart just about stopped when, as he was leaving, he tipped his head towards me and said, "Until we meet again Sookie Stackhouse." I *know* my heart didn't stop but I'm pretty sure my bikini bottoms were soaked through.

I had some very naughty dreams that night about Mr. Eric Northman and I woke up extra early to make sure I had enough time to shower and do my hair before I went into work at 8. I rarely wore make-up, but I put on a touch of mascara and my favorite sundress before heading out the door. I guessed my attempt at dressing up for him was obvious to Jesus and Lafayette because as soon as I walked into the shop they both whistled and fanned themselves with Lafayette saying, "Look at you all gussied up. You gotta date later on? You know they's gotta get our seal of approval before they go trottin' you out the door."

I blushed feeling like I'd been caught, but I knew that Lafayette was serious. Both he and Jesus treated me like I was their daughter and while they were both flamboyantly gay they were also big sturdy men that could handle themselves in a fight if they needed to and would put a serious beat down on any guy that hurt me. I loved them all the more because of it.

"No, I don't have a date. I just woke up early and had more time to get ready, that's all." They eyed me clearly not believing my flimsy denial, but let me off with an "Mmhmm.." and went back to whatever it was they were doing. I'd already seen that the boat Eric had rented wasn't back yet, but by the time it was ten o'clock in the morning I started getting worried. He didn't seem like the type that would steal a boat, but you never really know someone and I didn't know him at all.

Lafayette had had a few boats go missing over the years so he'd had a Lojack type tracking device installed in all of his boats that he could track with his computer. I pulled up the one for the boat Eric had rented and saw it was several miles out in the ocean still and it didn't move for the hour I spent watching its location. We tried to reach him on the radio, but there was no answer and I started getting terrible feeling that something was wrong.

The boat was already reserved for another rental later on that afternoon so Jesus and I took a smaller boat out to where Eric's boat was while Lafayette manned the shop. A half hour later we

were at the boat, but it was empty of any people. I couldn't remember if Eric had said he'd have other people on the boat with him because I was too busy fantasizing about having sex with him to pay attention and I wanted to kick myself now because of it.

We tied the two boats together and climbed into the larger one. I found his duffel bag down below, but what gave me pause was the giant rifle I found with it. I went back on the deck to tell Jesus what I'd found when he said, "Sookie! Look over there!" My eyes followed where he was pointing and it took a minute before I saw him. At least I assumed it was Eric, but whoever it was, they were floating face down in a wetsuit and not moving.

Tears sprung to my eyes and I felt faint as I held onto the side of the boat to steady myself. Jesus raised the anchor and started up the boat moving us closer to the floating body while towing the smaller boat behind us. He cut the engine once we were alongside him and dropped the anchor before leaning over and grabbing onto an arm. We could see the bullet wound on the right side of his back, but Jesus said, "I don't think he's dead because the wound is still pumping out blood."

I helped him pull the body onto the boat and Jesus removed his mask and the small pack on his back. "I think it's a rebreather," he commented as he threw it to the side. That was when we both saw the gun holstered onto his lower back. We looked at each other with wide eyes, but Jesus' medical training kicked in and he took the knife that was sheathed on Eric's left thigh and used it to cut off his wetsuit.

We each took a small moment to admire his naked backside before I grabbed a towel from below and covered him up. Jesus rolled him slightly and said the bullet didn't go all the way through so it was still lodged inside of him. "The temperature of the ocean water must have slowed his heart rate so he didn't bleed out." He looked over at me and said, "We need to notify the authorities."

"NO!" My reaction was immediate and startled us both. I don't know why, but something inside me was screaming that he couldn't be turned in. "No Jesus. I mean I know this looks bad and all, but I have a really bad feeling he'll be in danger if we turn him in. Can't you help him? Please?" The tears started falling down my face as I pleaded with him.

As soon as I saw his shoulders sag I knew he was going to agree with me and I felt relief flood through my body. His gaze dropped back down to Eric's back before meeting mine again as he said, "Okay Sookie, but just for now. If he doesn't have one helluva good reason for all of this, " he gestured around the boat with his hands, "then I can't make any promises."

I leapt over Eric's body and flung my arms around his neck saying, "Thank you. I'm sure he can explain it all."

Jesus wrapped his arms loosely around me and patted my back saying, "Don't thank me yet. If we don't get that bullet outta him soon it might not make any difference. And Lafayette is gonna be hell on wheels when he hears about this!"

I knew he was right, but I'd deal with Lafayette later. Jesus had me press a towel on top of Eric's wound while he sped us back to the shore, towing the smaller boat behind us. As soon as we got

to the dock he ran and pulled his car closer to the dock and then came back with Lafayette trailing along behind him.

"What the hell you talkin' about?" Lafayette asked Jesus as they got closer to the boat. Jesus stopped, aware there were other people nearby, and whispered in Lafayette's ear. I watched his eyes go wide and his mouth open in surprise, but when it looked like he was about to disagree, Jesus' face took on a harder edge and I could see him say 'Sookie' while he whispered. When he was through whisper talking they both looked at me simultaneously and if it hadn't been a life or death situation I would've laughed at their identical expressions.

They both got on the boat and I found Eric's shorts which they pulled up his lifeless body, but not before they each admired his naked ass. I wanted to snap at them feeling strangely protective of that ass, but they were helping me so I wasn't going to do anything to make them change their mind. The three of us maneuvered a t-shirt over Eric's head and arms and then Lafayette scooped him up and threw him over his shoulder in a fireman's carry and I ran down and grabbed Eric's duffel bag throwing his gun and knife inside, but I hid the rifle inside a storage bench, before heading for the car.

The looks on people's faces had the three of us trying to laugh it off while saying, "Poor guy can't hold his liquor and being out on the water didn't help any." Their looks of concern changed to amused understanding and no one paid us any more attention.

I got in the backseat and they pulled him in until his head was resting on my lap. His legs were so long they practically had to roll his legs into the fetal position before he would fit. They hopped into the car and we sped towards their house. It wasn't large or grand, but it was nice and they had a garage that we pulled right into. Once the door was shut they pulled Eric out and brought him into the dining room.

Lafayette made several threats on what would happen if any blood got spilled onto his Persian rug while he ran to get some old sheets to cover everything. Jesus got out his medical bag and washed up before pulling a couple of latex gloves over his hands. He cut Eric's shirt off his body and inspected the wound a little closer and stuck his finger inside the hole making me wince. Eric's body didn't even twitch and if I hadn't seen the rise and fall of his chest I would've thought he was dead. His whole body was pale and I worried that he might not make it.

Jesus dug out some clear tubing and attached a needle on either end before looking up at me and asking, "What blood type are you?"

"O negative." I immediately put my arm out knowing my blood type was universal and Jesus seemed pleased that I was on board with what he didn't have to ask me to do. As he inserted the needle into my arm he glanced at the clock and then inserted the other end into Eric's vein. "It shouldn't take me too long to get it out because I could feel it with my finger. If you start feeling light headed, tell me and I'll take the needle out, otherwise I think we should leave it in for maybe thirty minutes tops."

"Okay." I didn't want him to die and I'd replenish the blood after a little while. I just wanted Eric to be okay.

Lafayette reappeared and they spread the sheets out to cover everything. Jesus cleaned Eric's wound with alcohol, but when he started cutting into his back I turned my head away. I wasn't particularly squeamish, but I really had no desire to watch.

Lafayette disappeared into the kitchen and came back with some cookies and orange juice for me to keep my blood sugar up and twenty-five minutes later I heard Jesus say, "Done!" I glanced over and saw the bullet lying on the sheet next to Eric's body and the hole was now stitched up looking much better than it had. Eric's color had even gotten better and I was relieved thinking he might just pull through.

Jesus removed the needles connecting Eric and I telling me to stay seated for now. They started cleaning up and I grabbed the bullet before they could throw it out and kept it in my hand. I don't know why I did it, but for some reason I felt the need to hold onto it. Between the two of them, they lifted Eric and I followed behind while they carried him to their guest room on the second floor and laid him out on the bed. It was a queen sized mattress and it was kind of comical seeing his legs dangling over the end.

I gave them each a hug and thanked them before they left to go back to the shop. I went to my apartment and changed into shorts, tucking the washed off bullet into my pocket, and a t-shirt before going back to check on Eric. He was still unconscious, but Jesus said we'd just have to wait and see unless we took him to a hospital. That was out of the question, so I sat next to him on the bed and just stared at him for a while.

He really was the most handsome man I had ever seen and I traced along his jaw line from his ear to his chin while sending up a silent prayer that he would be okay.

I woke up feeling disoriented because one, I didn't know I'd fallen asleep, and two, I was curled up against someone else. As soon as my brain fully turned on my eyes shot open and I was looking into those beautiful blue eyes I remembered from the day before. I abruptly sat up and practically screamed, "You're awake!"

He seemed confused, which I guessed he would be seeing as how he woke up in a strange room with and a strange woman curled up next to him. He was concentrating on my face when he asked, "Do I know you?"

My heart kind of fell thinking I wasn't special enough for him to have remembered me from the day before. I thought we had connected a little, but I guess I was the only that felt it. "I was the one you rented the boat from yesterday. Remember?" I smiled softly at him trying to inject a little levity into the atmosphere, but he brought a hand up and rubbed his eyes before opening them and saying, "No."

"Oh," I whispered, "well then you'll just have to trust me when I say it was me that rented you the boat." I was about to ask him what happened, but he raised a hand up stopping me from talking and said, "No, I don't remember you. I don't remember *anything*."

*Uh oh...*

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## Chapter 3: Struggle

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### Struggle

#### EPOV

I woke up with a throbbing pain on the right side of my back. I could feel that I was lying down on a mattress as well as the feeling of someone pressed up against my left side. When I opened my eyes I had no idea of where I was and the panic started to set in. I quickly turned over and saw a beautiful girl asleep next to me and just the sight of her instantly calmed me.

I focused on her willing myself to make sense of everything. Who was she? Where was I? Only then did it dawn on me that I couldn't remember *anything*. I stared down at her while trying to get my brain to work, but no matter what I tried I couldn't remember. Not her or even me. Nothing in the room looked familiar to me and I couldn't understand why. It was almost as if I was born at that very moment with no recollection of my past.

I watched as she started to stir and when her eyes opened, looking into my own, the panic faded completely. I figured she must be someone special to me because of the calm I felt in her presence. I watched her eyes go wide and she sat up saying, "You're awake!"

I wondered if I had been asleep for so long that she was surprised that I *was* awake. I could see the recognition in her eyes, but I still couldn't remember who she was so I asked, "Do I know you?"

Her features went from surprised to disappointed and I felt bad thinking that I must have hurt her feelings, but I was at a complete loss. She said that she had rented me a boat the previous day, but that didn't jog my memory in the least and again she seemed disappointed. I fought the urge to pull her into an embrace wanting to make it up to her, but I told her the truth instead. Not only did I not remember her, but I couldn't remember anything at all.

"Are you serious?" she asked. I couldn't stop staring at her beautiful face and combined with her southern accent she was making me want to strip her clothes off and become reacquainted with her and her body. I wondered if we were in bed together because we'd already had sex. If that was the case I would try to talk her into doing it again because I would want to have remembered it.

Once I realized she was still waiting on an answer I said, "Unfortunately, yes. Why am I here? Did we..." I was trying to think of a tactful way to say *fuck*, but she cut me off with a smirk saying, "Apparently your personality is still intact and we most certainly did not have sex."

All of the playfulness left her face as she recounted everything that she knew from the time we'd met the day before until I woke up here in her boss' house. None of it made sense, but at least I knew why my back was hurting. I could see the slight bruise on her arm from where the needle had been stuck in her arm and I reached over without thinking and ran my finger across it. I watched the goose bumps rise up on her skin and I looked up into her eyes and asked, "Why would you do all of this for me, a virtual stranger? Why not turn me in?"

It seemed odd that she would be so trusting of someone she barely knew and no matter how grateful I was to wake up here instead of a hospital or jail cell I still struggled to understand her actions. For some unknown reason I worried that her trusting nature would get her into trouble one day.

She thought over her answer while looking into my eyes and she reached out brushing some hair away from my face. I closed my eyes and leaned into her touch until the sound of her voice made me open them again. "I know it all looks bad, but there's just something about you that tells me you're a good person. And I'm sure you'll have a really good reason for it all *when* you get your memories back."

I was glad that she seemed so sure that I would eventually remember, but I couldn't find it within myself to believe it as well. In the meantime I needed to make new memories so I started by asking, "What's your name?"

She smiled and said, "Sookie. Sookie Stackhouse. And *your* name is Eric Northman."

I rolled both of our names through my mind but I was still drawing a blank. Sookie must have read my expression because she stood and walked across the room grabbing a duffel bag from the floor and placing it back on the bed next to me.

"This is yours," she said. "You had it when you rented the boat."

I gingerly sat up, still feeling the pain in my back, and opened the bag to see what was inside. I pulled out some clothing as well as a gun and a knife and I looked up to see Sookie looking back at me. "I had these in the wetsuit?"

She smiled grimly and said, "Yes. There was also a rifle in the cabin below deck, but I hid it in a storage bench."

I stared at the gun and knew instantly that I knew how to use it which only frustrated me more that I couldn't remember anything else useful. I set it aside and pulled out a smaller drawstring bag that I opened and turned over dumping the contents out onto the bed. I felt my eyes go wide when I saw several stacks of one hundred dollar bills banded together in five thousand dollar increments as well as several passports. I opened each one and was shocked to see that they all

had different names but the same picture and they were all from different countries. There weren't any mirrors in the room and it felt strange to not know what I looked like, but I held one up to my face and looked at Sookie for confirmation.

"Yep, that's you." She tried to smile but I could tell that it bothered her as well. There was a wallet in the bag that had more cash inside along with a New York state driver's license that had my picture and the name 'Eric Northman' with an address in New York City. None of the other passports had that name so I couldn't be sure if that was my real name, but it felt right anyway.

We both stared at the contents of the duffel bag piled on the bed with each of us lost in our own thoughts when my stomach growled. I looked up as Sookie said, "I guess you don't know when the last time was that you ate, huh?"

A small smile formed on her lips that had me smiling back at her as I shook my head no. She continued to smile as she continued with, "Well then, I'm going to run over to my apartment and fix you something to eat. Why don't you just rest until I come back?"

The thought of her leaving me here wasn't pleasant at all. I wasn't afraid, but for whatever reason I felt like I had to stay with her. I was sure I looked like a lost puppy as I looked at her and asked, "Is it alright if I come with you?"

Her eyebrows furrowed as she answered, "Doesn't your back hurt? I won't be gone long."

My back *did* hurt, but not so much that I couldn't move around. "A little," I replied, "but I'd rather go with you if you don't mind me tagging along." Just the idea that she wouldn't be near me had me feeling lost inside and while I was sure I sounded somewhat pathetic, I didn't care enough to chance not being with her.

She smiled again and said, "Okay," as she started piling everything back inside of the duffel bag. I slid to the side of the bed and after she helped me put on a t-shirt I leaned on the headboard as I slowly stood up. Once I was sure I could withstand the weight on my legs Sookie tossed the duffel bag over her shoulder and I followed her to her apartment above the garage. She explained how she came to live there and while I should have been more concerned about everything else I found what I wondered the most was whether or not she was unattached.

We walked into her apartment and she appeared to live alone but I asked anyway. She smiled and confirmed, "I live alone." I sat down at her kitchen table and watched as she pulled out some items from the refrigerator before looking over at me and asking, "Do you remember if you like turkey sandwiches?"

I tried to shrug my shoulders but the movement made the pain in my back flair and I ended up hissing instead. She grabbed a bottle of water and gave it to me along with a couple of ibuprofen tablets that I quickly swallowed down while she went back to fixing our dinner.



We ate in silence while a million questions ran through my mind. Once we were finished I followed Sookie into the living room and she helped me sit on the couch before sitting in the space next to me and asked, "How do you feel?"

"Physically I'm a little sore, but it's not that bad. The rest of me is just..." I couldn't find any words to describe how it felt to not know who you are.

"Lost?" she asked.

I nodded and stared back at her still wondering how she could be so trusting of me. Especially now that I'd seen the gun and knife she said I'd had when she found me along with the passports and piles of cash. I didn't *feel* like I was a 'bad guy', but it certainly *looked* that way. I felt protective of her and yet I wasn't so sure that the one person she needed to be protected from the most was me. We had no way of knowing whether or not whoever had shot me wasn't going to come looking for me and I didn't want her to be caught in the middle.

"Sookie, maybe I should leave." A look of shock flashed across her face as she responded with, "Why? Where are you going to go?"

I had no idea where I would go, but I'd figure out something. "You've already done a lot for me and I'm grateful, but I don't know who I am or how I got shot. What if I'm dangerous? What if whoever shot me comes back to finish the job?"

She chewed on her bottom lip as she thought over what I'd said and all I wanted to do was lean over and kiss her. I could tell when her decision had been made by the way she squared her shoulders and she said, "You're *not* dangerous."

I looked at her as if she was insane and leaned over pulling the gun out of the duffel bag as I held it pointing away from her with a questioning look on my face. Her eyes narrowed while she said, "Do you *feel* like you're dangerous? That you want to *hurt* me?"

Just the thought of hurting her had me recoiling inside and I answered instantly. "No!"

She seemed pleased with my response and she smiled saying, "So then I have nothing to worry about. And no one besides Lafayette and Jesus know that you're here so you're safer staying put than you would be wandering the streets."

She seemed so sure of everything that I had a difficult time trying to come up with a way to dispute her claims. And I still felt uneasy at the thought of being away from her, but I would do it if I thought she would be better off if I left.

When I had no response she smiled and said, "So, now that *that's* settled, is there anything I can get you?"

I felt grimy all over so I asked, "Can I use your shower?"

"Sure, right this way." I followed her to the bathroom and she helped me take my shirt off. I looked down and watched as she stared at my naked chest with her mouth slightly open and couldn't help feeling pleased at the thought that she found me attractive. When her eyes finally met mine again I smirked while a blush crept up her face at being caught, but she just smiled and left the room.

I stayed under the hot spray for a while letting the hot water work out the stiffness in my neck and shoulders. When I finally emerged from the bathroom I saw that Sookie had fallen asleep while sitting up on the couch. It was already after 11 o'clock at night and I didn't want to disturb her, but I also wasn't comfortable just climbing into her bed. Other than the kitchen table the couch was the only other place to sit down so I turned out the lights and quietly lowered myself on the opposite end of where Sookie was and smiled when her sleeping form slowly leaned over until she was resting against my side. I don't know how long I spent staring down at her until I finally drifted asleep.

My eyes shot open and every hair on my body stood on end. It was still dark out and I could feel Sookie's sleeping body pressed against my side. I glanced at the clock and saw that it was three o'clock in the morning. My insides were practically vibrating and I could feel my body filling with adrenaline as I tried to figure out what my senses were trying to tell me.

I carefully unwrapped myself from Sookie and lowered her head until she was lying down on the couch as I stood up. I heard a faint noise outside and peered through her curtains down below staring for a few minutes until I saw the source.

A man was standing in the shadows of the house and I watched as he slowly crept along, checking each window for a way inside until he finally found one that was unlocked. I saw him pull a gun out from the small of his back before he quietly climbed inside.

I spun around and got my gun from the bag and put my hand over Sookie's mouth as I shook her awake. Her eyes sprung open and before she could make any noise I whispered, "We need to go. Someone just went into the house with a gun."

Her eyes went wide and she said, "But what about Lafayette and Jesus?" From the way she spoke of them earlier I knew she wouldn't leave quietly with me without them so I said, "I'll go in and get them, but I want you away from here." I didn't give her any time to argue and pulled her up as I grabbed the duffel bag and we climbed down the stairs as quickly and quietly as possible.

The garage was empty and Sookie whispered, "They're not home. Their car isn't here." I felt relieved knowing she would be more willing to leave now. I had a strong desire to go into the house and find out who the intruder was and what he wanted knowing he *had* to be there because of me, but my desire to keep Sookie safe outweighed everything else.

I listened at the door and when I was sure there wasn't anyone waiting on the other side I stepped out pulling Sookie along behind me. We stayed in the shadows and quickly cut through the neighboring yards until we were a few blocks away before slowing down. I kept her hand in

mine and we ducked into a dark alley where I said, "We can't stay out in the open. Is there somewhere nearby we can go until I figure out what we're going to do?"

She responded instantly with, "The shop." We made our way there less than five minutes later, but I made Sookie hide down by the docks while I went inside to check it out. As soon as I walked inside I was glad I did.

There was broken glass and splintered wood showing there was obviously a struggle. I checked the other rooms and found them empty, but I stopped short at what I found behind the counter. A sound at the door caused me to whip my body and gun around but I quickly lowered it when I saw Sookie standing there. Her eyes were wide as she took in everything, but when I tried to block her view of what I found behind the counter it was too late. She saw the blood on the floor first and tears started falling from her eyes as she yelled out, "LAFAYETTE! JESUS?"

I caught her falling body by wrapping my arm around her waist and said, "I'm sorry. It's too late. They're gone."

The bodies of both men were lying behind the counter, each of them with a bullet in the back of their head. Sookie screamed as she shook her head saying, "NO! I have to help them!"

"Sookie, we have to get out of here. There's nothing we can do for them now, I'm sorry."

She struggled in my arms trying to free herself until her body went limp against mine as she broke down into sobs. I held her close wanting to soothe her, but I knew we needed to leave before whomever it was that killed them came back.

I grabbed the keys to one of the boats and carried Sookie out of the shop and down the dock until I found the right boat. I went back and got my duffel bag before jumping in and quickly taking us out into the ocean. Once we were a few miles out I cut the engine and dropped the anchor. The sun wasn't up yet, but the sky was beginning to lighten and I felt that we'd be safer out here for now where I could see all around us.

I found Sookie curled up into a ball still crying, but making no sound. My heart broke seeing her in so much pain and I sat next to her not knowing what to do. I was afraid that she would blame me for the death of her friends so I was surprised when she curled up in my lap while I wrapped my arms around her wanting her to feel safe.

We stayed that way until the sun finally rose up over the horizon. While the tears had stopped, Sookie's breathing was still a little erratic and I continued to rub her arms and back with my hands waiting for her to speak. My mind was running through different scenarios on what we should do next. We needed to get away from here, but I knew the boat would never make the journey without the need to refuel somewhere along the way. Commercial flights were out of the question so I was stuck.

"Who do you think killed them?" she asked, barely whispering the words.

"I don't know."

"Do you think it was whoever shot you?"

I sighed and answered, "More than likely." I tilted her chin until she looked up at me and said, "I'm so sorry Sookie. It's my fault your friends are dead and I know you probably want to be rid of me, but I don't know where to take you so that you'll be safe."

The tears silently fell from her eyes again as she answered, "You didn't kill them. And now that they're gone," her voice broke before she took a deep breath and continued, "I don't have anywhere else to go."

I hugged her close again and whispered, "We'll figure it out together." She tucked her head underneath my chin and I knew I would kill to protect her. I would die to keep her safe.

We silently held each other for a while before she pulled back and with a determined look on her face she asked, "So what do we do now?"

Hearing her say 'we' warmed my insides and I said, "*We* need to figure out a way off the island. I think we should go to New York and start looking for answers there." I didn't realize how presumptuous my thoughts were until I said them out loud. I quickly followed up with, "Unless you'd rather not go with me. I still think you should leave the island, but you don't have to go with me to New York."

"I told you, I have nowhere else to go and I want to help you figure out what happened. I want to go with you." I could see the sincerity behind her eyes and while I knew it might be dangerous for her I still felt like I was the one that should protect her and I wouldn't be able to do it if she wasn't with me. I was shocked when she said, "And I know how we can get off the island."

She stood up and started the boat and as soon as the anchor was up she drove us towards the shore. We ended up at a deserted dock several miles away from the boat shop where a puddle jumper airplane was bobbing in the water. I grabbed the duffel bag and followed Sookie as she walked up to a small office front with a sign that read, "Merlotte's Tour by Air". There was a collie lying down across the doorway that sat up as Sookie approached and she bent down scratching his head saying, "Hi Dean."

We walked inside and saw a man sitting with his feet kicked up on the desk reading a newspaper. He folded it up when we walked through the door and his eyes lit up seeing Sookie. I didn't like it.

"Hey Chere. Just coming by for a visit?" He ran his hands through his wiry strawberry blond hair and I didn't like the way he looked at Sookie. It was obvious that he liked her and I had to stop myself from standing in between them and growling at him.

She smiled sweetly, seemingly oblivious to his affection, and said, "Actually, I was hoping you could do us a favor." Upon hearing the word 'us', he finally looked over at me and I watched him

size me up while I did the same. I had no doubt that we each held the same contempt for the other with both of us wanting Sookie for ourselves.

He finally looked back at Sookie and asked, "And what would that favor be?"

"We need to get back to the States, but literally, under the radar. Do you think you could help us out?"

His eyes shot back over to me as he asked, "And who is this guy? Did he get you in some kind of trouble?" He was getting angrier with each question, but I held my own anger in check since it seemed that he was genuinely worried about her.

Sookie placed her hand on his shoulder and said, "The less you know the better." He opened his mouth to disagree, but Sookie held firm saying, "Really Sam. I need you to trust me on this. All I can tell you is that we're not safe here and we need to get back to the States. Will you help us?"

He kept glancing back and forth from me to Sookie before he finally settled his gaze on her and said, "Okay Chere, I'll help you."

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## Chapter 4: Knowing

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### Knowing

#### SPOV

It took all of my willpower to hold it together once Eric and I got to Sam's. He was a nice enough guy and I'd known for a while that he had a thing for me, but I just didn't see him that way. And now that I had to try and deal with Lafayette's and Jesus' murders while trying to escape their same fate it was all I could do to not collapse into sobs at any given moment. I was sure the shock of it all helped steel my resolve for now, but that could only last so long and I hoped we would be far away from here when it happened so I could mourn their loss without having to explain myself.

While Sam was outside readying the plane for our departure my resolve waived when a picture of their dead bodies flashed through my mind and a sob came out of my throat. The sound had no sooner left my lips when I felt Eric wrap his arms around me from behind and I automatically turned myself towards his body while he tried to soothe me. I knew he felt responsible for their deaths and while I was pretty sure they were killed by someone looking for Eric, I couldn't place the blame on him. He'd been shot himself and I knew no matter what, neither Lafayette nor Jesus deserved to die for helping him. Whoever had killed them was evil to their core.

Sam came back in and grunted his displeasure at seeing Eric's arms wrapped around me so I reluctantly tried to pull away not wanting to give him a reason to back out of helping us, but Eric merely tightened his hold on me letting out a little growl of his own. It was enough to snap me

out of my sadness for the moment and I chuckled as I playfully slapped at his chest while I pulled away and turned to face Sam.

"Will we be leaving soon?" I asked.

He ran his hands through his hair and I worried knowing this was his 'tell' when he was nervous. I waited on pins and needles wondering if he was going to back out when he finally said, "Yeah, we should be good to go in a few minutes." He walked over to his desk and pulled out a map calling us over to see what he was now pointing at and I felt my body sag with relief.

I'd forgotten about Sam's younger brother Tommy. I'd met him a few times when he'd come to visit Sam and now remembered that Tommy lived in the Florida Keys. Apparently Sam had called Tommy when he was outside getting the plane ready and got Tommy to agree to meet the plane several miles away from the coast. It was a chancy proposition given that the US Coast Guard might spot the plane landing, but the way Sam spelled it all out made me think that this might not have been the first time they'd done this sort of arrangement. I, however, didn't want to know so I didn't ask and a sideways look at Eric told me he thought the same thing.

Sam went back outside to finish fueling the plane and while he was gone Eric pulled me back into his arms and asked, "How well do you know *Sam*?" I hid my smile at his obvious distaste and was flattered that Eric seemed to be jealous, although he had no reason to be.

"I met him not long after I started working for..." My breath caught in my throat with me unable to say their names and Eric rubbed my back and whispered, "I'm sorry." Once I was able to compose myself again I asked, "Why do you ask?"

"There's something about him that's not sitting right with me." I pulled back and looked up at Eric with my unspoken question and he just shrugged his shoulders and said, "It's just instinct I guess. He's *shifty*."

"Shifty?" I laughed. "Sam's just...Sam. I trust him."

"Okay. It's not like we have a lot of other options anyway," he sighed.

Sam came back and said everything was ready to go and we all hopped into the plane minutes later. Sam sat in the front with Dean as his co-pilot while Eric sat down beside me in the back. Surprisingly, I actually managed to fall asleep not long after we took off. Normally I'm a nervous passenger when flying, but the exhaustion from the previous night coupled with Eric's arm around me was enough to lull me to sleep. I was dead to the world until Eric woke me a couple of hours after we'd left Sam's as we were landing in the Atlantic Ocean with no land visible as far as the eye could see.

We sat in the plane bobbing up and down in the ocean with Sam staring through a pair of binoculars for a few minutes before he said, "There he is." I stared out into the distance where Sam had been pointing and I eventually saw a tiny dot that turned into a boat, getting progressively larger the closer it got to us. Tommy came to a stop next to the plane and once the

plane and the boat were tied together we all climbed on board. After introductions were made Sam and Tommy spoke in hushed tones to each other and Tommy handed Sam a suspicious looking duffel bag that he'd pulled out from under a seat.

I turned away from them, not wanting to witness what I thought I was seeing, and wondered how my life had gotten so crazy in less than 48 hours. I'd found and helped rescue a stranger that I felt an undeniable connection to from the moment we'd met; the two men I'd come to look at as my only real family had been murdered, more than likely by whomever had tried to kill said stranger; I've just fled my home for the past year traveling with the same stranger running from those same killers, and now I was on a boat only miles away from illegally entering the US while witnessing a probable drug trade with nothing more than the clothes on my back and a virtual stranger by my side. It had been years since I'd stepped one foot inside a church, but I was pretty sure I was due for another visit.

Sam threw the duffel bag into the plane and walked towards me giving Eric the stink eye as he put his arms around me and said, "I don't know what's got you running, but know that I'll always be there for you." Hearing the sincerity in his voice made the tears well up in my eyes once more as I hugged him back and said, "Thank you Sam. I wish I could tell you everything that's going on but I'm afraid for *your* safety."

He pulled back and asked, "Does Lafayette and Jesus know you're leaving?" The tears fell from my eyes as soon as he said their names and he looked horrified saying, "I'm only asking in case they come to me looking for you. I don't know what you want me to tell them."

I couldn't form any words and I was grateful when Eric answered for me saying, "They were murdered and whoever killed them is after us or me actually, but because Sookie has been helping me she wouldn't be safe staying here."

I felt Sam's body tense up as he yelled, "WHAT THE FUCK DID YOU DRAG HER INTO?" When Eric didn't respond I pulled back and held Sam's hand in my own as I said, "He didn't *drag* me into anything. I wish I could tell you more, but *really*, it's not safe for you to know everything. All I can ask is that if anyone comes to you looking for me that you deny having seen me for the last couple of weeks. And *please*, be wary of any strangers lurking around asking questions."

Sam stared down at me as I stared back at him pleading with my eyes for him to understand. I knew I was taking a huge selfish risk by going to him and asking for his help knowing what the consequences were for Lafayette and Jesus, but I couldn't think of any other way. The thought that he would meet the same fate ate away at me inside and I could only hope and pray that he would be okay.

His eyes finally softened, as did his tone when he said, "Okay chere, if anyone asks I haven't seen you in weeks. And I'm sorry about Laf and Jesus. I know they meant a lot to you."

"Thank you Sam," I whispered.

He put each hand on my shoulders and said, "Stay safe chere. Hopefully our paths will cross again and when all of this *bullshit*," he glared at Eric before looking back to me and saying, "is over and done I hope you'll call me and let me know that you're okay."

"I will." They were the only words I could form.

Sam rubbed his hands up and down my arms before glaring back at Eric and saying, "Keep her safe."

Eric, who had been glaring at Sam the whole time he was touching me, tore his eyes away from Sam and looked into my own saying, "I will." Deep down inside I knew he would and it was probably the biggest reason I was running with him. I knew I would be safest with him.

Sam climbed back into the plane and once Tommy untied the ropes that held the boat and plane together he started the engine and turned the boat to head back to the mainland. I sat next to Eric while I watched Sam's plane take to the air and the tears flowed again while I thought of everything I had just left behind. Not the material things, but the people who had become my family and friends. I always knew I would be leaving there one day, but I never thought I would be leaving like this.

Eric put his arm around me pulling me up against his side and even though I barely knew him I couldn't deny that just being in his presence felt *right*. I knew from the get go that we had chemistry, but with everything that had happened in the last two days it had turned into something more than just a sexual attraction.

The way he followed me back to my apartment after he had woken up with no memory of who he was or what had happened to him all the while looking like a lost puppy had pulled at my heartstrings. I guessed it was because, with his memory loss, I was the only person in his life. He had no one else that he could rely on, and now that Lafayette and Jesus were gone I was, quite literally, in the same boat as him. I still occasionally kept in touch with Tara, Amelia, and sometimes Jason, but they weren't really a part of my life anymore. I certainly wouldn't feel right running to them now. It was just now sinking in that Eric was all I had.

We'd been on the boat for about an hour when I looked over and saw that Eric had fallen asleep. I knew he must have been exhausted and his back was probably hurting him as well. I just stared at his face while he slept and all of the questions I wished he could answer were running through my mind. Who was he really? Did he have a family worried about where he was right now? My heart dropped wondering if he had a wife or girlfriend waiting for him to return. Did he have kids? I knew I was already falling for him so I made myself a new promise, since I'd already broken the one about staying away from trouble. I promised myself that nothing would happen between Eric and me until I knew I wouldn't be the 'other woman'. I knew I was making a *huge* assumption that something like that would happen between us, but I couldn't deny the attraction that was there. And, without his memories, he wouldn't even know he *was* cheating if we did, but I knew if we took that next step that I would be heartbroken if and when his memories returned and we learned he had already committed himself to someone else in his life.



I was lost in my own thoughts when his body jerked awake and he had a wild look in his eyes. His chest was panting and a light sheen of sweat coated his face until he looked over at me. I watched the tension leave his body while he looked into my eyes and I asked, "Are you okay?" It took another minute or two before he answered, "Yes." I knew there was more to it, but I didn't want to push him for an answer yet so I just squeezed his hand in my own and leaned against his side as we continued towards the shore.

It took another hour before we were finally pulling up the dock where Tommy kept his boat. We were lucky to have made it back without getting caught and I smiled a little wondering to myself if it was because my Fairy Godmothers, Laf and Jesus, looking out for us. I giggled a little picturing them in pink bodysuits and full ballerina skirts knowing they would've loved them.

Once we were on land Tommy surprised me by saying, "I overheard what you were telling Sam and I know how highly he thinks of you." His eyebrow rose up with a knowing look on his face and I wondered what exactly Sam had told Tommy about me in the past, but I just remained silent and nodded.

Tommy's gaze moved from mine to Eric's as he said, "I don't want to know whatever it is that's going on, but I figured if you came back to the States on the down low, you're gonna need to travel on the down low now that you're here." Tommy then turned and pointed towards an older sedan before turning back and saying, "It's not much, but it runs good and the registration is up date, so if you want it it's yours."

My mouth gaped open at his offer, but Eric didn't hesitate at all saying, "If you'll take a thousand dollars for it you have yourself a deal." Tommy's eyes lit up at Eric's response and we were in the car heading north on the interstate with Tommy being a thousand dollars richer.

We sat in silence for a while before Eric reached over and held my hand asking, "How are you holding up?"

None of what had happened seemed real yet even though I knew it was so all I could say was, "I'm okay." I turned to face him and squeezed his hand asking, "How about you?" I had to keep reminding myself that he had no memories and I couldn't imagine what the last twenty four hours had been like for him.

Eric sat there, I assumed thinking over his response, when a smile came on his face and he said, "I'm hungry." I knew he was deflecting, but he started slowing down and I looked to see that we were pulling into a roadside rest area that had a gas station with a small convenience store and a diner. My stomach growled just seeing it so I let his deflection go for now.

We walked into the diner and after we each cleaned up in the bathroom Eric chose a booth in the corner and sat with his back to the wall so he was facing the rest of the dining area. A waitress brought us some menus and I noticed her giving me a funny look, but she walked away again before I could think too much of it. I felt like I was starving and I couldn't decide on what I wanted to eat so I looked up at Eric to ask what he was going to order when I saw that he wasn't

looking at the menu. He was scanning the room with his eyes instead and my whole body tensed up expecting more trouble.

I leaned forward and whispered, "What's wrong?"

Eric snapped out of it and looked back at me saying, "Nothing's wrong."

"*Something's* wrong. What were you looking at?" I casually turned my head to glance around the room, but all I saw were a few families and random truck drivers all either eating or waiting for their food. I turned back to Eric and gave him a '*Well?*' look.

"Really Sookie, there's nothing wrong. My brain just seems to be in overdrive at the moment." He looked confused and I felt bad for him, but I still didn't understand.

"In what way?" I asked.

Eric took a deep breath and blew it all out before saying, "I can't remember *anything* before I woke up lying beside you twenty four hours ago, but as soon as I saw the gun in my bag I *knew* how to use it. My senses woke me from a dead sleep before the intruder ever got into the house and when we got into Sam's airplane I *knew* I could fly it. I *know* I can hotwire any car out there in the parking lot and that the cab of the blue pick-up truck out front is the best place to look for a weapon. I *know* that out of the twelve people scattered around this room, the guy in the baseball cap at the counter would be able to handle himself in a fight and the one sitting alone in the booth drinking coffee has a knife strapped to right ankle. I can recite the license plate numbers of all seven cars in the parking lot and I can read and speak every word of Russian, French, German, and Swedish that are written on the passports in my bag. How can I *know* all of *that* and not know who I am?"

*Well damn!* He looked so lost again and the only thing I could think of to say was, "We'll figure it out."

The waitress returned as soon as I'd said the words and we each placed our orders, but I noticed the funny look she was giving me again before she walked away. I also noticed the flirty looks she was making at Eric and I bristled in my seat holding back the urge to kick her legs out from under her.

Eric must have noticed because as soon as she was out of earshot he asked, "What's wrong?" I smiled thinking I just asked *him* that same question five minutes ago.

I didn't want to own up to my flare of jealousy so I just said, "That waitress keeps giving me funny looks. Do I have something on my face?" I knew from my trip to the bathroom when we walked in that my appearance had seen better days, but I didn't think I looked bad enough to warrant extra attention from our waitress.

Eric smiled back at me and just seeing it pushed the irritation right out of me. I started repeating my 'no nookie' promise I'd made to myself earlier and had completely forgotten what we'd just been talking about until Eric said, "No, there's nothing on your face. You're beautiful."

*So NOT helping!* I felt the blush creep up towards my cheeks and the tingle in between my legs, but I ignored it all and stammered out, "So then why does she keep looking at me weird?"

Eric's smile got bigger, more than likely from the obvious effect his words had on me, and said, "We *are* in the south so maybe she's not used to seeing pretty girls with pink, purple, and blue streaks in their hair." His face turned serious when he continued with, "Whoever is looking for me will more than likely know that you're with me. As much as I like them, it might be a good idea to change your hair into just *one* color."

I hadn't thought about it, but as soon as he said it I knew he was right. I'd stand out too much with the streaks no matter where we were so as soon as I agreed with Eric's suggestion we decided to find somewhere we could buy hair dye and some clothes. That thought made me realize that I didn't have a dime to my name. Well I *did*, but the majority of what little I had was currently sitting in a bank in St. Thomas.

Our food came and when I hadn't touched mine Eric asked, "Why aren't you eating?"

I didn't like feeling dependant on anyone and while I traveled everywhere with Quinn, his sponsors were the ones footing the bill, not him, so I didn't really mind. But now I was here with no way of getting access to my savings account without calling the bank and I was pretty sure *that* would be a bad idea. I was still lost in my thoughts when I heard Eric say, "Sookie?"

I looked up at him and sighed before saying, "I don't have any money Eric. Everything I have is back on St. Thomas and the only way for me to get it now would be to call the bank. I should've thought it all through before going to Sam." I wanted to kick myself.

Eric's eyebrow cocked up in disbelief as he said, "Sookie, you saved my life. The only reason you're going through *any* of this is because of me. There isn't enough money in the *world* for me to ever repay you for that, but I can certainly take care of everything for you here. Please don't worry about it."

I opened my mouth about to protest, but he raised his hand in front of me and said, "And please don't argue with me about it. In addition to all of the other things I seem to know I can *sense* that you have a stubborn streak a mile wide, but I'm not backing down on this one so you'll just be wasting your breath."

My eyes narrowed as I glared at him and his *accurate* appraisal. I knew I was as stubborn as the day is long, but Mr. Freaky Senses calling me out on it when he hardly knows me made my inner tween want to stomp my foot and yell out 'whatever!' Gran's voice echoed in my head asking where my manners were so I just said, "Fine. And, thank you."

The shit eating grin that appeared on Eric's face at winning our first almost-fight made me want to pick another one so *I* could win one, but the smell of the cheeseburger in front of me drowned out that desire pretty quickly. We finished eating our meal and Eric asked the whore, I mean waitress, where the closest store was. She put on a really good display of her chest as she leaned over the table towards him as she wrote down directions to a nearby Wal-Mart, but if Eric even noticed her blatant attempts he hid them well. Too bad for her that my inner tween was still looking for an outlet to vent her frustration on so I accidentally-on purpose spilled a full glass of sweet tea on her saying, "Oops! Sorry." Whore.

I couldn't help snickering when she stomped away and the clueless look on Eric's face told me that he really had no idea of what she was doing. He paid for our meal and as soon as we were in the car he looked at me and asked, "Did I miss something?"

I laughed until my sides hurt and tears leaked out of my eyes until I finally calmed down enough to answer him. "Really? You know which guy in there could give you trouble, which one was carrying a knife, you know everybody's license plates and how to speak God knows how many languages, but you *didn't* know the waitress was flirting with you?"

The corner of his mouth rose into a smirk as he asked, "She was flirting with me? And you didn't *care* for that I take it?"

*Oh boy...* Then I remembered his little pissing contest with Sam and said, "Hello Pot, I'm Kettle, nice to meet you." He just looked even more confused so I reminded him, "I do believe you *growled* at Sam earlier today. And it makes no difference whether or not I cared that she was flirting with you, for all she knows you're my husband or my boyfriend so what she did was downright rude."

Eric's eyes narrowed into a smoldering gaze as his voice dropped an octave and he said, "You didn't answer my question."

*Ruh roh Shaggy.* "What question would that be?" I asked in my most innocent voice.

His eyes stayed locked on mine as he slowly leaned towards me and all I could do was chant, '*No nookie! No nookie!*' in my head and hope my body would listen. With his face just inches from mine he whispered, "Why didn't you like that the waitress was flirting with me?"

I leaned forward a little myself and whispered, "Why do you want to know?"

I swear you could cut through the tension in the car with a knife it was so thick between us and just when I thought he was about to kiss me the alarm went off in the car parked next to us and I practically jumped out of the seat. It was enough to break the spell we'd been under and we both laughed as Eric started the car and we headed out of the parking lot.

## Score

### EPOV

As Sookie and I drove to the store my brain was back in overdrive. I was still internally freaking out over everything that I'd confessed to Sookie while we were at the diner and I'd left out the nightmare I'd had while we were on Tommy's boat. It seemed like a flashback and I knew it was pieces of a memory. Incomplete pieces. All I had were flashes of a boat that I was on. It was dark and I felt the adrenaline running through my body, but it turned into apprehension. The final pieces were a birthday hat and the dark water. It didn't make any sense.

While all of that was playing in my mind it was overshadowed by the feelings I had for Sookie. According to her we'd barely known each other when I woke up lying in bed next to her and now we were running from God knows who or why. Yet just the *thought* of not having her near me was enough to make my insides clench with anxiety no matter how dangerous everything seemed to be. She was my anchor and I knew I instinctively *needed* her more than anything else.

It also wasn't lost on me that we had a lot of chemistry between us. I found myself staring at her more than I probably should and wondered if her lips were as soft as they looked. I wanted to run my hands over every delightful curve of her body and learn the ways I could make her moan and squirm underneath me. I wanted to watch her come undone while screaming my name and then I wanted to do it all over again.

The way Sam had looked at Sookie made my inner caveman roar wanting to stake my claim on her whether or not I actually had one and while I honestly didn't notice the waitress flirting with me I was ecstatic at the thought that Sookie had been jealous. I had taken note of every person we'd seen at the diner, but other than to assess their potential threat to us I didn't *notice* anyone but Sookie. My past was nothing more than a dark void in my mind, but she was the light that warmed me inside. She was my present and, hopefully, my future.

We pulled in to the Wal-Mart parking lot and I made a mental note of everyone and everything around us as we got out of the car. There was nothing there jumping out at me that screamed *Danger!*, but the sight of some of the customers and their attire gave me pause. When I hesitated I felt Sookie slip her hand into mine, lacing her fingers with my own, and just like that the tension in my shoulders and neck lessened at the physical contact.

I looked down to see her smiling blue eyes looking up at me as she asked, "Why are you making that face?"

"What face?" *I was making a face?*

"You look like you've just stepped on to an alien planet," she giggled. We walked through the sliding glass doors into the store and she swept her other hand out in front of us and said, "Welcome to Wal-Mart!"

I might not remember my past, but I was pretty sure I wasn't a regular customer at Wal-Mart. There was cheaply made junk everywhere with people pushing shopping carts full of it in every direction. Yellow smiley faces were on every conceivable surface and the squeaking wobbly wheels of the shopping carts nearly drowned out the screaming kids running around dodging carts, people, and racks of clothes. *Nearly*.

Sookie grabbed a cart and steered me towards the health and beauty care section like she'd been here a hundred times. While she looked at different boxes of hair color I noted the number of cameras all over the store and told Sookie that we probably shouldn't spend too much time here and why. She agreed but she still couldn't decide on what color to dye her hair and finally asked me, "What do you think? Blond, brunette or red head?" I took a long look at her hair and couldn't resist asking, "Are you blond all over? Because I am."

The blush that bloomed on her cheeks was beautiful and I wanted to make her whole body flush with more than just words. She quickly composed herself and smiled saying, "I know. I've seen." I took a step closer, invading her personal space, while looking down at her with my eyebrow cocked up and said, "Well that hardly seems fair. I think a little quid pro quo is in order."

Her eyes darkened with lust as she took her own step closer to me and her hands dropped down to the waistband of her shorts. For a moment it was as though we were the only two people in existence and I thought she was actually going to give me a peek until her hands ran along the front of her waist to her hips and she smirked saying, "Then yes, I AM blond all over." She quickly stepped back and acted like we'd been discussing nothing more torrid than the weather as I stood there trying to will my rapidly growing erection away. I quick glance to my left did the trick when I saw a morbidly overweight man squatting down with a bright red thong on display as his jeans slid down his hairy ass. When he stood up and turned I saw the front of his shirt said "Real Vampires Sparkle" and I looked to Sookie not knowing what in the hell that meant while being pretty sure that if vampires were real they *wouldn't* sparkle. She just giggled and shook her head throwing a couple of boxes of light and dark brown hair color into the cart.

We continued walking around the store getting snacks and bottled water before going to the clothing department. I had no idea what size I wore so Sookie stepped behind me and my breath caught when I felt her hands on my waist with my body freezing on the spot where I stood. I could feel the heat radiating off of her body and the warm air from her breaths against my back. She lifted the back of my t-shirt up over my hips and slid her fingers along the small of my back leaving goosebumps in their wake before delving into the top of my waistband and flipping it over to see the tag inside. She whispered "Thirty-four," before flipping the band back and I had to swallow the groan in my throat when her hands left my body. I knew she was going to be the death of me and I doubted it would have anything to do with a gun.

The smile on her face when she appeared in front of me said that she knew she had affected me so after I threw a few pairs of jeans and shorts into the cart I followed her to the ladies department where she was picking out underwear. I went straight to where the bras were hanging and looked over at her wagging my eyebrows and asked, "Do you need me to check the tag on the one you're wearing?"

She just laughed and while I knew she'd say no I was still disappointed when I heard her say it. I picked up a lacy black bra and held it up as she watched while I slowly slid my hand over the cup, caressing it as if it was being worn by her. My heated gaze met her own and I took great satisfaction when she visibly swallowed while the blush bloomed on her cheeks once more. "This one's nice," I said as I held it out to her. The movement of the bra being held out in front of her shook her out of her momentary haze and she smirked taking it from me. She returned it to the rack and selected an identical one trading the sized 34B for a 34D and threw it in the cart saying, "The other one was too small." I visibly swallowed myself then and I had to keep recalling the sight of the man in the red thong to keep my body in check as she picked out other various bras. When she started selecting matching underwear that were nothing more than tiny scraps of fabric and holding it in front of herself I had to walk away from a smiling Sookie with the score being Sookie 2; Eric 1 and ended up in the electronics department where I bought two disposable cell phones and a GPS figuring it would come in handy on our trip north.

As I was looking at the different models on display I had more flashbacks of something similar, but the harder I tried to remember, the quicker the memory disappeared from my mind. I was more than a little frustrated from it all when I found Sookie again and we quickly paid for the other items before finally leaving the store.

It was starting to get dark when we got back onto the interstate and while we were both tired I wanted to get a few more miles north before finding a place to stay for the night. I made sure to hover near the speed limit knowing the last thing we needed was to be pulled over by the police. Sookie played with the car radio switching from station to station and pausing at every song waiting for me to figure out if I liked it or not. I figured out pretty quickly that I wanted nothing to do with country music, but rock and classic rock seemed good to me.

Even in our less than ideal situation, I found myself smiling and laughing often with Sookie telling me stories from her childhood. She sounded like she'd been a hellcat and I wondered if I had been the same way. Something inside told me, no. It didn't sound like she was close to her brother at all and with her parents and Grandmother already gone she seemed to be all alone. My heart broke for her when she talked of how Lafayette and Jesus had become her family and she silently wept again over their deaths. Without thinking I reached out and took her hand in mine, giving it a small squeeze with my own.

We decided to call it a night once we reached the Florida/Georgia border having spent twelve hours on the road. Using the GPS to search out nearby hotels we called around looking for available rooms, but were only able to find one vacancy in a no-name motel. We checked in and were both pleasantly surprised that it looked clean. I was also silently happy that there was only one room available and it had only one king sized bed. Sookie took a long look at the bed before her eyes looked up into my own and I saw the apprehension behind them. It took every shred of decency I had to say, "If you're uncomfortable sharing the bed I don't mind sleeping on the couch."

We both looked over at the 'couch' which was really a loveseat at best and looked about as comfortable as a pile of bricks, but I'd do it anyway if it made her feel better. Sookie was all I had and I wasn't about to make her wary of me. Given everything that we were up against I knew

we needed to trust each other. Relief swept through my body when she looked back at me and said, "Don't be silly. We're both adults and we can certainly share the bed." She dug through the shopping bags we'd brought in with us taking out something to wear along with the hair dye (dark brown I noted) and went into the bathroom without another word.

I sat on the couch, which *was* in fact as comfortable as a pile of bricks, and tried to not think about the fact that Sookie was naked on the other side of the door. It turned out that was harder to do than I thought it would be and it was making *me* harder as time wore on. Since we'd both been hungry when we checked in I decided to run through the drive-thru of a fast food chain that was down the road from the motel hoping the time away would help alleviate my growing problem. At this rate I was going to have to sleep on my stomach so I wouldn't scare her away.

I returned fifteen minutes later to find Sookie standing in the room wearing a camisole and sleep shorts toweling her now dark hair dry. While I would prefer her to be her natural blond, her dark hair coupled with her blue eyes and tanned skin made a beautiful end result. She looked at me nervously running her fingers through her damp locks and asked, "What do you think?"

*I think I'm going to have a HARD time, both literally and figuratively, keeping my hands to myself.* I kept that thought to myself and truthfully said, "You're beautiful." She smiled, seemingly relieved, and we both sat down and ate. She must have been more hungry than I thought because she moaned in delight with every bite she took and I had to keep shifting in my seat from the uncomfortable tightness in the crotch of my shorts. Once we were both done eating I got up to jump in the shower when Sookie held up the box of the lighter brown hair color and said, "Don't you think you should lose the blond too?"

I ran my hands through my hair and said, "Yeah, I guess I should." I took the box and read through the directions when Sookie walked over, looking at me reluctantly, while holding up a pair of scissors saying, "You should probably go with a shorter hairstyle too." My hair just fell short of touching my shoulders and I knew it would be for the best so I agreed.

She pulled up a straight back chair and indicated that I should sit down while I looked at her questioningly. She smiled softly saying, "I used to cut the boys' hair all of the time." I saw the tears welling in her eyes again so I quickly sat down not wanting her to get upset. I felt confident that I could kick damn near anyone's ass, but the sight of her tears was enough to break me instantly.

Sookie told me to wet my hair in the sink before having me sit down in the chair again. I closed my eyes just enjoying the sensation of her running her fingers through my hair and I heard her sigh as she made the first cut. "Why are you sighing?" I asked with my eyes still closed.

"I, uh, just liked you hair long," she stammered. She quickly changed the subject telling me about the different hair styles she'd done on Lafayette and Jesus, laughing about the times they'd dress in drag wearing wigs and going out to the clubs. I loved the sound of her laugh and I hoped to hear it often.



I'd kept my eyes closed while she cut my hair, but when I felt her come to stand in front of me I opened them to see I was eye level with her chest only inches away from my face. The camisole top she was wearing seemed to have a built in bra, but I could still see the perfect outline of them. Sookie continued telling me stories completely unaware that I was openly gaping at her breasts and I took a deep breath in an attempt to calm myself down. I wasn't prepared for when I released that breath and it ghosted over her breasts making her slightly gasp as her nipples hardened underneath her shirt. I thanked God I had a towel in my lap to hide the hardening going on with my own body and balled my hands into fists within the towel to keep from reaching out to touch her.

Sookie regained her composure and started talking again while she finished cutting my hair. When she was done I looked in the mirror and thanked her seeing that she'd done a really good job. She picked up the box of hair color and started mixing the ingredients telling me to take off my shirt. I looked over at her suggestively and she smiled while rolling her eyes and said, "It's so you can just get in the shower once the time's up and you won't have to worry about getting hair color on your shirt."

I seemed to be competitive because I was still irked from earlier knowing Sookie was in the 'I'm affecting you' lead so I made a show of slowly pulling my t-shirt up and over my head before tossing it aside and stretching with both of my arms up in the air. The stretching made my sore back ache some, but when I looked over at Sookie and saw her mouth gaping slightly open at my naked chest it was well worth the minor pain. I had to hold in the chuckle I felt bubbling inside when she closed her eyes and took a deep breath while thinking I'd give anything to be able to read her mind at that moment. Sookie 2; Eric 2.

I waited until she opened her eyes again before slowly walking back to the chair and sitting down again. I closed my eyes as she started putting the dye in my hair, tilting my head whenever she directed me to, and only opened them when I felt her in front of me again as she colored the front of my head. Her breasts were perfect and I knew with my large hands I'd be able to cup each one easily. I wanted to run my tongue all over them while feeling their weight in my hands and I had to close my eyes again to keep myself from leaning forward and kissing them through her shirt. The sound of her snickering made me open them again to see her staring down at me and it was then that I knew *she* knew exactly what she'd been doing and the affect it would have on me. I silently cursed at the change in score. Sookie 3; Eric 2.

Once she was finished I helped her clean up the mess, throwing everything inside of an empty shopping bag because something inside told me not to leave any evidence behind. Sookie turned on the TV and climbed into the bed while I went into the bathroom to shower. I washed my hair several times until the water ran clear before washing the rest of my body. I towelled off once I was done and only then did I realize I hadn't brought any clean clothes into the bathroom with me so I wrapped the towel around my waist and opened the door. The steam from the shower followed me into the room as I headed towards a bag to get out a pair of shorts when the sound of Sookie gasping made me stop short.

I automatically tensed thinking something was wrong and my head whipped around taking in the room and the surrounding noises. Nothing seemed out of the ordinary until I looked over at

Sookie and saw what can only be described as her ogling me. It must have really struck a chord with her because I stood there with a smile on my face watching her for a long moment before she noticed me watching her. The blush came back with a vengeance and I laughed out loud when she groaned and pulled the covers over her face. Sookie 3; Eric 3.

I grabbed a pair of shorts and went back into the bathroom where I put them on and brushed my teeth before going back into the room. Sookie still had the covers over her head so I turned out the lights and climbed in on the opposite side of the bed with only the light from the TV on in the room. I could hear her mumbling something and when she didn't emerge from her hiding spot I chuckled and pulled the covers over my head asking, "What are you doing?"

"Just praying," she meekly responded. The smell of the soap and shampoo she'd used flooded my senses and the warmth of her body had warmed the sheets nicely. I inhaled deeply before saying, "Uh huh. Do you always pray with your head buried under the covers?" I longed to reach out and pull her body flush against my own, running my hands all over her from head to toe. Lying here all night without touching her was going to be difficult if not impossible.

Without missing a beat she replied, "Of course, doesn't everyone?" She pulled the covers from over her head with a small smile and we just laid there inches apart and stared at each other. I couldn't stop myself from reaching over and brushing a stray lock of hair out of her face while she closed her eyes and leaned in to my touch. The warmth of her cheek ran through the veins in my hand spreading out to my whole body and I found myself leaning forward until my lips were hovering a hair's breadth over her own. Her eyes opened and she looked into mine as she seemed to be searching for an answer to an unspoken question while I waited for her to say something or close the remaining distance between us unsure of what she was going to do.

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## Chapter 6: Home

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### Home

#### SPOV

I stayed under the covers while Eric laughed his way back into the bathroom to get dressed, thoroughly humiliated and thoroughly *turned on*. It should be illegal for a human being to look *that* sexy without even trying. His skin still glistened from the dampness of the shower and I almost told him he must be a vampire because he sparkled. My mouth was unable to form the words though since it was too busy hanging open catching flies.

Our little tit for tat while shopping at Wal-Mart had been fun and helped in keeping me distracted from thinking of Lafayette and Jesus too much, but as soon as we walked into the motel room that only had *one* bed I knew tonight was going to be a drain on my 'no nookie' willpower, especially since Eric had been making it perfectly clear that he was attracted to me. How that was even possible I'll never know because he was totally out of my league as far as I was concerned.

While cutting his hair was my idea I really hated having to cut it. I longed to run my fingers through his thick mane and did just that for as long as I could before making the first snip. I could picture several different naughty scenarios where I'd be holding onto that head of hair while it was positioned over different locations of my body. Making that first cut had been the hardest and I had no idea I'd made any sound until Eric asked me about it. Just being around him had me all discombobulated, but there was nowhere else I'd rather be than right by his side.

I cut his hair shorter on the sides and in the back, but I made sure to leave enough length on top that I would still be able to grab a hold of should the opportunity present itself. I really should've thought it through before telling him to take off his shirt so I could put in the hair color. I'd already seen him shirtless, but he was unconscious for most of that time so it didn't really count. Watching the way his muscles moved underneath his skin made my knees go weak and if not for the fact that I was holding onto the back of the chair I'm sure I would've toppled over. At the same time I was a little disappointed he didn't ask me to make him brunette 'all over' since he'd told me he was blond there too.

I tried to distract myself from his half-nakedness by talking non-stop until I glanced down to see him staring at my chest which was right at his eye level at the time. I held stock still and had to keep from doing a fist pump at the affect it was having on him. It served him right for being too damn sexy himself. I was grateful when it was time for him to get in the shower because I was seconds away from rubbing myself all over him like a cat in heat.

And now, here I was, hiding under the covers chanting 'No nookie' over and over hoping my body would listen to my words because even though I was saying them, my brain wasn't really on board with that idea either.

I was so absorbed in my own little world that I didn't even notice Eric had come back in the room until I felt him sliding under the covers. My eyes had already adjusted to the darkness since my head was buried under the covers too and I had to squeeze them shut when I saw he was wearing nothing more than a pair of shorts. *Woo boy!*

I felt him lifting the covers as he pulled them over his head as well when he asked, "What are you doing?"

*My best to not rape you.* "Just praying." I had no idea of what I'd been mumbling, but I imagined it was my 'No Nookie' chant.

He smelled so good it was taking all of my willpower to stay on my side of the bed so I kept my eyes closed for good measure.

"Uh huh. Do you always pray with your head buried under the covers?"

His voice had a dreamy edge to it and I wondered if it was as difficult for him to be around me as it was for me to be around him. I swallowed the drool that had pooled in my mouth along with every instinct I had to reach out and touch him and said, "Of course, doesn't everyone?"

I pulled up my metaphorical big girl panties and pulled the covers back down from over my head and we lay there just staring at each other. He'd turned the lights off so it was only the faint glow from the TV that allowed us to see one another. He really was the most handsome man I'd ever seen and it made me all the more sure that he must have *someone* in his life. A wife or a girlfriend. There was no way someone this good looking, sweet and sexy was unattached.

When he reached over to brush a stray lock of my hair from my face I involuntarily closed my eyes and leaned into his touch. I couldn't help myself. I heard and felt him slide closer and opened my eyes to see him this close, hovering right in front of me. He wanted me to kiss him. I *wanted* to kiss him. But, I knew if we started down that slippery slope I wouldn't have been able to stop at just a kiss and I couldn't let that happen yet. Not until I *knew* there wasn't someone else that already had a claim on his affections. After everything we'd been through together in the short amount of time we'd known each other it would be so easy to give in to temptation, but I didn't want to be left with either a broken heart or guilt later on if we found out he wasn't single.

I reached up and placed a single finger over his lips as I whisper confessed, "I *want* to. I *really* do, but we don't know if you're a single man and I won't be the other woman."

I could tell from his expression that it hadn't even occurred to him that he might have someone waiting for him at home and he kissed my finger before sighing and flopping back down on his back beside me. "I hadn't even thought of that," he admitted.

I lay there silently while I watched him wrestle with the thoughts in his mind when he finally rolled onto his side to look at me as he said, "I don't *feel* like I'm missing someone. Wouldn't I *feel* it? Wouldn't I *long* for them subconsciously?"

I could only shrug my shoulders because I really had no idea. My evil brain had no problems imagining his perfect wife at home waiting for her Adonis husband to call or come back as she tended to their perfect 2.5 children. And a dog. While being a part-time supermodel. And running a homeless shelter. Baking cookies and shit. *Yep, no problems at all.*

Eric reached over and trailed his finger along the side of my face, pulling me out of my miserable thoughts as he said, "I guess we *don't* know. Not yet anyway. But know this, I feel drawn to you. There's something about you that calms me inside. It was there from the moment I opened my eyes when I first woke up and saw your sleeping face lying next me. So much so that if you had told me that we had been together for years and were very much in love I wouldn't have questioned it at all. *You* feel like home to me and the thought of you leaving my side is unbearable."

Tears welled in my eyes as he confessed his thoughts and I had no idea of how to respond. We silently stared at each other before I finally said, "You might feel differently once you get your memories back. Especially if it turns out that you're...married." I could barely choke out the word because just the thought that it was a possibility was enough to put me into a tailspin. I found the thought of leaving his side unbearable as well. He was the only person I had in my life at the moment and I *had* all of *my* memories.

Seeing my tears, Eric reached over and pulled me up alongside his body with his arms around me while my head rested in the nook of where his shoulder met his neck and rubbed his hand up and down my back while shushing me. "We'll figure it out. Everything is going to work out in the end."

I wished I could feel as confident as he sounded, but the long hours had finally caught up with me and I fell asleep in his arms without another word spoken between us.

I woke up the next morning completely wrapped up with Eric's body around my own. At some point in the night I had turned over and Eric was spooned up behind me with his arms wrapped around me as well as one of his legs thrown over the top of mine. I wanted to giggle at the ridiculousness of being his human security blanket, but I was enjoying the feeling of it too much to risk moving a muscle. I could feel his slow even breaths against the back of my neck and I told my full bladder to shut the hell up because I wasn't getting out of bed yet.

I lay there for a while, alternately listening to Eric's breathing and vaguely paying attention to the morning news that was on the TV when I heard the news broadcaster saying that blond actress I despised had been injured the night before. I only ever referred to her as 'Skelewhore', but I recognized her name instantly and I quickly paid attention to what was being said.

*She was fleeing a group of paparazzi outside of the hotel she'd been photographed entering earlier that evening with a man that wasn't her purported boyfriend and as she stepped off of the curb she was hit by an oncoming bus. The driver of the bus reported that he never saw her and the police concluded that due to her emaciated frame it was plausible that the bus driver wouldn't have been able to see her standing there in profile. Given her small stature she wasn't seriously hurt as her body was merely blown into a garbage can and her representatives released a statement saying that she would be released from the hospital later on today. When asked for a comment on her accident, her 'boyfriend's' only response was, " GO HAMMARBY!" as he made his way inside the stadium to watch his beloved Hammarby soccer team.*

I didn't know what to think about that, but I was distracted as I felt Eric start to stir. One part of him was waking up faster than the rest of him and I *may* have shifted just a little to gauge the size of what was growing inside his shorts. It felt *huge*. I shifted again and felt the heat flush through my body when Eric growled a little in his sleep and clutched me tighter against him.

I could see the potential for this to quickly escalate into all out naked sweaty screaming morning sex and as much as that idea appealed to me I had stay strong for now so I attempted to extract myself from Eric's kung fu grip, but he wouldn't let go. I pulled and tugged as hard as I could, but he only gripped me tighter. My whole body tensed when I felt him kiss the back of my neck before he said, "Where do you think you're going?"

*To Hell in a hand basket if you keep that up.* "I have to pee," I sighed. Eric gave me one more squeeze before sighing himself and releasing me from his embrace. I missed the feeling of being wrapped up in him instantly, but I rolled out of bed anyway and stumbled into the bathroom. I was shocked by my reflection in the mirror having momentarily forgotten about coloring my hair

the night before, but I didn't think it looked too bad. I pulled it back into a ponytail and then washed my face and brushed my teeth before going back out into the room.

Eric had pulled on a pair of jeans, thank God, and had started the small coffee pot in the room to brew. I sat down and stared at it, willing the pot to fill faster, while Eric went into the bathroom himself. I quickly changed into jeans and a t-shirt while I was alone in the room when I heard the news broadcaster say,

*Federal authorities are asking citizens to be on the lookout for this man. He's identified as Eric Northman.*

My head whipped around to see the screen as I shouted, "ERIC!" He came running into the room with his toothbrush still in his mouth as I pointed at the screen where his picture was being displayed. Eric's picture was identical to the ones in his passports with his long blond hair.

*He is believed to be travelling in a 1995 black Dodge Intrepid, Florida License plate ALS-5273, stolen from this man.*

A picture of Sam's brother Tommy came up, taking the place of Eric's photo. It appeared to be a mug shot.

*Tommy Mickens was found murdered last night and his car is missing. Authorities believe he was killed during a drug deal gone bad. Eric Northman is wanted for questioning in that murder and he is to be considered armed and dangerous. Authorities ask anyone with information on his whereabouts to call 911 immediately. In other news...*

I felt the panic bubbling up in my chest as I asked, "What in the hell was that? We didn't kill Tommy! How did they get your picture? How do they know who you are?"

I was babbling nonstop, peppering Eric with questions as he went around the room gathering all of our stuff before coming to stand in front of me. He placed his hands on each of my shoulders and said, "SOOKIE! We need to get out of here. I don't know what's going on but we can't stay here. Whoever is after us is who killed Tommy so we need to go."

All I could do was nod my head as I finished throwing everything we had into Eric's duffel bag while he went around wiping down every surface we may have touched with a towel. We left the room key on the desk and left the motel on foot. Eric said he'd already wiped down the inside and outside of the car the night before when he'd returned with our food and when I looked at him wondering why he would do that he just shrugged his shoulders. Odd, but definitely helpful.

As it turned out, we were only a mile down the road from another Wal-Mart and we walked into the parking lot heading towards the store. A car pulled in to the lot and parked with a woman getting out of the car and running inside. She was wearing a blue Wal-Mart smock so we assumed she was an employee. After making sure there wasn't anyone else around we strode over to her car and lucked out when we discovered she'd left it unlocked.

Eric jumped into the driver's side while I climbed in on the passenger's side and he ducked down underneath the steering column doing God knows what, but just a few seconds later the engine came to life. He popped up with an impish grin on his face before throwing the car into drive. We had no idea of how long that woman's shift was so Eric said he wanted to get rid of the car within six hours.

We travelled north into Georgia and I was surprised when Eric started taking the exit for the Atlanta International Airport. I looked over at him asking, "We're not flying somewhere are we?" I didn't think that was a good idea given the fact that his picture was all over the news this morning.

He looked at me like I was daft and said, "Uh, no. I want to ditch this car in the long term parking lot and get us a different one."

I felt like an idiot. "Oh, okay," was all I could say. I thought that I should feel remorse or guilt over the fact that we were driving a stolen car and were about to steal another one, but my instincts to survive won out. I wanted to get away from whoever it was that chased us to the States and I'd do whatever was necessary for us to survive.

I felt Eric's hand wrap around my own and I looked over to see him looking worriedly back at me as he said, "Are you okay? I know you've gone through a lot because of me and if you want, I'll drop you off at the airport. You can tell the police that I kidnapped you and you got away."

He looked like he felt so guilty and heartbroken at the same time and I practically shouted, "NO! I want to stay with you." Tears spilled from my eyes at the thought of not being with him as I whispered, "Please don't leave me."

He continued to stare at me gauging my reaction and I only felt better when I saw his shoulders sag in relief. He squeezed my hand asking, "Are you sure?"

"Yes, I am," I said with as much confidence as I could muster. It seemed to be enough because he turned into the long term parking lot at the airport, but didn't let go of my hand until we parked the car.

We sat there for a few minutes looking over the different vehicles and I noticed Eric staring at a red corvette two aisles away and jokingly said, "Yeah, no one will notice *that* car."

"It's *nice* though and I bet she's *really* fast." The way he was staring at it you'd think he was looking at a Hooters calendar. I looked around and pointed saying, "What about that one?"

Eric averted his gaze from the corvette to see the powder blue minivan I was pointing at and said, "No way! I'm *not* driving a *minivan*. *Ever*."

"But it won't stand out. They're everywhere and if we *need* to, we can sleep in it."

Eric mentally chewed over my argument and I'd thought he was about to cave when he said, "Nope. Sorry, I'd do it if we didn't have any other options, but thankfully, we do." We ended up agreeing on a Nissan Pathfinder SUV so we *would* be able to sleep in it if we had to and after wiping down the car we were back on the interstate within fifteen minutes.

"So where do you think you learned how to do that so quickly?" I asked as I motioned underneath the steering column. I knew he had no memories, but I couldn't fathom where he'd been to learn the amount of things he knew how to do.

"Your guess is as good as mine," he said as he shrugged his shoulders. We agreed that we should try and drive for as long as possible with us trading places every time we had to stop for gas. We stayed with the flow of traffic, not wanting to risk being pulled over for speeding, and by the next morning we were going across the George Washington Bridge into New York City.

Eric had jumped into the driver's seat when we stopped for gas on the New Jersey Turnpike so I was able to gawk out the windows looking at the city I'd longed to visit for the very first time. The buildings were so tall and the amount of traffic was ungodly. People were walking on the sidewalks and I stared at every yellow minivan taxi driver looking for the Cash Cab.

Eric had programmed the address from his license into the GPS, but when he saw how much I loved looking around he took us on a detour through Time Square. I hoped we'd get the chance to look around the city at some point, but I also knew it probably wouldn't be a good idea any time soon.

Eric started heading towards the address for his home and I could tell he was feeling the same tension that I was wondering who, if anyone, would be waiting for him. I was confused when Eric pulled over and parked along a stretch of sidewalk when the GPS said we still had another 5 miles to go. Looking over at him I saw him staring at a tall building across the street. It appeared to be an apartment building with a doorman opening the door for people entering and exiting.

"Eric?" was all I could think to say.

"This looks familiar. I think I've been here before." He continued to look across the street before turning to look at me and saying, "Care to check it out with me?"

Eric put on a baseball cap and we each donned a pair of sunglasses as we climbed out of the SUV. Eric threw the duffel bag over his shoulder and held my hand as we crossed the street. As soon as we got up to the doorman he looked at Eric and smiled saying, "Mr. Thomas! You're back from your trip! How was Peru?"

Eric didn't miss a beat responding, "It was fine, thank you. I'm afraid I've misplaced my keys though, would you be able to let us in?" He sounded so natural, like wasn't lying through his teeth.

"Of course, of course..." the doorman said as he gestured for us to follow him. We lucked out when he pressed the button for Eric's floor and led us to the apartment at the end of the hall



where he unlocked the door and said, "I'll have a replacement key waiting for you when next come down. Have a good day!"

We both watched him get back on the elevator and Eric motioned for me to stand just inside the doorway as he took the gun he'd hidden in the small of his back and silently swept through the apartment. If I wasn't so nervous I would've been fanning myself over how sexy he looked doing it.

He was only gone for a couple of minutes before he came back saying, "It's all clear." We both relaxed a little then and slowly walked around taking in our surroundings. All of the furniture was modern and expensive looking, but very minimalist. There was no clutter whatsoever. It was practically sterile.

The living room had a large leather sectional couch facing a huge plasma TV that was mounted on one wall with the far wall having mostly large windows overlooking Central Park. The kitchen was galley style and based on the lack of food in the refrigerator or staples in the cabinets I had to guess that he didn't cook often. We found what looked to be an office in a spare bedroom with a full bath across the hall from it and at the end of the hallway was the master bedroom.

There was a huge California king sized bed centered against the car wall with another huge plasma screen TV on the opposite wall. There was an attached full bath with a separate shower that could probably hold four people and a sunken whirlpool tub as well. I also noticed there weren't ANY items around that indicated anyone else lived there besides Eric.

As if he was reading my mind I heard him call out, "Sookie?" I walked back into his bedroom from the bathroom and saw him standing in the doorway to what turned out to be his walk-in closet. The man was a clothes horse, but before I could contemplate that I heard Eric say, "There're no women's clothes. I'm not married," as he spun me around and his lips crashed onto mine.

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## Chapter 7: Crash

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### Crash

#### EPOV

Sookie. Even with her next to me practically every minute since I'd first woken up without my memory, lying next to her in bed, she was constantly on my mind. I wondered if my thoughts would be as consumed by her if I still had all of my memories, or if it was only because *she* was my only memory. I lay there for an hour just staring at her sleeping face lying on my shoulder and decided that it didn't matter. I felt a real connection to her and no matter what we found out once we got to New York, I wouldn't willingly let go of her. I could only hope and pray that she would choose to stay with me regardless of the circumstances.

I was thrown for a loop the next morning when Sookie shouted my name and pointed at the TV where my picture was on the screen. I had no idea of how I got linked to Tommy's death, but I was almost positive it had to do with Sam. I *knew* he was shifty from the moment I laid eyes on him. The fact that he clearly had a thing for Sookie didn't help my opinion of him either. I just hoped that Sookie's involvement would be kept out of the press and prayed that the news story of my 'wanted' status remained locally in Florida and didn't go national.

Later on that afternoon, I felt a moment of panic when we were heading to the airport to steal another car thinking that maybe I was asking too much of her. She hadn't done anything wrong so she shouldn't have to live a life on the run from whoever was after me. It killed me inside when I offered to leave her at the airport, but I would have done it if that was what she'd wanted. I would do anything she asked of me, but I couldn't deny that I felt a sense of relief when she said she wanted to stay with me.

Whenever I managed to doze off as we took turns driving north towards New York my dreams would consist of fragmented scenes. Nothing really made sense and I tended to forget the specifics quickly, but I did notice I had a strong sense of *déjà vu* when we passed an exit sign in Maryland for the US Naval Academy. I tried to concentrate on the feeling, but no memories surfaced so I didn't mention it to Sookie at the time.

I had another sense of *déjà vu* once we finally reached New York City and I was able to navigate the streets without needing to use the GPS, but once we were coming up to the apartment building something clicked inside of me. I followed my instincts to go inside and it seemed they were right when the doorman recognized me. I didn't know if it was the hat covering my now darker and shorter hair that made the doorman not question my new look without comment or if perhaps I was good tipper during the holidays but he seemed helpful enough. A part of my mind was figuring out a way to question him, especially about the name Mr. Thomas, without it seeming odd while he led us to my apartment, but I let it go for the time being thinking I'd have a good look around the apartment first.

After sweeping through the apartment and coming back for Sookie, I locked the front door and took a good look around. It all *felt* familiar, but I still couldn't really remember anything. Almost like how a hotel room feels familiar in that they're basically all the same. It didn't feel like *home* though, not like Sookie felt like home.

She'd wandered into the bathroom while I eyed the huge bed in the center of the room thinking of how much room I had to work with if everything went the way I wanted it to and I was ecstatic when I opened the door to the walk-in closet to see that there was only men's clothing hanging inside. I *had* to share the good news.

"Sookie?" I called out. I watched as she exited the bathroom and came to stand in the doorway of the closet poking her head inside to see what was in there. Even after being in a car for nearly twenty-four hours straight, she was still the most beautiful woman I'd ever seen and I couldn't wait one minute longer.

"There're no women's clothes. I'm not married," I said as I spun her around to face me and finally, leaning down, pressed my lips to hers. They were even softer than I'd imagined and when she gasped in surprise I took the opportunity to explore the inside of her mouth with my tongue. It didn't take long for Sookie to moan in response and kiss me back with just as much fervor.

I held onto the back of her head with one hand while I wrapped my other arm around her back, pulling her front flush against my body. I felt Sookie's hands travel up my back to wrap around my neck and I automatically straightened up pulling her body up with me. Her legs wrapped around my waist as I held her back against the wall with my body and I finally broke our kiss so we could breathe. My lips refused to part from her skin though so I kissed my way along her jaw line to her neck making her gasp again.

I was lost in her, completely enveloped by her scent and taste, so much that I didn't hear her talking until she started pushing against my chest. I finally pulled back far enough to see that her mouth was moving, but I had to literally shake my head to clear it enough before I heard the actual words she was saying.

"We have to stop."

I knew my face fell when I asked, "We do?" Maybe I read her wrong? I certainly didn't want her to feel forced into going any farther so I did my best to reign in my urge to pounce on her again as I set her back down on her feet. I was about to take a step back from her when she held onto my shirt, looking up into my eyes, and said, "I don't want to stop either, but we still don't really know anything yet."

My head was still foggy from all of the blood in my body still residing in my lower half so I remained silent as I tried to understand what she was getting at. I assumed she read the confusion on my face because she continued on saying, "I mean this isn't even the same address that was on your license. The doorman called you 'Mr. Thomas', not Mr. Northman, so what if this is like a crash pad for you and your *real* home is still five miles away?"

*Huh?* "Why would I have a 'crash pad' if I lived five miles away?" The look on her face spelled it out and this time I did take a step back as I harshly asked, "What, you think I'm some sort of cheating bastard that keeps an apartment to fuck around in?" I was irrationally pissed off that she would think something like that about me even though she had made perfectly valid points.

The tears that sprung to her eyes quickly pulled my head out of my ass, but when I tried to wrap my arms around her she pushed me away and tried to walk out of the closet. I wasn't about to let this fester between us so I trapped her by placing a hand on the wall on either side of her with her body in between them. She refused to look at me so I spoke to the side of her head saying, "I'm sorry. You're right, we don't know anything yet and I shouldn't have gotten mad. Maybe I *am* a cheating bastard."

My voice had gotten progressively softer as I realized it might be true. I doubted Sookie would want anything to do with me if that were the case and now that I had acted like a dick she might

just walk right out the door and not look back. I held my breath and closed my eyes as I dropped my arms to my side freeing her and prayed like hell that she wouldn't leave.

It seemed like forever, but couldn't have really been more than a few seconds before I felt her arms wrap around my waist. My arms wrapped around her before my head even registered their movement and she pressed the side of her face against my chest and said, "I don't think you're a cheating bastard. At least I hope you're not." She took the opportunity to smack my ass with her hand and we both chuckled and took a deep breath now that the tension between us was gone.

I kissed the top of her head and she hugged me tighter before releasing me and said, "Do you mind if I take a shower?"

"Of course I don't mind. Do you need any help with that?" The words left my mouth before my brain could filter them out, but when she looked up at me and blushed I couldn't help leering at her in response. It was like my body had its own mind where she was concerned and its only mission in life was to get her naked. I was all for her being naked too, but I didn't want to scare her away.

Apparently I was worried for nothing because she moved lightening quick and pulled my lips back to hers kissing me for all she was worth, while rubbing the front of her body against mine and just as I started to forget what we had even been talking about she pulled away smiling and said, "No thanks!" and she ran into the bathroom giggling as she shut and locked the door.

I stood there stunned with a raging hard on while I contemplated getting the lock picking tools out of my office to open the bathroom door when it hit me. *There's lock picking tools in my office!*

I ran to the office and stood in the doorway taking it all in. There was a desk with nothing more than a computer monitor and telephone sitting on it and a leather chair on the opposite side. I walked forward and sat in the chair opening the top drawer where I *knew* the lock pick tools would be and yet I was still surprised when I saw them sitting there.

I turned the computer on and got frustrated when I saw that it was password protected. I hoped that eventually that would come to me too, so in the mean time I searched through all of the desk drawers. The only helpful things I found were some files, one of which contained the lease for this apartment under the name Stephen Thomas. According to the lease, I'd signed it two years earlier and the name I'd listed as my emergency contact was William Compton with a Washington D.C. phone number.

I continued to dig and found bank records which were listed under the name Stephen Thomas as well. It appeared that the monthly rent, as well as the other utility and phone bills, were paid automatically from that account and it was replenished every month by a wire transfer that kept the account at a constant \$20K.

I kept searching for anything else, like a resume or paycheck stub, but there was nothing like it that I could find. I'd noticed there weren't any pictures of people hanging up in the apartment or

anywhere else I'd seen, but there were a few framed black and white photographs hanging in each room. The one hanging in the office was a black and white photo of a huge naval battleship out at sea and I was again reminded of the déjà vu I'd felt when we drove passed the US Naval Academy. Something told me that it meant something, I just didn't know what.

I had spread everything out on the desk in front of me and as I was sitting there contemplating being 'Stephen Thomas' Sookie came into the room. Her hair was wet from her shower and she had changed into one of my dress shirts that I assumed she must have gotten from the closet. The sleeves were rolled up a bunch of times and it was so big on her she could wear it out as a dress. The shirt was light blue matching her eyes perfectly and it was beautifully contrasted with her darker hair. I felt my lower regions beginning to stir again at the sight of her and I must have been staring too long because I saw her blush before saying, "I hope you don't mind me wearing your shirt."

"No, I don't mind at all." And I really didn't. I didn't think seeing her wearing my clothes would be such a turn on, but it was and I was thankful the desk was blocking the evidence of just how much I liked seeing her in them.

"Did you find anything?" she asked.

I closed my eyes and tried to not focus on the fact that I didn't think she was wearing a bra which made me wonder if she was wearing panties. Nope, not focusing on that at all.

I took a few deep breaths and pointed at the paperwork spread out in front of me, afraid of what might come out of my mouth if I tried to speak. I watched her walk forward until she was standing next to me and when she leaned forward to pick up the lease I caught sight of her tanned skin where the shirt opened at the top since she'd left the top three buttons undone. I sat on my hands to resist the urge to run them up her tanned legs and pulling her down onto my lap.

While she sifted through everything I'd found I had to look away to get myself under control and wondered if I had some sort of sex addiction or something. That didn't really make sense since I only wanted to have sex with Sookie, so maybe I just had a Sookie addiction instead. Ever since we'd kissed in the closet earlier my body wouldn't let my brain concentrate on anything else but finishing what we'd started whenever she was in the same room as me. I had no idea how long I could keep going on like this before I just dropped to the floor, a bumbling idiot with a hard on.

"Eric?" Somewhere in the back of my head I registered her voice and looked up to see her staring back at me with a look of concern. "Are you okay? You look kind of pale."

*That's because all of my blood is below my waist. "I'm fine."*

*What else could I say? 'Sookie, I'm afraid that I won't be able to concentrate on finding out who I am or who might be after us until you yield to me. I long for your hot naked flesh pressed against mine as your body writhes in ecstasy beneath me and until it happens I won't be able to think of anything else whenever you're around. Care to help me out?'*

"Do you think we should try and call this William Compton guy?" she asked, completely oblivious to my mental confessions.

I could smell the soap and shampoo she'd used as well as a scent that I identified as purely Sookie. It was a mixture of sunlight and something sweet, honeysuckle maybe? Whatever it was I couldn't get enough of it. The sight of Sookie's hand waving in front of my face pulled me back into the conversation we'd been having, but I'd completely forgotten what she'd asked.

"I'm sorry, what did you say?"

Her eyes furrowed as she stared down at me with concern and said, "I think maybe you should lie down and get some rest. Neither one of us has slept more than a few hours total in the last day and a half. We'll take a nap and then figure out what we're doing next." With that said she put the papers she'd been holding back down on the desk and headed out of the office back towards the bedroom.

How in the hell was I supposed to be able to lay down next her now without rubbing myself all over her? Even while I was thinking there was no way I could lay next to her in bed in my frazzled state, my body acted on its own and had followed her into the bedroom without my brain realizing it. I really wished they'd start communicating better. I watched her go over to pull the blinds shut over the windows to darken the room before she got underneath the covers and slid towards the center of the bed. Knowing I would end up embarrassing myself or pouncing on her if I got in bed at that moment, I turned and walked into the bathroom instead, closing the door behind me.

I stripped off my clothes and climbed into the shower turning on just the cold water and swallowed the shout that wanted to come out of my throat when the cold spray hit my overheated body. I washed my body and shampooed my hair and didn't get out until my teeth were chattering and my balls had crawled up inside to hide underneath my ribs looking for warmth.

I toweled off and realized I hadn't brought anything in with me to wear, so I walked out into the bedroom once again wearing nothing but a towel. My eyes immediately went to Sookie and I was both relieved and disappointed that she appeared to have fallen asleep already. It was probably for the best because if I saw the tiniest bit of lust in her eyes like I had back in the motel room I'd have a hard time not trying to press my luck.

I totally understood why Sookie was still hesitant, but for whatever reason I didn't believe I had a wife or girlfriend waiting for me somewhere. Even without my memories that thought didn't feel familiar to me at all, but without my memories actually coming back to me I had no idea of how I'd be able to convince Sookie of the same thing.

I didn't realize she'd woken up while I'd been staring down at her lost in my thoughts until she asked, "What are you thinking?"

*If you only knew.* I said a small prayer thanking God that she couldn't read minds and replied, "Nothing," as I turned and headed into the closet to find something to wear. After searching

through a few drawers I pulled out a pair of Under Armor shorts and put them on before heading back into the bedroom.

I crawled into the bed underneath the covers and stared at Sookie while she stared back at me. I knew she was waiting for me to tell her what I'd been thinking but I didn't think we'd be getting any sleep if we started down that path and her occasional yawns told me she needed to rest no matter how much I yearned to pull her close.

"I forgot to tell you, I remembered something earlier." I figured it was a safe topic so long as I didn't tell her *why* I'd been contemplating lock picks. I expected her to ask me what I'd remembered so I was surprised when her eyes lit up and she flung her arms around my neck hugging me and saying, "That's so great!"

God, she smelled so good and her body was so warm that I couldn't help pressing myself right back against her. I may have purred, but I can't really be too sure. Her hands started rubbing up and down my back and arms as she asked, "Why is your skin so cold?"

My face was burrowed into her neck when I answered, "Cold shower." Did I mention how good she smelled? Because she smelled even better up close.

"Why did you take a cold shower? Did I use all of the hot water?" She threw one of her legs over mine rubbing it up and down my legs while continuing to try to warm me up. Her efforts were working on some parts of my anatomy more quickly than others.

"I wouldn't know if you used all of the hot water because I only turned on the cold."

Her hands started to slow down as she pulled back to look at me and asked, "Why?"

I couldn't help grinning just a little over her being completely clueless about how she'd affected me and asked, "Why do you think?"

She must have been *really* tired because she seemed genuinely stumped until I inadvertently gave her a hint when her leg brushed up against my growing erection. "Oh," she squeaked. I could make out her blush even with the room being dark, but I didn't want her to get upset so I lay down on my back and raised my hands up to prop them underneath my head so I wouldn't be tempted to touch her while fully expecting her to pull away from me.

I was pleasantly surprised when she didn't pull away and instead she molded herself against the side of my body with half of her body laying on top of mine while wrapping an arm around my chest and her leg still thrown over mine. A few minutes later she huffed before reaching up and pulling my hands down wrapping my arms around her and then resumed her previous position.

We stayed wrapped up in each other for a while with neither one of us saying anything. I could tell by her breathing and the feel of her eyelashes occasionally brushing against my bare chest that she was still awake.

"What did you remember earlier?" she faintly whispered.

"That I had lock picks and where they were."

"That's weird."

I wasn't going to tell her *why* I was thinking of lock picks so I tried to shrug in response.

"What if you *are* married?" she whispered even quieter.

"I'm not," I whispered back.

"How can you be sure?" she asked.

I reached down and tilted her chin up until she was looking in my eyes and said, "I just *feel* it, but I understand why you're hesitant. I'm okay with it. I'm not going to push for anything more than what you're ready to give. We'll figure it all out eventually."

She snuggled back down onto my chest before asking, "What if we don't? What if you never get your memories back?"

"Then I'll just keep making new memories, hopefully with you."

We continued to lay there in silence until we eventually fell asleep.

I had more fragmented dreams consisting of nothing but flashes of images. I woke up with a start still wrapped around Sookie and I tried to recall them all. I was running along a beach at night with a heavy backpack on my shoulders. I was swimming in the dark with my muscles protesting with every stroke I made through the water. I was falling through the sky watching the muzzle flashes lighting up the ground as I approached, again at night. It was always dark with my view nothing more than tunnel vision. There wasn't any sound either.

As I lay there something inside of me tensed making me take notice of our surroundings and as I was slipping out from underneath Sookie and out of bed I heard a noise outside the front door of the apartment. I reached for the gun I'd left on the nightstand and as I turned to go into the hallway I heard a crash.

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## Chapter 8: Need

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### Need

### SPOV



As I stood in Eric's shower I couldn't help running through everything that had happened in the last few minutes. I could still feel the sensation of his lips pressed against mine with the taste of him still lingering in my mouth. I'd kissed my fair share of guys, but I'd never been kissed like the way Eric kissed me. The heat that generated between us would give a Louisiana summer's day a run for its money. It was wrong for me to have kissed him again before running into the bathroom, but I felt like I needed to in case it was my last opportunity to do so.

Rationally, now that we were in his apartment, my fears of him being married were lessening given there weren't any indicators that anyone besides Eric lived here. However, there was still that voice in my head telling me to keep my guard up at least until we could check out the address on his license. If the part time supermodel-homeless shelter volunteer-wife-mother of his children-cookie baker wasn't there then I didn't think I'd be able to hold onto my 'no nookie' mantra for much longer.

I felt horrible for insinuating that this was a crash pad for him, but it still didn't make any sense to me why he would live here when his driver's license said differently. Maybe he'd moved and never gotten his address changed on the license? As much as I longed to believe that was true, it didn't explain why the doorman called him 'Mr. Thomas' and not 'Mr. Northman.' Then again, there was a different name on his license and all of his passports as well. For all we knew his *real* name might very well be whatever 'Thomas'.

As odd as it seemed, given the circumstances we were in, everything else about Eric seemed 'right'. It felt completely natural to me to hold his hand, or wrap my arms around him not to mention kissing him like there was no tomorrow. I couldn't form the words or the rationalization that made me feel like he and I were meant to be together, but I felt it nonetheless. I just hoped now that we were in New York we'd find more answers than creating more questions. Somehow I doubted that would be the case.

I finished up in the shower and wrapped the towel around my body after I dried off since I'd forgotten to grab any clothes beforehand. I silently prepared myself for the possibility of Eric being in the room before opening the door and I was flooded with both relief and disappointment when I discovered the bedroom was empty.

The duffel bag was still in the living room so I went into Eric's closet and gaped again at the amount of clothes he had. Everything was organized with the suits hanging together, then his dress shirts, casual shirts, slacks, jeans, etc. with even spacing between each hanger. I selected a blue dress shirt and purposely pushed a few of the hangers closer together making a mental note to check them later to see if Eric had OCD tendencies. If he did I knew it wouldn't be the last time I would secretly mess with him.

Eric's dress shirt came down to my knees highlighting the differences in our height and I had to roll the sleeves up four times just to get them to end at my wrists. I heard what I assumed was Eric in another room so I walked out of the bedroom and found him sitting at his desk with a bunch of papers in front of him. He looked up from the papers in his hand and his eyes travelled over the shirt I was wearing so I said, "I hope you don't mind me wearing your shirt."

From the way he was looking at me I didn't think he'd mind if I wandered around naked either, but he only said, "No, I don't mind at all."

I walked forward and looked at the papers on his desk, but any time I tried to ask Eric something he seemed lost in his own thoughts. We were both tired from driving practically nonstop so I suggested we take a nap before trying to figure anything else out at the moment. He still seemed like he was in a daze, but he followed me back into the bedroom and walked into the bathroom as I crawled under the covers.

I sighed out loud at how comfortable his bed was and the sheets must have been a high thread count because they felt so soft against my skin. I must have dozed off for a few minutes because when I opened my eyes I saw Eric standing by the bed wearing nothing but a towel staring down at me. I had a pretty good idea of what was going through his mind at the time, but I asked anyway. He muttered, "Nothing," and disappeared inside his closet before returning a moment later wearing just a pair of shorts.

It took every ounce of willpower I had to simply lay still and not jump on him, but my body seemed to have missed the memo from my brain because as soon as he'd said he had remembered something my arms automatically launched themselves around him happy that something had come back to him. His skin was freezing cold so I immediately started trying to warm him up not realizing the reason why he'd chosen to take a cold shower until I *felt* the reason up against my leg.

My resolve to remain chaste was diminishing fast, but my mind refused to let go of the notion that he might not be single. Even so, when Eric had taken the high road and lay on his back with his hands up underneath his head I still felt compelled to remain pressed against his side and when he made no response I huffed pulling his arms down until they were wrapped around me knowing it would be impossible to fall asleep any other way.

We talked for a few more minutes with him telling me that he truly didn't believe he was married and I wanted nothing more than to believe that to be true until I finally fell asleep with Eric's final words floating through my mind, *'Then I'll just keep making new memories, hopefully with you.'*

The muffled sound of a crash woke me from my nap and my eyes snapped open just in time to see Eric creeping down the hallway holding his gun defensively in front of him. A sickening feeling started in the pit of my stomach as I threw the covers off and started going after him. As soon as I made it to the bedroom doorway Eric held his hand up behind him in a 'halt' command towards me without ever turning to face me and continued moving forward until he slinked around the corner and out of sight.

I held my breath straining to hear everything around me, but all I could hear was the frantic beating of my heart in my eardrums. It felt like a lifetime had passed when Eric came walking back into the hallway shaking his head with the gun down by his side as he said, "I guess I have clumsy neighbors."

"What?" My mind couldn't make sense of anything he had said.

Eric continued walking towards me and it wasn't until his arms were wrapped around me that I realized I was shaking like a leaf. He rubbed his hands up and down my arms and back trying to calm my nerves as he said, "A woman, I assume my neighbor across the hall, dropped a bag of her groceries right outside the front door. That's what the noise was.

I felt relieved immediately, but wondered how long it would take when every little unknown sound would no longer induce panic to flood my body. I couldn't imagine living that way for the rest of my life and it only made me more resolved to try and figure out who was after us and why.

Eric continued to embrace me in his arms and with my face pressed against his chest it was hard to ignore the fact that he wasn't wearing a shirt. I inhaled deeply relishing in the fact that his scent and touch soothed me in a way that I'd never felt before. I felt safe and it was in that moment that I made a leap with my mind and my heart. The man wrapped around me, *this* Eric Northman, had made it perfectly clear that he would be mine whenever I was ready. I didn't believe he'd only meant sexually either, but completely mine as I already knew that I was completely his. The ball was in my court and I knew there was a chance he would never regain his memories so what was I waiting for, a wife and family that very well might not exist?

What if something happened to one of us? With everything that had happened in the short time we'd known each other it was a very real possibility. I had lost so much over the last few days, hell over my relatively short lifetime that I needed Eric. I needed him in every way possible and for me my need outweighed the possible consequences of my actions because I knew I would always regret it if I had held back now.

My movement was limited while Eric held my body tightly against his so I turned my head slightly placing a kiss on his chest. His whole body stilled as if he was trying to figure out what my intentions were so I slowly trailed wet kisses across his chest until my mouth settled over one of his nipples. It pebbled instantly as soon as my tongue made its first pass over it and Eric wove his fingers through my hair at the back of my head keeping it in place while a soft moan escaped his lips.

I could feel his rapidly rising erection growing between our bodies and my hands ran across the muscles on his back from his shoulder blades down into the waistband of his shorts where I gripped one of his finest assets with both hands holding him firmly against me while my lips made their way across his chest giving equal attention to his other nipple.

"*Sookie,*" he moaned as he pulled my head back from his chest as his lips came crashing down onto mine. His hands ran down my back to the backs of my thighs before trailing back up underneath the shirt I was wearing and he growled into my mouth when he discovered I wasn't wearing any underwear. Eric cupped my ass pulling me up as my legs automatically wrapped around his waist and he turned so that my back was up against the wall with his body holding me in place.

He pulled his mouth away from mine and kissed his way across my jaw to my neck, licking and nipping at my skin with his teeth. His hands left my hair running down to my shoulders before coming to rest on my breasts and my eyes closed as I arched my back pushing them against his hands as he skimmed his fingertips across my nipples through the fabric.

The sensation he created across my sensitive skin caused me to moan out, "*Eric*," while my hips ground against him desperately seeking any sort of friction. The feel of cool air across my front and the sound of buttons scattering across the floor caused my eyes to snap open to see his heated gaze staring back at me as he leaned forward capturing one of my nipples in between his lips.

I cried out as he flicked his tongue over my hardened peak while his free hand snaked in between our bodies rubbing circles over my clit. My left hand gripped the hair on top of his head, glad that I'd left it long enough on top to do so, while the nails on my free hand raked up his back. I could feel the tension in my body coiling tighter and tighter with my impending climax when he thrust two fingers inside of me sending me over the edge as I screamed his name.

My body convulsed with involuntary shudders with my legs still locked around his waist and I felt the mattress against my back without ever realizing we had left the hallway. I sat up on my elbows and my eyes grew big as I watched Eric slip the waistband of his shorts over his hips letting them fall to the floor finally allowing my eyes to see what I had been feeling. He was definitely proportionately built and I licked my lips seeing the bead of moisture pooling at the tip.

Our eyes never broke contact as Eric crawled on the bed leaving wet kisses along my each of my legs and blowing warm air across my moistened center before parting my folds with a long lick of his tongue. My skin was still hyper sensitive from my first orgasm and my whole body shuddered at the contact making Eric snake one of his arms across my abdomen to keep me still. It didn't take long before my hand found its way back into his hair holding him there as I wantonly pushed myself against his face.

Eric thrust two fingers back inside of me as his mouth wrapped around my clit flicking his tongue over my small bundle of nerves in time with his fingers and just as I was reaching the point of no return Eric sat up grabbing my hips and plunged inside of me to the hilt. I came so hard my vision was reduced to nothing more than flashes of light and I vaguely registered that Eric held himself completely still inside of me while we both felt my inner walls spasm around his length.

I'd never felt anything like what Eric was making me feel and when I couldn't take it anymore I moved my hips urging him on. His lips found mine kissing me with a passion that could no longer be contained while he slowly withdrew before pushing forward again. We swallowed each other's moans at the sensations coursing through our bodies while our rhythm gradually picked up speed. I could feel the tension building yet again when Eric lifted one of my legs higher up on his hip changing the angle of his thrusts and hitting that hidden spot deep inside of me over and over until my entire body exploded like never before.

I felt Eric's body tense above me as he forcefully thrust into me one last time before giving in to his own explosive climax with my name being the only coherent word that left his lips. We stayed that way for a while before he leaned down tenderly kissing me again and then rolled to my side pulling my body flush against his with both of us a panting and sweaty mess.

I was still riding my post multi-orgasmic high when I felt Eric's body tense next to me and I looked up asking, "What's wrong?"

He appeared to be holding his breath as he said, "I'm so sorry. I wasn't thinking clearly."

"What are you talking about?" I asked still confused.

"Sookie, we didn't use any protection." He seemed to brace himself waiting for an angry reaction that he wasn't going to get.

I sighed admitting, "I know and it was stupid for us not to considering we don't know your medical history. I know I'm clean and I've been getting a Depo Provera shot like clockwork for years even though there's been no need for me to be on birth control for the last year until now. But, what's done is done and honestly, after all of *that*, I'd be hard pressed to get upset over anything right now."

I pressed my lips against his successfully willing his tension away as his fingers wound their way through my hair deepening our kiss. He wrapped his arms and legs around my body and sighed against my neck mumbling, "I must have done something right in a previous life to have found someone like you."

I giggled whispering, "Well, technically, *I* found *you*."

He placed a light kiss against my neck and his voice dropped an octave as he said, "You *do* realize that now that I've had you, tasted you, you'll never get rid of me, right?"

My own voice sounded a bit hoarse when I replied, "Who said I wanted to be rid of you?"

Our hands started roaming over each other yet again when my stomach growled in protest of not being fed anything substantial in over 24 hours. Eric pulled away saying, "I need to feed you. You'll need all of the energy you can get." He waggled his eyebrows as he spoke and he looked so damn sexy doing it with his 'sex hair' that for the first time in my life I had to fight the urge to lick someone's eyebrow. "Sookie, if you keep looking at me like that you're never going to get fed."

I felt the blush bloom in my cheeks which was completely ridiculous considering what we'd just done and looked away from him saying in denial, "I don't know what you're talking about." I turned over looking for the shirt I'd been wearing when I felt Eric grab onto each side of my body as he started tickling me saying, "Really? You don't know what I was talking about?" I was half snorting half giggling as I tried to squirm away, but he pounced on me leaving me no room for escape.

"Admit it, you want me. Again and again and again." I was pinned beneath him, but I was too stubborn to let him win. Knowing men tended to be visual creatures, while Eric waited for my surrender (he'd have a better chance of becoming a werewolf at the next full moon than getting me to give in) I ran my hands up my body and slowly licked my lips before sucking each of my pointer fingers into my mouth, moaning as if they were something else, and then watched his gaze darken as his eyes followed their path to my breasts. I gently traced my nipples before rolling them softly between my fingers and I arched my back up into my hands moaning again.

Eric was so still I couldn't even tell if he was breathing anymore as he watched me playing with my breasts and when I ran my right hand down the front of my body he immediately slipped off to the side of me not wanting to block my hand's progress. I slowly traced an invisible pattern across my stomach inching lower and lower and when I was sure Eric was concentrating on nothing more than watching my hand I sprung up off the bed like I'd been shot out of a canon and grabbed the shirt I'd been wearing as I ran down the hallway laughing out, "I admit nothing!"

I had forgotten that the shirt was now minus several buttons and he must have been too stunned to move because I had enough time to grab a pair of underwear from the duffel bag and put them on along with a sundress that I slipped over my body before he finally joined me in the living room wearing the shorts he'd had on before. He was trying to scowl at me but the corners of his lips gave away his amusement and I had no doubt I would be paying for my little stunt at some point in the future.

We'd somehow lost the day when I looked at the clock and saw that it was already after 8 pm. Neither one of us felt like going out to eat so as we hunted through his practically bare cupboards in the kitchen we managed to find several take-out menus in one of the drawers. After deciding on Chinese food Eric picked up the phone in the kitchen and called in our order to be delivered.

I gazed into the refrigerator and saw he had a few bottles of water and beer, but not much else and said, "If we're going to be staying here for a while we should go grocery shopping." When he didn't respond I turned to see him standing at the window in the living room looking down onto the street below. I walked over and put my arms around his waist leaning against his chest asking, "Are you okay?"

He sighed before answering, "Yes, I'm just frustrated that I don't remember more. I mean, I remembered this building and then the lock picks I had in the desk drawer, but nothing else."

I wished I had some magical cure I could give him, but since I didn't I just hugged him tighter hoping it would make him feel at least a little bit better. He kissed the top of my head and said, "I should go put on a shirt before the food gets here."

I followed him into the bedroom having decided to take another quick shower since we'd gotten all sweaty together with Eric pouting wanting me to wait so he could join me. After I promised to soak in the tub with him after dinner he was more agreeable and gave me another toe curling kiss before I scooted into the bathroom.

I piled my hair on top of my head knowing we'd be bathing again in a little while and quickly washed up. I'd been in the bathroom less than ten minutes when I opened the door and stepped into the bedroom wearing the same sundress I'd thrown on earlier when I heard some sort of commotion coming from the living room.

I grabbed Eric's gun from the nightstand and ran down the hallway to see him facing off with an Asian man. He was shorter than Eric by a good six inches, but he seemed to be just as powerful. There was a gun on the floor that must have slid under the coffee table with each of them attempting to keep the other away from it. The attacker held a switchblade in each of his hands while Eric had a large bloodied chef's knife in his right. The other guy had cuts across his forearms and abdomen with his blood dripping to the floor, but they didn't appear to slow him down any. I could see through the rips in his shirt that his arms and chest were covered in tattoos that looked like the kind worn by the Japanese Yakuza gang. They lunged at each other with neither of them making a sound other than the occasional grunt and they moved so fast it seemed like a choreographed dance.

I held the gun in front of me but there was no way I could shoot for fear of hitting Eric so I stood there helplessly watching their every move. The attacker lunged forward again only he slipped in a pool of his own blood giving Eric the opportunity he needed. He grabbed his right wrist and spun around behind him jerking his arm as he went and the attacker cried out as I heard his shoulder dislocate from its socket. The knife he'd held in that hand clattered to the floor, but he still tried to reach around with his other hand in another attempt to stab Eric. Eric, however, was too quick and he swept the man's feet out from under him and landed on top of him as he forced the knife the man still held in his left hand to point at his own chest above his heart while asking, "Who are you? Who sent you?"

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## Chapter 9: Answers

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### Answers

#### **EPOV**

Once our dinner was ordered I walked over to the window staring out at the city street below us trying to force my brain to remember something, anything. I felt like I was failing both Sookie and myself for not having the answers to my past. While my memory loss was nothing new at this point, the reality of it sunk in even deeper when we were lying in bed after the most amazing sex of my life (with or without my memories, of that, I was sure) and it occurred to me that we'd had sex without using any protection. I'd been so caught up in the moment that the only thought I'd had at the time had to do with Sookie's naked writhing body in front of, and then underneath, me. I thought she would surely get upset, if not with me, than at least at the situation, but she surprised me with her response. I should have known better because her response to every situation we'd been in from the moment we met had surprised me, so this shouldn't have been any different.

I walked into the bedroom to put on a shirt after getting Sookie to agree to a post-dinner bath and searched through my closet looking for a t-shirt to wear. I found them in the back of my closet and after straightening out a few hangers I went back out into the living room to wait on our dinner. I had been sitting for only a few minutes when I heard a knock on the door so I checked the peephole and opened the door after seeing an Asian guy standing there holding what appeared to be our dinner.

"Could you just leave it there?" I asked, pointing at the kitchen counter as I turned to get my wallet from the duffel bag. He stepped inside and as I was turning I caught his reflection in the window. He put the bag on the counter and then reached inside his waistband pulling out a gun as he turned to face my back.

"Northman." As the words left his lips I was already spinning and I kicked out behind my body hitting his hand holding the gun causing it to drop from his grasp and slide underneath the coffee table. No sooner had the gun dropped from his hand than he had pulled out a couple of switchblades holding one in each of his hands.

My body reacted without me having to consciously think about what I was doing as I dodged, blocked, and spun away from his every lunge towards me until I was close enough to grab a knife from the butcher's block on the kitchen counter. My longer arm span allowed my first swipe across his front to make contact leaving a shallow 4 inch gash across his abdomen, but it wasn't deep enough to slow him down very much.

In the back of my mind I knew Sookie would be getting out of the shower any minute and I wanted him subdued before she came out so she wouldn't get hurt. He made another lunge forward earning him another gash to his forearm as I spun out of reach of his other hand.

I knew that less than a full minute had passed and yet it was as if everything was happening in slow motion. I was able to predict each of his next moves just by looking at him. It was almost like watching a television that had a picture-in-picture option. His body filled my entire visual frame, but my brain was able to focus and zero in on each little nuance, like the tensing of his biceps or the flicker of his eye giving away his next move, while maintaining the overall picture as well.

I probably could have ended our fight at that point, but once I realized what my brain was capable of I wanted to test it out a little more. Another minute or two went by as we continued on and I had to admit that he was worthy opponent, but I knew I was better. It wasn't until I heard Sookie coming down the hallway that I decided to end it having a feeling that she might be apt to jump into the melee without giving any thought to her own safety. The fact that she'd not only saved me when she first found me while refusing to notify the authorities, she also blindly took off with me on this deadly and dangerous quest to find out who I am. To me, it was proof that her self preservation instincts were severely lacking. It also proved she was kind hearted and loyal as well, but I still hoped I could keep her safe in spite of herself.

I saw my best opportunity to take him down when his foot slipped on the blood he'd spilled onto the floor and I grabbed the wrist holding the knife he'd lunged forward with and spun around



behind him yanking down as I went dislocating his shoulder with a loud pop. The knife he'd held in that hand fell to the floor as he cried out in pain while I dropped my own knife and swept his feet out from under him. He landed on his back pinning his own limp arm behind him while I grabbed his other wrist and forced the tip of the blade over his own heart while straddling his body on the floor.

I pressed the tip down, just piercing his chest, while he futilely tried to force the knife upwards and asked, "Who are you? Who sent you?" He was our one shot at getting any answers and while I waited for him to respond another part of my brain was cataloging my own body's injury status which seemed to be none. My heart rate hadn't even elevated very much unlike earlier when it was threatening to pound out of my chest while I was in bed with Sookie.

"Who are you? Who sent you?" I asked again. I pushed the knife down another fraction, but all he did was smile and I saw his decision register as a slight flicker in his eyes a split second before he did something I wasn't expecting. Instead of pushing against the knife he pulled it down while pushing his body up effectively impaling himself as I held onto his wrist. He slumped down onto the floor and I watched the life drain out of his body not only in his rapidly vacant stare, but in the blood pooling on the floor around him as I let go of him.

"Shit!" It was my own damn fault for playing with him instead of just subduing him earlier.

"Eric? Are you okay?" Sookie asked as she ran over still holding the gun in her shaking hands. I stood up and carefully took it from her so she wouldn't accidentally squeeze the trigger and wrapped my arms around her trying to calm her frazzled nerves for the second time tonight. My touch seemed to soothe her instantly as her body became still in my embrace and a part of me took the time to rejoice in that fact knowing she had the same effect on me as well.

"I'm fine," I whispered into the hair on top of her head. I was afraid that with everything that kept happening to us she would eventually reach her limit and leave me. I wouldn't blame her one bit, but I hoped I would find a way to put an end to it all before that happened. I couldn't imagine trying to go on without her by my side and just the very thought of it was capable of bringing me to my knees. In an effort to avoid that scenario altogether it only steeled my resolve even more.

She took a deep breath and asked, "What happened? Did you not give him a tip?" She half sobbed and half chuckled as she clutched me tighter and I felt relieved knowing that if she was able to make a joke then she was still okay, at least for now.

"I'm not really sure. I thought he was delivering our dinner," I pointed at the bag on the counter, "and when I turned to get my wallet from the duffel bag I could see him pulling a gun out of his waistband in the reflection in the window while my back was turned. It kind of escalated from there."

She pulled back far enough to look up at me and asked, "He just attacked you? Did he say anything?"

"Northman. That's it." Shit, we needed to get out of the apartment. "Sookie, we need to leave. Whoever 'they' are, they know where we're at." In what was now becoming our daily routine we quickly bagged up everything that could be of use to us, including the papers from my desk and more clothes from my closet. Both of us changed into jeans and t-shirts and seeing her practically naked again wasn't helping my focus at all. I shook off my lustful thoughts and we were down on the street within three minutes of making the decision to leave. Even though we were both starving we left the food on the counter not trusting it to be safe to eat.

I'd made sure to check the dead guy's pockets, but all I found was a cell phone and some cash. I turned it off in case anyone was tracking it and stuffed it in my pocket while we walked a few blocks making sure we weren't being followed. There were more than a few people out walking at nine o'clock at night so we blended in easily with the citizens of the city that never sleeps. When I felt certain there was no one following us we ducked down into the subway and hopped onto the first train that pulled into the station. We exited the train two stops later and went back up onto the street where we took a cab to JFK International Airport.

Sookie and I didn't talk very much, but our hands had remained clasped together from the time we'd left the apartment. We seemed to be subconsciously taking turns rubbing soothing circles on each other's hands with our thumbs while lost in our own thoughts with my own volleying back and forth from the surprise attack to lamenting over missing out on soaking in the tub with Sookie.

Twenty minutes later the cab driver took the exit for the airport and I pulled out the cell phone I'd taken from the mystery attacker. Turning it on, I wrote down the numbers in his call history noting he'd received a call at practically the same time I had placed our dinner order. I recognized the number as the same one for the emergency contact on my apartment lease supposedly belonging to a William Compton. I wondered who Compton was to me and how he was associated with the man that was now lying dead on my living room floor. I assumed this Compton, or whoever 'they' were, had my phone in the apartment tapped which was something that should have occurred to me earlier. I know at the time I was still caught up in the moment from being with Sookie for the first time, but it was an almost fatal error. I couldn't afford to make another one knowing our lives were literally on the line.

I told the driver to let us out at the International Departures area and Sookie and I walked, still hand in hand, like we were any other travelers. I made sure that we stayed as far away from the surveillance cameras as possible without drawing any undue attention to us and hit the send button calling the last number the phone had received a call from, which according to my lease was from William Compton.

It only rang once when someone answered with, "You were supposed to report back an hour ago. Was the target eliminated?" It was a man's voice and he sounded as though he might have originally been from the south, but tried to lose his accent. I felt better hearing him say 'target', not plural, and hoped like hell they had no idea Sookie was with me or even that she existed at all. When I didn't respond he said, "Chow?"

I waited for the noise to abate from a plane taking off above us before asking, "Why are you after me?" With the attacker dead, apparently named Chow, I figured I had another shot at getting some answers.

"Northman. I suppose I can assume you've killed another one of your brethren since you're calling from Chow's phone. You need to come in. Now." At least one question was answered now that I knew whomever it was I was talking to knew me well enough to know who I was from the sound of my voice.

I didn't want to give away the fact that I had lost my memories so I tried to keep my end of the conversation vague while keeping track of the time spent on the call. "Technically, he killed himself. What do you mean 'another one'?"

"Don't be coy Northman," he scoffed. "DeCastro lives, you fall off the radar, your not-so-secret Swiss account is flushed with ten million dollars the morning after you disappear, and suddenly the others are dropping like flies. Not to mention a few civilian casualties too. It doesn't take a genius to figure out you've gone rogue and sold out not only your fellow soldiers, but your country as well." He sounded like a pompous ass making me hope like hell he wasn't a former friend of mine because I would have to question whether or not I was normally a prick too to have considered having someone like him as a friend.

My mind quickly ran through everything he'd just said looking for more insight and my brain settled on, '*Fellow soldiers? Sold out my country?*' I could hear him scrambling in the background while he spoke as well as a female's voice practically growling "Give me the phone!" I knew they were tracing the call so I said, "I need some answers before I agree to come in. I'll call you back," and hung up.

I left the cell phone powered up, wiped it clean, and at the first opportunity I saw I dropped it into an unsuspecting traveler's bag. Hopefully they were headed far away and it would throw off whoever was after us. Sookie gave me a look that said she wanted to know what he'd said, but I didn't want to talk about it with anyone else around and just shook my head saying, "Once we're on the road."

She nodded her understanding and we quickly made our way to the 'Arrivals' area where we hopped onto the shuttle for the long term parking lot. We found another SUV and I instantly felt the loss as we broke our physical hold on one another for the first time in over an hour. We were back on the interstate heading south ten minutes later and as soon as we were alone in the car I filled Sookie in on everything that Compton told me.

"Did you say Compton?" Sookie asked.

"I assume it was him," I replied. "It was the same phone number that was listed on my apartment lease under the name William Compton. Why?"

"What are the odds?" she mumbled almost to herself. "Back home in Bon Temps our neighbor across the cemetery from us is named Jessie Compton. He never married or had any kids of his

own and he was forever bragging to Gran about his nephew Bill. Bill Compton. You don't think it could be the same guy do you?"

It seemed like a long shot to me, but other than the phone number we really didn't have much else to go on and I did detect a faint southern accent from him. "Maybe. What types of things did he brag about?" I asked.

"Oh, just about everything. Mostly how smart he was and how he'd gotten into Princeton on a full scholarship. I never really paid too much attention."

I could tell she was sifting through her memories so I waited a few minutes before asking, "Do you know anything else about him like what he looks like, or where he could be now?"

She sat there in quiet thought for a moment before saying, "Yes, I met him once when his family had come to visit Mr. Compton." She scrunched her nose up in disgust before saying, "He's about three years older than me with brown hair and walked around with his nose in the air and a stick up his ass looking down on us backwater hicks." A noticeable shiver going through her body before she said, "He had a black heart."

I looked at her confused thinking I might have heard her wrong and asked, "He had a what?"

Even in the dark interior of the truck I could see the blush bloom in her cheeks as she said, "A black heart. I have a really good sixth sense about people and no matter how big his smile was or how polite his southern gentleman manners were, he was evil on the inside." She looked embarrassed at her admission in believing her 'sixth sense' and it made my mind momentarily wander off topic.

After I chewed on her words for a minute I was almost afraid of the answer to my next question. "And what does your sixth sense say about me?"

She reached over and laced her fingers through mine once more with each of us sighing in relief as soon as our skin made contact before saying, "Your heart is full of light. It wasn't as bright when you first walked into the shop, but it's practically blinding now."

Logically it all sounded a little 'hocus pocus', but I believed her nonetheless and it made me feel a little bit better about myself thinking that maybe I wasn't normally a prick like Compton.

Sookie broke through my silent musings by asking, "He called you a soldier, like maybe you're in the military?" I figured I must have had some sort of military-type training given everything I could and knew how to do, but I figured my hair would've been shorter if I was in the military and told her so.

We sat in a comfortable silence for a while driving with no destination in mind when she asked, "Did he say anything that triggered any memories for you?" When I said no she continued saying, "I know the name DeCastro is pretty common, but I wonder if he meant Felipe DeCastro."

"Who's that?" The name didn't ring any bells, but then again, virtually nothing else did either.

"I only know what I've read about him in the gossip magazines the boys kept around the shop, but from what I gather he's just a wealthy business man that likes to hang out with celebrities." She gasped and turned to face me saying, "He was on St. Thomas when you were there. Laf and Jesus heard through the grapevine that he was there celebrating his birthday and was going to throw one of his legendary parties on his yacht. They were trying to come up with a way to crash it," she ended wistfully.

I knew she was still hurting over losing them so I tried to keep her mind off of it by saying, "Well, odds are he's the guy Compton was talking about." When Sookie mentioned he was celebrating his birthday the image of the birthday hat from my nightmare flashed through my mind and I knew it couldn't have been a coincidence.

"He said 'DeCastro lives' as if you were the reason for that and that it wasn't a good thing he was still alive." Her voice lowered into a whisper when she asked, "What do you think that means."

I didn't want to admit it even to myself much less to Sookie, but it was becoming painfully obvious that I was some sort of gun for hire. "Given the course of events over the past few days and the condition in which you found me along with the rifle you found on the boat I can only assume that I'm some sort of scumbag hitman." It worried me to realize that I must not be a 'good guy' if that was the case and I was concerned that sooner or later Sookie would realize that too and want nothing more to do with me.

I knew my worries were unfounded for the time being when I saw Sookie was already shaking her head 'no' while I confessed my thoughts and she said, "No. He called you a 'soldier' and accused you of betraying your country, so if anything whatever your profession is, or was, it was more than just being a gun for hire."

Her words made me feel marginally better, but not too much when I took into account with her seemingly poor self preservation skills. I chose to follow her point of logic for the time being knowing there was no way of knowing for sure short of my memories returning or until we found out the truth some other way. "Let's assume that's true and I'm some sort of government sanctioned assassin for my country. Why would the United States, or any other country, want him killed if he's just a wealthy business man that likes to get his picture taken with celebrities?"

Sookie looked just as stumped as I felt when she admitted, "I don't know." If he was, in fact, the target of an assassination there had to be something pretty sinister going on with him for the government to want him dead. There were far more questions than we had the answers to and it frustrated me to no end.

We sat there in silence when a thought finally hit me. "Does Jessie Compton still live next door to where you grew up?" Maybe there was a way we could find out some information on one William 'Bill' Compton from him. Hopefully he still liked to brag.

"As far as I know. I haven't been back there in a few years, but I'm sure Tara would've said something in passing if he'd moved or died. There's not a lot going on in Bon Temps so that would've been news worthy gossip. Why?"

"What do you think about going back home for a visit?" It was worth a shot and at this point we didn't have any other leads or anything to lose.

I could see the wheels spinning in her head when she finally made the connection and she smiled brightly while taking out the GPS and programmed her home address into it saying, "I think that would be a very good idea."

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## Chapter 10: A New Religion

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### A New Religion

(10 points to whomever can name the band that goes with that song title!)

#### SPOV

I watched the cars and exits go by as we travelled along the interstate wondering how in the hell I'd gotten here. I mean I *knew* how I got here, but if someone would have told me a year ago that I'd be on the run with a perfect (and I do mean *perfect*) stranger running from unknown killers while he had no memories whatsoever I would've laughed my ass off. Hell, I would've laughed it off a week ago! While my wild streak was always a concern with Gran I had always been proud of it. I liked travelling down the unbeaten path, thinking outside the box and whatever other turns of phrase there were to describe my personality, but even I could admit that this situation was *way* beyond the norm.

The only thing that allowed me to be okay with everything was Eric even if it was my association with him that put me here to begin with. I didn't blame him in any way, it wasn't like he asked to be hunted down, but I also knew it was my choice to stay with him. Just like it was my choice not to notify the authorities when we found him floating in the ocean. My instincts, when it came to other people, had never failed me before and my instincts were telling me to trust Eric, so that's what I did.

We took Interstate 78 West into Pennsylvania and stopped at a rest area to finally get something to eat. We'd been sitting in a comfortable silence since we'd left New York with each of us lost in our own thoughts. I hoped that going back home to Bon Temps wasn't a waste of time, but since we had no other leads there really wasn't any choice. I made a mental note to call Tara once we were closer to home so she wouldn't be blindsided when we showed up.

Once we were back on the interstate I kept replaying the scene of Eric fighting Chow over and over remembering how mesmerizing it had been to watch the fight unfold. The way Eric moved was both frightening and sexy which left me questioning my sanity even more. It was wrong to

get aroused at the thought of him in a lethal dance with his would be killer, right? A lethal dance with knives. At that very moment I happened to notice a roadside sign for a Native American Reservation/Casino and my mind flashed to the Kevin Costner movie "Dances with Wolves." I snickered while imagining Eric in a loin cloth renaming him "Dances with Knives."

"What's so funny?" Eric's voice cut into my mental movie so I hit my internal pause button because the image of him wearing nothing but a loin cloth was something I wanted to come back to later on.

"Nothing," I lied. I chanced a glance in his direction and saw him looking back at me, eyebrow raised, silently throwing the invisible bullshit flag. I squirmed under his gaze not wanting to fess up to my retarded internal musings so I changed the subject by asking, "Do you think going to Bon Temps will be a waste of time?"

I'm not sure if he responded verbally because the sight of him shrugging his shoulders made me lose my train of thought while I watched the muscles moving underneath his fitted t-shirt. My eyes roamed down his body and it immediately brought back all of the memories of what we had done earlier that evening with me suddenly realizing I really wanted to do it again. Now. Before tonight I hadn't had sex in a *long time*, but now that my dry spell appeared to be over my body seemed to want to make up for lost time. I tried to push the lustful thoughts out of my head knowing now certainly wasn't the time, but they weren't budging.

My eyes eventually made their way back to Eric's and found that he was staring just as intensely back at me. Apparently I wasn't the only one feeling frisky and I silently cursed Chow and Compton for ruining our planned post-dinner soak in the tub. I audibly sighed and tried to remain unaffected saying, "I mean, what are the odds that old Mr. Compton's nephew is the same Bill Compton?" while forcing myself to face forward and praying to God to give me the strength to resist my urges before I climbed over the center console and attacked him.

Eric's voice was strained when he replied, "I admit it's a long shot, but it's not like we have anything else to go on." His right hand left the spot it had been resting on, the middle of my left thigh, and began slowly traveling upwards while tracing an invisible pattern over my denim clad leg.

I glanced down at his wandering hand saying, "True," before shooting him a pointed look only to find him staring innocently at the highway in front of us. I couldn't tell whether or not he was moving his hand mindlessly or intentionally up my leg while he drove, so I forced myself to remain still instead of taking his hand and moving it to where I wanted it which was shoved down the front of my pants.

My left hand had come to rest on his right thigh at some point and my eyes stayed locked on Eric's profile looking for any sign he was getting me worked up on purpose, but his expression gave nothing away. The growing bulge straining inside his pants, however, said plenty. A gracious plenty.

"So Jessie Compton lives next door to where you grew up?" he asked as if his fingertips hadn't just fluttered over the center seam of my jeans which they had.

I forced my face to remain neutral and my voice steady as I replied, "Yep. The Comptons have lived next door to the Stackhouses since before the Civil War." The pressure of Eric's fingertips increased over the center of my jeans while I spoke and I had to swallow the moan that threatened to leave my throat. The only evidence that I was affected by his ministrations was the growing dampness in my panties which I was sure he couldn't detect yet. In my mind we were playing a more intimate game similar to the one we'd played in Wal-Mart and I had every intention of winning. If I had my way we'd *both* be winners in the end.

My own hand had slowly made its way up his thigh and I lightly traced the outline of the bulge I found there, smirking when I saw Eric's eyes close briefly at the sensation. His voice too remained steady while he said, "Wow, that's a long time. Hopefully he'll be willing to talk once we get there." His fingertips flicked open the button to my jeans as he said the word 'time' and he had my zipper down by the word 'there'.

I spread my legs a little to give him more access while trying to remain focused on the conversation. His fingers delved inside my panties and I heard a low growl come from his chest as he discovered the wetness waiting for him there. My hand automatically stroked up and down his length over his jeans in sync with his hand as I fought for something to say that had nothing to do with '*faster*' or '*harder*'. It took me a minute when I finally said, "Maybe I'll make him Gran's signature pecan pie and bring it over to him."

I flipped open the button to his jeans and the zipper practically went down on its own with my hand automatically wrapping around what sprang out to greet me. My thumb ran over his moistened tip causing Eric to let out a throaty, "Mmm...", sound and my eyes darted to his face in triumph thinking he broke our unspoken rule first by acknowledging what we were doing.

Eric looked at me and smirked saying, "I *love* pie." I lost the game and the capability to think clearly after that because two of his fingers thrust inside of me at the same moment he said 'pie' and my back arched while my hips lifted towards his hand. For a split second I thanked God it was the middle of the night and there wasn't any way for anyone to see what we were doing, but I was already so worked up that it wasn't long before I was praising Eric and God in tandem as I came on his hand.

He slowly withdrew his fingers and I watched as he licked them clean saying, "Yep, I love pie." There wasn't enough blood left above my waist to blush at his words and the sight of his erection pointing like a compass towards the North Star reminded me that my task wasn't complete.

I unbuckled my seatbelt and leaned over the console tracing Eric's right ear with my tongue lightly blowing air over the moist shell with my whispered words, "I prefer something a little meatier." His breath caught in this throat and a hoarse, "*Fuck*," left his lips as my own descended over his hardened length in the next instant.



Living with two gay men whose favorite pastime after a pitcher of margaritas was 'Let's make Sookie blush by talking about how to please a man' came in handy. Eric was packing more heat than Tony Soprano, but I'd paid attention to Lafayette's and Jesus' drunken tutelage. I relaxed my throat and swallowed on every downward pass while maintaining a steady suction on my way back up. I felt Eric's hands weave into my hair and he moaned each time he hit the back of my throat. It didn't take long before I felt him swell even harder signaling his impending release so I let out a moan of my own and felt his body tense as he climaxed while grunting out a few choice praises himself. I swallowed down everything he had to give and his body visibly shuddered as I released him from my mouth with one last firm pull from my lips.

I sat up, proud that I'd been able to take in all of him, but my pride quickly turned to panic when I saw Eric leaning back with his eyes closed completely spent. I gasped about to yell at him to open his eyes, worried that we would crash, when I looked out the window and saw that we were stopped along the side of the interstate.

As I waited for my heartbeat to slow down Eric's eyes eventually fluttered open and a sated smile adorned his face as he said, "Good God woman," causing a smile of my own to appear. It took us a few minutes to compose ourselves and Eric pulled me to him for a toe curling kiss before we pulled back onto the highway.

We took turns driving and somehow managed to keep our interactions PG for the most part. It was with an obvious effort though and I began to wonder if I would ever, could ever, be tired of him. I seriously doubted it. Eric seemed to struggle keeping his hands to himself just as much as me so I felt better knowing I wasn't the only one.

Whenever we took turns sleeping I found myself staring at him memorizing every detail I could. Whenever we were both awake I talked about everybody back home filling Eric in on the people we might encounter once we were there. Tara and JB for sure because I was hoping we could stay in the farmhouse since the only motel in town was pretty seedy. I wanted to keep to ourselves as much as possible though because neither one of us thought it was a good idea to advertise the fact that Eric was with me. I decided it was time to call Tara once we hit Birmingham Alabama.

"Hey Tara, it's Sookie."

"Hey Sook, did you get my email?" she asked.

"Uh, no. I haven't checked it in a few days." In actuality I couldn't remember when I had checked it last, but I was sure it had been at least a week prior to meeting Eric.

"Oh, well JB and I finally bought a house. We're actually just finishing up moving in today, but everything at the farmhouse is paid up through the end of the month."

"Oh." I wondered for a split second at what I was going to do with the farmhouse, but decided it was for the best at the moment considering we were on our way there. "That's great Tara!"

"So you're not upset with us?" she asked hesitantly. "We would've given you more notice, but the house we bought was about to be foreclosed on and we got a really good deal. I'm sorry if we've left you in a bind."

I could hear the worry in her voice so I tried to reassure her by saying, "Of course I'm not upset. I'm happy for you guys. Besides, I was calling to tell you that I'm on my way back to Bon Temps now, so it's fine. As a matter of fact, we should be there in a few hours."

"We?" Tara asked.

I bit the lower lip of my big mouth not wanting to say too much about Eric so I replied with a noncommittal, "Huh?." Espionage and subterfuge was clearly not my forte.

"You said 'we'," she said undeterred. "As in more than just you. Who's coming to Bon Temps with you?"

"Just a friend," I quickly muttered. I changed the subject by asking, "Is the spare key still on the porch?" *Lame Stackhouse. Lame.*

"Yes, and don't change the subject." I heard the baby crying in the background and said a silent *Halleluiah* as Tara sighed saying, "I guess you're off the hook for now, but you better call me once you're settled. I want to meet whoever 'we' is."

We quickly said our goodbyes and hung up while I mentally calculated how long I would have before Tara showed up unannounced. I figured we had about three days at most. I glanced over at Eric and was met with what was becoming his signature raised eyebrow plus sexy smirk expression which usually equaled Sookie minus panties. A very complex mathematical equation. Not.

We stopped off at a supermarket close to Bon Temps to pick up a few things knowing there wouldn't be anything to eat once we got there. When I picked up the ingredients for the pie I was going to make, the looks Eric was giving me caused the blush that had been MIA the night before to return with a vengeance. He just chuckled and kissed the top of my head before following me to the checkout.

It was dark out once we pulled onto Hummingbird Lane and a warmth spread through my chest when the farmhouse came into view lit up by the glow of the full moon. I couldn't wait to move out when I lived here, but seeing it again now brought back all of the good memories I had of growing up. It surprised me just how much I'd missed it without ever realizing it until now.

I found the key hidden under the flower pot on the porch and unlocked the front door. Eric brought everything inside while I walked around turning lights on so we could see. Everything was pretty much how I remembered it since Tara and JB had left most of the furniture in place since they didn't have much of their own after they got married. They had used one of the bedrooms upstairs so they would be across the hall from where they set up the nursery and Gran's bedroom had remained untouched.

I was surprised that I had more happy thoughts and memories than sad ones seeing everything again. I had been devastated when Gran died, but now I simply felt a warmth in my heart just thinking about her. I pondered what she'd have to say about everything Eric and I been through recently as I pulled some sheets from the linen closet and made up the bed. Gran had always been pretty open minded, but thinking of Eric pulling the stolen SUV around to the back of the house at that very moment had me believing that even *she* wouldn't have been *that* easy going. We had already decided to drive it to the Monroe Mall the next day to leave it there since my car had been stored at the farmhouse and I hoped it would be the end of our grand theft auto days.

I was dead tired, but I felt grimy from being on the road for the last 24 hours so once the bed was made I stripped off my clothes and climbed into the shower in the master bathroom. I had my eyes closed letting the water rain down over my head when I jumped at the feeling of Eric's hands on my waist from behind and I abruptly turned around ready to chastise him for sneaking up on me. Instead, I ended up sputtering from the water I accidentally inhaled at the sight of him standing there in all of his naked and highly aroused glory. It was the first time I'd seen Eric completely naked since we were too busy doing other things the first time we'd gotten naked together. I had already known from the bits I had seen as well as felt that his body rivaled Michaelangelo's David, but standing inches away from him while he wore nothing but a few drops of water and smile made my knees weak and my girly bits throb. It seemed I wasn't as tired as I thought I was.

"I believe you owe me a bath, but I'll settle for a shower right now." Eric's tone of voice was an octave lower when he spoke and I watched silently as he poured some shampoo in his hand and gently lathered it through my hair only breaking our gaze when necessary to see what he was doing. I enjoyed the feeling of his fingers lightly massaging my scalp as he rinsed the suds away before using those same fingers to gently comb the conditioner through. He lathered his hands with soap next and spun my body around so that my back was pressed against his chest with me rubbing up against his obvious arousal in between us like the harlot I seemed to revert to in his presence.

Starting at my right shoulder he lathered the soap down my arm all the way to my fingertips working out any tension he encountered before pulling my arm up above my head and resting my hand on the back of his neck. He repeated the process on my left arm before moving down to my breasts now that my arms were out of the way.

He must have considered them very dirty given the lengthy amount of time he'd spent getting them clean, but my only unspoken complaint would have been the fact that I was sure I would die if he didn't move his hands farther down my body. No matter how many times I wriggled my hips or arched my back and moaned his name, Eric's hands seemed to be perfectly content massaging and kneading my breasts. It felt great, but I needed *more*. I let my right hand drop down from his neck to, *ahem*, take matters into my own hands, but he quickly placed it back around his neck whispering "Patience..." in my ear which only served to make me that much more impatient.

Forever seemed to pass by when he finally, *Finally!*, lathered his hands with more soap and washed my abdomen and hips. He had to lean down some since he was so much taller than me,

but he didn't seem to mind. His hands ran back and forth from my hips to my inner thighs all the while avoiding where I wanted them the most. Just when I thought I couldn't take it any longer the fingers of his right hand delved between my thighs with two of them plunging inside of me before pulling right back out. My hips bucked up towards his hands in a failed attempt at getting them back to where they belonged and a hoarse cry at their loss left my throat, but before I could voice any further protests they slid in once more.

My hips moved of their own accord in perfect rhythm with his thrusts when I felt his tongue on the side of my neck trailing down towards my shoulder. The coil low in my abdomen wound tighter and Eric used his other hand to part my folds while angling my lower half to allow the hot water to steadily beat down from the shower head onto my engorged clit. I could feel my inner walls spasm around his fingers when he suddenly bit down where my neck and shoulder met. He didn't bite hard enough to break the skin, but the unexpected minor pain coupled with all of the other sensations he was causing threw me over the edge into orgasmic bliss.

The first syllable of crying out "Er..." had barely left my throat when he pushed my top half forward and filled me to the hilt from behind with the "...ic," barely audible as his thrusts took my orgasm to a whole new level. My hands fell forward and braced against the safety handrail that had been installed for Gran as she got older. It turned out I needed it too because I had to hold on for dear life as Eric grabbed my hips and lifted me up while he furiously pounded into me from behind with the sounds of flesh slapping against flesh echoing throughout the room. The teasing seduction was long gone with animalistic need having replaced it. All signs were pointing towards another orgasm cresting over the horizon, but the strength in my arms was giving out and my concentration faltered as I tried to avoid face planting into the tiled wall.

I heard Eric chuckle from behind and he pulled out long enough to turn me around and scoop me up in his arms before thrusting back inside with my body held in between his and the tile. My legs locked around his waist while my arms encircled his neck and my hoo-hah prepared to sing *Amazing Grace* paying homage to the deity that is Eric Northman like he'd risen from the dead on Easter Sunday. My lips devoured his in a demanding kiss and it only took three more thrusts before the church bells rang and the angels wept. I may have even shouted 'Amen!' into Eric's mouth, but I can't be sure because he had his own spiritual moment at the same time.

Eric continued to hold me upright while I regained use of my legs again and pushed the church metaphors from my mind as he languidly placed open mouthed kisses along my neck and collarbone before moving back to my lips. He was skilled in so much more than just knife fights and hotwiring cars with kissing topping the list. Could he have been trained in that too? I mentally changed his name from 'Dances with Knives' to 'Master of Orgasms'. It slowly dawned on me that multiple orgasms left me a brainless twit so I focused solely on returning the favor of washing Eric from head to toe. I may have lingered a bit while washing his award winning ass, but really, how could I not?

By the time we toweled off and climbed into bed it was after midnight and no matter how much I wanted to continue worshipping my newfound religion, as soon as Eric gathered me into his arms I was out like a light.

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## Chapter 11: Memories

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### Memories

#### EPOV

I awoke to the smell of something wonderful floating through the air. My arm reached out to where Sookie had been lying next to me only to find that I was alone in the bed with my eyes slowly opening while adjusting to the natural sunlight shining through the windows. I stretched out my arms and legs recalling the shower we'd shared the night before and I doubted I had ever been as relaxed as I was at this very moment. The memories of it flashed through my mind like a highlight reel on SportsCenter causing another part of my anatomy to stretch out (and up) as well.

That thought, along with the sounds of Sookie moving around somewhere else in the house, convinced me to get out of bed. After making a pit stop in the bathroom to brush my teeth and relieve my full bladder I walked down the hallway finding Sookie in the kitchen. The smell that I had woken up to turned out to be the pecan pie she'd said she was going to make, but what I saw was even better than what I had smelled.

Sookie was wiping down the counters that were still covered in flour, which also coincidentally covered some of her as well, while wearing an apron. And, by all appearances, it seemed she was wearing nothing BUT an apron. My legs were already stalking towards her before my brain had made the decision to move, but she turned towards the kitchen sink before seeing me enter the kitchen and I could see from behind that in actuality she *was* wearing clothes in the form of a pair of cut-off denim daisy duke shorts and a halter top. Barely clothes, but still...clothed.

Undeterred, I made a mental note to try and convince her to change her outfit before we left the house because I didn't want to have to kill someone later on for leering at her while I silently continued forward and wrapped my arms around her waist from behind earning me a high pitched shriek with Sookie yelling, "God! Eric, quit sneaking up on me!"

I buried my face into the side of her neck and inhaled her scent saying, "Still thinking of me as your God Lover? Are you interested in a morning prayer service?" I'd remembered everything that she'd said while in the throes of passion the night before, most of which I was sure she hadn't realized she was saying out loud at the time, and I'd found it to be a massive ego boost that I had affected her so profoundly. Truth be told, I was affected just as much by her.

I watched the blush rise up from her chest as she tried to keep the smile from her face while she smacked my arm saying, "Jesus didn't brag about turning water into wine so take a page from his book and shut it mister."

I laughed out loud enjoying the softness of her body wrapped up in my arms and was surprised at the feeling of contentment that washed through me. This beautiful woman cocooned in my

embrace had quickly become my whole world and suddenly I no longer cared who I was before she'd come into my life because deep down inside I knew I would be no one without her. My only reason to pursue my true identity now was to put an end to whoever was after me in order to keep her safe.

The sound of the timer buzzing next to the stove earned a sigh from both of us as Sookie pulled herself away to get the pie out of the oven as she said, "Why don't you jump in the shower while I make us some breakfast and then we can bring this over to Mr. Compton."

"You're not going to join me? Who's going to wash my back?" I attempted to pout, but I'm sure my expression was more of a predator eyeing his prey. Now that I knew of the carnal pleasures to be had with Sookie any amount of time in between our encounters was too much. If I had my way I would spend every waking moment worshipping her naked form knowing eternity wouldn't be long enough for me to get my fill of her.

I could tell by the look in her eyes that she'd considered the idea for a moment before she took a deep breath and sighed, "I'm sure you'll manage." I pouted for real then earning a giggle from Sookie as I sulked back down the hallway.

Once we were done eating, and I accidentally on purpose spilled a glass of orange juice on Sookie which made her have to change her clothes, she grabbed the pie and we left the house on foot walking hand in hand to Compton's house. It was late spring, but the weather wasn't too warm yet and I found myself happily getting lost in the sight of the sunlight dancing across Sookie's hair and face.

When we got closer to the cemetery that separated the farmhouse and Compton's land I noticed Sookie's pace slowing down until she came to a stop at one of the tombstones. I didn't realize she was crying until I heard her sniffle and looked down to see tears silently falling down her face. Looking at the tombstone I saw that it read 'Adele Stackhouse'. I let go of Sookie's hand and silently stood behind her with my arms wrapped around her waist as I kissed the top of her head.

"This is my Gran," she whispered. I noticed she was buried in between a 'Mitchell Stackhouse' and a 'Corbett Stackhouse' with 'Michelle Stackhouse' on his other side and I realized, with the exception of her brother, this was Sookie's entire family. I couldn't help but wonder if I had parents or siblings somewhere out there in the world and a part of me felt ashamed for only thinking of it now.

I kept my arms wrapped around Sookie until she wiped the tears from her eyes and grabbed my hand before smiling softly up at me and said, "She would've loved you." I highly doubted that statement given everything her granddaughter had been through since I came into her life, but I kept those doubts to myself. I also kept quiet on the other thought that popped into my head wondering if Sookie would, or could, love me too because I was pretty sure I was falling in love with her.

We started walking towards Compton's house again and I was pulled from my thoughts by Sookie when she asked, "Should I introduce you as Eric?"

"Probably not a good idea in case he still keeps in touch with his nephew." I didn't want to use any of the names on any of the documents I had and figured we should keep it simple. "How about John?" I grinned. "Like John Doe."

"Ugh...no," she replied. I gave her a questioning look and she followed up with, "My ex's name is John, even though everyone called him Quinn."

I was surprised at the minor stab of jealousy I felt hearing Sookie talking about her ex. I knew of him because she'd told me the story of how she'd ended up in St. Thomas, but now that we'd been intimate just the thought of someone else being with Sookie in that way made me want to spit nails no matter how irrational I knew that was. My only saving grace was knowing that Sookie was with me now and I had no intention of letting her go. I pushed those thoughts aside and asked, "Well then *you* come up with a name."

We stopped walking while Sookie stared up at me chewing on her bottom lip thinking it over, but seeing her like that only made me want to remove her lip from in between her teeth with my tongue. I should have known by the way her lip curled up innocently as she asked, "Umm...how about Seymour?"

"Seymour?" I asked.

"Yeah, Seymour Butts," she cackled.

"Tsk ts. Sookie, I didn't think you had it in you," I mocked scorned her unable to hide my grin.

Her eyes narrowed as she took a step closer to me and said, "Oh, I've *had it in* me Hugh."

"Hugh?"

"Mhmm...Hugh G. Rection," she broke out into another fit of giggles. Personally, I liked Hugh just fine knowing it had to do with Sookie thinking of *other* parts of me. We resumed walking towards the Compton house with each of us going back and forth with ridiculous names never really deciding on any one in particular by the time we found ourselves on his front porch. I figured I'd just go with whatever name Sookie went with at the moment when she knocked on the front door.

We heard movement inside and I felt Sookie's grip tighten on my hand when the door opened to reveal an older African American woman. She looked at the two of us with a kind smile on her face as she asked, "May I help you?"

I looked over at Sookie to see a confused expression on her face before she finally uttered, "I'm Sookie Stackhouse." She pointed behind her towards the farmhouse that could barely be seen from where we stood as she continued, "I've just recently returned home and I thought I'd make Mr. Compton a pie and bring it over so we could catch up with each other. Is he available?"

I'd turned to watch the woman as Sookie spoke and saw a flash of pity go across her face before she smiled sweetly and took a step back saying, "Won't you please come in? My name is Octavia and I'm Mr. Compton's daytime nurse."

"Oh my, is Mr. Compton alright?" Sookie asked with her southern accent the most prominent I'd heard from her yet. No matter how inappropriate the timing was at the moment, hearing her made my dick twitch just the same.

"Physically he's fine," she answered as she showed us into the living room where we saw a frail old man sitting in a wheelchair in front of the television. The three of us stood in the doorway as Octavia explained, "Mr. Compton is suffering from Alzheimer's. He has good days and bad days, but I'm afraid the disease has progressed to the point where he doesn't have many lucid moments anymore. Sometimes, first thing in the morning after he wakes he's more aware of his surroundings, but for the most part he's pretty withdrawn these days with barely any memory of who he is much less anyone else."

"That's just awful," Sookie exclaimed. She handed me the pie as she walked over and knelt down in front of the wheelchair, reaching out to place her hand on top of Compton's as she said, "Mr. Compton? It's Sookie, Sookie Stackhouse. Adele's granddaughter. Do you remember me?" She smiled softly at first, but it slowly left her face when it became apparent she wouldn't be getting a response. Octavia walked over and patted her back saying, "I'm sorry dear, but please don't take it personal."

I watched Sookie wipe the tears from the corners of her eyes as she stood and forced her lips into a smile saying, "It's just so sad." She reached out and took the pie from my hands before placing it into Octavia's saying, "I'd like you to have it and if you ever have need of anything or are just looking for a little company while you're here please feel free to give us a call."

Octavia seemed genuinely touched and said thank you as we left the Compton house without any more information on Bill Compton than we'd gone in with. Sookie had remained quiet and once we were passed the cemetery I looked down at her and asked, "Are you okay? You seemed a little shook up seeing him like that. I'm sorry, I didn't realize you were that close."

Sookie came to a stop and looked up at me with fresh unshed tears saying, "Eric, that wasn't why I was upset. I'm upset that we've hit another dead end. If he barely even knows who he is himself, he'll never be able to tell us anything about Bill Compton, or where he is. I know you're frustrated not knowing who you are or what happened to you and now I'm at a loss as to what else we can do."

I cupped each side of her face in my hands as my thoughts from earlier that morning ran through my mind once more and I finally gave voice to them saying, "Sookie, as long as you're safe I can honestly say I don't care if I never get my memories back."

She looked at me like I was speaking a foreign language so I did my best to explain my thoughts only feeling the truth of them as they fell from my lips. "We can't let our guard down, probably ever, but I imagine whatever happened that allowed them to track us to Florida from St. Thomas



never involved your name or identity. Otherwise, someone would've been waiting for us here already. I meant what I said on our way to New York. *You* feel like home to me and if you'll have me, I'd like to stay with you. We could build a life here, together. Or somewhere else if you don't want to stay, but as long as I'm with you and you're safe from harm I'll be happy."

Sookie seemed unconvinced and said as much. "But won't you feel short-changed living this half life here with me? Without your memories; not knowing who you are or where you came from? No matter how much I might want to keep you all to myself, it wouldn't be fair to you and it's something I could never ask of you."

I watched a stray tear fall from her eye and gently brushed it away with a kiss before placing a gentle kiss on her lips. Pulling back to look into her eyes I said, "But you didn't ask it of me. I'm asking it of you."

I watched the emotions flit across her face as she went over everything I'd said and I felt the tension building inside of me as if I'd just asked her to marry me and was awaiting her answer. That thought made me feel sad knowing we could never get married, legally anyways, with this hanging over our heads. How could she marry someone who didn't even know his real name? Was it fair to have asked this of her? Asking her to let me into her life even more than she already has? Building a life with me knowing we could never take that next step?

I ended up rambling out every one of my new questions in the next moment and was shocked by her reaction. Sookie smiled before pulling me down for a kiss that we quickly got lost in and when we finally broke apart from each other she said, "If you're willing to give up searching for your true identity to stay with me, I can certainly give up a futuristic piece of paper that's much too soon to even be contemplating right now anyway. It's not something I would need to be happy, but it would seem that I do need you."

My heart soared with her words and I swept her up in my arms taking her back into the house and showed her just how happy I was. Several times. And days turned into a week and weeks turned into a month and so on and so on.

Neither one of us ever truly let our guard down, but after keeping our distance from the outside world at first, we slowly allowed ourselves to be assimilated into the community. It would've been difficult not to after Tara, and eventually Jason, stopped by and once the news of Sookie's return with a 'boyfriend' in tow spread like wildfire through the little town it would've been impossible to continue laying low.

We had enough cash to sustain us for a while, especially since the house was paid for leaving only the property taxes and utilities needing to be paid, but Sookie insisted on getting a job waitressing at the local diner. It didn't take long for me to go stir crazy enough to look for something to do myself, but it was more difficult for me since I couldn't provide any documentation (that I'd want them to use anyway) on who I was. We'd opted to keep 'Eric' as my first name after Sookie spent that first week we'd kept to ourselves trying to get used to calling me Hugh (*what?*), but she could never keep it up consistently and we didn't want to get called out if she slipped up and called me Eric by accident. We took half of my Stephen Thomas

persona from New York and I became known around Bon Temps as Eric Stephens. It wasn't exactly original, but not uncommon enough to attract attention either.

It was during one afternoon while I ate lunch at the diner Sookie was working at that I met Tray Dawson. He owned a motorcycle shop in town and after striking up a conversation I learned he was looking for some help in the shop. I didn't know how good I'd be fixing motorcycles, but it turned out I was pretty good. When I told Sookie excitedly how easy it all seemed to be she didn't look as surprised as I felt. The best part was that Tray was the one to offer to pay me under the table so I didn't have to worry about providing him with a social security number.

Over the following months I was readily accepted as Bon Temps newest citizen. With the community being as small as it was it didn't take long to know who everyone was which made it easier to know when to be wary of any strangers that happened through town. We'd even felt at ease enough for both of us to go back to our natural blond hair.

Sookie spent time getting to know Octavia and had come to view her as a friend. She'd tried to find out any information she could on Compton's nephew, but Octavia had never been in contact with him, having been hired through an agency, and she'd never heard from any relatives in the time she'd been working there. According to Sookie, Octavia never asked why she was interested but said she'd let her know if he, or anyone else, ever contacted her.

I also spent time teaching Sookie, out in the woods surrounding the farmhouse, how to shoot a gun as well as ways she could use the woods to evade anyone chasing after her. I taught her to defend herself with a knife and how to disarm an attacker as well as hand to hand combat using nothing more than her body as a weapon. We made it a game of sorts anywhere we went where she would point out different items around that she could use as a weapon and how. She was a fast learner and I was impressed with her skill level. Her small size was a disadvantage with a larger opponent, but her unassuming appearance worked in her favor because no one looking at her would suspect all that she was capable of.

I even went so far as to build a hidden underground bunker of sorts not too far into the tree line that was stocked with water and other non-perishables along with several weapons that was large enough to house both of us if necessary, but my main objective was to provide a safe place for Sookie to go to if the need arose. Just the thought of her being harmed was enough to keep me up some nights.

Other nights I would wake with the still foggy nightmares of flashes of what I assumed was my former life. Some of it I thought had to be training I'd gone through and was very similar to what I'd taught Sookie. Water was a prevalent theme as well as darkness, but I was never able to hold onto much of the dreams after I woke up. I didn't tell Sookie about them though. Not because I didn't trust her, but there wasn't much to tell and I wanted to spare her the frustration they caused me knowing she would feel the same way.

We went about living normal lives together going to barbeques in the summer and we watched the Fourth of July fireworks cuddled up on a blanket down at the lake alongside half of the town. We walked hand in hand through town practically every day and I even helped build floats for

the small Labor Day Parade. Together Sookie and I hosted Thanksgiving at our house inviting her brother and his latest girlfriend along with Tara and JB and their son.

I may not have had my previous memories, but I had plenty of new ones and they all centered around Sookie. Our mutual attraction for one another never waned or faltered and only seemed to increase as time went by. I would never have enough of her and I was certain she felt the same way.

I was happy. *We* were happy. It was like we actually *were* a normal couple.

A normal couple in love. We'd both been dancing around the word with each of us hesitant to say it out loud, but there was no denying it. I knew it. She knew it. I think we were still waiting for the other shoe to drop, or armed attacker to burst into the room. I'd already bought her an engagement ring that I had hidden upstairs and intended to give her on Christmas morning. I knew we couldn't get married, at least not anytime in the foreseeable future, but I wanted her to know that I *wanted* that kind of commitment with her. As ridiculous as it sounded I wanted to mark her as mine because I was undeniably hers. It would be even *more* ridiculous to ask her without ever having told her how I truly felt about her, but I wanted to pick the perfect moment instead of blurting it out in the throes of passion.

I was surprised, but it turned out the perfect moment was on a cold Sunday afternoon in early December. We were decorating the tree we'd just come back from buying at the church parking lot and she caught me silently staring at her still awed by her beauty, both internal and external.

Sookie brushed away non-existent dirt from her face and fixed hairs on her head that were already perfectly in place as she asked, "What? Is there something wrong?"

She could've been covered in raw sewage and completely bald and it wouldn't have changed how I felt about her and before I knew it the words were leaving my lips. "I love you."

She gasped at my unexpected declaration and I watched the tears form in her eyes as she remained momentarily silent. I didn't expect her answering three words. "And that's wrong?"

I pulled her into my arms knowing my touch calmed her as much as hers calmed me and said, "Nothing could be more right," before I leaned down giving her a gentle kiss not wanting to push her into anything more in that moment. I felt her hand on my cheek as she pulled away to look in my eyes and said, "I love you too." I knew she did, I'd had absolutely no doubts, but actually *hearing* her say it was unreal. I wasn't prepared for the physical reaction my body had from the rise in my heart rate to the warmth that flooded my veins. My knees actually got weak and I found myself clutching her a little tighter.

I'd somehow known from that very first night I'd woken up next her that I wouldn't willingly let her go, but now there was no comparison. Without her in my life I would never be whole. I would let her go if she asked it of me because I could never refuse her anything, but I would never again be complete or at peace. She held the key to my happiness and it would always be hers to hold.

I wasn't sure who initiated what, but before I knew it we were well on our way to becoming naked underneath the Christmas tree. I registered that the phone was ringing, but neither one of us cared about anything more than getting the other undressed so we let the machine get it. I completely missed whoever it was and what they had said, but Sookie must have been paying attention because her actions went from frantically removing clothing to completely still.

I nipped at her neck using my own hands to pick up where she'd left off, but she grabbed my hands asking, "Eric, didn't you hear that?"

"No Lover," I sighed, "I was a little preoccupied with getting you naked. Whoever it was, they can wait." I attempted to thwart her protests with another kiss, but she couldn't be swayed.

"Eric! That was Octavia. She said Mr. Compton's nephew called saying he was in the area and he's on his way over there now!"

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## Chapter 12: Change

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### Change

#### SPOV

*He loves me!* Deep down inside I knew it before he'd ever said the words, but a part of me was scared just the same that maybe I was the only one that had fallen in love. It would have been impossible not to. Everything about him, aside from the whole *someone is out to kill him/memory loss thing*, was perfect. Or, at least, perfect for me.

Never in my life had I felt more cared for and valued than I did by Eric. I could tell by the way he looked at me that I was his whole world and while I knew that I made him happy I couldn't help but wonder if perhaps the only reason was because I *was* his whole world. Without his memories of his former life I was the one person in the world that truly knew him now. Even the friends he had made since we'd arrived in Bon Temps didn't know the *real* Eric. I was the only one and that fact caused both warmth and pity to fill my heart. I know he'd said he didn't care if his memories never returned, but I knew better.

It was hard to miss the fact that he sometimes had nightmares given that our bodies were always wrapped up in each other's every night, but he never mentioned anything about having them. I'd hoped he would one day confide in me, but in the meantime I always made sure I was extra affectionate the on days after he'd experienced them. And more than once in our quiet times together I'd see him with a detached yet frustrated stare knowing he was trying to remember something, anything, and in those moments I would give or do anything to be able to give him his memories back.

He'd seemed obsessed in the beginning when he started training me on how to protect myself. I knew the thought of me getting hurt because of him wasn't something he would willingly let

happen, but it was out of his control much like everything else he'd had to deal with since he awoke with no memories. His only option, *our* only option, was to do whatever we could to prepare ourselves in every way possible and it wasn't something either one of us took lightly.

I had always considered myself relatively physically fit and having grown up Jason Stackhouse's sister I felt I could hold my own if push came to shove. But now I felt not only strong, but powerful. Eric's training changed my thought processes and reactions which only made me wonder just what exactly he'd gone through in his other life to be capable of everything that seemed second nature to him. In the months that we'd spent together I sometimes found it hard to reconcile the sweet, gentle, passionate man I had fallen in love with and the lethal killer I knew he could be. They were two very different sides of Eric Northman, but I loved them both knowing it was the sum of both parts that made him whole.

Once those three little words, or four in my case, were finally spoken I felt a tension leave my body that I hadn't known existed. What insecurities I'd been holding onto left me in that moment having been replaced with complete and utter certainty that Eric was who I was meant to be with. Every choice I'd made, no matter how questionable they'd seemed at the time, were the right ones to make because they'd led me to this moment in time embraced in the arms of the man I loved and who loved me back. A small part of me wished that we could one day take the next step in our relationship and perhaps get married, but if we never had more than what we had right now for the rest of our days I knew I would die happy and content without any regrets.

Speaking of happy, I could *feel* Eric's *happiness* pressing against my inner thigh. I might even venture to say he was downright ecstatic. We'd been together for seven months now and I still couldn't get enough of him. We'd had sex in every room of the house and at more than a few locations outside the house, but it hadn't gotten old. We knew what drove each other wild and put our knowledge to good use daily, but while we were now very familiar with one another it was somehow still very new each and every time. There was always something new I would discover about him in those intimate moments whether it was a look he would give me or a sound he would make that would make my toes curl. I was always momentarily shocked at his size every time he entered my body and given the grunts and groans that always left Eric's lips I would guess he felt the same.

We were well on our way to happy naked times under the Christmas tree when I heard the phone ring. I'd been in sexual relationships in the past where I'd sometimes mentally drift to other things in the moment like whether or not I had to do laundry or making a mental shopping list, but that never happened with Eric. His seemingly inherent skill in all things extended to his undeniably pure sexual prowess as well and it was only because we had barely started that I'd been able to register the message Octavia was leaving on our answering machine. My entire body tensed as I realized what she'd said, but I knew by the way Eric was acting he was singularly focused on getting our clothes off.

I finally stilled his hands saying, "Eric, didn't you hear that?" I already knew the answer but waited for his response anyway.

"No Lover, I was a little preoccupied with getting you naked. Whoever it was, they can wait." He tried to kiss me into submission, which I'll admit that my track record proves that tactic has worked for him well in the past, but I couldn't be swayed now. Not when it came to finally having the opportunity to maybe learn *something* about his past.

I finally pulled back enough to whisper yell, "Eric! That was Octavia. She said Mr. Compton's nephew called saying he was in the area and he's on his way over there now!" I can only guess it was our state of near nakedness that had me whisper yelling even though there was no one anywhere nearby that could've heard me screaming bloody murder. Kind of like how I felt the need to whisper whenever I was in a bookstore as if I were in the library. Once Eric figured that out he enjoyed yelling for me from across the store just to make me cringe. He finally stopped when I yelled back that I was looking at books for him on how to please a woman. I paid for that comment later, but it was worth it.

Eric's hands finally stopped and for the longest moment we silently stared at each other. I had a feeling that everything was about to change, but whether or not it was for the better I had no idea. I could tell he was struggling with something internally and I had a sneaking suspicion it was his fear of me getting hurt coupled with his desire to keep me happy in the little world that we'd created together that kept him from leaping off of the floor and running across the cemetery. I didn't want him to have to struggle with this on my account. I could never, would never keep him from doing whatever needed to be done to find the truth.

Sighing, he brushed a strand of hair away from my face and said, "I meant what I said before Sookie, we can just stay here and be happy, together."

I could tell by the tone of his voice that it pained him to say it and I knew I had to be strong for him no matter how much I wanted to hide him away in the bunker he'd built until the coast was clear. My conscience would never allow it anyway so I sucked it up and said, "We'll still be together, no matter what." I believed what I'd said with every fiber of my being and I reached up to cup his face in the palm of my hand while he closed his eyes leaning into it causing me to reign in the sudden urge to cry. Instead I waited for his eyes to open and confessed, "I love you and no matter what we find out that will never change."

"I love you too," he whispered as he leaned down to give me a gentle but passionate kiss.

A tear escaped from my eye as a bad feeling started to grow in the pit of my stomach, but I attributed it to the unknown 'William/Bill Compton' that we were about to finally be able to put a face with the name. I wiped away the evidence of it before Eric could see and when he pulled back I forced myself to say, "We should probably get going before we miss him."

Eric's face remained as still as a stone, but there was an entire storm brewing behind his eyes. He looked more lost in that moment than I'd ever seen before, even when he first woke up with no memories, and I would've given anything to have been able to read his mind just then. Although the urge to ask him what he was thinking was rapidly becoming a losing battle, I stayed quiet knowing he needed the time to work through whatever he was feeling. The look of determination

had just come into his eyes when he said, "You're right, we should probably get going before we miss him."

Only instead of standing up Eric's lips crashed onto mine demanding I yield to him which I readily did. It was unexpected, but I quickly became consumed with my need for him. The change lingering on the horizon was palpable, like a living entity all on its own and it seemed that both of us needed to reaffirm what was between us before we went in search of what would become of us. What had started out as a gentle and playful romp under the Christmas tree after admitting our true feelings for one another was now a forceful, if not desperate, claiming of each other. He was *mine* and no one would harm him no matter the cost and I had no doubt that he felt the exact same way.

Since our clothes were already halfway off it only took a few seconds to kick our pants the rest of the way down our bodies and without bothering to remove our shirts Eric was inside of me in one powerful thrust. I cried out in relief not knowing just how incomplete I'd felt only seconds before. He was truly my other half and I knew that would never change.

Our pace was fast and hard and I was sure there would be bruises left on my hips from where Eric's fingertips gripped my skin, but I didn't care. I wanted the bruises because they would show that I was his in every way.

I found out Eric's thoughts were in line with mine when he broke our kiss growling out, "Fuck Sookie, you're mine. Say it! No matter what! Say it!"

"I'm yours," I gasped out. "No matter what, I'm yours. Aahh...Eric..I love you." I barely got the words out as my orgasm washed over me with my inner muscles clamping down on Eric pulling his own orgasm from him. His body covered mine like my very own shield and his face was buried in the side of my neck so I could both feel and hear his breathing and heart rate gradually slow down.

After a minute or two he pulled back and looked me in the eyes saying, "I love you too Sookie." It took everything I had not to burst into tears seeing the sincerity in his eyes, but I knew now wasn't the time for that. I needed to be strong for him knowing we were about to go searching for answers we might not want to find.

We reluctantly stood up and fixed our clothing and after Eric grabbed his gun and a couple of daggers, tucking them into his pants, we stepped out onto the porch and headed towards Mr. Compton's house on foot across the cemetery. We stopped next to Gran's grave and could see that it was still only Octavia's car in the driveway so he hadn't arrived yet. We spent the time while waiting for him trying to come up with several different plans on trying to get some information. In my opinion the best one had me knocking on the door *alone* under the guise of coming to visit with Octavia and striking up a conversation with Bill. Eric could watch from the tree line and would be able to see him perfectly well in either the doorway or the living room through one of the windows if we happened to speak in there.

Eric thought it was too dangerous, but it wasn't like *he* could go up to him to make small talk. No matter what, we had already decided that we would be following him when he left the house knowing we'd never get another opportunity like this again. We kept a bag packed with clothing, cash and weapons that was ready to go at all times (another one of Eric's handy but weird quirks) so we'd only have to run back across the field and grab the bag and the car to be ready to go.

We were still disagreeing on whether or not I should try and speak to Bill when the sight of headlights coming down Compton's driveway had us both quieting. The moon was nothing more than a sliver in the sky, but we were still able to move with relative ease staying under the cover of the trees with all of Eric's nighttime training he'd insisted I go through coming into play. When the car came to a stop in front of the house we came to a stop as well.

We silently watched as the door opened and a man in a suit stepped out of the car. The outdoor lights illuminating the front of the house made it easy to see him and I recognized him as the pompous ass I'd met years earlier. He looked basically the same with his brown hair and stiff facial features although now it looked as though he'd aged twenty years instead of the six or seven that had actually passed with him sporting patches of premature graying at his temples and harsh lines across his forehead. He also grew ridiculously large sideburns that made him appear even older.

I held my breath as Bill stood still seeming to take in his surroundings before walking towards the passenger side door, removing his suit jacket, and placing it on the passenger seat. While the door was open his briefcase could clearly be seen sitting on the passenger floorboard. The chime and flashing of his headlights signaled the doors had been locked and the alarm engaged before he climbed the steps finding Octavia waiting for him with the front door open. After introductions were made Bill stepped inside and the door was closed.

I turned towards Eric and whispered, "Do you think you can get inside of his car without setting off the alarm?"

His reply was a cocked eyebrow and a look saying, '*What do you think?*' before saying, "We have no idea of how long he'll be inside so it's not a good idea."

"If I went in there and distracted him for a little bit you'd have more time," I replied a little irritated.

"I won't be able to get to you right away if he tries anything," he replied just as irritated.

"What do you think he's gonna do, drain all of the blood from my body with Octavia right there? If he knew who I was and that you were here with me, do you really think he'd be taking the time to visit his sick uncle?" I knew Eric was just being overprotective, but sometimes I didn't know if I wanted to kiss him or smack him upside the back of his head.

His silence either meant he was considering my last statement or he was thinking about smacking *me* upside the head, but I knew he relented when his shoulders sagged and he pulled a



sheathed dagger from his pants pocket and handed it to me saying, "Try to stay more than arm's length from him and keep your eyes on him at *all times*. I mean it Sookie."

I could see how difficult it was for him to agree and I pulled him down placing a kiss on his lips saying, "I will."

The look of determination appeared on his face again before saying, "I won't need more than five minutes tops, but if it looks like he's onto you then I want you to get out of there immediately."

"Got it. Five minutes and if it looks like he's about to go apeshit I should run like the girl that I am." My attempt at injecting a little bit of levity into the situation went over like a lead balloon so I hid the dagger in my waistband with a sigh and turned towards the house, but before I could take one step Eric pulled me back into his arms and kissed me like he was saying farewell before going off to war.

It scared me.

Once he pulled back and I got my wits about me again I made my way towards the house and approached the front door. I took a deep breath and tried to put on an innocent neighborly expression, but I barely had it in place when the door opened before I could knock.

Bill stood there staring at me while I firmly affixed my 'Crazy Sookie' smile on my face that automatically happened whenever I was nervous with neither one of us saying a word. He finally broke the silence asking, "May I help you?"

His voice was speaking to me, but his eyes were speaking to my breasts. *Pig*, I thought, but I decided to use it to my advantage, changing my original plan from being the innocent neighbor to the neighbor with questionable morals, and leaned to one side while twirling my hair around my finger. I infused my voice with as much flirtiness as I could muster and said, "Hi! I was just coming to visit with Octavia." I swallowed hard over what I was about to do and did my best to eyefuck him without gagging while asking, "Haven't we met before?"

I swear, I could *feel* Eric's eyes boring into the back of my head, but I pushed the feeling away so I could concentrate on the man in front of me. *Lord help me.*

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## Chapter 13: Feelings

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### Feelings

#### EPOV

I stood there watching Sookie flirting with Compton and had to swallow the growl building in my chest. I knew it was all an act on her part, but it was definitely being well received by him and the sight of his eyes travelling across her form made my hands clench into fists. I attempted

to calm my caveman instincts as they continued to make small talk in the doorway and took a moment to replay the day's events in my mind.

I'd finally said it, that I loved her, and by some small miracle she loved me too. I didn't really have any doubts that she did, but hearing her say the words and seeing the truth of them in her eyes made my heart skip a beat. We should be celebrating right now. I'd meant it when I told her that I didn't care if my memories never returned. We'd built a wonderful life together over the previous seven months and there wasn't a single thing that I could think of that I might be missing out on if we never left Bon Temps again.

I wanted to argue with her; to refuse to seek out Compton and everything that single action would bring with it because I loved our life. I didn't want to risk everything changing because I had everything I wanted and needed. I had Sookie. But after getting to know her over the previous seven months one of her strongest traits was her stubborn streak. I could tell by the look in her eyes that she wasn't going to back down so I resigned myself to following through.

My full attention was brought back to the present when I heard Compton invite Sookie inside of the house and I stayed in the tree line until I could see both of them standing alongside Octavia in the living room. Once they all took a seat I knew I'd have some time to go through his car so I darted through the shadows of the yard to the driveway and quickly disengaged the alarm before popping the lock on the passenger door.

Once it was open I turned off the interior light and quickly opened the briefcase he'd left sitting on the floorboard. There were a couple of flash drives inside along with receipts for hotels and the like indicating he'd most recently stayed in Las Vegas having checked out that morning. But what I saw next made my mouth gape open.

There was a file of nothing but *me*. My mind memorized everything that my eyes flew across in an effort to read as much as I could while listening for signs that anyone was about to open the door. A picture of me was affixed in the top left corner of the first page, the same one that had been used in my passports, with my name underneath as well as several aliases including the ones listed on the passports as well as a few others. It seemed to be a fact sheet of me, or the person I had been prior to losing my memories.

Apparently I worked for *The Lex Talionis Alliance*, country of origin – United States, and had been recruited almost eight years earlier. I knew *lex talionis* was Latin for the law of retaliation, or eye for an eye, so it only gave credibility to my earlier notions that I had been a hit man, albeit a government sanctioned one. A list of my skills, both combat and linguistic, was listed bullet style at the top of the page, but my attention was drawn to the bottom.

My last known whereabouts started with the time I was in Saint Thomas back in May. I'd been sent there to assassinate Felipe de Castro, which Sookie and I had already guessed at the time, but everything after that was pure fabrication. The synopsis read:

*Northman is currently underground and believed to be subversively employed by Felipe de Castro. His credited kills include: Samuel Merlotte – Civilian, May 15th; Thomas Mickens –*

*Civilian, May 16th; Kazuhiro Chow – LTA Japan, May 18th; Appius Ocella – LTA Italy, Aug 3rd; Sean Clancy – LTA Ireland, Nov 4th. Northman's knowledge of the Alliance is believed to have led to the deaths of undercover operatives: Charles Twining- LTA UK, May 16th; Jessica Hamby – LTA US, May 16th. Threat remains high. Orders are shoot to kill on sight.*

My mind was whirling with everything before me, but I continued to flip through the remaining pages and felt only relief when I saw Sookie's name wasn't mentioned anywhere. Nothing I read jogged my memory however it did shed some light on my life before Sookie, but other than Chow I knew I had nothing to do with the deaths listed. It didn't make any sense to me other than I was being framed. The question was by whom? I returned the file to the briefcase and glanced at an e-ticket indicating Compton would be flying out of Shreveport the next morning en route to Washington D.C. so I had no idea if he would plan on staying here or leaving for Shreveport tonight since it was a relatively short drive from Bon Temps.

I patted down the pockets of his jacket and was shocked to find his cell phone in one of the pockets. I put everything back the way I'd found it and quietly shut the door before glancing through the front window. Sookie and Compton were still sitting in the living room talking with Octavia pouring everyone a cup of coffee so I knew I still had some time to spare. I figured Sookie was safe for now since she wasn't alone with Compton, so I sprinted back to the farmhouse and darted inside to grab a couple of things I'd picked up a few months earlier.

Sookie and I had gone shopping in Shreveport over the summer and we came across a spyware shop. I picked up a few items including a SIM card duplicator, which was what I wanted now, as well as a device that would allow me to then listen into all of his incoming and outgoing calls in real time. Once I had it and my laptop I sprinted back to Compton's house and after making sure they were all still seated in the living room I quickly went back to his car and retrieved his phone. After copying his SIM card I quickly copied all of the files on his flash drives onto my laptop and put everything back before locking the car and re-engaging the alarm.

It seemed like hours had passed since Sookie first went inside, but in actuality it was less than 30 minutes. I went back into the tree line to wait for her and breathed a sigh of relief when she walked out the front door 10 minutes later. Shadowing her every step, I remained under the cover of the trees, while she walked towards the farmhouse and as soon as we were out of sight of the Compton residence I came up to walk beside her earning me a startled jump from Sookie.

"Jesus! You scared me!" she whisper yelled making me chuckle and easing the tension I'd been feeling since reading my file.

"Sorry Lover. So what did he have to say?" I wanted to find out what she managed to learn first in case we needed to be ready to follow Compton soon while still trying to process everything I'd discovered which I wasn't ready to share just yet.

"Well for one, he's a pig. He talked to my chest the entire time even with Octavia right there! And while she never said a word, you can be rest assured that you have a fan in her because she was giving me the stink eye whenever I flirted with him. I just hope that I can explain it to her one day so she doesn't hate me for it."

"So, he's a pig and she's a fan. Anything else?" I hadn't expected him to just open right up to her, but she'd been in there for a while. Were they flirting *the whole time*? I felt my fists clench again just thinking about it.

"He's an all around asshole. He was there to tell Octavia that he plans on moving poor Mr. Compton into a home in Monroe and sell off the house so he *'doesn't have to deal with the hassle'* anymore since he's his last surviving relative. Jessie Compton has lived in that house literally from the time he was born! You'd think he'd let him die there instead of some unfamiliar sterile room."

She was really getting worked up over it all, but knowing how much she'd loved her Gran I figured the whole concept of shipping away your elders was repulsive to her so I took her hand in mine and rubbed small circles on her palm trying to soothe her. She physically shook herself before continuing, "He was there to get a look at the house to have an idea of what it's worth before heading out to Shreveport tonight. The only thing he said about himself, when I asked, was that he was a business manager and that he travelled a lot, but I didn't want to dig too deep. He didn't even ask Octavia how Mr. Compton was doing. I don't know what he's got going on after that because I hightailed it out of there when he started making suggestions that I *join* him. OW!"

I didn't realize I'd squeezed her hand tightly when she'd said he wanted her to *join* him and I immediately relaxed my grip. "Sorry," I mumbled.

"What about you? Did you find anything in the car?" she asked.

"Did he say when he was leaving for Shreveport?" I still wasn't sure how Sookie was going to react when I told her everything I'd found out since I didn't know what to think about it all myself.

I could feel her staring at me, but I kept my eyes ahead of us and heard her say, "Probably soon. He'd told Octavia that he would be out of her hair as soon as he took a look around the house to see if there was anything he wanted to keep. Jerk."

"Well then we should hurry up." We were walking up the porch steps by then and we both threw what we might need into a duffle bag and grabbed the one we kept on hand with the cash and weapons inside. I made sure we had the device to listen in on his phone calls and I brought everything out to the car while Sookie locked up. I stared up at the house I'd come to see as my home feeling as though it might be the last time I ever set eyes on it. I had a really bad feeling that something profound was going to happen once we left here tonight and hoped I was wrong. Somehow I didn't think I was.

I set up the cloned SIM card in the device to listen to all of Compton's phone calls and after Sookie got in the car we parked near the end of the driveway with the lights off. A few minutes later Compton's car drove by headed towards the interstate and I pulled out behind him a few moments after that. I stayed back far enough that he shouldn't have suspected anything and once we got on the highway we were able to blend in with the rest of the traffic.

"So Mr. Change-the-subject, what *did* you find in his car?" Sookie asked breaking the silence.

How was I going to tell her that I was an assassin? It was one thing to speculate, but to have confirmation of it was something else entirely. Would she think any less of me? I opened my mouth to just blurt it all out when the SIM card device lit up indicating Bill was getting a call. I turned up the volume so we could listen in.

"*Compton.*"

"*I know...I called you,*" said the snarky female on the other line.

"*Pamela, what can I do for you?*"

"*That's Ms. De Beaufort to you. And you can tell me why you have my people chasing Northman's ghost instead of trailing de Castro. We had credible information that Victor Madden would be rising up from the bowels of Hell for the first time in over a year but we've got no operatives within 500 miles of the target area in New Orleans.*"

I risked a glance at Sookie when my name came through the speaker and saw her eyes were wide with fear. I'd definitely have to tell her everything I found out once the call ended.

"*Ms. De Beaufort,*" he spat out, "*I personally checked out the tip in New Orleans and it was a bust. You'll have my full report on your desk when I return to Washington tomorrow.*"

"*And why am I just now learning of your trip? As your superior, in EVERY way, don't you think it would be wise to inform me of your whereabouts? You're not an operative Mr. Compton and YOU work for ME. You need to remember that or the next thing you'll know I'll have you relocated to Elmendorf AFB Alaska where you'll spend your remaining years watching moose fuck and driving dog sleds. Maybe you can move next door to Sarah Palin and see Russia from your house!*"

We could hear Compton take a deep breath, undoubtedly biting back his initial response, before replying, "*I was merely taking the initiative to be proactive. I felt the information on Madden was negligible at best and believe Northman should remain our top priority.*"

"*I'm well aware of your stance where Northman is concerned. Where are you now?*"

He hesitated before replying, "*New Orleans.*"

A lie since we were just about at the exit for Shreveport and I hoped it would lead to something we could use.

"*Make sure you see me as soon as you're back in the office. We need to come to an understanding of EXACTLY what your role is.*"

She hung up and the device fell silent once the call was disconnected. We remained silent in our own thoughts before Sookie asked, "Why are they looking for you? I can tell that you found *something* so tell me."

I sighed before confessing to everything I'd come across in the car. She listened to it all without interrupting with the exception of a hitch in her breath when she learned that Sam was dead and once I was done she remained silent until the anxiousness got to be too much for me to bear and I asked, "What are you thinking?" *Thinking what a huge mistake you made in saving me? Thinking you've spent the last seven months living with a killer? Thinking you wished I'd never come into your life? Thinking you could never love someone like me? Thinking maybe you'd be better off without me?* I was starting to wonder about that last one myself.

"I think it's all a bunch of hooley!" was her reply.

I wanted to smile at her turn of phrase, but I couldn't find it within myself to do so given our topic of conversation. "I'm not too sure about that," I reasoned. "It explains how I can do everything that I can."

"Maybe, but you couldn't have killed those people. I was with you the whole time. Sam and Tommy were alive when we left them so I *know* they're wrong. Someone is trying to frame you, but why? For what? You've been 'a ghost' for over seven months and they're still actively seeking you out. Someone is still out there murdering people and blaming you. *Those* are the questions we need answered."

I was stunned by her acceptance of it all, but then I remembered how she lacked any self preservation skills where I was concerned. Everything she'd had to do or deal with from the moment she found me floating in the ocean until we reached Bon Temps should have had her running in the opposite direction, but instead it only made her cling more tightly to my side. I was and am grateful that she did, but a part of me worried that she could end up being seriously hurt because of me. I couldn't bring myself to go any farther down that train of thought knowing I couldn't imagine a world without Sookie in it.

I noticed Compton's car signaling to take the exit for Shreveport and as I started to move over into the right lane, several car lengths behind him, the SIM card device became active again with the light indicating he was making an outgoing call.

"Yes." The greeting was tersely made by a male.

"*I'm taking the Shreveport exit now,*" said Compton.

The call was disconnected with nothing further said and I could feel the adrenaline starting to course through my body instinctually in preparation for what was to come.

We followed Compton through the city to a nondescript building in an industrial park full of warehouses. It seemed deserted at this time of night, but I was sure he was meeting someone

here so I parked the car far enough away from him to not be noticed but where I could still see him exit the car and enter the building in front of him.

I quickly armed myself with a 9mm Beretta holstered at my back and a dagger sheathed on each of my ankles before turning to Sookie and said, "I'm going to follow him, but I want you to stay in the car." The look on her face showed she was about to gear up for an argument so I silenced her with a kiss before continuing, "Please Sookie. I need to be able to focus in there and I can't do it if I'm worried about you. We don't have time to argue about it."

She crossed her arms over her chest and huffed out saying, "Fine. But promise me that you'll be careful."

I breathed a sigh of relief and kissed her again saying, "I promise," and then I ducked out of the car before she could change her mind.

I stayed in the shadows listening for signs of anyone nearby as I made my way towards the warehouse. Hearing none I slid inside of the door Compton had entered and made my way down a darkened hallway. The building appeared to be abandoned with empty beer cans and graffiti littering the floors and walls. I could hear a muffled conversation taking place ahead of me and silently rounded the corner where another darkened hallway awaited me. There were four doors on either side and all of them were open with the exception of the last door on the right. It was closed and the light from inside of the room spilled out underneath the door illuminating the hallway floor in front of where an emergency exit sat at the very end.

I quickly swept through each of the open rooms, checking for others, while making my way towards the end of the hall. Crouching outside of the closed door, I listened in to their conversation.

*"She needs to be handled. She's not going to let go of the idea that you're still alive, nor is she going to drop everything to find Northman because she's never really bought into the idea that he's a traitor. I only hope that your men find him first or else everything is going to unravel. Quickly."*

I recognized the speaker to be Compton and I could only assume that he was talking about the Pamela de Beaufort woman he'd spoken to earlier on the phone. I liked her without even knowing her because she obviously disliked Compton just as much as me.

*"Are you suggesting we kill the Deputy Director of the Lex Talionis Alliance?"* came the reply. I was sure it was the same man he'd called a few moments earlier.

*"Are you AFRAID Victor? I doubt Felipe would appreciate your cowardice and with that bitch out of the way I'll be next in line to take the position. Nothing could stop us then."*

Victor Madden, last known whereabouts residing in the bowels of Hell. I assumed Compton and Madden were both working for de Castro and I made a mental note to pull Pamela de Beaufort's contact information from my copied SIM card to somehow let her know what I'd learned.

I'd guessed Madden didn't like being called a coward because I heard the distinct sound of what I assumed was a punch to the gut due to the wheezing for air I could hear coming from the room. The sound of it muffled the extra few seconds I would have needed to hear the approach coming from outside of the building and was caught by surprise when the emergency exit door opened as what must have been hired muscle came walking through the door. As soon as he saw me he lunged forward in an attempt to grab me, but I was quicker and spun just out of his reach while landing a kick to his stomach which caused him to fall backwards through the door and into the room with Compton and Madden as splintered wood flew in every direction.

I grabbed my gun from its holster and trained it on the three men inside as I came into the room, turning so my back wouldn't be exposed to the open hallway while noting there was another door on the back wall but no windows.

"Northman!" Compton sneered. "How nice of you to come to us. It'll make our jobs a lot easier."

"I don't see how since I'm the one holding the gun," I replied. Now that I was seeing him up close, he *did* seem familiar and my mind started racing trying to make the connection.

The man that had to be Victor Madden shook his head in disgust at my attacker as he gingerly stood up and gave a calculated look towards the open door. I thought he might have been thinking of bolting from the room when I heard footsteps coming down the hallway, so I backed further into the corner of the room to keep the three of them and the doorway in my line of sight. My heart dropped in the next second as I heard, "*Let me go!*"

Sookie.

She appeared in the doorway with a gun pointed at her temple held onto by a man twice her size. He bore a striking resemblance to the other hired hand so I assumed they were brothers and I figured them to be German when he opened his mouth and said, "Found her outside."

I watched Compton openly leer at her from the corner of my eye as he said, "Why Miss Stackhouse, what a surprise seeing you here. Did you come all the way from Bon Temps just for me?"

Sookie's eyes met mine so I could see the tears welling inside of them and my heart broke with her silent apology. But this was entirely my fault. If only I'd left her at home or sent her away once we got back to the States she wouldn't be in this position.

Compton noticed our silent exchange and drew the correct conclusion when he said, "You two are *together?*" The prick smiled and continued, "Well isn't that *interesting*. Tell me Northman; just how tight is that little piece of southern ass?"

My gun and glare trained on him instantly and he laughed saying, "Maybe I'll just have to see for myself. Now drop your gun or else your little white trash honey gets her brains blown away."



I had no doubt that he meant what he said. I could easily kill him, or the one holding Sookie, but not before he could possibly get a shot off. The risk was too high and I heard Sookie say, "Eric, no!" as I dropped my gun to the floor.

"Kick it towards me," Compton demanded. I complied and his eyes never left me as he bent over to pick it up while I ran through different scenarios in my mind to get us out of here.

Sookie's captor lowered his gun and pushed her further into the room and stood off to her side while Compton smiled, lifting my gun towards Sookie as he said, "I lied."

Everything slowed down as I saw his finger squeeze the trigger and I leapt towards Sookie to shield her from the oncoming bullet. I saw her eyes grow wide. I heard the sound of the gunshot. I felt the bullet burn a path across my temple and everything went black.

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## Chapter 14: Ghost

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### Ghost

#### SPOV

I could still feel the sensation of Eric's lips on mine as I watched him darting from shadow to shadow across the parking lot towards the warehouse. If I hadn't known he was there I would've never seen him. He really was like a ghost and a part of me wondered if their description of him as such was due to his ability to disappear before their eyes.

My stomach was in knots with worry and when I saw him slip inside through the same door Bill Compton had used I thought my heart would pound out of my chest. My hand was resting on the door handle as I hemmed and hawed for all of three seconds before getting out of the car and following in Eric's footsteps. I paused everywhere he had paused; I darted exactly where he had darted and I'd thought I had done a pretty good job of recreating his path. That is until I was surprised and grabbed from behind when I stopped at the door to listen in before opening it.

I turned to see a behemoth sized man, or perhaps he was a woolly mammoth. I'd thought they were extinct but that guy was bigger than my first car! I tried to pull free from his grasp and managed to kick him in his shins once or twice, but I was sure my actions had physically hurt me more than him since his only reaction was a chuckle followed by, "Feisty."

"I'll give you feisty," I spat out and used his freakish size (he really was built like a mountain) to my advantage. He was holding onto me by my elbow, but I had enough room to use his grip like an anchor as I literally climbed his body with my feet and landed a kick to his jaw. My body was now practically upside down and I'd fully expected to be dropped on my head since I couldn't continue my forward momentum without possibly dislocating my arm, but I figured that was better than being caught. It turned out the only thing I accomplished was making him grin, showcasing his bloody teeth, before he wrangled me upright again.

Once I had my feet underneath me he opened the door and shoved me down the hallway before turning down another one. I could see the light spilling from the room at the end and as we got closer I could hear Eric's voice saying, "I don't see how since I'm the one holding the gun."

I couldn't believe how stupid I'd been. He told me, practically begged me to stay in the car so he wouldn't have to worry about me. He needed to focus and from the sounds of it he had the upper hand. Now, because of my stupidity, it could all fall apart. I desperately wanted to get away to spare him the trouble my presence was sure to cause and whisper yelled, "Let me go!"

He just snorted and shoved me into the open doorway. My eyes swept the room until I found Eric staring back at me with a pained expression on his face and it was only then that I felt the cold metal of a gun barrel pressed against my temple. My comic relief audience of one spoke up behind me saying, "Found her outside."

My gaze was broken from Eric's as I heard Bill Compton say, "Why Miss Stackhouse, what a surprise seeing you here. Did you come all the way from Bon Temps just for me?"

My mind went back and forth from wanting to tell him I was sure having sex with a cheese grater would be more pleasurable than him, to wanting to beg Eric's forgiveness for messing up everything. I wouldn't blame him if he never forgave me. Thankfully, I was able to remain silent.

I watched Bill's eyes go back and forth from me to Eric when he finally said, "You two are *together?*"

*Give the man a prize. A Darwin Award would suffice.*

"Well isn't that *interesting*. Tell me Northman; just how tight is that little piece of southern ass?"

The movement of Eric whipping his gun around to point directly at Bill curbed the retort that was on the tip of my tongue, I *am* a lady after all, and I could practically see the steam coming from Eric's ears. This would end very poorly for Bill Compton if Eric got his way.

"Maybe I'll just have to see for myself. Now drop your gun or else your little white trash honey gets her brains blown away."

Apparently Compton didn't know who he was dealing with. Eric would *never* give away our only advantage. I was a little worried that Bill might follow through and I gave myself a quick mental pep talk to be ready for anything. I'd go down fighting tooth and nail, that's for sure.

But my mental pep talk *didn't* prepare me to see Eric lowering his gun to the floor and, "Eric, no!" left my lips without thought. How could he? Why would he?

Bill looked triumphant as he said, "Kick it towards me," and I watched Eric do just that. My heart sank, completely crestfallen, and Gigantor pushed me further into the room taking the gun away from my head as he came to stand next to me.

I watched Bill pick up the gun with a sinister smile as he brought it up to point directly at me. My adrenaline, which had waned while we stood there, was back in full force and with the fuzzy white noise that suddenly filled my ears I barely heard him say, "I lied."

I started to try and pull myself free to dive towards the floor as the sound of the gunshot exploded inside of the room when suddenly Eric was in front of me; on top of me. He'd leapt in front of me to save me from the bullet and I don't know if it was the weight of his body or because Gigantor had been surprised, but he'd let go of my arm and we both fell to the floor.

Because I had been crouched forward when Eric landed on me, my head ended up next to his feet and I reached under the hem of each of his pant legs, grabbing the daggers I'd watched him strap on in the car, and threw one right into Bill Compton's chest without thought before rolling onto my back and throwing the other one into Gigantor's neck. *How's that for feisty?*

I watched him crumple to the floor clutching the knife lodged in his throat before turning to see Eric lying face down, still halfway on top of me, with a pool of blood forming at a rapid rate around his head. As I scrambled to get out from underneath him knowing I still had to deal with the other two I heard another gunshot and looked up to see three new people had come into the room, each of them holding a gun and I heard the sound of the bullet hitting its target behind me.

I turned to see what must have been Gigantor's brother, given their uncanny resemblance to one another, falling backwards behind me with a gun clutched in his hand. The bullet fired from one of the other three had entered the center of his forehead and he was dead before he hit the floor.

I looked around desperately searching for another weapon, but they were all too far away so I covered Eric's body with my own and held onto him tightly awaiting my own death. "I love you," I whispered in his ear hoping against hope that he'd somehow hear me in his unconscious state.

"Go! He can't be far," I heard a woman's voice say. She sounded familiar and I looked up to see one woman, with darker features making me think she was perhaps from India, run through the door at the back of the room. The man was tall and broad shouldered wearing all black, and his features were darker as well, but I thought him to be from the Middle East. The woman who seemed to be in charge looked more like a well-to-do housewife with her long straight blond hair held back from her face with a thin headband and her pale pink twinset and white linen pants. Well, a well-to-do housewife holding a gun.

She knelt down by Eric's head, ruining her pants, and checked the wound at his temple which was still pouring out blood. She pulled a handkerchief out of her pocket holding it out to me while saying, "Hold this on his head and apply pressure."

I did as she ordered while I watched them move throughout the room checking the others. "Compton is dead," the man said with a slight accent in his voice. I looked over and sure enough, the knife I had thrown entered Bill's chest right where his heart would be and his chest was completely covered in his blood.

"Damn it," the blond woman said and I worried that she was on Bill's side, but there was nothing I could do to save us now. I relaxed a little when she said, "I wanted to be the one to kill him."

Gigantor moaned and the Middle Eastern man walked over to him to check on his wound. The knife was still stuck in his throat, but the wound wasn't bleeding much and I could see that he still seemed to be able to breathe and his eyes were open and aware.

The Middle Eastern man chuckled over him asking, "How does it feel to be bested by a little southern flower Siegbert?"

Gigantor's eyes narrowed and I was pretty sure he choked out the word, "Feisty," before he gave up trying to speak at all. He didn't seem to be amused by me any longer.

I looked around noticing for the first time that the man who had been standing near Bill when I first came into the room was gone. I guessed that was who they were talking about going after since I had no idea who they all were except for Eric and Bill.

The blond stood in front of me staring down with a hard look on her face as if she was trying to solve some puzzle before asking, "Who are you?"

"Who are YOU?" I said before my brain could filter down to my mouth watch my tone since they were the ones holding the guns. I braced myself for her wrath, but after a moment the corners of her mouth twitched upwards and her eyes took on a more amused expression as she said, "Feisty indeed. I'm Pamela de Beaufort," she pointed at Eric's still unconscious body and continued, "his boss, but you can call me Pam."

Answers. Could it be we were finally going to get some answers? I had a million of them flood my brain, but my primary concern was Eric so I said, "We need to get him to a hospital."

I'd seen that the bullet had just grazed the side of his head, but head wounds tended to bleed a lot and the fact that he was still unconscious wasn't helping me to calm down any.

"No, no hospitals," she replied. I was about to protest when she held her hand up and said, "There's a safe house not far from here. We have a doctor on retainer that will come and tend to him."

I wasn't sure if I could trust them, but I had no choice and my instincts weren't telling me to fight them so I did as they said without complaint.

The Middle Eastern man, Rasul I was told, pulled a large cargo van up to the door at the front of the warehouse while she issued orders to someone over her phone. I went with Rasul as he carried Eric's limp body out to the van, draping him over a long bench seat directly behind the front seats, and I knelt down on the floor holding the now blood soaked handkerchief to his head and noticed our duffle bags from the car were next to me on the floor. It scared me a little when I looked inside and saw the weapons were gone, but at least I had something clean to change into at some point so I pushed the fear aside and stared down at Eric.

His hair was stuck to his head from all of the blood, but other than that he merely looked like he was sleeping. His breathing was even and he didn't make any grunts or sounds of protest when Rasul put him in a fireman's carry to bring him out to the van so I hoped he wasn't in any pain. I loved him so much and now that things had settled down and we seemed out of immediate danger I felt the tears form. Whether it was from love, fear, or relief I didn't know. It was probably all three.

Rasul went back inside and returned a moment later with Gigantor in tow. The knife was still sticking out of his neck, but he was able to walk on his own and one of them had secured his hands behind his back using two sets of handcuffs since he was so wide. Rasul secured him in the very back of the van with another set of handcuffs attached to the ones he was wearing on one end and through a metal ring bolted to the floor of the van with the other end. Hopefully that would hold him.

Rasul climbed into the driver's seat with Pam climbing into the passenger seat a minute later, still talking on her phone, and as we drove away I heard her say, "Two bodies. I want the building searched and no traces left behind." With that she ended the call and turned to Rasul saying, "Indira hasn't found him yet, but she's heading south on the off chance our informant wasn't completely full of shit."

He just nodded and then she turned to me saying, "You're pretty good with knives. Isn't she Siegbert?" He grunted making her cackle, which seemed like an odd sound to be coming from her given the whole lethal Stepford wife thing she had going on. I didn't respond, still unsure of whether or not they could be trusted, and the interior of the van fell silent. I paid attention to our surroundings, just as Eric had taught me, and when we pulled up to a darkened ranch style house ten minutes later I knew I could find our way back to where we had started at the warehouse if necessary.

Rasul pulled the van into an oversized garage attached to the side of the house and took Gigantor out first. Pam disappeared through the door with them telling Rasul to take him to the basement and moments later Rasul returned to get Eric with me following along behind them into the house.

It looked like any other middle class ranch style house except that it definitely wasn't a *home*. It was sterile looking with zero clutter, but it was a thousand times better than that warehouse so I was happy. I followed Rasul to a back bedroom, relieved that we weren't going to the basement too, where an oversized hospital bed was already set up and a very small woman was waiting. She was standing on a step stool on the side of the bed and had a tray of medical tools off to her side and a lot of different machines were lined up against the far wall.

I watched as she pulled on a pair of latex gloves and began examining Eric as soon as he was situated on the bed and breathed a sigh of relief when she said, "It's just a flesh wound." She continued to examine his head and looked up at Rasul saying, "He's got an egg-sized knot on the side of his head. Bring me the portable x-ray." He did as she asked without comment and she shooed us out of the room as she took his x-rays before allowing us back in.

She had me tell her about how Eric became injured and I looked to Rasul silently asking if I should tell her the truth. He seemed to appreciate that I would think to check first before spilling out everything that had happened and he nodded his approval. I told her everything from the point Eric had leapt in front of me until I saw him lying unconscious on the floor while watching her put an IV drip into Eric's arm and seven stitches into the side of his head that she covered with a bandage. When she was done Pam came into the room with us and looked at the doctor saying, "So?"

She appeared annoyed, but responded, "He's got a concussion, probably from hitting his head on the concrete floor when he dove in front of the bullet. He should be fine, but he probably won't wake up for the rest of the night. The other one is in the basement?" she asked and Rasul escorted her out of the room, I assumed to treat Gigantor. The relief I felt at her words was indescribable and all I wanted to do was crawl up alongside of Eric and cry my eyes out.

Instead I went back out to the van and retrieved the bag that had our clothes inside before searching through the kitchen cabinets. I found a large basin that I filled with soapy water along with a couple of dish towels and leaving the bag there, I brought the clothing and everything else into the room with Eric. I didn't care that Pam had stayed in the room; I just wanted to take care of Eric so that's what I did.

Using the pair of scissors the doctor had used when she cut the thread from Eric's stitches I cut away his blood soaked shirt and pulled it off of his body. I placed a towel behind his head and began the slow process of cleaning all of the blood out of his hair and off of his face, neck, and chest. I was careful to not let the water get near his stitches and it took over an hour and several refills of soapy water before I deemed him clean enough.

There was an en suite bathroom that I used to shower myself when I was done and when I emerged in my clean set of clothes the exhaustion of the day finally set in. It seemed like a lifetime ago that Eric and I were at the church buying our Christmas tree, but in reality it was less than 24 hours earlier. When Pam came back in I guessed my expression said it all because she said, "Why don't you get some rest and we can talk when you get up," and she left the room shutting the door behind her.

I was glad she didn't question whether or not I wanted to stay in the room with Eric and I did exactly what I'd wanted to do earlier. I crawled up alongside of him, feeling comforted with his body pressed against mine, and finally drifted asleep.

I awoke the next day to the smell of coffee and opened my eyes to see Pam standing there wearing a powder blue designer pantsuit with a cream shell and sky high heels. "She lives," she said as she waited for me to wake up enough to take the cup of coffee from her extended hand.

"Thank you," I said and turned to look down at Eric. He hadn't moved at all from when I'd fallen asleep, but he still only looked like he was sleeping. I looked back over at Pam and said worriedly, "Shouldn't he have woken up by now?"

She took a seat in one of the chairs by the bed and shrugged her shoulders saying, "Ludwig said to call her if he's not awake by tonight. It's still the afternoon so I'll give him a few more hours."

Afternoon? How long had I slept? According to my bladder, too long. I carefully got out of the bed and set my coffee down before heading into the bathroom. When I came out a few minutes later Pam patted the seat of the chair next to hers and said, "Let's chat."

"O...kay," I hesitated.

"Start at the beginning."

I didn't have to ask what she'd meant and since she'd gone through the trouble of having Eric taken care of and I wasn't locked up in the basement I figured she was one of the good guys so I sat down next to her and told her everything.

She nodded her head at some parts of my story and got lethal looking at others, namely the Chow incident, but she remained silent throughout. Once I was done she gave me an appraising look before she said, "You've been through quite a lot. There's a discretionary fund that we use to pay informants so you'll be rewarded for your troubles."

"I DON'T WANT ANY MONEY!" I screeched. How dare she?

My ire was thrown off when she smiled as though she'd expected my outrage and she asked, "Why would you help him? I mean it's obvious that you love him now, but why in the beginning when he was just a stranger to you?"

"I DO love him. In the beginning I helped him because he needed it. When he woke up without his memories he was so lost, but I could tell that I made him feel better. The thing is, I didn't know how lost *I* had been until he came into my life. He made *me* feel better. Even with all of the death and running he'd manage to make me smile or laugh. I felt protected with him. I would die for him."

Her eyes softened just a smidge as she said, "I know," before her stoic expression was back.

I looked back at Eric before holding her gaze again and said, "Your turn."

"That's classified," was her only response.

"That's bullshit," I countered.

"Classified."

"Bullshit."

Before we could dissolve into a never ending verbal loop the sound of the sheets rustling next to my head caught both of our attention. I quickly stood up next to Eric's head and looked down seeing his eyes move behind his eyelids so I softly said, "Eric? Honey, are you awake?"

His eyes opened seconds later and I wanted to cry feeling relieved all over again. He was okay!

He looked unsure, which was understandable considering he was waking up in a strange bed without having any idea of how he got there. Talk about déjà vu.

"Do you feel okay?" I asked as I reached down to brush the hair out of his eyes.

He tried to clear his throat and realizing he probably needed a drink I grabbed a bottle of water that had been left on the side of the bed and opened it before handing it to him. He stared at me as he drank the entire bottle and handed it back saying, "Thanks."

He looked contemplative before asking, "Who are you?"

I laughed saying, "That is SO not funny."

He didn't laugh. He didn't even crack a grin. I was not amused.

He stared at me some more and said, "Aren't you the girl from the boat shop? You had pink and purple and blue streaks in your hair, right?"

I wasn't laughing anymore and stared him down saying, "After everything that's happened in the last 24 hours I don't find this funny at all Eric. Quit playing around."

He sat up in the bed and looked over at Pam asking, "What's going on? Why is she here?" He looked around the room and added, "Where is here, exactly?"

"Eric stop!" I pleaded with the tears falling freely down my face. This couldn't be happening.

He spared me a glance before looking back at Pam who was looking back at him and not hiding her confusion. "What do you remember last?" she asked.

He flicked his eyes at me before looking back to her with his eyebrow raised up when she said, "You can talk in front of her. She knows everything," she lied. I couldn't spare a thought to wonder why.

"I'd gone to eliminate de Castro three miles off the coast of Saint Thomas. The intelligence was bad, there was no party, and after four hours I slipped onto the boat and took out two of his guards. I found him below deck, but his young daughter was asleep on top of him so I returned to the deck to head back to the boat. That's the last thing I remember."

His voice was cold and detached. I'd never heard him sound that way before and it frightened me in more ways than one.



"She found you," Pam motioned towards me, "floating in the ocean with a bullet in your back. She saved you; helped you escape the island. She went with you to NY to try to figure out who you were and when someone tried to kill you she took you home with her where you've been ever since."

Eric continued to stare at Pam before turning to face me and said in the same cold and detached voice he'd used moments ago, "Thank you for your services. There's a discretionary fund that we can use to pay you for your troubles. Would you mind waiting in another room so I can speak to Pam?"

My heart broke with the irony of it all. The Eric Northman I knew, the sweet, gentle and passionate man I had fallen in love with, would die for, disappeared before my very eyes. Just like a ghost.

I turned and ran from the room, barely able to see through the tears that flooded my eyes.

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## **Chapter 15: Hurt**

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### **Hurt**

#### **EPOV**

I felt like I was drowning, only instead of water it was memories. They flooded into my consciousness like a tsunami starting with my parents. Childhood Christmases and birthdays flickered through my mind like a video on fast forward. I saw my father beam with pride as he read my acceptance letter into the Naval Academy and my mother's eyes fill with tears when they left me there at the start of my first semester.

I remembered when I had decided to try out to be a Navy SEAL and how quickly I'd come to love the competitiveness of it. I wanted to succeed and I did in spades. The career path I had chosen would have been difficult, but it would definitely be rewarding.

And then everything changed. When my parents were executed by that terrorist scum, it changed me. The fundamental core of who I was changed from playfully exuberant to lethally focused. I became cold and hardened inside with my only want to be the one to avenge my parents' deaths so I pushed myself beyond the limits settling for nothing less than perfection in whatever it was I did. And when I was approached by the Lex Talionis Alliance it was like my prayers had been answered.

Killing. It was what I did best and for years I felt okay with my life. I was helping to rid the world of the vile and evil creatures that had been held unaccountable for their actions until their paths crossed with mine. But after I was able to exact my own personal revenge on the coward that killed my parents my enthusiasm lessened. It wasn't that it suddenly felt wrong to kill the bad guys, but my cold and hardened interior was starting to just feel hollow.

When I'd gone to kill de Castro, finding his young daughter lying asleep on top of him and hesitated from killing the target for the very first time, I knew then that the end of my career was in sight.

The mental barrage of memories was beginning to be too much and I felt restless as I heard voices quietly talking in the background. My head was pounding so I couldn't quite make out what was being said or by whom, but I felt a feather light caress across my forehead and opened my eyes to see the most beautiful pair of blue eyes staring back at me.

*Sookie.*

God how I loved this woman. I had no idea of what happened after I blacked out, but she didn't seem any worse for wear. If anything she looked happy to see me. Me, the one that almost got her killed.

"Do you feel okay?" she asked brushing away the stray hairs I'd felt move across my forehead a moment earlier.

I tried to tell her I was sorry, but my throat was too dry to speak and after she handed me a bottle of water I took my time drinking it down as I made the decision on what I had to do. It would, without a doubt, be the *hardest* thing I'd ever *have* to do.

"Thanks," I said as I handed her the now empty bottle while steeling my nerves for what had to be done, knowing I'd have to give the performance of a lifetime.

I narrowed my eyes at her, like I had on that fateful night when I first awoke and saw her beautiful face, repeating the same words I'd spoken then. "Who are you?"

She threw her head back in laughter and when her eyes met mine again they danced as she said, "That is SO not funny." It almost broke my resolve, seeing her so full of joy and life, but it was those traits that forced me to stay on course. It was too dangerous for her to stay with me; she didn't ask for this lifestyle and even though I'd been out of it for the last several months I knew I was going to be drawn right back in. If I tried to push her away in any other way she would never let me go, but if I made her believe that I didn't remember her she'd have nothing left of me to hold onto.

"Aren't you the girl from the boat shop? You had pink and purple and blue streaks in your hair, right?" *You were sweet, sassy, and sexy but I had no idea then that you would become my whole world.*

The smile slowly left her face as she tried to discern whether or not I was serious and being the spitfire that she is, she let me have it.

"After everything that's happened in the last 24 hours I don't find this funny at all Eric. Quit playing around."

I couldn't keep looking at her even though I only wanted to *see her*. If I didn't break my gaze she'd be able to see the truth in my eyes no matter what my voice was telling her so I looked over and saw Pam staring down at me. I'd known Pam for years now, from the time she'd come with that prick Compton to recruit me at the Academy. She knew me better than anyone else. At least she did before Sookie, but I couldn't think about that now.

"What's going on? Why is she here?" I asked Pam. Looking around the room I added, "Where is here, exactly?" I was sure we were in one of the agency's numerous safe houses, but I had a role to play.

Before Pam could respond I heard Sookie say, "Eric, stop!" Her voice broke and I quickly glanced at her to see that she was crying, but I couldn't take witnessing the pain I was causing her and looked back at Pam. I couldn't relent. I fought my instincts to gather her up in my arms and soothe away her hurts, but I couldn't. It was what was best for her.

"What do you remember last?" Pam asked.

The sound of Sookie's breath hitching in her throat as she fought to quell her tears made my eyes flicker back to her before I looked back at Pam raising my eyebrow at her to say, *'Can't you wrap an arm around her or something? A tissue perhaps?'*

Pam wasn't a dense woman and she knew all of my tells. In the past we'd had entire conversations consisting of nothing more than facial expressions, so I knew she was deliberately yanking my metaphorical chain when she said, "You can talk in front of her. She knows everything." She was fucking with the wrong person. I knew where she stored her collection of many years' worth of 'yet to comeback designer clothes' that she'd been saving. If she kept this up, I had a match with her name on it.

While plotting equally devious ways to pay her back, I clinically recited everything I now remembered of the time I'd spent in St. Thomas. Everything with the exception of my time with Sookie. I raised my eyebrow at her once more hoping she'd do something to comfort Sookie *now*.

"She found you," Pam motioned towards Sookie, "floating in the ocean with a bullet in your back. She saved you; helped you escape the island. She went with you to NY to try to figure out who you were and when someone tried to kill you she took you home with her where you've been ever since."

Her shoe collection. That was going up in flames too.

Sookie did so much more than Pam's thirty second synopsis. She had saved more than just my life; she'd saved my soul. My cold, hardened, hollow shell was filled with her warmth, her suppleness and made my life truly meaningful for the very first time.

I quickly reflected on Sookie's personality traits and picked the one I thought would help end both of our immediate suffering. Her pride wouldn't be able to handle me wanting to pay her for her 'services' as if she was nothing more than a hired hand.

I remained resolute, staying on course and turned to her saying, "Thank you for your services. There's a discretionary fund that we can use to pay you for your troubles. Would you mind waiting in another room so I can speak to Pam?"

Her tears streaked down her face and I nearly reached out for her hand, but she turned and ran through the door with a quiet sob. I felt tears forming in my own eyes so I blinked them back before glancing up at Pam and gesturing for her to close the door.

Once she returned to her seat I watched her pull a linen and lace handkerchief from her pocket and throw it on the bed next to me.

"I'm not crying," I mumbled. *At least I was trying not to.*

She cocked her brow at me saying, "You are too, but that's not for your tears you pussy, that's me throwing down the bullshit flag."

"Just tell me what's been going on," I said feeling completely defeated.

Her eyes narrowed letting me know this would be a quid pro quo session before she said, "When you failed to report back within the allotted time frame following your mission and de Castro surfaced on the island alive and well I sent Rasul to St. Thomas to find out what happened. He used the GPS chip that had been attached to your gear bag and found it in a boat docked next to Merlotte's shack along with his dead body inside. He had two gunshots to the back of his head and he'd been roughed up pretty good beforehand.

He located the boat's owners through the registration, but when he went to check it out the shop was burned to the ground along with the owners' home. They had paid Sookie under the table and she'd apparently kept herself to just them so with everything up in flames we had no idea she even existed. I had Rasul pay off the local police to rule their deaths a murder-suicide just in case you had a hand in it.

Next Rasul checked the flight logs with the air traffic control tower for Merlotte's plane. He was gone longer than what his flight plans indicated he should have been. Long enough to get close to the US shoreline and a background check on him turned up his relationship to one Thomas Mickens, but by the time Rasul arrived the police were already on the scene and you had somehow been named a suspect in his murder by an anonymous tip. I suspect Merlotte gave that much up before they killed him, but we still don't know if it was Compton's or de Castro's people that did the deed."

She paused as though she was done talking, but I wasn't ready to start talking about Sookie yet so I asked, "And how did Compton figure into all of this?"

"When you disappeared his first reaction was that you had gone rogue. You of all people! He was quick to pull your financials and shoved your Swiss Bank statements into my face saying, '*You see? Ten million dollars was just wired into his account! You are wrong about Eric Northman. He can't be trusted!*' I know you and I know that money doesn't motivate you.

Then other operatives were found murdered; operatives who were at *home*; operatives that you have personally met and he was right back in my face, '*He's sold us out to the highest bidder!*' I, of course, didn't believe him, but I let him do his thing and quietly kept tabs on him waiting for him to hang himself. I wanted to put my foot up his ass when you called after killing Chow and he wouldn't hand me his phone, but I didn't want to ruin my black peep toe Louboutins. Chow's orders were to bring you in, not kill you, but even so I couldn't fault you for killing him. He always got on my nerves anyway.

Back to Compton. He laid low for a few months, but recently he'd begun taking unscheduled trips. I went through backdoor channels with the CIA to keep him out of the loop and got their best techie to help me out by planting an undetectable bug and tracking device in his phone while we were all sitting in on a Level 5 Restricted meeting at the Pentagon. All electronic devices are left outside those doors and picked up once the meeting is over. My techie played hat check girl for the Pentagon that day. *I played with her later on.*"

She licked her lips and got a faraway look in her eyes when I said, "Focus Pam."

"So when Bill flew to Las Vegas, I knew where he was. He was actually dumb enough to stay in a suite at de Castro's casino and we placed one of our assets in his path at the roulette table. Now that I think about it, she looked *a lot* like Sookie."

I glared down at her adding her stupid fucking hat collection to the list of shit I would be setting fire to. She wore them every year for the Kentucky Derby even though she had never attended one race because '*Horses smell like horseshit.*' She just smiled back at me before continuing.

"So once my gal left his room she'd gotten from him that he would be flying into New Orleans the next morning. I was waiting and followed him to Shreveport, but I backed off once he got to that little backwater you've been hiding out in worried that he'd spot me in a one horse town. We knew he had a relative in the area so I didn't think too much of it and met up with Rasul back here in Shreveport while Indira took over the surveillance.

Once he got to the warehouse, Rasul and I were waiting here at the safe house when Indira called and we headed right over. When we arrived she told us that she'd seen Siegbert taking what turned out to be Sookie inside a few moments earlier and we arrived in time to see Sookie throw a dagger into Compton's heart and another into Siegbert's throat. Rasul was able to take out Wybert before he could shoot Sookie, but that coward Madden escaped out the back door just before we came into the room."

She cocked her eyebrow at me and said, "Your turn."

I stared down at my hands and admitted, "Of course I remember her, but as long as she is with me then she'll be in danger. You know what our lives are like. I can't put her through all of that. She's better off without me."

"Are you fucking kidding me?" Yeah, Pam wasn't the comforting type.

"No, I'm not fucking kidding you," I lashed out. "I wish I'd never gotten my fucking memories back so I could still be with her, but that ship has sailed. If I had known who I was when she first saved me, she wouldn't be hurting right now. Her life wouldn't have been turned upside down because I would have never allowed it to happen. If I had known better, like I do now, there never would have been a 'me and Sookie'."

"And *why* can't you be together anymore?"

"Because it's too *dangerous!* I can't risk her safety for my own selfish reasons."

"Pfft...I disagree."

I watched as she reached into the carry-on luggage she called a purse sitting next to her feet and pulled out a pair of black rimmed glasses that were nothing more than another accessory for her because she had eyes like a hawk. After placing them over her eyes she pulled a file from the same bag and flipped it open before looking back at me, letting the glasses slide to the tip of her nose, and saying, "Let's review shall we?"

I had no idea what she was getting at so I said nothing and waited for her to continue.

"This fragile girl you're talking about, Sookie Stackhouse was living in St. Thomas when you arrived there on your mission. You rented a boat from her place of employment and when you failed to return it the next day she went looking for you. She found your sniper rifle in the boat you'd rented and then found you floating in the ocean miles from the shore with a bullet hole in your back, at death's door," I rolled my eyes at her dramatic style as she continued, "and she helped bring you back to shore; refused to call the proper authorities; bullied her employer who was once a doctor into performing surgery on you on their dining room table."

She glanced up from the file saying, "Stop me if I'm wrong. No? Good. When you woke up without your memories, a virtual stranger who had been armed to the teeth, she took you into her apartment; made you a sandwich. When you escaped her apartment ahead of the killer..."

"It was Wybert," I interrupted. Siegbert and Wybert had been well known as Madden's bodyguards.

Pam merely looked annoyed that I'd interrupted her stroll down my memory lane and acted like I hadn't said a word.

"You went back to her place of employment where she was confronted with the knowledge that the only two people she had in her life at the time were both dead and yet she was still able to

come up with the idea to go to that shithole Merlotte's to beg your way off the island. She traveled with you across the US stealing cars and watching a UFC death match in your living room, but did she run? NO! She brought you home on the off the wall chance that her gazillion year old neighbor was related to that douche bag Compton."

"Don't you get it?" I asked trying to keep my voice down so Sookie wouldn't hear me yell. "That's why I did what I did! She has piss poor judgment where I'm concerned and it could get her killed. Look at what she did last night! I *told* her to stay in the car. I *told* her it wouldn't be safe and yet she *still* ended up with a gun to her head. Compton fired a bullet at her!"

Pam flipped her file closed and shoved it back into her bag before saying, "Really? Indira watched her go all 'Matrix' like on Siegbert, running up his body like there was a Nordstrom's sale rack at the top of his head where she kicked him right in the face. If he was human it would've been enough to take him down. I personally witnessed her *piss poor judgment* at pulling the daggers from your unconscious body and throwing them with deadly accuracy, saving your ass. When we came into the room she threw herself on top of you like a shield and told you she loved you while thinking she was about to die. When Ludwig was done treating you Sookie was exhausted, but she spent over an hour washing the blood from your hair and body before getting herself clean. I checked on her every hour after she went to sleep because I was sure she would have nightmares, but she slept soundly curled up at your side. So YOU tell ME, does THAT sound like some fragile little girl to you?"

I looked down at my chest and ran my fingers through my hair feeling nothing of the blood that would have covered me the night before. I couldn't believe Sookie had killed Compton and wounded Siegbert, but I didn't question the fact that she would cover my body with her own trying to save me. She would always want to save me. Was it fair to push her away for her own good?

"And don't kid yourself about your *job* being the reason for you pushing her away. We both know you haven't had your heart in it ever since you avenged your parents' deaths so it wouldn't take much for you to just walk away from it all. I'd honestly thought that might have been the case when you first went missing." Pam's love of Dear Abby was coming into play now, I was sure of it.

"She really was spectacular when she killed Bill," Pam mused. Her eyes brightened and she laughed saying, "Kill Bill! Get it? Oooh, I wonder how delectable Sookie would look in head to toe leather. Yellow would be a fabulous color on her."

Pam made a point of looking down at the file in her bag before saying, "You know Eric, she really does seem to have a natural talent for what we do. I'm thinking of recruiting her, but there's one thing missing from my notes that you might be able to help me with." She looked back at me with a leer in her eye as she asked, "Does Sookie swing both ways because I wouldn't mind recruiting her into my bed as well."

The bitch cackled when I growled at her and said, "Well if you're going to throw her away then I'd be more than happy to help her pick up the pieces. Does Sookie growl too because I could get into that."

I watched her smirk and stand up smoothing the wrinkles from her pants before saying, "I'm going to go see how Rasul is doing with Siegbert in the basement. When you get your head out of your ass you would do well to go and grovel at Sookie's feet begging for her forgiveness because if I *do* recruit her and you're still on her bad side she just might make you her first target."

I stayed in the bed for a few more minutes before going into the bathroom to take care of my full bladder. As I stood at the sink brushing my teeth I looked in the mirror seeing no sign of the blood from the night before anywhere on me, but when I glanced down into the tub I could see the basin Sookie must have used along with the blood stained towels. The guilt ate away at me knowing she was somewhere in the house devastated thinking that I didn't remember her or our time together. It was hard to believe that it was just around this time the day before when I finally admitted to her that I was in love with her.

I hung my head in shame knowing what an ass I'd been so I quickly finished up and set off to find her. Almost two hours had passed, while I had been talking to Pam, since she'd left the room in tears so I checked all of the common areas first, like the kitchen and living room, but there was no sign of her. The door to the hallway bathroom was open and obviously empty and I highly doubted she was in the basement knowing what Pam and Rasul would be doing to get Siegbert to talk so I stood outside of the closed door leading to another bedroom and lightly knocked saying, "Sookie?"

I got no response, but I knew she was upset so I kept on talking. "Sookie, I'm sorry. I lied when I said I didn't remember you because I was afraid of you getting hurt. My life is dangerous and my worst fear is you getting hurt because of me. I thought if I pretended to not remember you then you could go back to your life in Bon Temps and find somebody else. Someone who doesn't kill other people for a living. Someone that isn't wanted by God knows how many countries, warlords, and gangs. Someone that actually deserves your love, but I'm selfish enough to ask you to forgive me and to let me try to make it all up to you. I love you Sookie."

I waited for another full minute or two before knocking again and saying, "Sookie?" and trying the door handle which I discovered was locked from the inside.

"Sookie? Will you please open the door so I can at least see that you're okay?"

Nothing.

Not a sound.

I banged on the door a lot harder than before hoping to hear her jump at the sound, but again...nothing.



I got a paper clip from the kitchen and had the lock popped a few seconds later.

What I saw when I opened the door made my chest hurt as though the air had been sucked from my lungs. The window was open and Sookie was gone.

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## Chapter 16: Escape

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### Escape

#### SPOV

I locked myself in another bedroom unable to hold back the tears any longer. I felt broken in a way that I'd never imagined was even possible. It was as if I'd literally been torn in two. My body shook uncontrollably with the sobs that racked through me. How I had pictured my present and future changed in the blink of an eye with my past seeming like nothing more than a pipe dream. I'd thought I had finally found my one true love, he'd even said those three little words I had longed to hear, but I'd been wrong. He wasn't real. None of it was.

I had no idea of how much time had gone by while I cried all alone in the room and the fact that Eric hadn't come to try and console me only reiterated the fact that he didn't remember me. My Eric couldn't stand the sight of my tears and would do anything to try and make me feel better, but he was gone; replaced by someone I didn't know at all and the fact that he looked identical to my Eric only pushed the knife deeper into my heart.

I couldn't stand being there for another moment knowing he was so close and yet a lifetime away. I had to get out of there. I hadn't noticed Rasul when I'd run crying from Eric's room and into this one and I didn't know if he'd let me leave on my own, but I wasn't going to hang around to find out. I had to escape.

I went to the window and slid it open before silently slipping outside. The sun was starting to set and my feet started running in no particular direction with my only thought to get as far away from Eric Northman as I possibly could. It was probably all for nothing since he didn't want me any longer anyway and I doubted he would have tried to stop me if he knew I'd left, but those thoughts only propelled my body to go faster. He may not want me anymore, but I sure as hell didn't want to have it thrown in my face.

It seemed like I'd been running for hours with my lungs burning in my chest and when my legs started to feel like jelly I finally slowed down and took in my surroundings. The sun had completely set by then, but even in the darkness I could see that I'd ended up travelling along the same path we'd taken earlier this morning. I was just a block away from the warehouse; the place where my whole world had changed.

I walked to where we'd left the car and was thankful that when I'd changed clothes the night before I'd had the forethought to put my keys back into my pocket. A small sob left my throat

when I sat in the driver's seat and had to move it forward since Eric had moved it back to give his long legs the room they needed when he'd driven us there the night before. I still couldn't wrap my mind around how much had changed in such a short amount of time and it took a while before I finally put the key in the ignition and set off for home.

I'd kept the radio off while I drove needing the peace and quiet to go over everything in my mind. The Eric I knew was gone, replaced with a carbon copy minus the love he'd felt for me, but that didn't excuse how he'd treated me when he woke up. Pam told him everything I'd done for him, granted her version of events had been short and to the point, but he didn't really seem grateful at all for any of the hardships and sacrifices I'd made for him. Even if he *was* a trained killer and didn't bat an eyelash at dangerous situations, that didn't give him leave to treat me like I was inconsequential; like I didn't *mean* anything more to him than being a tiny footnote in the story of his life. We'd spent *months* together. Even if he *didn't* know that we'd fallen in love wouldn't he have to assume that we were at least *friends*?

Is *that* how he treated his friends?

The more I thought about it the angrier I got and I decided that if that one small glimpse I'd gotten of his personality tonight was the *real* Eric Northman then maybe I'd be better off without him no matter how much my heart hurt at just the thought.

I must have driven on autopilot because the next thing I knew I was parked in back of the farmhouse. The full head of steam that I'd worked up on the drive home almost fell apart when I walked inside and saw the half decorated Christmas tree in the living room. We'd stood right there barely 24 hours earlier and admitted our love for one another. We'd made love on the floor, claiming each other as our own, and now I stood in the exact same spot with only my memories as a testament that once upon a time Sookie Stackhouse had found love.

*Never again*, I told myself. Like Scarlett O'Hara would never again go hungry, I would never again give my heart away if it could hurt this badly when things went wrong. I say *when*, not *if*, things went wrong because I couldn't think of a single thing in my life that had ever gone right.

I worked my earlier fury back up to full force before my pity party could take over and I stomped my way to the front door, flinging it open hard enough that the door knob left a dent in the drywall, and pulled the Christmas tree out of the house. I could hear some of the glass ornaments breaking against the hardwood floor, and I would more than likely regret my actions later since they were ones my Gran had collected over her many years, but in that moment I wanted nothing in the house that would remind me of Eric Northman.

I had taken the next two weeks off from work leading up to Christmas to do some last minute shopping, excited that I had Eric in my life to share my favorite holiday with, but since there wouldn't be a Christmas at the Stackhouse residence this year I left it sitting in a sad pile of pine needles and broken glass on the front porch before marching into the bedroom with a box of trash bags in my hand. I filled bag after bag of Eric's things going through the dresser drawers and closet, dragging each bag to the front door and tossing them one by one out into the yard as I filled them. It felt good to do at the time, but in the back of my mind I knew that Eric wouldn't

come looking for his things so I would be the one having to later drag them down to the end of the driveway for the trash collectors to haul away.

I went through my task as quickly as I could, not wanting to really *see* any of the things I threw into the bags, knowing that each article of clothing could bring with it another memory of a life that no longer existed. Once his clothes were all bagged I moved onto his shoes that were all neatly lined up at the bottom of the closet.

Eric's OCD shined the brightest with how he kept his things. Each side of the closet was a complete opposite of the other. His side was perfect with each hanger evenly spaced the width of his fingertip apart from the next (I know, I watched him do it one day) with everything neat and orderly. My side had my clothes shoved in wherever they would fit and my shoes were piled on top of one another at the bottom. More often than not they would knock over the metal softball bats from my high school days that were leaning up in the corner that I'd never gotten around to storing in the attic.

I almost smiled thinking of how I would purposely kick one or two of his shoes out of place just so I could hear him quietly sigh before fixing them back into perfectly spaced pairs, but I bit it back. Maybe at some point down the road I could look back on our time together and smile at the mostly fond memories I would have of him, but that was a complete impossibility right now.

I kicked his shoes all into one big pile on the floor and took a moment to internally rejoice at the jumbled mess I'd created with his things (I could practically picture him twitching) before throwing them, one by one, into the trash bag. I was having a much needed '*I am woman; hear me roar*' moment until I picked up one of his favorite black boots. He always drove me batshit whenever he wore them because he rarely tied them shut, but it wasn't the boot itself that ended my zeal. It was what I found rolling around in the bottom of the boot that made me want to die for the second time that day.

I reached inside holding my breath and with trembling hands I pulled out a small velvet jewelry box with a shiny red bow on top. It was undoubtedly my Christmas present from Eric. I shuddered remembering what I had gotten for him and knew it would be a *long* time before I would be able to look at it again. I slumped down onto the closet floor from my knees to my butt just staring at the tiny box knowing I wouldn't have the strength to toss it into the bag without first opening it up to see what was inside.

I lost all track of time once more as I sat there staring at the box in the palm of my hand while the last seven months ran through my mind. I thought of the way his eyes crinkled in the corners when he laughed; how he listened to any and every little thing I had to say as if it was the most interesting thing he'd ever heard; how his mere presence could soothe me like nothing else; his ability to make my heart start racing with nothing more than a raised eyebrow; how his kisses could go from lovingly sweet to feral and everything in between so that no two were ever really the same; how the love I felt for him literally warmed me from the inside out. Everything with Eric had been so perfect and now...now it was over.

*Did I really need to see what was in the box? Did it matter anymore now that he no longer remembered me? Us?*

The answer to all three questions was no, but I opened it anyway.

The tears flowed silently down my cheeks as I looked down at the beautiful solitaire engagement ring nestled inside and more than anything I wished I could wake up from this horrible nightmare to see that it had all been a dream; to know that Eric still loved me. The light from the bedroom caught the ring in a way that I was able to see there was an inscription on the inside of the band.

Almost from the very beginning, in the quiet times before we would drift off to sleep, I would sometimes hear Eric whisper something into the darkness while he held me, but it was always in a foreign language that I didn't understand. I eventually got him to tell me what he'd be saying for all of those months. It was a phrase he used to describe who I had been to him before today; I was his past, his present, and his future.

*My One and Only.*

I curled up on the closet floor with the box still clutched in my hand and cried myself to sleep hoping against hope that my wish would come true and when I woke up again that this nightmare would end.

I heard the sound of glass crunching on the floor and opened my eyes feeling out of sorts before realizing I was still lying on the closet floor. Even though the silence had returned, the hairs on the back of my neck stood on end and my instincts told me to hide. I wanted to pull the closet door shut, but the trash bag half full of shoes was in the way and it would make too much noise if I attempted to move it. Moving as quietly as I could I silently cursed myself remembering that I'd never locked the front door after throwing Eric's clothes into the yard, but this was Bon Temps. Nothing ever happens here.

Since Eric's side of the closet was practically empty I slipped behind the longest dresses I had hanging in the far corner of the closet and grabbed my lucky bat as I waited for something to tell me that I was either crazy and hearing things or that there really was someone in my house. I hoped for the former, but given my recent streak of shitastic luck I was sure it was the latter.

I knew I was right when I heard the floorboard squeak in the hallway right outside the bedroom door. As old as the house was, there was no way for anyone to travel silently anywhere inside of it unless you were Spiderman and I was almost certain it wasn't Peter Parker creeping around my house.

I couldn't have been asleep for very long because it was still dark outside, but the light in the bedroom had been left on when I curled up and fell asleep so I could easily see the man walking into the room from my hiding spot. It was the same one that had been standing with Bill and I almost audibly gasped, but was able to hold it back just in time. If only I could silence my heart as well because I was pretty sure he was going to hear it pounding inside of my chest. I certainly did.

*Why would he be here? What could he want from me?* I had no idea who he was, but since he'd been with Bill it didn't bode well for me.

I didn't so much as blink as he slowly picked through my things in the room and I remembered everything Eric had told me about how to center yourself when your system floods with adrenaline and the fight or flight instincts kicked in. I would pick 'flight' if given the opportunity, but I prepared myself for 'fight'. Knowing I had to focus so I wouldn't be able to give into temptation and panic, which would give him the advantage, I concentrated on every minute detail I could pick up from where I was hidden and noted the outline of a gun on his left hip underneath his jacket that I hadn't noticed earlier. His build was slender, but the width of his shoulders and the way he moved told me that he was strong, definitely stronger than me.

I would be completely fucked if he was able to get a hand on me so I gripped my bat tighter hoping I'd have room to swing it with enough force to do some damage if I needed to.

My bedroom looked like a cyclone had gone through it with things tossed everywhere from my weak attempt at erasing Eric from my life and I hoped he would assume there was no one home given the ransacked appearance my room portrayed. I didn't hear any other noises coming from inside of the house and hopefully he was alone because it would be hard enough trying to elude just him.

As he slowly made his way towards the closet I crouched down further and willed myself to blend in with the wall I was pressed against, hoping that he wouldn't move anything that would give my hiding spot away. I saw him look at Eric's side of the closet with his brows furrowed and then to my side still looking perplexed, but once he got his visual fill he moved on to the attached bathroom and for the first time that day things were looking up for me.

He eventually left the room altogether and once I heard him hit the top of the stairs I took a chance and crept out of the closet, bat in hand. My footsteps were quick but silent since I knew where the squeaky floorboards were and I chanced a peek up the stairs as I passed, but saw no one. When the front door was in sight I thought I was home free until I slipped on a fallen ornament and fell to the floor with my face landing in the broken glass. The bat flew from my hand when I tried to catch myself and bounced along the floor before rolling away. A herd of elephants charging through the room would have been quieter and sure enough Mr. Bad Guy came flying down the stairs.

It felt like I'd twisted my knee in the fall, but the adrenaline helped dull the pain as I scrambled across the floor, cutting my arms on the broken glass, trying to reach the bat. I felt his hand wrap around my ankle pulling me back towards him as he said, "Ah, ah, ah Miss Stackhouse. We'll have none of that."

"Let me go!" I yelled trying to kick at him, but he'd grabbed my good leg and the kicks coming from my injured one were hurting me more than him.

He had the audacity to smile like the Cheshire cat asking, "Now why would I do that?" before grabbing my injured leg and twisting it until I screamed out in pain. He released his grasp and

picked up my bat, twirling it in his hand like it was a baton and asked, "Where is Eric Northman?"

I wiped what I thought were just tears from my face not realizing I was bleeding until I saw the blood on my hands and I pushed myself up off the floor, placing the majority of my weight on my good leg, while ignoring his question and asking my own.

"Who are you?"

I leaned against the wall behind me thinking of the irony I kept finding myself in lately. Hadn't Eric just asked me that same question? I decided I didn't like irony at all. It wasn't my friend.

Again, he smiled with a look of incredulity saying, "You don't know who I am? Whoever kept you uninformed certainly wasn't doing you any favors."

*That's classified*, I heard Pam's voice saying in my head. I was officially fed up with them ALL and didn't hide my sarcasm when I said, "And that still doesn't answer my question. Who. Are. You?"

His amused expression just pissed me off more, but I didn't give in to the temptation to do my 'Goodfellas' impression of '*I amuse you? I make you laugh, I'm here to fuckin' amuse you?*' since I didn't think it would help matters.

"I'm Victor Madden."

I remembered his name from the phone conversation Eric and I had listened into between Bill and Pam, but you'd think he'd said he was Elvis Presley given the look on his face that said I should know who he was by his name alone. As far as I knew, he didn't know about our eavesdropping so I played the dumb blond and said, "I don't know who you are. Why are you here?"

My eyes stayed on him, but I scanned the rest of the room with my peripheral vision looking for anything I could use as a weapon. Seeming to like being the center of attention, Madden began slowly pacing back and forth by the front door as he took on the appearance of a professor giving a lecture and began to speak.

"I suppose I can tell you since you won't be around for much longer. I assume you've heard of Felipe de Castro?" He looked at me for confirmation and when I nodded my head while contemplating the '*you won't be around for much longer*' statement he continued, "I am his Lieutenant, his second in command if you will. You see, Felipe isn't the upstanding businessman he portrays to the outside world; his *true* interests are much darker in nature. His casinos and other business ventures are a mere pittance of his income with his true wealth lying with his South American endeavors where we operate our very own military base training anyone and everyone in the art of war that can afford our fees; Al Qaeda, Taliban, North Korea. We don't care what their political beliefs are; we only care that their check clears the bank."

When he paused I couldn't help myself and asked, "But what does that have to do with me or Eric?"

He shook his head, almost with pity in his eyes, asking, "Do you really know nothing about the people you've aligned yourself with?"

The answer was obviously 'No' so as I stood there with the trails of blood drying on my face and my knee throbbing in sync with my heartbeat, I listened as my potential murderer gave me the answers no one else had.

"There is a group called the Lex Talionis Alliance. They're made up of men and women from all over the world who are trained black op assassins and commanded by a select group of individuals who have the authority to secretly act on behalf of their country's interests when politics get in the way of them openly retaliating against those who don't conform to conventional warfare. Bill Compton was one of those select individuals near the top of the food chain within that organization and fortunately for us his fealty had a price that we were willing to meet. He fed us information keeping us one step ahead of the LTA and it was his plan to kill their best operative and frame him for the murders of the operatives we later killed creating a complete clusterfuck at the heart of their organization. When the Director of the LTA would eventually be held accountable and fired for the systematic execution of their operatives, Bill Compton would step into her place and we would be untouchable."

He paused once more, but I wanted to keep him talking. During his diatribe I'd spotted my only shot at getting out of there alive, but I needed to get a little closer to it and him or else I was done for.

"What does that have to do with me?"

My stomach lurched when his eyes lit up like the madman he was, but I forced my feet forward towards where my weapons of choice sat putting me even closer to the man I desperately wanted to escape from.

"Don't you see? I was the one lying in wait when Northman showed up to kill de Castro. Thanks to Compton's tipoff, I planted the rumor of his big 50th birthday celebration and I was there watching when he crept inside to kill Felipe. I waited for it hoping he would take care of the task for me, but for whatever reason he let him live. You see, with Felipe out of the way everything would be mine, but before I could take care of him myself Felipe woke up. He'd had no idea of the plot to assassinate him, but since I was holding my weapon I had to act as though I was defending him so I went up on deck and put a bullet in Northman's back before he could slip away. If Felipe wasn't such a coward, demanding to head back to shore, I would have searched out his body and made sure the job was done. And since both you and Northman are the only witnesses to my meeting with Compton neither one of you can be allowed to live. I am here Miss Stackhouse because as long as I have *you* I will get *him*. I saw the way he looked at you when Siegbert pushed you into the room. Hell, he even leapt in front of a bullet meant for you so I have no doubt that he will come for you again."

Little did he know that the Eric that saved my life was dead and gone, replaced by someone that didn't view me as anything more than an insignificant caregiver he had no allegiance to; we would be waiting for a long time.

I waited until he was looking directly at me and snapped my head towards the front window as if I saw something outside causing him to do the same and while his head was turned I lunged forward grabbing the can of spray adhesive sitting on the hallway table that I'd been using to repair some of the older Christmas decorations and the lighter we used for the fireplace. I lit the flame and pressed the spray nozzle turning them into a makeshift flamethrower and aimed the resulting fire at Madden. He screamed dropping the bat from his hands as his body went up in flames and I ran as fast as my injured leg would allow out the front door.

I automatically ran towards the tree line thinking only of the safety the bunker Eric had built would afford me and when I heard Madden's voice clearly yelling, "YOU BITCH!," and the sound of a gunshot in the distance behind me I knew I needed to move a lot faster.

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## Chapter 17: Gone

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### Gone

#### EPOV

I stood there in shock unable to believe that Sookie was really gone. I knew I would have heard any commotion or scuffle if she had been taken by force. I had, after all, heard her crying and while it took every ounce of willpower I had not to go to her at the time, I wanted to kick myself now knowing she had left of her own free will. Realizing what an asshole I'd been, I couldn't really blame her. I could only imagine the pain she must be feeling thinking I didn't remember her and without wasting another moment I ran into the garage and hopped into the van without hesitation, taking off to try and find her.

The sun had set and the roads were dark causing me to go slowly up and down the neighborhood streets, afraid I might miss seeing her in the shadows. I came upon a small park and ended up wasting another half hour running around on foot looking for her while yelling out her name.

Frustrated and afraid, my next stop was the various bus stops in downtown Shreveport, but again nothing. It was like Sookie had vanished into thin air and it wasn't until I drove by the warehouse we'd come to the night before that saw her car was gone. I knew it wasn't at the safe house when I'd left earlier so I knew she must have taken it, but the question was... *where?*

I'd left the safe house almost two hours earlier so Sookie had a potential four hour head start. Fear for her wellbeing gripped my chest and I only had myself to blame. It was a long shot, but Madden was still on the loose and I hadn't stopped to tell Pam where I was going when I'd left, nor did I have a cell phone to use. I sat there running through everything I knew about Sookie trying to think of where, or to whom, she would run to.



In the time that I'd come to know her, I had been the one she would always turn to whenever she was upset, even from the very beginning. But now, now that she was upset over me I had no idea of who she would look to for comfort. I knew she had Tara and her brother Jason, but in reality they weren't very close because Sookie and I had pretty much just stuck together over the last several months. It hit me then harder than ever that it had truly been the happiest time in my life and it was all because of her. I'd fucked up everything and I had to find her knowing I had to make it right again. I was a fool thinking I could go on without her, even if I still believed it was the best thing for her. No matter how selfish it was, I needed her in my life because, for me, I knew I'd never find peace or feel a sense of coming home again without her; wherever she was would be home to me.

I smacked my palm against my forehead in the next moment realizing that the only thing that might bring her any kind of comfort would be going home to the farmhouse. Hoping I was right, I headed north on the interstate towards Bon Temps praying like hell that she'd be there.

The highway was a blur as I sped along trying like hell to make the van fly by pressing the gas pedal into the floorboard as far as it would go. I knew the Agency vehicles, like the one I was in now, had weapons concealed in the door panels and I popped the hidden latch pulling out a 9mm Beretta and an extra clip of ammo as I took the exit for Bon Temps.

Turning onto the gravel driveway, I felt relieved for the briefest second when I noticed Sookie's car parked around back until I saw the front door was wide open. It was close to 11 o'clock on a chilly December night so there was no *good* reason for the door to be open and that's when my heart sunk seeing the various trash bags strewn around the front yard and the Christmas tree lying on the front porch. I guessed her earlier denial over my memory loss had turned to anger at my cold demeanor, so I knew I had my work cut out for me.

I tucked the gun into the back of my waistband as I walked up the front steps and stepping around the glass shards of the broken ornaments, I was about to call out Sookie's name when I smelled the distinct smell of burnt sulfur.

*What was she burning?*

The house was completely silent and a quick glance at the fireplace showed nothing, but as my eyes swept back across the room I noticed one of Sookie's softball bats near the couch and blood smeared along the floor.

"SOOKIE!" I yelled running down the hallway. I had just stepped into the bedroom when I heard a gunshot coming from the woods behind the house.

I was out of the front door and running through the backyard heading for the tree line in the next instant with the Beretta trained down at my side. The sounds of leaves crunching and branches breaking under heavy footsteps could be heard ahead of me and I realized it was in the same vicinity of where the bunker was hidden. Moving as quickly and silently as possible my footsteps stilled as I heard, "*YOU FUCKING BITCH!*"

*Madden.* I was sure it was his voice, maybe fifty yards ahead.

My feet carried me closer and my heart plummeted in my chest with what I heard next.

*"You might as well just kill me now."*

*Sookie.* She didn't sound scared...she sounded broken.

*"Oh I will, but for now I need you alive to get Northman,"* he seethed. Again, she was in danger because of me.

*"LOOK AROUND! DO YOU SEE HIM HERE?"* She was quickly becoming hysterical by the sounds of it. *"NO! BECAUSE HE'S NOT COMING BACK!"* she yelled and I moved faster hearing her sob, *"He doesn't love me anymore."*

I had gotten close enough to where I could see both Madden and Sookie through the trees about twenty yards in front of me and only a few feet from where the bunker was hidden. She'd almost made it.

I kept moving forward and watched the gun in Madden's right hand begin to rise as he said, "Well, in that case..."

The sound of the gunshot was deafening in the darkness of the woods.

The front left side of Madden's head blew out in front of him after my bullet entered the rear right side of his skull and Sookie, who had instinctively turned away from his rising gun, narrowly avoided the spray of blood and brains that shot out in its wake. I sprinted the remaining distance and got to Sookie just in time to catch her as her legs gave out from underneath her.

Lowering us to the ground, I studied her face seeing the smears of dried blood and the cuts along the side of her cheek along with a bruise forming on her temple that was starting to swell. It made me want to kill Madden all over again.

Sookie looked up at me as if she couldn't believe I was really there and simply questioned, "Eric?"

At seeing the undeniable relief etched on my face, her expression brightened and her eyes filled with hope. Tears quickly formed and threatened to spill out of them while she stared back at me asking, "You remember me now?"

The amount of love I felt for her was staggering and I held her tighter, relieved that she was safe and in my arms again. Burying my face in her hair I confessed, "I never forgot you Sookie. How could I?"

Before I could continue apologizing, her whole body stiffened in my embrace and she pulled away to look into my eyes. The warmth that was there only seconds earlier had been replaced by

a cold steely gaze that I'd never seen her wear before and the tears that fell from them went hand in hand with the hurt in her voice when she asked, "You lied to me?"

I didn't know what to say at first, afraid of her reaction to what I'd done. Sookie's temper was quick to ignite, I knew that firsthand, but with everything that she'd been through over the last twenty four hours I was fearful it would push her over the edge. When I didn't answer quickly enough she tried to push me away, only causing me to hold onto her tighter because I would never again be ready to let her go. She repeated her question using a much harder tone, "Did you lie to me?"

"Yes." There was no way to skirt the issue and I wouldn't do that to her after everything we'd been through together. Sookie deserved hearing the truth and I deserved the consequences of it.

She hesitated for just a moment before successfully pushing my arms off of her and pulling herself away from me while a storm brewed in her eyes. The only sound was the slight breeze blowing the fallen leaves scattered across the ground until Sookie finally closed her eyes and taking a deep breath, she exhaled asking, "Why?"

"Look at what being with me got you," I replied, pointing at Madden's corpse just a few feet away.

"But you didn't know he would come after me when you woke up," she interrupted. "After *everything* we've been through together, *why* would you lie to me *now*? How could you *hurt me* like that?"

The pain I'd caused her was evident and I reached forward wanting and needing to touch her, knowing the contact would soothe us both, but the sight of her flinching away from me froze my hand only inches from her arm. A new fear started to form in the pit of my gut while a previously unforeseen consequence materialized in my mind; *What if she doesn't forgive me?* I didn't know how I hadn't thought of it earlier, but it was starting to look like a distinct possibility so I did my best to explain.

"From the very beginning, I've brought nothing but death and danger to your doorstep and that was *before* I knew who I was." Looking into her eyes so she'd understand the gravity of it all I said solemnly, "Sookie, I'm a killer. And because of that there are people out there that want me dead. My life is dangerous and my profession isn't one that's easily walked away from."

She didn't seem shocked by what I was telling her and I thought back to Pam's assessment of Sookie's strengths earlier that evening. I'd never once doubted her tenacious spirit, but until that moment I don't think I truly grasped the fortitude of her character. Sookie remained silent so I continued trying to verbally rationalize why I'd chosen to intentionally lie to her. It was becoming more difficult to state my case as the logic I'd used to make that choice was quickly losing ground in my own mind.

"When I remembered everything I made a split second decision. I pretended that I didn't remember you thinking it was in your best interests for you to move on with your life. I didn't

think you should have to live with the kinds of threats I normally faced on a regular basis. You've never had much regard for your own personal safety where I was concerned," she bristled with my assessment, but I kept talking seemingly persistent in digging myself into fairly deep hole, "and I was worried that you would be hurt because of it. I thought you'd be better off without me."

Sookie was trembling in front of me, but I had no idea if it was from rage, sorrow or the wintry air. In a sad attempt of changing the subject I said, "Why don't we head back to the house and I'll call Pam to take care of this." I pointed at Madden's body and stood, holding my hand out to Sookie to help her up. She made a point of refusing my help with a cut of her eyes in my direction and used a nearby tree to pull herself up, but when she nearly fell over my hands automatically shot out and held her waist. Sookie was trying not to put any pressure on her left knee making me wonder what all had happened prior to my arrival, but I kept my questions to myself for now and maneuvered my arms to pick her up bridal style when her hands came up as she pushed me away saying, "No! I don't want your help."

"Sookie, don't be stubborn," I chided. It was a mistake based on the angry stare I earned and I quickly tried to mollify her saying, "It's *my fault* that you're hurt. Please, let me help you."

She ignored me and found a sturdy branch that she used as a makeshift cane as she started hobbling back towards the farmhouse. My eyes never left her, ready to catch her at the first sign of frailty on her part, but the longer we walked the more it became apparent that she wasn't as frail, feeble, or fragile as I'd believed. Again, I could hear Pam's voice in the back of my mind and I followed alongside Sookie wondering where we went from here.

While she had remained silent, I'd noticed her grit her teeth from the pain whenever her injured leg was jostled and I'd had to hold back from just ignoring her wishes and scooping her up into my arms. It seemed to be a trait of mine that she wasn't finding endearing at the moment.

When we'd finally arrived at the house I watched helplessly as Sookie slowly climbed up each porch step and followed her inside before shutting the door behind us. She remained silent, ignoring me and everything else as she made her way into the bedroom with me forlornly trailing her every step. My continued path was cutoff when she limped into the bathroom, closing the door behind her with the clicking sound of the lock signaling her desire to be left alone.

Once she was no longer in front of me I was able to see the shambles the room had been left in. My first thought was that Madden must have ransacked the room, but when I peered into the closet and saw everything of mine was gone with the exception of a half filled trash bag of shoes I realized just how deep of a hole I was standing in. I didn't want to entertain the idea that Sookie wouldn't want me in her life anymore, no matter the evidence that she didn't want me in her house, so when I heard her turn on the shower I distracted myself by sweeping up the broken glass by the front door.

Once the floor and porch were free of debris I went into the kitchen and called Pam, giving her a brief rundown on what had happened and telling her to pick up Madden's body. When I heard

Sookie getting out of the shower I ended the phone call and grabbed an icepack from the freezer. Taking it into the bedroom, I stood just inside the doorway and waited for Sookie to emerge.

She appeared a few moments later wearing her pajamas with her wet hair framing her face as she shuffled across the floor and pulled herself up onto the bed. Her eyes refused to meet mine and the silence was becoming unbearable, but I didn't want to push her to talk to me so I simply went into the bathroom and came back with the first aid kit. I was grateful that she allowed me to cover her cuts with antibacterial cream and I gingerly placed the icepack over her knee after propping it up with a pillow underneath, but when I was done we were still left sitting there in silence. Her gaze fell anywhere but on me and I worried that shock was setting in so I broke the silence saying, "Sookie, I'm sorry."

Her eyes snapped to mine as she replied, "You should be."

"I am sorry, truly." I tried to push every ounce of the sincerity I felt through my eyes and into hers. I carefully trailed my fingers over her wounds admitting, "This is all my fault."

"It is."

While I obviously agreed with her, I was still somewhat surprised that she was actually allowing me to take the blame. Not because I blamed anyone other than myself, but because Sookie had never held me responsible for the dangers I'd brought into her life previously. I was frightened wondering how her newly formed opinion of me would change our relationship. I didn't have to wonder for long.

"This," she gestured to her cuts and injured leg, "is *entirely* your fault."

"I know..." I interrupted, but she cut me off raising her hand up to silence me.

"I don't think you do. Because of *YOU* I was put into the position of being attacked tonight. Because *YOU CHOSE* to lie to me I was left vulnerable to some crazy killer that I'd never even known existed until last night."

"That's what I was trying to tell you Sookie. People like Madden fill my world. I hunt them down and kill them, but that makes me susceptible of becoming preyed upon as well. I heard him in the woods telling you he was only holding you to get to me and that's exactly why I did what I did back at the safe house. I didn't want to expose you to the kind of danger being with me would bring you." I quit talking while having an internal conscience war over whether or not I was doing the right thing by remaining here. I wanted her; needed her; loved her more than I ever thought possible, but could I be selfish enough to try and keep her? Would she even still *want* to be with me?

"Are you really that dense?" she asked. "How *dare* you decide what's best for *me*? It's *my life* and *my right to choose*. I *chose* to help rescue you and not call the authorities way back when. I *chose* to go with you back to the States to try and help find out who you were. I *chose* to take you home with me, here, and they were the best decisions I have ever made." Tears started

running down her cheeks and I tried to reach out to brush them away, but she knocked my hand to the side and continued on. "*MY* choices, *MY* decisions, allowed me to discover what true unconditional love is. Because of my choices I now know the difference between mere lust and undeniable passion; the difference between feeling just relaxed and genuine heartfelt contentment. My choices may have led me to make some sacrifices and put me in a few scary situations, but before tonight I didn't think I would ever regret my choice to surrender my heart to you."

Until that moment, the selfish part of me had held out hope that maybe things between Sookie and I would work out okay. Hearing her say she *didn't think she would regret* giving me her heart, I wasn't feeling so hopeful anymore and knowing she held all of the cards, I was completely helpless. The future I'd pictured barely 24 hours earlier was slipping away and I was powerless to stop it.

"But *you chose* to lie to me," she continued. "*You chose* to crush me, utterly devastate me, by making me believe that not only did you not remember me, but left me thinking I'd be alone in the memories of our relationship. Do you have any idea of how desolate you made me feel? You were *everything* to me, but you *chose* to push me away leaving me abandoned."

She broke down into uncontrollable sobs and my arms reached out for her with tears forming in my own eyes. Thankfully, Sookie let me hold her as she cried against my chest and all I could do was whisper '*I'm sorry; I was wrong*' over and over.

She shifted slightly and yelped in pain when her knee moved which brought an end to her tears as she pushed me away. Angry again, she snapped at me, "And *YOUR CHOICE* led to all of *THIS!* If you hadn't *lied to me* I wouldn't be hurt right now. If you hadn't *pushed me away*, I wouldn't have been running for my life. If you had *valued me and our relationship at all* I wouldn't have been staring down the barrel of a gun tonight."

"I did it to PROTECT YOU!" I shouted back. I wouldn't sit idly by and let her think she didn't mean the world to me. She was still my everything.

"Well I hope for your sake you never get assigned as a bodyguard because you do a piss poor job as one."

I was forming my retort when her voice lowered to barely a whisper as she said, "I want you to leave now."

*Leave?* I stared back at her and when she didn't respond I realized I hadn't said it out loud.

"Leave?"

"Yes, leave. Go back to wherever it is you came from."

My heart sunk and my brain screamed in protest while my body obeyed her command. I thought back to the very beginning when I'd contemplated going on alone to keep her from harm. I didn't

want to be apart from her even then at the start of it all, but now, like then, I knew I'd do it if she asked it of me. I'd do anything she asked. I always would.

My steps were slow moving down the hallway towards the front door. Looking around I remembered every moment we'd spent together within these walls and I didn't want to believe that there wouldn't be any more moments between us. Would I never again feel the warmth of her skin pressed against mine? Hear the sounds she would make as we made love? Taste the sweet cherry flavored gloss coating her lips? See the love in her eyes when she looked back at me?

I continued to move forward giving no thought to any of the material things I would be leaving behind. There was only one thing I wanted in this house, but unfortunately she was the one asking me to go. I had just stepped onto the porch when I heard Sookie yell, "Eric! Wait!"

*I would wait forever if she asked.*

My hopes rose up as I watched her limp down the hallway towards me while I looked for any sign that she forgave me, but once she reached the door my hopes were dashed by the look in her eyes.

Wordlessly, she held out her hand in front of her and when I held out my own, I felt the blood drain out of my face seeing what she'd dropped into it.

Her engagement ring.

Seeing it brought every hope and dream I'd had for us to the forefront of my mind and I cried, unashamed, begging, "Please don't do this Sookie. I love you."

Her voice broke with her reciprocal tears when she said, "But I don't even know who you are," and she shut the door.

Every hope; every dream; my entire future...gone.

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## **Chapter 18: Afraid**

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### Afraid

#### **SPOV**

The range of emotions I felt learning of Eric's lies whirled through me like a tornado, ripping away the already shattered pieces of my heart like they'd been held together by nothing stronger than the spray adhesive I'd used earlier that evening on Madden. After everything we'd been through together I couldn't understand why he would choose to intentionally hurt me the way he had, but the pain I felt initially believing he had no memory of me was nothing compared to the

hurt I now felt. I'd heard his apologies and felt the sincerity of his words, but the sting of his betrayal was too fresh; too raw. In my anger, I couldn't stand looking at him for another moment so I asked him to leave and go back to wherever it was he'd been before me; before us. Even as he walked out of our bedroom my heart was already begging him to stay, wanting him to fight for another chance at us, but when he didn't turn around or say another word the ache in my chest only grew larger. I wrenched my battered body from the bed and found the engagement ring on the closet floor before limping after him, resolving it would be the final time I would ever allow myself to go after Eric Northman. My grief overshadowed the pain I could see etched on his face as I handed it to him and his pleas fell on deaf ears; my heart just couldn't bear any more sorrow. When I shut the door in his tear stricken face it took every ounce of strength I had left in me to make my way back to bed where I collapsed into a sobbing ball of raw nerves. Eventually, thankfully, I cried myself to sleep.

## **PPOV**

Ending the call from Eric I turned to Siegbert and saw the relief in his eyes as I pulled off my latex gloves, so I gave him one last swift kick, lamenting over my already ruined Manolo's, saying, "While it's been fun Magilla Gorilla it seems I don't need you after all. Your master is dead." I turned to face Rasul and indicated with a slight raise of my eyebrow he should lock up the prisoner before I headed upstairs to change out of my blood splattered clothes. I hadn't planned on joining in with the festivities, or else I would have changed first, but I couldn't help myself sometimes feeling the need to add my expertise as it were.

I'd gone to check on Eric and Sookie's progress earlier, figuring I would be treated to the sounds of them fucking like rabbits after their reunion, but when I saw they were gone, along with the van, I'd traced its location with the built-in GPS to Bon Temps and assumed they'd decided to do their fucking at Sookie's home. When Eric called and relayed to me what happened I felt relieved Madden was finally dead while being pissed off that Sookie was foolish enough to have left the safe house on her own. It definitely fit with Eric's description of her lacking self preservation instincts, but I knew that trait could also be viewed as a tactical advantage if she were properly trained by the Alliance. Eric may have thought I was only kidding, but I had every intention of finding out Sookie's opinion on the matter.

Once Rasul joined me upstairs, I grabbed one of our spare cell phones for Eric and we went outside, climbing into my minivan so we could take Madden's body back with us to later be incinerated. Rasul drove while I called Indira on our way there, telling her to stop her now fruitless pursuit of Madden and then made a few other calls informing my counterparts within the Alliance of his demise as well as Compton's betrayal. As I ended the last call we were turning onto a rutted gravel driveway and I looked up to see the shuddering form of one of the most prolific and lethal assassins in the modern era. It was only when the chilly night's air hit my tongue did I realize my mouth was gaping open in shock. I don't *get* shocked. I don't *do* shocked, so I quickly snapped it shut and got out of the van stomping, as much as my Louboutin's would allow over the gravel and grass, to where Eric sat on the front porch steps.

"Are you *crying* again?" I asked incredulously. I could see the black velvet ring box he held in his hand and figured their reunion didn't go well.



"Fuck you Pam," he said, wiping the tears from his face.

"What's wrong now? Does she claim to not remember you?" Men were so fucking stupid sometimes it was no wonder I was a lesbian.

"I don't want to talk about it," he protested, pulling himself to his feet and heading towards the woods behind the house with Rasul trailing behind him carrying a rolled up body bag in his hand. I'd ruined enough pairs of shoes over the previous twenty four hours, so I opted to wait at the house. Given Eric's break down, I doubted Sookie would be receptive to my company at the moment so I stayed on the porch and took in my surroundings.

The Christmas tree lying underneath the front window with broken ornaments dangling from its branches left me perplexed, at first, and seeing the scattered trash bags littering her front yard had me thinking Sookie was a slob until I kicked one, accidentally ripping it open with the heel of my shoe, and saw it was filled with what I assumed was Eric's clothes. It answered the questions Eric had refused to and I wondered how long it would be before he would be fit for duty. Even with Madden dead, de Castro was still a matter of concern for the Alliance and I wanted him back within our ranks as soon as possible.

When they made their way back with Madden's dead body slung over Rasul's shoulder I watched Rasul put the body in the back of the van while Eric somberly picked up the trash bags from the yard and threw them on top before climbing inside himself.

"So that's it?" I asked. "You're just going to leave?"

"It's what she wants," he dully replied.

I highly doubted that, but if it would get him back on the job that much sooner, I was willing to let it go at the moment knowing I could always recruit Sookie later on.

"Well then quit acting like a big pussy already because I didn't bring either a handkerchief or a bullshit flag with me; both of which would be appropriate right now. In case you hadn't noticed, de Castro is still out there and I need you back on your A-game. I swear...*my* dick is bigger than yours right now."

I tossed the cell phone I'd brought for him into his lap and got one foot inside the van when he said, "I'm done. I'm not coming back to the Alliance."

"What?" I gritted my teeth to keep from making the shocked face again. I'd known he wasn't happy prior to his whole amnesia thing, but none of us were the type to ever really be happy. Amused maybe, content even, but not happy. I'd thought he would want to throw himself back into his work as a way to block out whatever ailed him, but it seemed I was wrong. He'd changed while he'd been away and, in my opinion, it wasn't for the better.

Eric stared back at the farmhouse with the same longing on his face that I got seeing the new Chanel line every year during Fashion Week. His voice was hoarse as he said, "It's not who I am anymore."

"Fuck this bullshit," I snapped, pulling my foot out of the van. I looked to Rasul saying, "Take him back to the safe house. If he tries to leave, shoot him," and slammed the van door. I knew Eric could take out Rasul before he could even form the thought to try and defend himself, but I also knew Eric wouldn't harm a fellow agent unless he was forced to. I hoped for Rasul's sake he wasn't so far gone down the rabbit hole that he felt cornered and lashed out after they left.

I turned back towards the farmhouse and heard the engine come to life behind me with Eric yelling out the open window, "Pam! What are you doing?"

"My job!" I yelled back as Rasul tore down the driveway before Eric could say another word. My phone was ringing a minute later and once I saw the caller ID flash Eric's new number across the screen, I shut it off. I knew he would keep calling otherwise and I didn't need any distractions while I did what I was paid to do and fixed the mess he'd made for himself.

## **SPOV**

My head was pounding when I woke up the next morning and the smell of fresh coffee in the air didn't register as odd right away. That is, until I opened my eyes and saw Pam sitting in a chair at the side of my bed with a mug in her hand.

"It's about time," she huffed. I watched her eyes travel around my still wrecked bedroom as she said, "I love what you've done with the place. Not so much 'shabby chic', more 'trailer trash'. Is that the style you were going for?"

"What are you doing here?" I'd never felt so defeated in my life and all I wanted to do was stay in bed for the next few years to wallow in my sorrow. Was that asking too much?

"What happened with Madden last night? Rasul informed he had third degree burns covering two thirds of his body and it smells like you held a bayou barbeque in your living room."

"That's classified." Take that Ms. Snarky Smug Face.

She smiled saying, "*Touché*."

I didn't want her admiration, so I asked again, "What are you doing here?"

"Dear Abby says females need other females to bond with and spill their guts out over relationship issues, especially when one is in despair. So here I am. Spill."

"Huh?" Was she serious? "Do you even *know* what despair feels like?" My instincts said 'No'.

She looked offended and I almost felt bad until she opened her mouth and began to speak.

"Of course I do! I'll give you an example." Pam's eyes looked up to the ceiling in thought before she said, "Here's one; there was a formal event I had to attend at the White House last year. It was all a bunch of schmoozing the new administration and the visiting Japanese monarchy, so I searched high and low for the perfect dress and ended up having to call in a favor from one of my favorite designers, Vera Wang. She came up with a stunning creation in blue silk with cream colored flowers and green leaves that was to die for. We emailed the finer details back and forth before I flew to New York for the final fittings and I felt like a million bucks when I strode through the doors the night of the event. So imagine how I felt when Compton walked in with his date wearing *my dress*! That ass had seen the designs and emails on my desk and even asked me about them like he was interested. I should've put two and two together then and just had him shot out back," she huffed all red-faced.

"Are you seriously comparing my heartache to you wearing the same dress as someone else?" I asked in disbelief.

"Sookie," she said exasperatedly, "I fretted over that dress for months. I fought with Vera on the length and making it sleeveless. *Fought with Vera!*" Her whole body shuddered before she continued saying, "And Compton stole it like the bastard he was and somehow had a knockoff made, draping it over his self-important mule of a date, Selah something. I'm jealous that you were the one to end him when I've dreamt of doing that very same thing ever since that night. So you see? I *do* know what despair feels like."

I gave my instincts a pat on the back as I picked up the cup of coffee and took a sip before saying in a monotone voice, "Oh you poor thing. How did you ever recover from such a traumatic experience?"

From the animated look in her eyes, I guessed I didn't inject enough sarcasm into my voice because she said, "Oh, I knocked that bitch out with a sleeper hold in the ladies room and stuffed her unconscious body inside of a broom closet. Compton looked for her for hours with me telling him she must have heard about his tiny dick and left. So you see my friend? It's up to us to heal our own hearts. We are in charge of making our own destiny."

She was unbelievable. "We're not friends Pam and after that story I doubt you even have a heart."

"Oh, but I do!" she countered. "It nearly beats out of my chest every spring and fall when I attend Fashion Week in New York City. You shall have to come with me next year and I'll even let you cop a feel so you can see for yourself that I have a heartbeat." The predatory gleam in her eye at the thought made me a little uncomfortable and I nervously glanced around the room looking for more makeshift weapons. Pam continued talking completely oblivious of my weaponry search. "Besides, if you come with me I won't get stuck sitting next to Lollipop Girl like I did last year."

"Who?" I knew I shouldn't prolong this bizarre conversation by asking any questions, but I couldn't seem to help myself.

"I don't know her real name, but she looks like a lollipop. You know, stick body making her head look like it's a hundred times bigger than it really is. I think she's supposed to be an actress or something and has some jewelry line... TackyMint? Something like that, but every time I see her she's wearing beige. *Beige!* And these hideous *beige* ankle boots!" Pam's nose wrinkled in disgust, but I was done humoring her. I just wanted to climb back underneath my blankets and stay there.

"Why are you here Pam?" I was pretty sure I already asked her that question, more than once, but my frazzled brain wasn't working very well at the moment.

She eyed me carefully before admitting, "I came here to ask you how you really feel about Eric."

I lay back down in the bed and pulled the covers over my head mumbling, "It doesn't matter anymore."

I didn't even hear her move before the covers were pulled halfway down my body as she said, "Quit hiding, from me and yourself. Where's the girl I saw throwing knives, killing everyone in her path to keep her man safe? Just spit it out. How. Do. You. Really. Feel?"

"BETRAYED! HURT! ANGRY! SCARED! ALONE!" My screams turned into sobs as I buried my face into my pillow and Pam remained quiet until I was all cried out.

"But do you still love him?" she asked.

"It doesn't matter. He doesn't care enough about me, or us, to even want to try," I admitted softly.

"What makes you say that?"

"When I asked him to leave last night he didn't even try to convince me otherwise." I felt weepy all over again remembering it all.

Pam shook her head seeming annoyed and said, "Sookie, men are stupid when it comes to what women want. It's why I'm a lesbian. Eric heard you say that you wanted him to leave, so in *his* mind he was simply doing what *you* wanted. But, trust me, leaving you was the *last* thing he wanted to do last night."

"If he really cared, he would have fought to stay," I protested.

"You're not living in some fairytale romance you stupid girl," she spat out. "Life sucks. Shit doesn't always go your way. Deal with it. And you're being a hypocrite if *you* don't care enough about *him* to fight for whatever you two had, so if that's the path you choose then you owe me roughly one million dollars."

"What in the hell are you talking about?" I asked, totally ignoring the nagging feeling I had over her using the word 'hypocrite'.

"Well I transferred a quarter mil into your bank account this morning for helping keep Eric safe, but your new balance falls well below what you'll need to pay me back."

"I told you I don't want that money! And pay you back for what?" I asked, my gloom giving way to anger.

"Then donate it to charity for all I care. And the million dollars is the cost of Eric's training. You broke my best agent and turned him into a giant pussy. He quit on me last night so now I need a new one."

He quit? I fought back the urge to defend him and instead just mumbled, "I doubt I broke him."

Pam stood up in a huff and the anger evident on her face frightened me as she spoke. "Believe what you want. I can see there's no getting through that thick skull of yours and, frankly, if this is how you choose to act then you're not worthy of him. I don't think highly of very many people, but he's one of the most honorable men I've ever known and, while he did make a mistake in lying to you at first, he only did it with the best of intentions wanting to keep you safe. If you ever pull your head out of your ass long enough to realize the *big* mistake you're making right now, I left his new number by the phone in your kitchen. But, if you're not willing to let him back into your life, don't use it."

I heard her heels storming down the hallway and the front door slam seconds later, leaving me to chew over her words while I cried myself back to sleep.

I stayed in bed for days on end, only leaving it to use the bathroom or get a drink of water. It took me two days to finish eating the piece of toast and banana I had left sitting on the nightstand next to the bed. I'd noticed on my first venture out of the bedroom that someone had put the Christmas tree back in the living room, but I didn't have the energy to drag it back out so I ignored it, hoping it would just go away and take my heartache with it.

My mind told me I couldn't hide in bed forever, but every time I tried to get up and move around the house, everything I saw reminded me of Eric so I gave up and crawled back into my hidey hole made up of Gran's quilts on the bed. The bed; it held now painful memories of Eric too, but as long as I kept my eyes closed and my head covered I could pretend I was anywhere but there. It was no use though because as soon as I would fall asleep, my dreams would betray my desire to hide by having Eric star in them and I always woke up in tears. It made no difference if it was a good dream or a nightmare, they all hurt just the same.

When a week had passed I decided it was time to pull up my big girl panties and get out of bed once and for all. The fact that the phone hadn't rung once, nor had I had any visitors after Pam left, brought my loneliness to the forefront so I made a decision to end my pity party and get on with my life. I still believed that if Eric truly wanted to be with me, he would have made contact by now. I only knew one side of him, but how closely that resembled who he really was as a whole, I had no idea. I missed him terribly and more than once I had started dialing his number before hanging up halfway through. I now understood he'd acted impulsively and foolishly out of his need to protect me, but no matter what I'd said that night in anger, it didn't explain his

complete withdrawal from my life unless it was what he really wanted. His absence made me believe that might be the case and I knew I wouldn't be able to withstand his rejection a second time, so I was afraid to put myself out there by making the first move. However, I did allow a very small part of myself to hope he might call. His silence was deafening.

I showered and did laundry before heading to the grocery store since everything in the refrigerator had expired during my time in bed. Although I had been faced with the Christmas tree taunting me daily from my living room, it hadn't occurred to me that Christmas was just a couple of days away at that point. It had always been my favorite holiday, but I had no Christmas cheer in me this year. Jason was spending the holidays with his flavor of the month at her parents' condo in Cancun and while I knew I'd always be welcome at Tara and JB's, the baby was old enough this year to enjoy opening his presents so I didn't want to intrude on their family time.

I had no desire to cook a big meal just for myself, so I stocked up on some sliced turkey and ham from the deli counter and figured that would be my Christmas dinner. On my way home I noticed the local nursery was selling grave blankets, so I stopped and bought ones for my parents' and grandparents' graves. After putting the groceries away at home, I carried them out to the cemetery next to the house and placed them on top of each of their resting spots, missing them all very much, but especially Gran.

I prayed to her for guidance on what I should do about Eric knowing she would have been the one I would have turned to for advice if she had still been alive. Would it be better to just let him go and try and move on, or should I take a chance with my heart once more and call him. I was no closer to coming to a decision than I had been the morning I'd talked to Pam so I asked for her to give me a sign.

"Sookie?" I heard from behind, startling me enough to jump forward with a yelp.

I turned to see Octavia standing there holding a Christmas themed cookie tin in her hand and I instantly recalled our last meeting had been when I'd come to see Bill Compton and the death glares she'd been shooting at me for flirting with him. She was Team Eric all the way, but, then again, I couldn't imagine anyone ever being on Team Bill.

I couldn't stand the thought of her hating me too, so I said, "Octavia, I'm so sorry for how I acted the last time I stopped by. It wasn't what it looked like, I swear..."

She raised her hand to silence me and smiled saying, "I know, your Eric already explained."

My Eric? He wasn't *my Eric* any longer, but I still had to ask, "What? When did you see him?" The fact he had stopped by to see Octavia but not me, had me fighting back tears yet again.

"Yesterday afternoon," she replied. "Apparently Mr. Compton's nephew had already gotten the ball rolling on getting him moved into that nursing home, but I had no clue until the ambulance showed up yesterday to take him away. None of his things were packed so I made them wait while I threw whatever I could into suitcases when, out of nowhere, Eric appeared at the front

door with a court order naming him as Mr. Compton's guardian, saying his nephew met an untimely end. I didn't know he had those kinds of strings to pull, but he must because he sent them away and asked me to quit the agency I worked for to work for Mr. Compton privately. He told me he knew I genuinely cared about Mr. Compton's welfare and trusted I would see to him properly, letting him live out his final days in the comfort of the only home he's ever known. He even doubled my salary."

There was no holding back the tears after hearing of what Eric had done and I had no doubt that he had done it for me. He knew how much it had upset me knowing Mr. Compton's fate because all I could picture was my Gran in the same predicament and it bothered me Mr. Compton's only family would shuttle him off like that. It gave me hope that maybe the Eric with all of his memories intact wasn't so different from the Eric I had known.

"What did Eric explain about that night?" I wondered out loud. I couldn't imagine he would have told her the entire truth.

"Just that you were trying to find out some information from Mr. Compton's nephew so you could try and stop whatever it was he might be up to. He said you'd met Bill a long time ago and didn't trust that his intentions towards Mr. Compton would be honorable so you used your feminine wiles to get some answers," she smiled knowingly. I still felt dirty having shamelessly flirted with him that night.

She placed her hand on my arm and said softly, "He also said that he made a very big mistake that cost him his relationship with you." The volume of my tears increased significantly and I watched her pull a handkerchief from her pocket, handing it to me while I wondered if I was the only person on the planet that *didn't* carry one around. I wiped the tears from my eyes as she said, "He didn't say what the mistake was, but he seemed genuinely remorseful. I think he misses you terribly and by the looks of it you miss him too."

I could only nod so she continued, "I don't know what happened, but if you can find it in your heart to forgive him, I think you should. He's worth it," she ended with a wink. *Yep, definitely Team Eric.* She handed me the tin of Christmas cookies she'd been on her way over to give me and wished me a happy holiday saying she might stop by the next night. I watched her heading back to Mr. Compton's house, leaving me to my thoughts and it was only when I turned to head home, and the wind blew Gran's grave blanket askew, did it dawn on me that maybe Octavia's impromptu visit was the very sign I'd been asking for.

I busied myself the rest of the night by cleaning the house top to bottom, since it had been awhile since I'd had the energy to do much more than brush my teeth, as I thought about nothing but Eric. Before then I'd been trying so desperately to avoid all thoughts of him, but now I wanted to sort through everything I knew about him to determine how I really felt. I played every 'What if' scenario I could dream up wondering what would happen if I found the courage to put my heart on the line again. He might still be sad about what happened between us, but that didn't mean he wanted me back. He hadn't said those words to either Pam or Octavia so it was all pure speculation as far as I was concerned. I wrestled with my thoughts into the early morning hours until sleep finally took me.

Ever since that horrible night when I'd left Shreveport without Eric, I hadn't had a decent night's sleep. I'd stayed in bed for days, in and out of consciousness, but my sleep was always fitful so I never really felt rested. But when I woke up the next day on Christmas Eve, and saw that it was already after 2 o'clock in the afternoon, I felt rejuvenated. I couldn't remember waking up at all during the night and it showed on my face. The dark circles underneath my eyes had faded away and although I'd lost a few pounds too many when I'd stopped eating I still looked healthier than I had just a day earlier. All of my injuries were healed so I almost felt like myself again. I say 'almost' because I was still missing a very large part of myself; about 6 foot 4 inches of myself.

I showered and changed before heading into the kitchen to make some coffee when I noticed the pitiful looking Christmas tree still sitting in the living room. I hadn't kept up with watering it so it now looked more like Charlie Brown's Christmas tree with most of the needles scattered underneath it and a few of the branches were broken from when it bore the brunt of my frustration.

I still hadn't come to any decisions on whether or not I would try and call Eric. I missed him more than I thought possible, but I was terrified even more thinking he might not feel the same. If I called him and found out he wanted nothing to do with me, it would destroy me. I knew I couldn't allow myself to sit on the fence forever where he was concerned so once I had a fresh cup of coffee I dug out another box of ornaments and decorated the tree while I tried to figure out what to do.

Since the winter solstice had passed only days earlier, the sky was already dark by the time I finished. I didn't dare put any lights on the tree, afraid it would burst into flames from being so dry, and it looked pretty pitiful given half of the ornaments I would have normally used were long gone, thrown away in the trash after they'd been broken during my rampage. I lit a fire in the fireplace instead and turned on some Christmas music, but it didn't help me get into the Christmas spirit any. And the only present I had to put under the tree was the one I had put together for Eric.

I went and dug it out from its hiding spot in the linen closet underneath the towels and sat down on the couch flipping through page after page of photos of Eric and me together. On every outing we'd gone to together since arriving in Bon Temps, I made sure to have someone take our picture together. Every special occasion, every backyard barbeque and even some moments of just the two of us all alone at home. Seeing our happier times together made me miss him even more and it dawned on me that up until that night in Shreveport, we'd had nothing but happy times together once we'd gotten to Bon Temps. I longed for that feeling again and knew deep down, he was the only one I would ever feel that way with.

He'd told me more than once that he didn't care if his memories never returned; he would make new memories with me. The album was full of them, but I wondered how he felt now that he had his other memories to compare them to. Would he fight to get back what we had? I realized Pam had been right in calling me a hypocrite and I decided at that moment that I would fight whatever I had to, to have him back no matter what it might cost me in the end. The question was, would he?



There was only one way to find out.

I picked up the cordless phone and started dialing the number I had long since memorized with my heart thumping wildly in my chest. The phone only rang once before I heard the voice I'd longed to hear for what seemed like forever say, "Sookie?" He sounded unsure, afraid, and hopeful all at the same time. I knew it, because I felt the same exact way.

"I just called to see how you're doing," I said, with my fear of rejection keeping my mouth from blurting out the whole truth.

"I've been better." He sounded different somehow, but then, so did I.

I was still feeling like a chicken shit so I made small talk while trying to bolster my courage and said, "I spoke to Octavia yesterday. I appreciate what you did for Mr. Compton. She's still a fan of yours." I couldn't help but smile a little at the truth of that statement. I was caught off guard by his next one.

"Is she the only one?"

His voice was so low, I barely heard him, but I was still afraid to answer him. Once I let my true feelings be known, there would be no taking them back. From him or from me and my heart was still barely being held together as it was. So, once again, I took the chicken shit approach and pretended I didn't hear him by saying, "I spoke to Pam last week. She told me you quit. Do you have any idea of what you're going to do with your life now?"

I'd been wondering about that a lot in the time since he'd been gone. Would he go back to New York? Did he really live somewhere else? Another country? I could hear the footsteps climbing up the porch steps and figured Octavia had made good on her promise to stop by, so I slowly walked towards the front door while waiting for Eric's reply.

"That depends," he said vaguely.

"On what?" I wondered aloud and upon hearing the faint knock against the front door, I opened it still waiting on his answer. I dropped the phone upon seeing my visitor.

Eric stood there looking like he held the weight of the world on his shoulders as he brought the phone down from his ear and said, "On you."

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## **Chapter 19: Home Again**

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### Home Again

**EPOV**

Pam was right, I was a pussy. I'd been *thisclose* to Sookie when I'd stopped by Compton's house waving my court order in the EMT's faces and making them leave, but I didn't have the balls to go knock on her door. I'd done a lot of thinking over the previous two days and now that my memories had returned I was afraid she wouldn't want the real me. I'd done some pretty bad shit over the last few years, not that the subjects of my deeds didn't deserve it, but still. Sookie had a kind soul and an even bigger heart, so I wasn't so sure how she would take to the real me or if I'd ever even have to chance to tell her about any of it.

I didn't know where Pam was getting her information from, but as soon as I'd returned to the safe house from Compton's, she was waiting for me with her hand out. I'd thought she had returned to Washington so I was surprised to even see her there and when I'd asked what she wanted, she said, "Your Man Card, it's been revoked." Now that my memories had returned, so did the knowledge of the favors I held throughout the world. Within hours her collection of hats lost an unfortunate fight with the Potomac River, but I'm sure the resident geese and ducks found them amusing. I certainly did.

As soon as we'd returned to the safe house from Sookie's (I no longer felt right calling it 'home') I hopped into a cab and went straight to the airport taking the first available flight back to New York. Rasul just looked at me, knowing better than to try and stop me, and I didn't give a flying fuck what Pam would think about me leaving. I had to get away, knowing I would find it next to impossible to stay away from Sookie. She had asked me to leave and the only way I knew to comply with her wishes was to put as many miles between us as I could stand.

Returning to my New York apartment, however, was no better because everywhere I looked I was reminded of our time together there. It was where we'd first made love so I buried myself within the sheets that had long since lost her scent and remained there for days. Pam called too many times, but since she was smart enough to have mentioned she'd given Sookie that phone number I wouldn't turn it off in case she decided to call me. I was pathetic and I didn't care in the least. Sookie had changed me. Gone were the feelings of restlessness, the call for battle; replaced by the call for her. I knew that would never change, nor did I want it to. I just wanted her.

I spent my time in New York thinking over *everything*. In a way, Sookie was right when she'd said she didn't know who I was. While the man she knew and had fallen in love with was real, it was only one side of me. I had a much darker side that she'd never been exposed to and I wasn't so sure that I wanted her to be. Now that I had all of my memories of who I was *before* Sookie, I had to find a way to make it mesh with who I'd become *because of* Sookie. I'd lain in bed for days just staring at the ceiling, wondering what she was doing. I wanted to lash out in anger and beat my frustrations out on someone, anyone, but I knew I only had myself to blame so I stayed put. I barely slept with every minute seemingly taking an hour to tick by and as the days dragged on I could feel my willpower slowly slipping away and knew I had to go back. I couldn't stand being so far away from her and ended up back in Louisiana with nothing more than the clothes on my back. It was the first time I could ever remember doing something without having planned it out first. I had no plan at all, just an undeniable longing to have her in my arms again; to have her love me again.

And that was how I ended up walking towards the farmhouse on Christmas Eve. The sight of it alone brought with it memory upon memory of when I lived there with Sookie. At the time, I'd felt like it was my home, our home, but seeing it didn't bring me any feelings of being home again. It had never been the house; Sookie had been my home.

While I was a man without a plan, what I lacked in strategy, I made up for in determination. One way or another she would hear what I had to say. Even if it changed nothing between us, I couldn't walk away for good without fighting for *us* one last time. I was pacing in her front yard trying to come up with what I would say once I knocked on her front door when I felt my phone vibrating in my pocket. I had no doubt Pam knew exactly where I was at the moment, so I almost ignored it thinking it was her. I was so glad I didn't.

Hearing Sookie's voice again, hesitant as it might have been, eased the tension in my chest that I'd been carrying since I'd last seen her. While she'd ignored my question of whether or not she was a fan of mine, like Octavia, the mere fact she'd been the one to call me gave me hope that maybe; just maybe, we could find our way back. I was willing to do whatever it took to have her back in my arms again so the fate of my future depended on whether or not she felt the same.

I was surprised I was even able to form the response when she'd opened the door. Her eyes were lined with dark circles underneath them and it was obvious she'd dropped a few pounds since I'd last seen her, making her appear even more fragile in my eyes. I wanted nothing more than to scoop her up into my arms and protect her from everything that dared to try and harm her. But I didn't because I knew it was my foolish notions of trying to protect her by lying to her that caused it all to begin with.

"Eric?" The sound of her voice pulled me from my mind's silent appraisal.

"I love you." The words were spoken from my heart before my brain had a chance to do anything about it. It was true, I did love her, but I also didn't want to scare her away before I had a chance to tell her everything I needed her to hear. *That's what happens when you don't have a plan*, my brain chided me.

She opened her mouth to respond, but I held my hand up wanting to put it all out there before she could tell me to go. "You were right when you said you didn't know who I was and, to be honest, I'm terrified of what your reaction will be once you find out. But I'll tell you all of it, every secret; every lie; every truth. Before my time with you I was a loner; I preferred it that way. I thought I led a full and somewhat satisfying life with no need to share it with anyone else. And then I met you. I remember walking into that shack you worked at and feeling my heart jump in my chest when I first laid eyes on you. Your voice washed over me like a warm summer's breeze and for the first time I had to fight the urge to stay there with you and abandoning my mission altogether. I felt a pull towards you from that very moment, but now...after everything we've been through together; after everything we've shared...now it's like you're the sun in my world. I can't help but to gravitate towards you. You're the only light and warmth in my life and it was something I never even knew I was missing. Without you I feel lost...incomplete. I told you once, in the beginning, no matter what we found out about my past, *you* felt like home to me. Sookie, those words have never been truer."

The words spilling from my mouth, while true, sounded cheesy even to me. I could see the tears forming in her eyes as I spoke, they mirrored my own, but I couldn't tell up from down at that point and had no idea whether or not that was a good sign. The thought of losing her forever ate away at me from the inside out. With my memories restored I knew exactly who and what I was; an assassin, maybe the best in the world. But the tiny woman in front of me could bring me down with nothing more lethal than her rejection and being the survivalist I am, I did what I was trained to never do. I begged.

Falling to my knees in front of her I said, "I'm sorry for lying to you. I'm sorry for hurting you and getting you hurt. Sookie, if you ask me to leave I'll do my best to abide by your wishes, but I honestly don't know if I can. I..."

My words were cut off when Sookie flung herself at me, burying her face into my neck and saying, "All I needed to hear was that you still love me. The rest is just details."

Having her in my arms again felt exactly like I'd told her; I was finally home again.

She pulled back and looked into my eyes whispering, "I love you Eric."

It was as if I could see the broken shards my life had consisted of swirling in the air around us, each of them clicking back into place and making me whole again. My lungs expanded as though I'd been underwater for far too long, her words being the oxygen I needed to survive. There was nothing I wouldn't do for the woman in my arms because I was nothing without her.

"I love you too Sookie."

I don't know which one of us moved first, but our lips met each other's softly, almost hesitantly. It was nothing like the furious clash of our first kiss back in my apartment, but it felt like a first kiss just the same. In a way, it was; it was our first kiss without the baggage of fears and doubts of the unknowns our lives were made up of back then. I *knew* who she was and she was learning who I was. Having been without her for so long, I wanted to savor every moment I had with her and was merely grateful being with her again.

So we stayed, wrapped up in each other's arms and kissing as though we were lying on a hammock on a beach instead of on our knees, on the porch, on Christmas Eve. One hand fisted into her hair, holding her face to mine, while the other trailed down to the small of her back, pressing her body against my own.

I would have happily stayed that way for hours until I noticed Sookie was trembling, so I pulled back saying, "You're cold Lover. You should go inside." I had no expectations of how the night would turn out and I didn't know if she'd want me to stay. I was simply happy knowing she still loved me.

Sookie had her own thoughts on the subject and voiced them succinctly. "We should go inside." She stood up, taking my hand in her own and leading me inside before shutting the door behind

us. "If you think I'm letting you get away that easily, you have another thing coming Mr. Northman," she ended with a smile.

*Fine with me*, I thought. I started heading towards the couch thinking Sookie would want to talk, but she pulled me towards the bedroom with the hand she'd not let go of yet. I hesitated, not wanting her to think I expected anything from her, given everything we'd been through since I got my memories back, and started saying, "Sookie, I don't want you to think I expect anything or that we have..."

She silenced me by twirling back around and kissing me stupid, my arms automatically wrapping around her, before she pulled back saying, "Make love to me Eric."

Like I said, there was nothing I wouldn't do for the woman in my arms...

I picked her up, with her legs wrapping around my waist, and kissed her all the way into the bedroom before laying her down in the center of it. I let my jacket drop from my shoulders onto the floor and kicked off my boots, not tying them came in handy, before crawling my way up until I was hovering over her body. Kissing my way down from her lips, I started at her chin and slowly moved across her jaw to my favorite spot under her ear. I couldn't help smiling at the involuntary shiver that ran through her body knowing, at the moment, she was anything but cold. The smell of her soaps and lotions, along with her unique scent, invaded my senses and I inhaled them deeply knowing it was one of the things I missed most about her while we'd been apart. Everything about her was addictive to me and I needed my fix.

The feel of Sookie's hands slipping underneath the hem of my shirt so her fingers could trail along my back made me abandon my plans to huff her scent like she was a Sookie sized can of Dust-Off and instead I trailed my kisses down her neck, nipping my way across her shoulder and licking my way back along her collarbone. Then I started all over again on her other side.

While I moved at a snail's pace across her skin, Sookie's legs had wrapped around my waist again with her hips finding a slow rhythm, grinding against my jean clad erection. I couldn't help moaning against her skin and caught a hint of a smile flash across her lips, knowing the effect she was having on me. It was pure torture, but one I would gladly endure. Once I finished my path across her collarbone I moved back to her lips, pulling her lower lip in between my own while my hands slipped underneath her. Holding her ass in place, I did a little grinding of my own and slanted my mouth over hers to swallow the cry it produced.

My actions and Sookie's response to them had both of us wanting to speed things along. Her hands started pulling at the hem of my shirt in an attempt to pull it over my head, so I sat up on my knees, but I pulled her body up with me. We removed each other's shirts at the same time with our lips only parted long enough for them pass over our heads before joining up again. I had her bra undone and off her body completely a second later before pressing her back down onto the mattress with nothing more than the weight of my body on top of hers. Feeling her hardened nipples pressed against my bare chest was the only thing that made leaving her lips bearable and knowing what awaited my attention farther down her body caused my whole body to throb with anticipation.

My tongue swirled a wet trail around her rose colored peak before sucking it in between my lips and lapping my tongue over and over across it while Sookie buried her hands in the hair on the back of my head. Her breaths were shallow and her body flushed with desire, with all communication between us whittled down to nothing more than sighs and moans. When I moved over to pay equal attention to her other breast, I let my hand trail down her stomach and into the front of her jeans. I was momentarily distracted by the fact that they shouldn't have been loose enough for my hand to fit and made a mental note to get her to eat something later, but when my fingers dipped into the moist heat awaiting me there as Sookie's hips bucked up into my hand while she grunted in pleasure, my focus became singular once more.

I redoubled my efforts with my mouth at her breast, with my free hand gently kneading the other, and slipped a finger of my other hand inside of Sookie causing her back to arch up off the bed with only the force of my mouth and hand keeping her in place. Her head thrashed from side to side as her hips thrust up into my hand, grinding her clit against my palm. Her arousal flowed freely making my hand slick with her juices and all I wanted to do was taste her, but she was too close to climaxing for me to take the time to pull her jeans off. I could be patient. When I slipped a second finger inside of her, it was her undoing and the sounds she made were almost *my* undoing. Her whole body tensed as her inner muscles clamped down on my fingers and I looked up in time to see her eyes had rolled into the back of her head before squeezing shut while she gasped air into her lungs.

Seeing the way I affected her made me painfully harder, but I still hadn't had any of her addictive taste yet so I made quick work of pulling her jeans and underwear from her body. Sookie tried to sit up with her hands reaching for my waistband, but I pushed her back down on the bed. Her indignant grunt was met with my growl as I bit her side, demanding her submission, and again noticed her ribs were showing more than they had before. My next growl against her skin was in frustration that she hadn't taken better care of herself, but before I could fall into the abyss of knowing it was all my fault, her giggling from her extreme ticklishness pulled me back into the moment.

I stared down at her naked body laid before me like a dream come true and answered prayer all in one, hardly believing my luck in all things Sookie. Luck that she came looking for and found me that day in the ocean; luck that she convinced her surrogate family to not only save my life, but not call the police; luck that she had a kind heart, but an even braver spirit when she didn't abandon me when things got scary; luck that she actually loved me back. I was a luckiest man alive.

The first swipe of my tongue parting through her folds caused both of us to make sounds of approval; hers from the sensation and mine from the taste. In the past, with other women, it was something I'd never thought of as more than a means to an end, but it was something I actually *craved* with Sookie. I craved each and every whimper, moan, and scream I could coax from her lips. If I could live on nothing but what I feasted on between her thighs, I would never know hunger and probably put on a few pounds if I had my way.

I lightly stroked my tongue up and down, barely touching every nook, cranny and curve I'd memorized long ago while licking away every bit of her essence I came across. I knew my

teasing attempts at stoking her fire again had worked when she grabbed my head and wiggled her hips whispering, "Please..."

Her every wish would forever be my command so I held her hips in my hands as I dove forward with purpose. My tongue no longer danced across her sensitive skin; it demanded she yield to me. I wanted the pleasure of her coming from nothing more than my tongue and I wouldn't be denied. Thrusting and swirling in and out of where another part of my anatomy longed to be, her hips bucked and jerked with staccato breaths intermingled with strangled cries hissing from her throat as she crested higher. When I wrapped my tongue around her clit, suckling and flicking the engorged flesh over and over, her thighs pressed against each side of my head as her body tensed and she screamed out again with her release.

If I had feathers I would have been preening right about then now that I was done preening her.

Sookie was still coming down from her orgasm high, not noticing I'd taken the time to remove what was left of my clothing until she felt every part of me pressing against her naked body. I watched as her eyes eventually focused on mine and only when her legs wrapped around my waist, letting me know she was once again cognizant, did I lean down and whisper, "I love you Sookie," against her lips as I pushed inside of her.

For the second time that night I felt like I was home again.

I wanted to go slow and draw out every part of our reunion, but it didn't take long for me to realize how much of a fight I had in front of me. Immediately I was nearly lost in her heat. I shuddered feeling her muscles spasm along my length as I buried myself inside of her to the hilt. She gasped while I groaned; her fingernails dug into my back while my teeth imprinted on her shoulder. My mind grasped at invisible straws trying to think of anything but Sookie and the way she was making me feel so I'd last longer than a 14 year old boy locked in the bathroom with a Victoria's Secret catalog. It was the sounds that did me in. The sound of our joining; the slapping of flesh against flesh slickened by the flavors I still savored on my tongue had me well on my way to apologizing, yet again tonight, only this time for coming before her.

I should have known my Sookie would come to my rescue again because her chanting of my name built in crescendo until she punctuated it by sobbing out, "I love you!" as her inner walls clenched around me, so I didn't have to even try to hold back my own hoarse cries as I emptied inside of her.

When our breathing evened out and our heart rates slowed to normal, I reluctantly pulled out of her and fell to her side, quickly pulling her sweaty body flush against mine. I thought our tears were done, for the night at least, but both of us welled up when she trailed her finger along my cheek and looked in my eyes whispering, "Merry Christmas Eric, I'm glad you came home."

Over the following weeks Sookie and I spent virtually every minute together. It took a lot of coaxing, but I eventually got her to agree to keep the money Pam wired into her account and I had enough money socked away that neither one of us would ever have to work again if we didn't want to. Out of necessity, we told one last lie to our friends and neighbors in Bon Temps. I

was quite the spectacle at first when they'd heard I had been in the witness protection program after witnessing a murder (little did they know, I was the one committing them prior to my arrival in their town), but the killer had been killed himself, so I was now free to resume my real identity.

When Sookie and I were alone is when I told her everything about my past, leaving absolutely nothing out. I sugarcoated nothing, nor did I omit any detail no matter how insignificant. I wanted nothing left standing between us to give her a reason to pause and lose her trust in me again. It was the most detailed debriefing I'd ever given in my life, warts and all, but with every touch of her hand or kiss from her lips after learning some new 'thing' from my past, I felt a little more of her light seeping into my darkened soul. It took three months before she finally knew all of it. I waited until then, for her to truly *know* me, before doing what I'd been longing to do.

I was surprised that *she* was surprised when I dropped down on bended knee in front of her, figuring she must have been expecting me to propose at some point, so she was only more beautiful when her stunned expression turned into one of amazement when she answered, "Yes."

Pam still called like clockwork, once a week, to check in with us. She still hadn't given up trying to get me back into the Alliance and she seemed sincere saying she wanted Sookie as well. Given Pam had a thing for curvy blonds; I had no doubts she wanted Sookie. Even with her irritating brass balls, I had to admit to having a certain fondness for her and knowing she had the personality of an annoying but lethal Chihuahua, I was surprised when she and Sookie seemed to forge a true friendship. I'd never known Pam to have any friends, but they would hear them giggling on the phone to each other laughing about something 'tacky' or 'minty'... I had no clue.

I didn't really *miss* working, but there were times when I'd see something on the news about certain people I knew to be on our, or the Alliance's, watch list and couldn't help speculating on how my choice to stay in Bon Temps with Sookie might have altered the paths of others, both good and bad. People like de Castro still walked the earth, unaccountable for their actions, and a part of me felt selfish for not doing what I'd been trained to do. It was only a very *small* part of me that felt that way because there was no way in hell the rest of me would be okay being away from Sookie for weeks at a time while I chased bad guys all across the globe.

It was on a Sunday morning in early April while sitting side by side with Sookie on the couch that I learned my 'last mission' had been completed. Sookie was looking at wedding dresses on her laptop for our small ceremony, to be held in June, while I watched the morning news. Even though we had enough money in our bank accounts that our future children wouldn't have to work either, Sookie would only give in to 'splurging' on her dress. The ceremony would be held in our backyard with her brother, Tara and JB, Tray, Octavia, and her friend Amelia as our only guests. Pam too, if she behaved between now and then.

Looking at the television screen, I knew the location before the newscaster uttered their first word of what I was looking at; after all, I'd seen enough aerial shots and satellite pictures. The crater and billowing smoke was new though.

"That's de Castro's military base," I said nudging Sookie to get her attention.



Her head lifted towards the TV as I turned up the volume and heard the local reporter saying a large explosion had taken place at a 'suspected terrorist site' and 'prominent businessman Felipe deCastro' was rumored to have been on hand at the time of the blast. They were speculating on a bomb-building exercise having gone wrong.

I paused the live broadcast and pointed out to Sookie the telltale signs that it was bomb alright, but not one they were building that caused the explosion. This one was likely dropped from 25 thousand feet above them given the size of the crater it left behind.

The phone rang seconds later and, seeing it was Pam calling, Sookie put it on speakerphone.

"Are you watching?" she asked.

"Yes." There was no need for subtlety with Pam; she certainly didn't have any.

"It's a shame really, you'd think with all of their 'expertise' they'd be a little more careful with the C4 when their boss was in attendance," she said. I could almost *see* her filing her nails in boredom, but I knew her well enough to hear the trace of amusement in her voice.

"Mhmm, or having ten thousand pound bombs dropped on top of them by drones they can't even see; they're so high up in the air." I knew she knew better than to believe I would believe that bullshit. If she were in the room, I'd find a fucking handkerchief and throw it down.

"Hmm?" she asked innocently. When I didn't bite she sighed dramatically saying, "Yes, or one of those. Pity they'll never be able to prove anything. Moving on. How do you feel about Paris in the spring time? I'm sure Sookie would find it very romantic."

I looked over at Sookie and cocked an eyebrow, silently questioning if she knew what Pam was getting at. When her only response was a shoulder shrug, and feeling completely wary of Pam's tone, I asked, "Why do you ask?"

"A little birdie told me a certain thorn in our side from North Korea is planning a little secret vacation to Morocco in a few weeks. It's just a hop, skip, and a jump away from Paris."

I looked back at Sookie while telling Pam, "I told you, I'm done."

"Yes, that statement is still in my vault. But don't forget that I know you better than you even know yourself and I have my doubts. Sookie would have fun and I've seen her throw knife or two, so I'm sure she'd do even better if you were conscious this time around! I *know* the two of you are probably bored to tears in that little backwater you call home now. Just think, now that my two favorite lovebirds are getting hitched, you could like Mr. and Mrs. Smith, only Northman! "

When I glanced at Sookie again I was surprised to see her eyebrow raised up, but I couldn't discern what her silent question was at first. We were both ignoring Pam who had gone off onto a tangent of when she'd had sex with Angelina Jolie before she 'had a bunch of rug rats'. Sookie

tapped at the keys on her laptop for a moment and when she turned it so I could see the flight times from Shreveport to Paris, my responding cocked brow was met by her shoulder shrug paired with a smile.

While Pam continued her diatribe of why she would *never* be a mother (thank fucking God), I pulled up the websites of some of the nicest hotels in Paris for Sookie to look them over as I wondered if I could get her to join the Mile High Club on the way there. I started compiling a list of all the places I wanted to take her to in and around Paris knowing our time would be limited since we'd have to be home again in time for her to become Mrs. Eric Northman.