

DEAD UNTIL DARK

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Chapter 1

I'd been waiting for the vampire for years when he walked into the bar.

Ever since vampires came out of the coffin (as they laughingly put it) four years ago, I'd hoped one would come to Bon Temps. We had all the other minorities in our little town – why not the newest, the legally recognized undead? But rural northern Louisiana wasn't too tempting to vampires, apparently; on the other hand, New Orleans was a real center for them – the whole Anne Rice thing, right?

It's not that long a drive from Bon Temps to New Orleans, and everyone who came into the bar said that if you threw a rock on a street corner you'd hit one. Though you better not.

But I was waiting for my own vampire.

You can tell I don't get out much. And it's not because I'm not pretty. I am. I'm blond and blue-eyed and twenty-five, and my legs are strong and my bosom is substantial, and I have a waspy waistline. I look good in the warm-weather waitress outfit Sam picked for us: black shorts, white T, white socks, black Nikes.

But I have a disability. That's how I try to think of it.
The bar patrons just say I'm crazy.

Either way, the result is that I almost never have a date.
So little treats count a lot with me.

And he sat at one of my tables – the vampire.

I knew immediately what he was. It amazed me when no one else turned around to stare. They couldn't tell! But to me, his skin had a little glow, and I just knew.

I could have danced with joy, and in fact I did do a little step right there by the bar. Sam Merlotte, my boss, looked up from the drink he was mixing and gave me a tiny smile. I grabbed my tray and pad and went over to the vampire's table. I hoped that my lipstick was still even and my ponytail was still neat. I'm kind of tense, and I could feel my smile yanking the corners of my mouth up.

He seemed lost in thought, and I had a chance to give him a good once-over before he looked up. He was a little under six feet, I estimated. He had thick brown hair, combed straight back and brushing his collar, and his long sideburns seemed curiously old-fashioned. He was pale, of course; hey, he was dead, if you believed the old tales. The politically correct theory, the one the vamps themselves publicly backed, had it that this guy was the victim of a virus that left him apparently dead for a couple of days and thereafter allergic to sunlight, silver, and garlic. The details depended on which newspaper you read. They were all full of vampire stuff these days.

Anyway, his lips were lovely, sharply sculpted, and he had arched dark brows. His nose swooped down right out of that arch, like a prince's in a Byzantine mosaic. When he finally looked up, I saw his eyes were even darker than his hair, and the whites were incredibly white.

'What can I get you?' I asked, happy almost beyond words.

He raised his eyebrows. 'Do you have the bottled synthetic blood?' he asked.

'No, I'm so sorry! Sam's got some on order. Should be in next week.'

'Then red wine, please,' he said, and his voice was cool and clear, like a stream over smooth stones. I laughed out loud. It was too perfect.

'Don't mind Sookie, mister, she's crazy,' came a familiar voice from the booth against the wall. All my happiness deflated, though I could feel the smile still straining my lips. The vampire was staring at me, watching the life go out of my face.

'I'll get your wine right away,' I said, and strode off, not even looking at Mack Rattray's smug face. He was there almost every night, he and his wife Denise. I called them the Rat Couple. They'd done their best to make me miserable since they'd moved into the rent trailer at Four Tracks Corner. I had hoped that they'd blow out of Bon Temps as suddenly as they'd blown in.

When they'd first come into Merlotte's, I'd very rudely listened in to their thoughts – I know, pretty low-class of me. But I get bored like everyone else, and though I spend most of my time blocking out the thoughts of other people that try to pass through my brain, sometimes I just give in. So I knew some things about the Rattrays that maybe no one else did. For one thing, I knew they'd been in jail, though I didn't know why. For another, I'd read the nasty thoughts Mack Rattray had entertained about yours truly. And then I'd heard in Denise's thoughts that she'd abandoned a baby she'd had two years before, a baby that wasn't Mack's.

And they didn't tip, either.

Sam poured a glass of the house red wine, looking over at the vampire's table as he put it on my tray.

When Sam looked back at me, I could tell he too knew our new customer was undead. Sam's eyes are Paul Newman blue, as opposed to my own hazy blue gray. Sam is blond, too, but his hair is wiry and his blond is almost a sort of hot red gold. He is always a little sunburned, and though he looks slight in his clothes, I have seen him unload trucks with his shirt off, and he has plenty of upper body strength. I never listen to Sam's thoughts. He's my boss. I've had to quit jobs before because I found out things I didn't want to know about my boss.

But Sam didn't comment, he just gave me the wine. I checked the glass to make sure it was sparkly clean and made my way back to the vampire's table.

'Your wine, sir,' I said ceremoniously and placed it carefully on the table exactly in front of him. He looked at me again, and I stared into his lovely eyes while I had the chance. 'Enjoy,' I said proudly. Behind me, Mack Rattray yelled, 'Hey, Sookie! We need another pitcher of beer here!' I sighed and turned to take the empty pitcher from the Rats' table. Denise was in fine form tonight, I noticed, wearing a halter top and short shorts, her mess of brown hair floofing around her head in fashionable tangles. Denise wasn't truly pretty, but she was so flashy and confident that it took awhile to figure that out.

A little while later, to my dismay, I saw the Rattrays had moved over to the vampire's table. They were talking at him. I couldn't see that he was responding a lot, but he wasn't leaving either.

'Look at that!' I said disgustedly to Arlene, my fellow

waitress. Arlene is redheaded and freckled and ten years older than me, and she's been married four times. She has two kids, and from time to time, I think she considers me her third.

'New guy, huh?' she said with small interest. Arlene is currently dating Rene Lenier, and though I can't see the attraction, she seems pretty satisfied. I think Rene was her second husband.

'Oh, he's a vampire,' I said, just having to share my delight with someone.

'Really? Here? Well, just think,' she said, smiling a little to show she appreciated my pleasure. 'He can't be too bright, though, honey, if he's with the Rats. On the other hand, Denise is giving him quite a show.'

I figured it out after Arlene made it plain to me; she's much better at sizing up sexual situations than I am due to her experience and my lack.

The vampire was hungry. I'd always heard that the synthetic blood the Japanese had developed kept vampires up to par as far as nutrition, but didn't really satisfy their hunger, which was why there were 'Unfortunate Incidents' from time to time. (That was the vampire euphemism for the bloody slaying of a human.) And here was Denise Rattray, stroking her throat, turning her neck from side to side . . . what a *bitch*.

My brother, Jason, came into the bar, then, and sauntered over to give me a hug. He knows that women like a man who's good to his family and also kind to the disabled, so hugging me is a double whammy of recommendation. Not that Jason needs many more points than he has just by being himself. He's handsome. He can sure be mean, too, but most women seem quite willing to overlook that.

'Hey, sis, how's Gran?'

'She's okay, about the same. Come by to see.'

'I will. Who's loose tonight?'

'Look for yourself.' I noticed that when Jason began to glance around there was a flutter of female hands to hair, blouses, lips.

'Hey. I see DeeAnne. She free?'

'She's here with a trucker from Hammond. He's in the bathroom. Watch it.'

Jason grinned at me, and I marvelled that other women could not see the selfishness of that smile. Even Arlene tucked in her T-shirt when Jason came in, and after four husbands she should have known a little about evaluating men. The other waitress I worked with, Dawn, tossed her hair and straightened her back to make her boobs stand out. Jason gave her an amiable wave. She pretended to sneer. She's on the outs with Jason, but she still wants him to notice her.

I got really busy – everyone came to Merlotte's on Saturday night for some portion of the evening – so I lost track of my vampire for a while. When I next had a moment to check on him, he was talking to Denise. Mack was looking at him with an expression so avid that I became worried.

I went closer to the table, staring at Mack. Finally, I let down my guard and listened.

Mack and Denise had been in jail for vampire draining.

Deeply upset, I nevertheless automatically carried a pitcher of beer and some glasses to a raucous table of four. Since vampire blood was supposed to temporarily relieve symptoms of illness and increase sexual potency, kind of like prednisone and Viagra rolled into one, there was a huge

black market for genuine, undiluted vampire blood. Where there's a market there are suppliers; in this case, I'd just learned, the scummy Rat Couple. They'd formerly trapped vampires and drained them, selling the little vials of blood for as much as \$200 apiece. It had been the drug of choice for at least two years now. Some buyers went crazy after drinking pure vampire blood, but that didn't slow the market any.

The drained vampire didn't last long, as a rule. The drainers left the vampires staked or simply dumped them out in the open. When the sun came up, that was all she wrote. From time to time, you read about the tables being turned when the vampire managed to get free. Then you got your dead drainers.

Now my vampire was getting up and leaving with the Rats. Mack met my eyes, and I saw him looking distinctly startled at the expression on my face. He turned away, shrugging me off like everyone else.

That made me mad. Really mad.

What should I do? While I struggled with myself, they were out the door. Would the vampire believe me if I ran after them, told him? No one else did. Or if by chance they did, they hated and feared me for reading the thoughts concealed in people's brains. Arlene had begged me to read her fourth husband's mind when he'd come in to pick her up one night because she was pretty certain he was thinking of leaving her and the kids, but I wouldn't because I wanted to keep the one friend I had. And even Arlene hadn't been able to ask me directly because that would be admitting I had this gift, this curse. People couldn't admit it. They had to think I was crazy. Which sometimes I almost was!

So I dithered, confused and frightened and angry, and then I knew I just had to act. I was goaded by the look Mack had given me – as if I was negligible.

I slid down the bar to Jason, where he was sweeping DeeAnne off her feet. She didn't take much sweeping, popular opinion had it. The trucker from Hammond was glowering from her other side.

'Jason,' I said urgently. He turned to give me a warning glare. 'Listen, is that chain still in the back of the pickup?'

'Never leave home without it,' he said lazily, his eyes scanning my face for signs of trouble. 'You going to fight, Sookie?'

I smiled at him, so used to grinning that it was easy. 'I sure hope not,' I said cheerfully.

'Hey, you need help?' After all, he was my brother.

'No, thanks,' I said, trying to sound reassuring. And I slipped over to Arlene. 'Listen, I got to leave a little early. My tables are pretty thin, can you cover for me?' I didn't think I'd ever asked Arlene such a thing, though I'd covered for her many times. She, too, offered me help. 'That's okay,' I said. 'I'll be back in if I can. If you clean my area, I'll do your trailer.'

Arlene nodded her red mane enthusiastically.

I pointed to the employee door, to myself, and made my fingers walk, to tell Sam where I was going.

He nodded. He didn't look happy.

So out the back door I went, trying to make my feet quiet on the gravel. The employee parking lot is at the rear of the bar, through a door leading into the storeroom. The cook's car was there, and Arlene's, Dawn's, and mine. To my right, the east, Sam's pickup was sitting in front of his trailer.

I went out of the gravelled employee parking area onto the blacktop that surfaced the much larger customer lot to the west of the bar. Woods surrounded the clearing in which Merlotte's stood, and the edges of the parking lot were mostly gravel. Sam kept it well lit, and the surrealistic glare of the high, parking lot lights made everything look strange.

I saw the Rat Couple's dented red sports car, so I knew they were close.

I found Jason's truck at last. It was black with custom aqua and pink swirls on the sides. He sure did love to be noticed. I pulled myself up by the tailgate and rummaged around in the bed for his chain, a thick length of links that he carried in case of a fight. I looped it and carried it pressed to my body so it wouldn't chink.

I thought a second. The only halfway private spot to which the Rattrays could have lured the vampire was the end of the parking lot where the trees actually overhung the cars. So I crept in that direction, trying to move fast and low.

I paused every few seconds and listened. Soon I heard a groan and the faint sounds of voices. I snaked between the cars, and I spotted them right where I'd figured they'd be. The vampire was down on the ground on his back, his face contorted in agony, and the gleam of chains crisscrossed his wrists and ran down to his ankles. Silver. There were two little vials of blood already on the ground beside Denise's feet, and as I watched, she fixed a new Vacutainer to the needle. The tourniquet above his elbow dug cruelly into his arm.

Their backs were to me, and the vampire hadn't seen me yet. I loosened the coiled chain so a good three feet of it

swung free. Who to attack first? They were both small and vicious.

I remembered Mack's contemptuous dismissal and the fact that he never left me a tip. Mack first.

I'd never actually been in a fight before. Somehow I was positively looking forward to it.

I leapt out from behind a pickup and swung the chain. It thwacked across Mack's back as he knelt beside his victim. He screamed and jumped up. After a glance, Denise set about getting the third Vacutainer plugged. Mack's hand dipped down to his boot and came up shining. I gulped. He had a knife in his hand.

'Uh-oh,' I said, and grinned at him.

'You crazy bitch!' he screamed. He sounded like he was looking forward to using the knife. I was too involved to keep my mental guard up, and I had a clear flash of what Mack wanted to do to me. It drove me really crazy. I went for him with every intention of hurting him as badly as I could. But he was ready for me and jumped forward with the knife while I was swinging the chain. He sliced at my arm and just missed it. The chain, on its recoil, wrapped around his skinny neck like a lover. Mack's yell of triumph turned into a gurgle. He dropped the knife and clawed at the links with both hands. Losing air, he dropped to his knees on the rough pavement, yanking the chain from my hand.

Well, there went Jason's chain. I swooped down and scooped up Mack's knife, holding it like I knew how to use it. Denise had been lunging forward, looking like a redneck witch in the lines and shadows of the security lights.

She stopped in her tracks when she saw I had Mack's

knife. She cursed and railed and said terrible things. I waited till she'd run down to say, 'Get. Out. Now.'

Denise stared holes of hate in my head. She tried to scoop up the vials of blood, but I hissed at her to leave them alone. So she pulled Mack to his feet. He was still making choking, gurgling sounds and holding the chain. Denise kind of dragged him along to their car and shoved him in through the passenger's side. Yanking some keys from her pocket Denise threw herself in the driver's seat.

As I heard the engine roar into life, suddenly I realized that the Rats now had another weapon. Faster than I've ever moved, I ran to the vampire's head and panted, 'Push with your feet!' I grabbed him under the arms and yanked back with all my might, and he caught on and braced his feet and shoved. We were just inside the tree line when the red car came roaring down at us. Denise missed us by less than a yard when she had to swerve to avoid hitting a pine. Then I heard the big motor of the Rats' car receding in the distance.

'Oh, wow,' I breathed, and knelt by the vampire because my knees wouldn't hold me up any more. I breathed heavily for just a minute, trying to get hold of myself. The vampire moved a little, and I looked over. To my horror, I saw wisps of smoke coming up from his wrists where the silver touched them.

'Oh, you poor thing,' I said, angry at myself for not caring for him instantly. Still trying to catch my breath, I began to unwind the thin bands of silver, which all seemed to be part of one very long chain. 'Poor baby,' I whispered, never thinking until later how incongruous that sounded. I have agile fingers, and I released his wrists pretty quickly. I wondered how the Rats had distracted him while they got

into position to put them on, and I could feel myself reddening as I pictured it.

The vampire cradled his arms to his chest while I worked on the silver wrapped around his legs. His ankles had fared better since the drainers hadn't troubled to pull up his jeans legs and put the silver against his bare skin.

'I'm sorry I didn't get here faster,' I said apologetically. 'You'll feel better in a minute, right? Do you want me to leave?'

'No.'

That made me feel pretty good until he added, 'They might come back, and I can't fight yet.' His cool voice was uneven, but I couldn't exactly say I'd heard him panting.

I made a sour face at him, and while he was recovering, I took a few precautions. I sat with my back to him, giving him some privacy. I know how unpleasant it is to be stared at when you're hurting. I hunkered down on the pavement, keeping watch on the parking lot. Several cars left, and others came in, but none came down to our end by the woods. By the movement of the air around me, I knew when the vampire had sat up.

He didn't speak right away. I turned my head to the left to look at him. He was closer than I'd thought. His big dark eyes looked into mine. His fangs had retracted; I was a little disappointed about that.

'Thank you,' he said stiffly.

So he wasn't thrilled about being rescued by a woman. Typical guy.

Since he was being so ungracious, I felt I could do something rude, too, and I listened to him, opening my mind completely.

And I heard . . . nothing.

'Oh,' I said, hearing the shock in my own voice, hardly knowing what I was saying. '*I can't hear you.*'

'Thank you!' the vampire said, moving his lips exaggeratedly.

'No, no . . . I can hear you speak, but . . .' and in my excitement, I did something I ordinarily would never do, because it was pushy, and personal, and revealed I was disabled. I turned fully to him and put my hands on both sides of his white face, and I looked at him intently. I focused with all my energy. *Nothing*. It was like having to listen to the radio all the time, to stations you didn't get to select, and then suddenly tuning in to a wavelength you couldn't receive.

It was heaven.

His eyes were getting wider and darker, though he was holding absolutely still.

'Oh, excuse me,' I said with a gasp of embarrassment. I snatched my hands away and resumed staring at the parking lot. I began babbling about Mack and Denise, all the time thinking how marvelous it would be to have a companion I could not hear unless he chose to speak out loud. How beautiful his silence was.

' . . . so I figured I better come out here to see how you were,' I concluded, and had no idea what I'd been saying.

'You came out here to rescue me. It was brave,' he said in a voice so seductive it would have shivered DeeAnne right out of her red nylon panties.

'Now you cut that out,' I said tartly, coming right down to earth with a thud.

He looked astonished for a whole second before his face returned to its white smoothness.

'Aren't you afraid to be alone with a hungry vampire?' he

asked, something arch and yet dangerous running beneath the words.

‘Nope.’

‘Are you assuming that since you came to my rescue that you’re safe, that I harbor an ounce of sentimental feeling after all these years? Vampires often turn on those who trust them. We don’t have human values, you know.’

‘A lot of humans turn on those who trust them,’ I pointed out. I can be practical. ‘I’m not a total fool.’ I held out my arm and turned my neck. While he’d been recovering, I’d been wrapping the Rats’ chains around my neck and arms.

He shivered visibly.

‘But there’s a juicy artery in your groin,’ he said after a pause to regroup, his voice as slithery as a snake on a slide

‘Don’t you talk dirty,’ I told him. ‘I won’t listen to that.’

Once again we looked at each other in silence. I was afraid I’d never see him again; after all, his first visit to Merlotte’s hadn’t exactly been a success. So I was trying to absorb every detail I could; I would treasure this encounter and rehash it for a long, long time. It was rare, a prize. I wanted to touch his skin again. I couldn’t remember how it felt. But that would be going beyond some boundary of manners, and also maybe start him going on the seductive crap again.

‘Would you like to drink the blood they collected?’ he asked unexpectedly. ‘It would be a way for me to show my gratitude.’ He gestured at the stoppered vials lying on the blacktop. ‘My blood is supposed to improve your sex life and your health.’

‘I’m healthy as a horse,’ I told him honestly. ‘And I have no sex life to speak of. You do what you want with it.’

'You could sell it,' he suggested, but I thought he was just waiting to see what I'd say about that.

'I wouldn't touch it,' I said, insulted.

'You're different,' he said. 'What are you?' He seemed to be going through a list of possibilities in his head from the way he was looking at me. To my pleasure, I could not hear a one of them.

'Well. I'm Sookie Stackhouse, and I'm a waitress,' I told him. 'What's your name?' I thought I could at least ask that without being presuming.

'Bill,' he said.

Before I could stop myself, I rocked back onto my butt with laughter. 'The vampire Bill!' I said. 'I thought it might be Antoine, or Basil, or Langford! Bill!' I hadn't laughed so hard in a long time. 'Well, see ya, Bill. I got to get back to work.' I could feel the tense grin snap back into place when I thought of Merlotte's. I put my hand on Bill's shoulder and pushed up. It was rock hard, and I was on my feet so fast I had to stop myself from stumbling. I examined my socks to make sure their cuffs were exactly even, and I looked up and down my outfit to check for wear and tear during the fight with the Rats. I dusted off my bottom since I'd been sitting on the dirty pavement and gave Bill a wave as I started off across the parking lot.

It had been a stimulating evening, one with a lot of food for thought. I felt almost as cheerful as my smile when I considered it.

But Jason was going to be mighty angry about the chain.

After work that night, I drove home, which is only about four miles south from the bar. Jason had been gone (and so

had DeeAnne) when I got back to work, and that had been another good thing. I was reviewing the evening as I drove to my grandmother's house, where I lived. It's right before Tall Pines cemetery, which lies off a narrow two-lane parish road. My great-great-great grandfather had started the house, and he'd had ideas about privacy, so to reach it you had to turn off the parish road into the driveway, go through some woods, and then you arrived at the clearing in which the house stood.

It's sure not any historic landmark, since most of the oldest parts have been ripped down and replaced over the years, and of course it's got electricity and plumbing and insulation, all that good modern stuff. But it still has a tin roof that gleams blindingly on sunny days. When the roof needed to be replaced, I wanted to put regular roofing tiles on it, but my grandmother said no. Though I was paying, it's her house; so naturally, tin it was.

Historical or not, I'd lived in this house since I was about seven, and I'd visited it often before then, so I loved it. It was just a big old family home, too big for Granny and me, I guess. It had a broad front covered by a screened-in porch, and it was painted white, Granny being a traditionalist all the way. I went through the big living room, strewn with battered furniture arranged to suit us, and down the hall to the first bedroom on the left, the biggest.

Adele Hale Stackhouse, my grandmother, was propped up in her high bed, about a million pillows padding her skinny shoulders. She was wearing a long-sleeved cotton nightgown even in the warmth of this spring night, and her bedside lamp was still on. There was a book propped in her lap.

'Hey,' I said.

'Hi, honey.'

My grandmother is very small and very old, but her hair is still thick, and so white it almost has the very faintest of green tinges. She wears it kind of rolled against her neck during the day, but at night it's loose or braided. I looked at the cover of her book.

'You reading Danielle Steel again?'

'Oh, that woman can sure tell a story.' My grandmother's great pleasures were reading Danielle Steel, watching her soap operas (which she called her 'stories') and attending meetings of the myriad clubs she'd belonged to all her adult life, it seemed. Her favorites were the Descendants of the Glorious Dead and the Bon Temps Gardening Society.

'Guess what happened tonight?' I asked her.

'What? You got a date?'

'No,' I said, working to keep a smile on my face. 'A vampire came into the bar.'

'Ooh, did he have fangs?'

I'd seen them glisten in the parking lot lights when the Rats were draining him, but there was no need to describe that to Gran. 'Sure, but they were retracted.'

'A vampire right here in Bon Temps.' Granny was as pleased as punch. 'Did he bite anybody in the bar?'

'Oh, no, Gran! He just sat and had a glass of red wine. Well, he ordered it, but he didn't drink it. I think he just wanted some company.'

'Wonder where he stays.'

'He wouldn't be too likely to tell anyone that.'

'No,' Gran said, thinking about it a moment. 'I guess not. Did you like him?'

Now that was kind of a hard question. I mulled it over. 'I don't know. He was real interesting,' I said cautiously.

'I'd surely love to meet him.' I wasn't surprised Gran said this because she enjoyed new things almost as much as I did. She wasn't one of those reactionaries who'd decided vampires were damned right off the bat. 'But I better go to sleep now. I was just waiting for you to come home before I turned out my light.'

I bent over to give Gran a kiss, and said, 'Night night.'

I half-closed her door on my way out and heard the click of the lamp as she turned it off. My cat, Tina, came from wherever she'd been sleeping to rub against my legs, and I picked her up and cuddled her for a while before putting her out for the night. I glanced at the clock. It was almost two o'clock, and my bed was calling me.

My room was right across the hall from Gran's. When I first used this room, after my folks had died, Gran had moved my bedroom furniture from their house so I'd feel more homey. And here it was still, the single bed and vanity in white-painted wood, the small chest of drawers.

I turned on my own light and shut the door and began taking off my clothes. I had at least five pairs of black shorts and many, many white T-shirts, since those tended to get stained so easily. No telling how many pairs of white socks were rolled up in my drawer. So I didn't have to do the wash tonight. I was too tired for a shower. I did brush my teeth and wash the makeup off my face, slap on some moisturizer, and take the band out of my hair.

I crawled into bed in my favorite Mickey Mouse sleep T-shirt, which came almost to my knees. I turned on my side, like I always do, and I relished the silence of the room. Almost everyone's brain is turned off in the wee hours of the night, and the vibrations are gone, the intrusions do not have to be repelled. With such peace, I only had time to

think of the vampire's dark eyes, and then I fell into the deep sleep of exhaustion.

By lunchtime the next day I was in my folding aluminum chaise out in the front yard, getting browner by the second. I was in my favorite white strapless two-piece, and it was a little roomier than last summer, so I was pleased as punch.

Then I heard a vehicle coming down the drive, and Jason's black truck with its pink and aqua blazons pulled up to within a yard of my feet.

Jason climbed down – did I mention the truck sports those high tires? – to stalk toward me. He was wearing his usual work clothes, a khaki shirt and pants, and he had his sheathed knife clipped to his belt, like most of the county road workers did. Just by the way he walked, I knew he was in a huff.

I put my dark glasses on.

'Why didn't you tell me you beat up the Rattrays last night?' My brother threw himself into the aluminum yard chair by my chaise. 'Where's Gran?' he asked belatedly.

'Hanging out the laundry,' I said. Gran used the dryer in a pinch, but she really liked hanging the wet clothes out in the sun. Of course the clothesline was in the backyard, where clotheslines should be. 'She's fixing country-fried steak and sweet potatoes and green beans she put up last year, for lunch,' I added, knowing that would distract Jason a little bit. I hoped Gran stayed out back. I didn't want her to hear this conversation. 'Keep your voice low,' I reminded him.

'Rene Lenier couldn't wait till I got to work this morning to tell me all about it. He was over to the Rattrays' trailer last night to buy him some weed, and Denise drove

up like she wanted to kill someone. Rene said he liked to have gotten killed, she was so mad. It took both Rene and Denise to get Mack into the trailer, and then they took him to the hospital in Monroe.' Jason glared at me accusingly.

'Did Rene tell you that Mack came after me with a knife?' I asked, deciding attacking was the best way of handling this. I could tell Jason's pique was due in large part to the fact that he had heard about this from someone else.

'If Denise told Rene, he didn't mention it to me,' Jason said slowly, and I saw his handsome face darken with rage. 'He came after you with a knife?'

'So I had to defend myself,' I said, as if it were matter-of-fact. 'And he took your chain.' This was all true, if a little skewed.

'I came in to tell you,' I continued, 'but by the time I got back in the bar, you were gone with DeeAnne, and since I was fine, it just didn't seem worth tracking you down. I knew you'd feel obliged to go after him if I told you about the knife,' I added diplomatically. There was a lot more truth in that, since Jason dearly loves a fight.

'What the hell were you doing out there anyway?' he asked, but he had relaxed, and I knew he was accepting this.

'Did you know that, in addition to selling drugs, the Rats are vampire drainers?'

Now he was fascinated. 'No . . . so?'

'Well, one of my customers last night was a vampire, and they were draining him out in Merlotte's parking lot! I couldn't have that.'

'There's a vampire here in Bon Temps?'

'Yep. Even if you don't want a vampire for your best

friend, you can't let trash like the Rats drain them. It's not like siphoning gas out of a car. And they would have left him out in the woods to die.' Though the Rats hadn't told me their intentions, that was my bet. Even if they'd put him under cover so he could survive the day, a drained vampire took at least twenty years to recover, at least that's what one had said on *Oprah*. And that's if another vampire took care of him.

'The vampire was in the bar when I was there?' Jason asked, dazzled.

'Uh-huh. The dark-haired guy sitting with the Rats.'

Jason grinned at my epithet for the Rattrays. But he hadn't let go of the night before, yet. 'How'd you know he was a vampire?' he asked, but when he looked at me, I could tell he was wishing he had bitten his tongue.

'I just knew,' I said in my flattest voice.

'Right.' And we shared a whole unspoken conversation.

'Homulka doesn't have a vampire,' Jason said thoughtfully. He tilted his face back to catch the sun, and I knew we were off dangerous ground.

'True,' I agreed. Homulka was the town Bon Temps loved to hate. We'd been rivals in football, basketball, and historical significance for generations.

'Neither does Roedale,' Gran said from behind us, and Jason and I both jumped. I give Jason credit, he jumps up and gives Gran a hug everytime he sees her.

'Gran, you got enough food in the oven for me?'

'You and two others,' Gran said. Our grandmother smiled up at Jason. She was not blind to his faults (or mine), but she loved him. 'I just got a phone call from Everlee Mason. She was telling me you hooked up with DeeAnne last night.'

'Boy oh boy, can't do anything in this town without getting caught,' Jason said, but he wasn't really angry.

'That DeeAnne,' Gran said warningly as we all started into the house, 'she's been pregnant one time I know of. You just take care she doesn't have one of yours, you'll be paying the rest of your life. 'Course, that may be the only way I get great-grandchildren!'

Gran had the food ready on the table, so after Jason hung up his hat we sat down and said grace. Then Gran and Jason began gossiping with each other (though they called it 'catching up') about people in our little town and parish. My brother worked for the state, supervising road crews. It seemed to me like Jason's day consisted of driving around in a state pickup, clocking off work, and then driving around all night in his own pickup. Rene was on one of the work crews Jason oversaw, and they'd been to high school together. They hung around with Hoyt Fortenberry a lot.

'Sookie, I had to replace the hot water heater in the house,' Jason said suddenly. He lives in my parents' old house, the one we'd been living in when they died in a flash flood. We lived with Gran after that, but when Jason got through his two years of college and went to work for the state, he moved back into the house, which on paper is half mine.

'You need any money on that?' I asked.

'Naw, I got it.'

We both make salaries, but we also have a little income from a fund established when an oil well was sunk on my parents' property. It played out in a few years, but my parents and then Gran made sure the money was invested. It saved Jason and me a lot of struggle, that padding. I don't know how Gran could have raised us if it hadn't been for

that money. She was determined not to sell any land, but her own income is not much more than social security. That's one reason I don't get an apartment. If I get groceries when I'm living with her, that's reasonable, to her; but if I buy groceries and bring them to her house and leave them on her table and go home to my house, that's charity and that makes her mad.

'What kind did you get?' I asked, just to show interest.

He was dying to tell me; Jason's an appliance freak, and he wanted to describe his comparison shopping for a new water heater in detail. I listened with as much attention as I could muster.

And then he interrupted himself. 'Hey Sook, you remember Maudette Pickens?'

'Sure,' I said, surprised. 'We graduated in the same class.'

'Somebody killed Maudette in her apartment last night.'

Gran and I were riveted. 'When?' Gran asked, puzzled that she hadn't heard already.

'They just found her this very morning in her bedroom. Her boss tried to call her to find out why she hadn't shown up for work yesterday and today and got no answer, so he rode over and got the manager up, and they unlocked the place. You know she had the apartment across from DeeAnne's?' Bon Temps had only one bona fide apartment complex, a three-building, two-story U-shaped grouping, so we knew exactly where he meant.

'She got killed there?' I felt ill. I remembered Maudette clearly. Maudette had had a heavy jaw and a square bottom, pretty black hair and husky shoulders. Maudette had been a plodder, never bright or ambitious. I thought I recalled her working at the Grabbit Kwik, a gas station/convenience store.

'Yeah, she'd been working there for at least a year, I guess,' Jason confirmed.

'How was it done?' My grandmother had that squinched, give-it-to-me-quick look with which nice people ask for bad news.

'She had some vampire bites on her – uh – inner thighs,' my brother said, looking down at his plate. 'But that wasn't what killed her. She was strangled. DeeAnne told me Maudette liked to go to that vampire bar in Shreveport when she had a couple of days off, so maybe that's where she got the bites. Might not have been *Sookie's* vampire.'

'Maudette was a fang-banger?' I felt queasy, imagining slow, chunky Maudette draped in the exotic black dresses fang-bangers affected.

'What's that?' asked Gran. She must have missed *Sally-Jessy* the day the phenomenon was explored.

'Men and women that hang around with vampires and enjoy being bitten. Vampire groupies. They don't last too long, I think, because they want to be bitten too much, and sooner or later they get that one bite too many.'

'But a bite didn't kill Maudette.' Gran wanted to be sure she had it straight.

'Nope, strangling.' Jason had begun finishing his lunch.

'Don't you always get gas at the Grabbit?' I asked.

'Sure. So do a lot of people.'

'And didn't you hang around with Maudette some?' Gran asked

'Well, in a way of speaking,' Jason said cautiously.

I took that to mean he'd bedded Maudette when he couldn't find anyone else.

'I hope the sheriff doesn't want to talk to you,' Gran

said, shaking her head as if indicating 'no' would make it less likely.

'What?' Jason was turning red, looking defensive.

'You see Maudette in the store all the time when you get your gas, you so-to-speak date her, then she winds up dead in an apartment you're familiar with,' I summarized. It wasn't much, but it was something, and there were so few mysterious homicides in Bon Temps that I thought every stone would be turned in its investigation.

'I ain't the only one who fills the bill. Plenty of other guys get their gas there, and all of them know Maudette.'

'Yeah, but in what sense?' Gran asked bluntly. 'She wasn't a prostitute, was she? So she will have talked about who she saw.'

'She just liked to have a good time, she wasn't a pro.' It was good of Jason to defend Maudette, considering what I knew of his selfish character. I began to think a little better of my big brother. 'She was kinda lonely, I guess,' he added.

Jason looked at both of us, then, and saw we were surprised and touched.

'Speaking of prostitutes,' he said hastily, 'there's one in Monroe specializes in vampires. She keeps a guy standing by with a stake in case one gets carried away. She drinks synthetic blood to keep her blood supply up.'

That was a pretty definite change of subject, so Gran and I tried to think of a question we could ask without being indecent.

'Wonder how much she charges?' I ventured, and when Jason told us the figure he'd heard, we both gasped.

Once we got off the topic of Maudette's murder, lunch went about as usual, with Jason looking at his watch and

exclaiming that he had to leave just when it was time to do the dishes.

But Gran's mind was still running on vampires, I found out. She came into my room later, when I was putting on my makeup to go to work.

'How old you reckon the vampire is, the one you met?'

'I have no idea, Gran.' I was putting on my mascara looking wide-eyed and trying to hold still so I wouldn't poke myself in the eye, so my voice came out funny, as if I was trying out for a horror movie.

'Do you suppose . . . he might remember the War?'

I didn't need to ask which war. After all, Gran was a charter member of the Descendants of the Glorious Dead.

'Could be,' I said, turning my face from side to side to make sure my blush was even.

'You think he might come to talk to us about it? We could have a special meeting.'

'At night,' I reminded her.

'Oh. Yes, it'd have to be.' The Descendants usually met at noon at the library and brought a bag lunch.

I thought about it. It would be plain rude to suggest to the vampire that he ought to speak to Gran's club because I'd saved his blood from Drainers, but maybe he would offer if I gave a little hint? I didn't like to, but I'd do it for Gran. 'I'll ask him the next time he comes in,' I promised.

'At least he could come talk to me and maybe I could tape his recollections?' Gran said. I could hear her mind clicking as she thought of what a coup that would be for her. 'It would be so interesting to the other club members,' she said piously.

I stifled an impulse to laugh. 'I'll suggest it to him,' I said. 'We'll see.'

When I left, Gran was clearly counting her chickens.

I hadn't thought of Rene Lenier going to Sam with the story of the parking lot fight. Rene'd been a busy bee, though. When I got to work that afternoon, I assumed the agitation I felt in the air was due to Maudette's murder. I found out different.

Sam hustled me into the storeroom the minute I came in. He was hopping with anger. He reamed me up one side and down the other.

Sam had never been mad with me before, and soon I was on the edge of tears.

'And if you think a customer isn't safe, you tell me, and I'll deal with it, not you,' he was saying for the sixth time, when I finally realized that Sam had been scared for me.

I caught that rolling off him before I clamped down firmly on 'hearing' Sam. Listening in to your boss led to disaster.

It had never occurred to me to ask Sam – or anyone else – for help.

'And if you think someone is being harmed in our parking lot, your next move is to call the police, not step out there yourself like a vigilante,' Sam huffed. His fair complexion, always ruddy, was redder than ever, and his wiry golden hair looked as if he hadn't combed it.

'Okay,' I said, trying to keep my voice even and my eyes wide open so the tears wouldn't roll out. 'Are you gonna fire me?'

'No! No!' he exclaimed, apparently even angrier. 'I don't want to lose you!' He gripped my shoulders and gave me a little shake. Then he stood looking at me with wide, crackling blue eyes, and I felt a surge of heat rushing out from

him. Touching accelerates my disability, makes it imperative that I hear the person touching. I stared right into his eyes for a long moment, then I remembered myself, and I jumped back as his hands dropped away.

I whirled and left the storeroom, spooked.

I'd learned a couple of disconcerting things. Sam desired me; and I couldn't hear his thoughts as clearly as I could other people's. I'd had waves of impressions of how he was feeling, but not thoughts. More like wearing a mood ring than getting a fax.

So, what did I do about either piece of information?

Absolutely nothing.

I'd never looked on Sam as a beddable man before – or at least not beddable by me – for a lot of reasons. But the simplest one was that I never looked at anyone that way, not because I don't have hormones – boy, do I have hormones – but they are constantly tamped down because sex, for me, is a disaster. Can you imagine knowing everything your sex partner is thinking? Right. Along the order of 'Gosh, look at that mole . . . her butt is a little big . . . wish she'd move to the right a little . . . why doesn't she take the hint and . . .?' You get the idea. It's chilling to the emotions, believe me. And during sex, there is simply no way to keep a mental guard up.

Another reason is that I like Sam for a boss, and I like my job, which gets me out and keeps me active and earning so I won't turn into the recluse my grandmother fears I'll become. Working in an office is hard for me, and college was simply impossible because of the grim concentration necessary. It just drained me.

So, right now, I wanted to mull over the rush of desire I'd felt from him. It wasn't like he'd made me a verbal

proposition or thrown me down on the storeroom floor. I'd felt his feelings, and I could ignore them if I chose. I appreciated the delicacy of this, and wondered if Sam had touched me on purpose, if he actually knew what I was.

I took care not be alone with him, but I have to admit I was pretty shaken that night.

The next two nights were better. We fell back into our comfortable relationship. I was relieved. I was disappointed. I was also run off my feet since Maudette's murder sparked a business boom at Merlotte's. All sorts of rumors were buzzing around Bon Temps, and the Shreveport news team did a little piece on Maudette Picken's grisly death. Though I didn't attend her funeral, my grandmother did, and she said the church was jam-packed. Poor lumpy Maudette, with her bitten thighs, was more interesting in death than she'd ever been in life.

I was about to have two days off, and I was worried I'd miss connecting with the vampire, Bill. I needed to relay my grandmother's request. He hadn't returned to the bar, and I began to wonder if he would.

Mack and Denise hadn't been back in Merlotte's either, but Rene Lenier and Hoyt Fortenberry made sure I knew they'd threatened me with horrible things. I can't say I was seriously alarmed. Criminal trash like the Rats roamed the highways and trailer parks of America, not smart enough or moral enough to settle down to productive living. They never made a positive mark on the world, or amounted to a hill of beans, to my way of thinking. I shrugged off Rene's warnings.

But he sure enjoyed relaying them. Rene Lenier was small like Sam, but where Sam was ruddy and blond, Rene

was swarthy and had a bushy headful of rough, black hair threaded with gray. Rene often came by the bar to drink a beer and visit with Arlene because (as he was fond of telling anyone in the bar) she was his favorite ex-wife. He had three. Hoyt Fortenberry was more of a cipher than Rene. He was neither dark nor fair, neither big nor little. He always seemed cheerful and always tipped decent. He admired my brother Jason far beyond what Jason deserved, in my opinion.

I was glad Rene and Hoyt weren't there the night the vampire returned.

He sat at the same table.

Now that the vampire was actually in front of me, I felt a little shy. I found I'd forgotten the almost imperceptible glow of his skin. I'd exaggerated his height and the clear-cut lines of his mouth.

'What can I get you?' I asked.

He looked up at me. I had forgotten, too, the depth of his eyes. He didn't smile or blink; he was so immobile. For the second time, I relaxed into his silence. When I let down my guard, I could feel my face relax. It was as good as getting a massage (I am guessing).

'What are you?' he asked me. It was the second time he'd wanted to know.

'I'm a waitress,' I said, again deliberately misunderstanding him. I could feel my smile snap back into place again. My little bit of peace vanished.

'Red wine,' he ordered, and if he was disappointed I couldn't tell by his voice.

'Sure,' I said. 'The synthetic blood should come in on the truck tomorrow. Listen, could I talk to you after work? I have a favor to ask you.'

'Of course. I'm in your debt.' And he sure didn't sound happy about it.

'Not a favor for me!' I was getting miffed myself. 'For my grandmother. If you'll be up – well, I guess you will be – when I get off work at one-thirty, would you very much mind meeting me at the employee door at the back of the bar?' I nodded toward it, and my ponytail bounced around my shoulders. His eyes followed the movement of my hair.

'I'd be delighted.'

I didn't know if he was displaying the courtesy Gran insisted was the standard in bygone times, or if he was plain old mocking me.

I resisted the temptation to stick out my tongue at him or blow a raspberry. I spun on my heel and marched back to the bar. When I brought him his wine, he tipped me 20 percent. Soon after that, I looked over at his table only to realize he'd vanished. I wondered if he'd keep his word.

Arlene and Dawn left before I was ready to go, for one reason and another; mostly because all the napkin holders in my area proved to be half-empty. As I retrieved my purse from the locked cabinet in Sam's office, where I stow it while I work, I called good-bye to my boss. I could hear him clanking around in the men's room, probably trying to fix the leaky toilet. I stepped into the ladies' room for a second to check my hair and makeup.

When I stepped outside I noticed that Sam had already switched off the customer parking lot lights. Only the security light on the electricity pole in front of his trailer illuminated the employee parking lot. To the amusement of Arlene and Dawn, Sam had put in a yard and planted

boxwood in front of his trailer, and they were constantly teasing him about the neat line of his hedge.

I thought it was pretty.

As usual, Sam's truck was parked in front of his trailer so my car was the only one left in the lot.

I stretched, looking from side to side. No Bill. I was surprised at how disappointed I was. I had really expected him to be courteous, even if his heart (did he have one?) wasn't in it.

Maybe, I thought with a smile, he'd jump out of a tree, or appear with a poof! in front of me draped in a red-lined black cape. But nothing happened. So I trudged over to my car.

I'd hoped for a surprise, but not the one I got.

Mack Rattray jumped out from behind my car and in one stride got close enough to clip me in the jaw. He didn't hold back one little bit, and I went down onto the gravel like a sack of cement. I let out a yell when I went down, but the ground knocked all the air out of me and some skin off of me, and I was silent and breathless and helpless. Then I saw Denise, saw her swing back her heavy boot, had just enough warning to roll into a ball before the Rattrays began kicking me.

The pain was immediate, intense, and unrelenting. I threw my arms over my face instinctively, taking the beating on my forearms, legs, and my back.

I think I was sure, during the first few blows, that they'd stop and hiss warnings and curses at me and leave. But I remember the exact moment I realized that they intended to kill me.

I could lie there passively and take a beating, but I would not lie there and be killed.

The next time a leg came close I lunged and grabbed it and held on for my life. I was trying to bite, trying to at least mark one of them. I wasn't even sure whose leg I had.

Then, from behind me, I heard a growl. Oh, no, they've brought a dog, I thought. The growl was definitely hostile. If I'd had any leeway with my emotions, the hair would have stood up on my scalp.

I took one more kick to the spine, and then the beating stopped.

The last kick had done something dreadful to me. I could hear my own breathing, stertorous, and a strange bubbling sound that seemed to be coming from my own lungs.

'What the hell is that?' Mack Rattray asked, and he sounded absolutely terrified.

I heard the growl again, closer, right behind me. And from another direction, I heard a sort of snarl. Denise began wailing, Mack was cursing. Denise yanked her leg from my grasp, which had grown very weak. My arms flopped to the ground. They seemed to be beyond my control. Though my vision was cloudy, I could see that my right arm was broken. My face felt wet. I was scared to continue evaluating my injuries.

Mack began screaming, and then Denise, and there seemed to be all kinds of activity going on around me, but I couldn't move. My only view was my broken arm and my battered knees and the darkness under my car.

Some time later there was silence. Behind me, the dog whined. A cold nose poked my ear, and a warm tongue licked it. I tried to raise my hand to pet the dog that had undoubtedly saved my life, but I couldn't. I could hear myself sigh. It seemed to come from a long way away.

Facing the fact, I said, 'I'm dying.' It began to seem more and more real to me. The toads and crickets that had been making the most of the night had fallen silent at all the activity and noise in the parking lot, so my little voice came out clearly and fell into the darkness. Oddly enough, soon after that I heard two voices.

Then a pair of knees covered in bloody blue jeans came into my view. The vampire Bill leaned over so I could look into his face. There was blood smeared on his mouth, and his fangs were out, glistening white against his lower lip. I tried to smile at him, but my face wasn't working right.

'I'm going to pick you up,' Bill said. He sounded calm.

'I'll die if you do,' I whispered.

He looked me over carefully. 'Not just yet,' he said, after this evaluation. Oddly enough, this made me feel better; no telling how many injuries he'd seen in his lifetime, I figured.

'This will hurt,' he warned me.

It was hard to imagine anything that wouldn't.

His arms slid under me before I had time to get afraid. I screamed, but it was a weak effort.

'Quick,' said a voice urgently.

'We're going back in the woods out of sight,' Bill said, cradling my body to him as if it weighed nothing.

Was he going to bury me back there, out of sight? After he'd just rescued me from the Rats? I almost didn't care.

It was only a small relief when he laid me down on a carpet of pine needles in the darkness of the woods. In the distance, I could see the glow of the light in the parking lot. I felt my hair trickling blood, and I felt the pain of my broken arm and the agony of deep bruises, but what was most frightening was what I didn't feel.

I didn't feel my legs.

My abdomen felt full, heavy. The phrase 'internal bleeding' lodged in my thoughts, such as they were.

'You will die unless you do as I say,' Bill told me.

'Sorry, don't want to be a vampire,' I said, and my voice was weak and thready.

'No, you won't be,' he said more gently. 'You'll heal. Quickly. I have a cure. But you have to be willing.'

'Then trot out the cure,' I whispered. 'I'm going.' I could feel the pull the grayness was exerting on me.

In the little part of my mind that was still receiving signals from the world, I heard Bill grunt as if he'd been hurt. Then something was pressed up against my mouth.

'Drink,' he said.

I tried to stick out my tongue, managed. He was bleeding, squeezing to encourage the flow of blood from his wrist into my mouth. I gagged. But I wanted to live. I forced myself to swallow. And swallow again.

Suddenly the blood tasted good, salty, the stuff of life. My unbroken arm rose, my hand clamped the vampire's wrist to my mouth. I felt better with every swallow. And after a minute, I drifted off to sleep.

When I woke up, I was still in the woods, still lying on the ground. Someone was stretched out beside me; it was the vampire. I could see his glow. I could feel his tongue moving on my head. He was licking my head wound. I could hardly begrudge him.

'Do I taste different from other people?' I asked.

'Yes,' he said in a thick voice. 'What are you?'

It was the third time he'd asked. Third time's the charm, Gran always said.

'Hey, I'm not dead,' I said. I suddenly remembered I'd

expected to check out for good. I wiggled my arm, the one that had been broken. It was weak, but it wasn't flopping any longer. I could feel my legs, and I wiggled them, too. I breathed in and out experimentally and was pleased with the resulting mild ache. I struggled to sit up. That proved to be quite an effort, but not an impossibility. It was like my first fever-free day after I'd had pneumonia as a kid. Feeble but blissful. I was aware I'd survived something awful.

Before I finished straightening, he'd put his arms under me and cradled me to him. He leaned back against a tree. I felt very comfortable sitting on his lap, my head against his chest.

'What I am, is telepathic,' I said. 'I can hear people's thoughts.'

'Even mine?' He sounded merely curious.

'No. That's why I like you so much,' I said, floating on a sea of pinkish well-being. I couldn't seem to be bothered with camouflaging my thoughts.

I felt his chest rumble as he laughed. The laugh was a little rusty.

'I can't hear you at all,' I blathered on, my voice dreamy. 'You have no idea how peaceful that is. After a lifetime of blah, blah, blah, to hear . . . nothing.'

'How do you manage going out with men? With men your age, their only thought is still surely how to get you into bed.'

'Well, I don't. Manage. And frankly, at any age, I think their goal is get a woman in bed. I don't date. Everyone thinks I'm crazy, you know, because I can't tell them the truth; which is, that I'm driven crazy by all these thoughts, all these heads. I had a few dates when I started working at

the bar, guys who hadn't heard about me. But it was the same as always. You can't concentrate on being comfortable with a guy, or getting a head of steam up, when you can hear they're wondering if you dye your hair, or thinking that your butt's not pretty, or imagining what your boobs look like.'

Suddenly I felt more alert, and I realized how much of myself I was revealing to this creature.

'Excuse me,' I said. 'I didn't mean to burden you with my problems. Thank you for saving me from the Rats.'

'It was my fault they had a chance to get you at all,' he said. I could tell there was rage just under the calm surface of his voice. 'If I had had the courtesy to be on time, it would not have happened. So I owed you some of my blood. I owed you the healing.'

'Are they dead?' To my embarrassment, my voice sounded squeaky.

'Oh, yes.'

I gulped. I couldn't regret that the world was rid of the Rats. But I had to look this straight in the face, I couldn't dodge the realization that I was sitting in the lap of a murderer. Yet I was quite happy to sit there, his arms around me.

'I should worry about this, but I'm not,' I said, before I knew what I was going to say. I felt that lusty laugh again.

'Sookie, why did you want to talk to me tonight?'

I had to think back hard. Though I was miraculously recovered from the beating physically, I felt a little hazy mentally.

'My grandmother is real anxious to know how old you are,' I said hesitantly. I didn't know how personal a question

that was to a vampire. The vampire in question was stroking my back as though he were soothing a kitten.

'I was made vampire in 1870, when I was thirty human years old.' I looked up; his glowing face was expressionless, his eyes pits of blackness in the dark woods.

'Did you fight in the War?'

'Yes.'

'I have the feeling you're gonna get mad. But it would make her and her club so happy if you'd tell them a little bit about the War, about what it was really like.'

'Club?'

'She belongs to Descendants of the Glorious Dead.'

'Glorious dead.' The vampire's voice was unreadable, but I could tell, sure enough, he wasn't happy.

'Listen, you wouldn't have to tell them about the maggots and the infections and the starvation,' I said. 'They have their own picture of the War, and though they're not stupid people – they've lived through other wars – they would like to know more about the way people lived then, and uniforms and troop movements.'

'Clean things.'

I took a deep breath. 'Yep.'

'Would it make you happy if I did this?'

'What difference does that make? It would make Gran happy, and since you're in Bon Temps and seem to want to live around here, it would be a good public relations move for you.'

'Would it make you happy?'

He was not a guy you could evade. 'Well, yes.'

'Then I'll do it.'

'Gran says to please eat before you come,' I said.

Again I heard the rumbling laugh, deeper this time.

'I'm looking forward to meeting her now. Can I call on you some night?'

'Ah. Sure. I work my last night tomorrow night, and the day after I'm off for two days, so Thursday would be a good night.' I lifted my arm to look at my watch. It was running, but the glass was covered with dried blood. 'Oh, yuck,' I said, wetting my finger in my mouth and cleaning the watch face off with spit. I pressed the button that illuminated the hands, and gasped when I saw what time it was.

'Oh, gosh, I got to get home. I hope Gran went to sleep.'

'She must worry about you being out so late at night by yourself,' Bill observed. He sounded disapproving. Maybe he was thinking of Maudette? I had a moment of deep unease, wondering if in fact Bill had known her, if she'd invited him to come home with her. But I rejected the idea because I was stubbornly unwilling to dwell on the odd, awful, nature of Maudette's life and death; I didn't want that horror to cast a shadow on my little bit of happiness.

'It's part of my job,' I said tartly. 'Can't be helped. I don't work nights all the time, anyway. But when I can, I do.'

'Why?' The vampire gave me a shove up to my feet, and then he rose easily from the ground.

'Better tips. Harder work. No time to think.'

'But night is more dangerous,' he said disapprovingly.

He ought to know. 'Now don't you go sounding like my grandmother,' I chided him mildly. We had almost reached the parking lot.

'I'm older than your grandmother,' he reminded me. That brought the conversation up short.

After I stepped out of the woods, I stood staring. The parking lot was as serene and untouched as if nothing had

ever happened there, as if I hadn't been nearly beaten to death on that patch of gravel only an hour before, as if the Rats hadn't met their bloody end.

The lights in the bar and in Sam's trailer were off.

The gravel was wet, but not bloody.

My purse was sitting on the hood of my car.

'And what about the dog?' I said.

I turned to look at my savior.

He wasn't there.