

From Dead to Worse

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Extract

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FROM DEAD TO WORSE

CHARLAINE HARRIS



Chapter 1

I was making a neat arrangement of liquor bottles on the folding table behind the portable bar when Halleigh Robinson rushed up, her normally sweet face flushed and tear-streaked. Since she was supposed to be getting married within an hour and was still wearing blue jeans and a T-shirt, she got my immediate attention.

“Sookie!” she said, rounding the bar to grab my arm. “You have to help me.”

I’d already helped her by putting on my bartending clothes instead of the pretty dress I’d planned on wearing. “Sure,” I said, imagining Halleigh wanted me to make her a special drink—though if I’d listened in to her thoughts, I’d have known differently already. However, I was trying to be on my best behavior, and I was shielding like crazy. Being telepathic is no picnic,

especially at a high-tension event like a double wedding. I'd expected to be a guest instead of a bartender. But the caterer's bartender had been in a car wreck on her way over from Shreveport, and Sam, who'd been unhired when E(E)E had insisted on using their own bartender, was abruptly hired again.

I was a little disappointed to be on the working side of the bar, but you had to oblige the bride on her special day. "What can I do for you?" I asked.

"I need you to be my bridesmaid," she said.

"Ah . . . what?"

"Tiffany fainted after Mr. Cumberland took the first round of pictures. She's on her way to the hospital."

It was an hour before the wedding, and the photographer had been trying to get a number of group shots out of the way. The bridesmaids and the groomsmen were already toggled out. Halleigh should have been getting into her wedding finery, but instead here she was in jeans and curlers, no makeup, and a tear-streaked face.

Who could resist that?

"You're the right size," she said. "And Tiffany is probably just about to have her appendix out. So, can you try on the dress?"

I glanced at Sam, my boss.

Sam smiled at me and nodded. "Go on, Sook. We don't officially open for business until after the wedding."

So I followed Halleigh into Belle Rive, the Bellefleur mansion, recently restored to something like its antebellum glory. The wooden floors gleamed, the harp by the stairs shone with gilt, the silverware displayed on the big sideboard in the dining

room glowed with polishing. There were servers in white coats buzzing around everywhere, the E(E)E logo on their tunics done in an elaborate black script. Extreme(ly Elegant) Events had become the premier upscale caterer in the United States. I felt a stab in my heart when I noticed the logo, because my missing guy worked for the supernatural branch of E(E)E. I didn't have long to feel the ache, though, because Halleigh was dragging me up the stairs at a relentless pace.

The first bedroom at the top was full of youngish women in gold-colored dresses, all fussing around Halleigh's soon-to-be sister-in-law, Portia Bellefleur. Halleigh zoomed past that door to enter the second room on the left. It was equally full of younger women, but these were in midnight blue chiffon. The room was in chaos, with the bridesmaids' civilian clothes piled here and there. There was a makeup and hair station over by the west wall, staffed by a stoic woman in a pink smock, curling rod in her hand.

Halleigh tossed introductions through the air like paper pellets. "Gals, this is Sookie Stackhouse. Sookie, this is my sister Fay, my cousin Kelly, my best friend Sarah, my other best friend Dana. And here's the dress. It's an eight."

I was amazed that Halleigh had had the presence of mind to divest Tiffany of the bridesmaid dress before her departure for the hospital. Brides are ruthless. In a matter of minutes, I was stripped down to the essentials. I was glad I'd worn nice underwear, since there wasn't any time for modesty. How embarrassing it would have been to be in granny panties with holes! The dress was lined, so I didn't need a slip, another stroke of luck.

There was a spare pair of thigh-highs, which I pulled on, and then the dress went over my head. Sometimes I wear a ten—in fact, most of the time—so I was holding my breath while Fay zipped it up.

If I didn't breathe a lot, it would be okay.

"Super!" one of the other women (Dana?) said with great happiness. "Now the shoes."

"Oh, God," I said when I saw them. They were very high heels dyed to match the midnight blue dress, and I slid my feet into them, anticipating pain. Kelly (maybe) buckled the straps, and I stood up. All of us held our breath as I took a step, then another. They were about half a size too small. It was an important half.

"I can get through the wedding," I said, and they all clapped.

"Over here then," said Pink Smock, and I sat in her chair and had more makeup reapplied over my own and my hair redone while the real bridesmaids and Halleigh's mother assisted Halleigh into her dress. Pink Smock had a lot of hair to work with. I've only had light trims in the past three years, I guess, and it's way down past my shoulder blades now. My roommate, Amelia, had put some highlights in, and that had turned out real good. I was blonder than ever.

I examined myself in the full-length mirror, and it seemed impossible I could have been so transformed in twenty minutes. From working barmaid in a white ruffled tux shirt and black trousers to bridesmaid in a midnight blue dress—and three inches taller, to boot.

Hey, I looked *great*. The dress was a super color for me, the

skirt was gently A-line, the short sleeves weren't too tight, and it wasn't low cut enough to look slutty. With my boobs, the slut factor kicks in if I'm not careful.

I was yanked out of self-admiration by the practical Dana, who said, "Listen, here's the drill." From that moment on, I listened and nodded. I examined a little diagram. I nodded some more. Dana was one organized gal. If I ever invaded a small country, this was the woman I wanted on my side.

By the time we made our way carefully down the stairs (long skirts and high heels, not a good combination), I was fully briefed and ready for my first trip down the aisle as a bridesmaid.

Most girls have done this a couple of times before they reach twenty-six, but Tara Thornton, the only friend I had close enough to ask me, had up and eloped while I was out of town.

The other wedding party was assembled downstairs when we descended. Portia's group would precede Halleigh's. The two grooms and their groomsmen were already outside if all was going smoothly, because now it was five minutes until liftoff.

Portia Bellefleur and her bridesmaids averaged seven years older than Halleigh's posse. Portia was the big sister of Andy Bellefleur, Bon Temps police detective and Halleigh's groom. Portia's dress was a little over-the-top—it was covered with pearls and so much lace and sequins I thought it could stand by itself—but then, it was Portia's big day and she could wear whatever she damn well pleased. All Portia's bridesmaids were wearing gold.

The bridesmaids' bouquets all matched—white and dark

blue and yellow. Coordinated with the dark blue of Halleigh's bridesmaid selection, the result was very pretty.

The wedding planner, a thin nervous woman with a big cloud of dark curly hair, counted heads almost audibly. When she was satisfied everyone she needed was present and accounted for, she flung open the double doors to the huge brick patio. We could see the crowd, backs to us, seated on the lawn in two sections of white folding chairs, with a strip of red carpet running between the two sides. They were facing the platform where the priest stood at an altar decked in cloth and gleaming candlesticks. To the right of the priest, Portia's groom, Glen Vick, was waiting, facing the house. And, therefore, us. He looked very, very nervous, but he was smiling. His groomsmen were already in position flanking him.

Portia's golden bridesmaids stepped out onto the patio, and one by one they began their march down the aisle through the manicured garden. The scent of wedding flowers made the night sweet. And the Belle Rive roses were blooming, even in October.

Finally, to a huge swell of music, Portia crossed the patio to the end of the carpet, the wedding coordinator (with some effort) lifting the train of Portia's dress so it wouldn't drag on the bricks.

At the priest's nod, everyone stood and faced the rear so they could see Portia's triumphal march. She'd waited years for this.

After Portia's safe arrival at the altar, it was our party's turn. Halleigh gave each one of us an air kiss on the cheek as we stepped past her out onto the patio. She even included

me, which was sweet of her. The wedding coordinator sent us off one by one, to stand reflecting our designated groomsman up front. Mine was a Bellefleur cousin from Monroe who was quite startled to see me coming instead of Tiffany. I walked at the slow pace Dana had emphasized and held my bouquet in my clasped hands at the desired angle. I'd been watching the other maids like a hawk. I wanted to get this right.

All the faces were turned to me, and I was so nervous I forgot to block. The thoughts of the crowd rushed at me in a gush of unwanted communication. *Looks so pretty... What happened to Tiffany...? Wow, what a rack... Hurry it up, I need a drink... What the hell am I doing here? She drags me to every dog fight in the parish... I love wedding cake.*

A photographer stepped in front of me and took a picture. It was someone I knew, a pretty werewolf named Maria-Star Cooper. She was the assistant of Al Cumberland, a well-known photographer based in Shreveport. I smiled at Maria-Star and she took another shot. I continued down the carpet, held on to my smile, and pushed away all the racket in my head.

After a moment I noticed there were blank spots in the crowd, which signaled the presence of vampires. Glen had requested a night wedding specifically so he could invite some of his more important vampire clients. I'd been sure Portia truly loved him when she agreed to that, because Portia didn't like bloodsuckers at all. In fact, they gave her the creeps.

I kind of liked vampires in general, because their brains were closed to me. Being in their company was oddly restful. Okay, a strain in other ways, but at least my brain could relax.

Finally, I arrived at my designated spot. I'd watched Portia and Glen's attendants arrange themselves in an inverted V, with a space at the front for the nuptial couple. Our group was doing the same thing. I'd nailed it, and I exhaled in relief. Since I wasn't taking the place of the maid of honor, my work was over. All I had to do was stand still and look attentive, and I thought I could do that.

The music swelled to a second crescendo, and the priest gave his signal again. The crowd rose and turned to look at the second bride. Halleigh began moving slowly toward us. She looked absolutely radiant. Halleigh had selected a much simpler dress than Portia's, and she looked very young and very sweet. She was at least five years younger than Andy, maybe more. Halleigh's dad, as tanned and fit as his wife, stepped out to take Halleigh's arm when she drew abreast; since Portia had come down the aisle alone (her father was long dead), it had been decided Halleigh would, too.

After I'd had my fill of Halleigh's smile, I looked over the crowd who'd rotated to follow the bride's progress.

There were so many familiar faces: teachers from the elementary school where Halleigh taught, members of the police department where Andy worked, the friends of old Mrs. Caroline Bellefleur who were still alive and tottering, Portia's fellow lawyers and other people who worked in the justice system, and Glen Vick's clients and other accountants. Almost every chair was occupied.

There were a few black faces to be seen, and a few brown faces, but most of the wedding guests were middle-class

Caucasians. The palest faces in the crowd were the vampires', of course. One of them I knew well. Bill Compton, my neighbor and former lover, was sitting about halfway back, wearing a tuxedo and looking very handsome. Bill managed to seem at home in whatever he chose to wear. Beside him sat his human girlfriend, Selah Pumphrey, a real estate agent from Clarice. She was wearing a burgundy gown that set off her dark hair. There were perhaps five vamps I didn't recognize. I assumed they were clients of Glen's. Though Glen didn't know it, there were several other attendees who were more (and less) than human.

My boss, Sam, was a rare true shapeshifter who could become any animal. The photographer was a werewolf like his assistant. To all the regular wedding guests, he looked like a well-rounded, rather short African-American male wearing a nice suit and carrying a big camera. But Al turned into a wolf at the full moon just like Maria-Star. There were a few other Weres in the crowd, though only one I knew—Amanda, a red-haired woman in her late thirties who owned a bar in Shreveport called the Hair of the Dog. Maybe Glen's firm handled the bar's books.

And there was one werepanther, Calvin Norris. Calvin had brought a date, I was glad to see, though I was less than thrilled after I identified her as Tanya Grissom. Blech. What was she doing back in town? And why had Calvin been on the guest list? I liked him, but I couldn't figure out the connection.

While I'd been scanning the crowd for familiar faces, Halleigh had assumed her position by Andy, and now all the

bridesmaids and groomsmen had to face forward to listen to the service.

Since I didn't have a big emotional investment in this proceeding, I found myself mentally wandering while Father Kempton Littrell, the Episcopal priest who ordinarily came to the little Bon Temps church once every two weeks, conducted the service. The lights that had been set up to illuminate the garden glinted off Father Littrell's glasses and bleached some of the color out of his face. He looked almost like a vampire.

Things proceeded pretty much on the standard plan. Boy, it was lucky I was used to standing up at the bar, because this was a lot of standing, and in high heels, too. I seldom wore heels, much less three-inch ones. It felt strange being five foot nine. I tried not to shift around, possessed my soul with patience.

Now Glen was putting the ring on Portia's finger, and Portia looked almost pretty as she looked down at their clasped hands. She'd never be one of my favorite people—nor I hers—but I wished her well. Glen was bony and had darkish receding hair and major glasses. If you called central casting and ordered an “accountant type,” they'd send you Glen. But I could tell directly from his brain that he loved Portia, and she loved him.

I let myself shift a bit, put my weight a little more on my right leg.

Then Father Littrell started all over again on Halleigh and Andy. I kept my smile pasted to my face (no problem there; I did it all the time at the bar) and watched Halleigh become Mrs. Andrew Bellefleur. I was lucky. Episcopalian weddings

can be long, but the two couples had opted for having the shorter form of the service.

At last the music swelled to triumphant strains, and the newlyweds exited to the house. The wedding party trailed after them in reverse order. On my way down the aisle, I felt genuinely happy and a weensy bit proud. I'd helped Halleigh in her time of need . . . and very soon I was going to get to take these shoes off.

From his chair, Bill caught my eye and silently put his hand over his heart. It was a romantic and totally unexpected gesture, and for a moment I softened toward him. I very nearly smiled, though Selah was right there by his side. Just in time, I reminded myself that Bill was a no-good rat bastard, and I swept on my painful way. Sam was standing a couple of yards past the last row of chairs, wearing a white tux shirt like the one I'd had on and black dress pants. Relaxed and at ease, that was Sam. Even his tangled halo of strawberry blond hair somehow fit in.

I flashed him a genuine smile, and he grinned back. He gave me a thumbs-up, and though shifter brains are hard to read, I could tell he approved of the way I looked and the way I'd conducted myself. His bright blue eyes never left me. He's been my boss for five years, and we've gotten along great for the most part. He'd been pretty upset when I'd started dating a vampire, but he'd gotten over it.

I needed to get to work, and pronto. I caught up with Dana. "When can we change?" I asked.

"Oh, we have pictures to do yet," Dana said cheerfully. Her

husband had come up to put his arm around her. He was holding their baby, a tiny thing swaddled in sex-neutral yellow.

"Surely I won't be needed for those," I said. "You-all took a lot of pictures earlier, right? Before what's-her-name got sick."

"Tiffany. Yes, but there'll be more."

I seriously doubted the family would want me in them, though my absence would unbalance the symmetry in the group pictures. I found Al Cumberland.

"Yes," he said, snapping away at the brides and grooms as they beamed at each other. "I do need some shots. You got to stay in costume."

"Crap," I said, because my feet hurt.

"Listen, Sookie, the best I can do is to shoot your group first. Andy, Halleigh! That is . . . Mrs. Bellefleur! If you-all will come this way, let's get your pictures done."

Portia Bellefleur Vick looked a little astonished that her group wasn't going first, but she had way too many people to greet to really get riled. While Maria-Star snapped away at the touching scene, a distant relative wheeled old Miss Caroline up to Portia, and Portia bent to kiss her grandmother. Portia and Andy had lived with Miss Caroline for years, after their own parents had passed away. Miss Caroline's poor health had delayed the weddings at least twice. The original plan had been for last spring, and it had been a rush job because Miss Caroline was failing. She'd had a heart attack and then recovered. After that, she'd broken her hip. I had to say, for someone who'd survived two major health disasters, Miss Caroline looked . . . Well, to tell the truth, she looked just like a very old lady who'd had

a heart attack and a broken hip. She was all dressed up in a beige silk suit. She even had on some makeup, and her snow-white hair was arranged à la Lauren Bacall. She'd been a beauty in her day, an autocrat her entire life, and a famous cook until the recent past.

Caroline Bellefleur was in her seventh heaven this night. She'd married off both her grandchildren, she was getting plenty of tribute, and Belle Rive was looking spectacular, thanks to the vampire who was staring at her with an absolutely unreadable face.

Bill Compton had discovered he was the Bellefleurs' ancestor, and he had anonymously given Miss Caroline a whacking big bunch of money. She'd enjoyed spending it so much, and she had had no idea it had come from a vampire. She'd thought it a legacy from a distant relative. I thought it was kind of ironic that the Bellefleurs would just as soon have spit on Bill as thanked him. But he was part of the family, and I was glad he'd found a way to attend.

I took a deep breath, banished Bill's dark gaze from my consciousness, and smiled at the camera. I occupied my designated space in the pictures to balance out the wedding party, dodged the googly-eyed cousin, and finally hotfooted it up the stairs to change into my bartender's rig.

There was no one up here, and it was a relief to be in the room by myself.

I shimmied out of the dress, hung it up, and sat on a stool to unbuckle the straps of the painful shoes.

There was a little sound at the door, and I looked up,

startled. Bill was standing just inside the room, his hands in his pockets, his skin glowing gently. His fangs were out.

"Trying to change here," I said tartly. No point in making a big show of modesty. He'd seen every inch of me.

"You didn't tell them," he said.

"Huh?" Then my brain caught up. Bill meant that I hadn't told the Bellefleurs that he was their ancestor. "No, of course not," I said. "You asked me not to."

"I thought, in your anger, you might give them the information."

I gave him an incredulous look. "No, some of us actually have honor," I said. He looked away for a minute. "By the way, your face healed real well."

During the Fellowship of the Sun bombing in Rhodes, Bill's face had been exposed to the sun with really stomach-churning results.

"I slept for six days," he said. "When I finally got up, it was mostly healed. And as for your dig about my failing in honor, I haven't any defense . . . except that when Sophie-Anne told me to pursue you . . . I was reluctant, Sookie. At first, I didn't want to even pretend to have a permanent relationship with a human woman. I thought it degraded me. I only came into the bar to identify you when I couldn't put it off any longer. And that evening didn't turn out like I'd planned. I went outside with the drainers, and things happened. When you were the one who came to my aid, I decided it was fate. I did what I had been told to do by my queen. In so doing, I fell into a trap I couldn't escape. I still can't."

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The trap of LUUUUVVVV, I thought sarcastically. But he was too serious, too calm, to mock. I was simply defending my own heart with the weapon of bitchiness.

“You got you a girlfriend,” I said. “You go on back to Selah.” I looked down to make sure I’d gotten the little strap on the second sandal unlatched. I worked the shoe off. When I glanced back up, Bill’s dark eyes were fixed on me.

“I would give anything to lie with you again,” he said.

I froze, my hands in the act of rolling the thigh-high hose off my left leg.

Okay, that pretty much stunned me on several different levels. First, the biblical “lie with.” Second, my astonishment that he considered me such a memorable bed partner.

Maybe he only remembered the virgins.

“I don’t want to fool with you tonight, and Sam’s waiting on me down there to help him tend bar,” I said roughly. “You go on.” I stood and turned my back to him while I pulled on my pants and my shirt, tucking the shirt in. Then it was time for the black running shoes. After a quick check in the mirror to make sure I still had on some lipstick, I faced the doorway.

He was gone.

I went down the wide stairs and out the patio doors into the garden, relieved to be resuming my more accustomed place behind a bar. My feet still hurt. So did the sore spot in my heart labeled Bill Compton.

Sam gave me a smiling glance as I scurried into place. Miss Caroline had vetoed our request to leave a tip jar out, but bar

patrons had already stuffed a few bills into an empty highball glass, and I intended to let that stay in position.

"You looked real pretty in the dress," Sam said as he mixed a rum and Coke. I handed a beer across the bar and smiled at the older man who'd come to fetch it. He gave me a huge tip, and I glanced down to see that in my hurry to get downstairs I'd skipped a button. I was showing a little extra cleavage. I was momentarily embarrassed, but it wasn't a slutty button, just a "Hey, I've got boobs" button. So I let it be.

"Thanks," I said, hoping Sam hadn't noticed this quick evaluation. "I hope I did everything right."

"Of course you did," Sam said, as if the possibility of me blowing my new role had never crossed his mind. This is why he's the greatest boss I've ever had.

"Well, good evening," said a slightly nasal voice, and I looked up from the wine I was pouring to see that Tanya Grissom was taking up space and breathing air that could be better used by almost anyone else. Her escort, Calvin, was nowhere in sight.

"Hey, Tanya," Sam said. "How you doing? It's been a while."

"Well, I had to tie up some loose ends in Mississippi," Tanya said. "But I'm back here visiting, and I wondered if you needed any part-time help, Sam."

I pressed my mouth shut and kept my hands busy. Tanya stepped to the side nearest Sam when an elderly lady asked me for some tonic water with a wedge of lime. I handed it to her so quickly she looked astonished, and then I took care of Sam's next customer. I could hear from Sam's brain that he was

pleased to see Tanya. Men can be idiots, right? To be fair, I did know some things about her that Sam didn't.

Selah Pumphrey was next in line, and I could only be amazed at my luck. However, Bill's girlfriend just asked for a rum and Coke.

"Sure," I said, trying not to sound relieved, and began putting the drink together.

"I heard him," Selah said very quietly.

"Heard who?" I asked, distracted by my effort to listen to what Tanya and Sam were saying—either with my ears or with my brain.

"I heard Bill when he was talking to you earlier." When I didn't speak, she continued, "I snuck up the stairs after him."

"Then he knows you were there," I said absently, and handed her the drink. Her eyes flared wide at me for a second—alarmed, angry? She stalked off. If wishes could kill, I would be lifeless on the ground.

Tanya began to turn away from Sam as if her body was thinking of leaving, but her head was still talking to my boss. Finally, her whole self went back to her date. I looked after her, thinking dark thoughts.

"Well, that's good news," Sam said with a smile. "Tanya's available for a while."

I bit back my urge to tell him that Tanya had made it quite clear she was available. "Oh, yeah, great," I said. There were so many people I liked. Why were two of the women I really didn't care for at this wedding tonight? Well, at least my feet

were practically whimpering with pleasure at getting out of the too-small heels.

I smiled and made drinks and cleared away empty bottles and went to Sam's truck to unload more stock. I opened beers and poured wine and mopped up spills until I felt like a perpetual-motion machine.

The vampire clients arrived at the bar in a cluster. I uncorked one bottle of Royalty Blended, a premium blend of synthetic blood and the real blood of actual European royalty. It had to be refrigerated, of course, and it was a very special treat for Glen's clients, a treat he'd personally arranged. (The only vampire drink that exceeded Royalty Blended in price was the nearly pure Royalty, which contained only a trace of preservatives.) Sam lined up the wineglasses. Then he told me to pour it out. I was extraspecial careful not to spill a drop. Sam handed each glass to its recipient. The vampires, including Bill, all tipped very heavily, big smiles on their faces as they lifted their glasses in a toast to the newlyweds.

After a sip of the dark fluid in the wineglasses, their fangs ran out to prove their enjoyment. Some of the human guests looked a smidge uneasy at this expression of appreciation, but Glen was right there smiling and nodding. He knew enough about vampires not to offer to shake hands. I noticed the new Mrs. Vick was not hobnobbing with the undead guests, though she made one pass through the cluster with a strained smile fixed on her face.

When one of the vampires came back for a glass of ordinary TrueBlood, I handed him the warm drink. "Thank you,"

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he said, tipping me yet again. While he had his billfold open, I saw a Nevada driver's license. I'm familiar with a wide variety of licenses from carding kids at the bar; he'd come far for this wedding. I really looked at him for the first time. When he knew he'd caught my attention, he put his hands together and bowed slightly. Since I'd been reading a mystery set in Thailand, I knew this was a *wai*, a courteous greeting practiced by Buddhists—or maybe just Thai people in general? Anyway, he meant to be polite. After a brief hesitation, I put down the rag in my hand and copied his movement. The vampire looked pleased.

"I call myself Jonathan," he said. "Americans can't pronounce my real name."

There might have been a touch of arrogance and contempt there, but I couldn't blame him.

"I'm Sookie Stackhouse," I said.

Jonathan was a smallish man, maybe five foot eight, with the light copper coloring and dusky black hair of his country. He was really handsome. His nose was small and broad, his lips plump. His brown eyes were topped with absolutely straight black brows. His skin was so fine I couldn't detect any pores. He had that little shine vampires have.

"This is your husband?" he asked, picking up his glass of blood and tilting his head in Sam's direction. Sam was busy mixing a piña colada for one of the bridesmaids.

"No, sir, he's my boss."

Just then, Terry Bellefleur, second cousin to Portia and Andy, lurched up to ask for another beer. I was real fond of

Terry, but he was a bad drunk, and I thought he was well on his way to achieving that condition. Though the Vietnam vet wanted to stand and talk about the president's policy on the current war, I walked him over to another family member, a distant cousin from Baton Rouge, and made sure the man was going to keep an eye on Terry and prevent him from driving off in his pickup.

The vampire Jonathan was keeping an eye on *me* while I did this, and I wasn't sure why. But I didn't observe anything aggressive or lustful in his stance or demeanor, and his fangs were in. It seemed safe to disregard him and take care of business. If there was some reason Jonathan wanted to talk to me, I'd find out about it sooner or later. Later was fine.

As I fetched a case of Cokes from Sam's truck, my attention was caught by a man standing alone in the shadows cast by the big live oak on the west side of the lawn. He was tall, slim, and impeccably dressed in a suit that was obviously very expensive. The man stepped forward a little and I could see his face, could realize he was returning my gaze. My first impression was that he was a lovely creature and not a man at all. Whatever he was, human wasn't part of it. Though he had some age on him, he was extremely handsome, and his hair, still pale gold, was as long as mine. He wore it pulled back neatly. He was slightly withered, like a delicious apple that had been in the crisper too long, but his back was absolutely straight and he wore no glasses. He did carry a cane, a very simple black one with a gold head.

When he stepped out of the shadows, the vampires turned

as a group to look. After a moment they slightly inclined their heads. He returned the acknowledgment. They kept their distance, as if he was dangerous or awesome.

This episode was very strange, but I didn't have time to think about it. Everyone wanted one last free drink. The reception was winding down, and people were filtering to the front of the house for the leave-taking of the happy couples. Halleigh and Portia had disappeared upstairs to change into their going-away outfits. The E(E)E staff had been vigilant about clearing up empty cups and the little plates that had held cake and finger food, so the garden looked relatively neat.

Now that we weren't busy, Sam let me know he had something on his mind. "Sookie, am I getting the wrong idea, or do you dislike Tanya?"

"I do have something against Tanya," I said. "I'm just not sure I should tell you about it. You clearly like her." You'd think I'd been sampling the bourbon. Or truth serum.

"If you don't like to work with her, I want to hear the reason," he said. "You're my friend. I respect your opinion."

This was very pleasant to hear.

"Tanya is pretty," I said. "She's bright and able." Those were the good things.

"And?"

"And she came here as a spy," I said. "The Pelts sent her, trying to find out if I had anything to do with the disappearance of their daughter Debbie. You remember when they came to the bar?"

"Yes," said Sam. In the illumination that had been strung

up all around the garden, he looked both brightly lit and darkly shadowed. “You did have something to do with it?”

“Everything,” I said sadly. “But it was self-defense.”

“I know it must have been.” He’d taken my hand. My own jerked in surprise. “I know you,” he said, and didn’t let go.

Sam’s faith made me feel a little warm glow inside. I’d worked for Sam a long time now, and his good opinion meant a lot to me. I felt almost choked up, and I had to clear my throat. “So, I wasn’t happy to see Tanya,” I continued. “I didn’t trust her from the start, and when I found out why she’d come to Bon Temps, I got really down on her. I don’t know if she still gets paid by the Pelts. Plus, tonight she’s here with Calvin, and she’s got no business hitting on you.” My tone was a lot angrier than I’d intended.

“Oh.” Sam looked disconcerted.

“But if you want to go out with her, go ahead,” I said, trying to lighten up. “I mean—she can’t be all bad. And I guess she thought she was doing the right thing, coming to help find information on a missing shifter.” That sounded pretty good and might even be the truth. “I don’t have to like who you date,” I added, just to make it clear I understood I had no claim on him.

“Yeah, but I feel better if you do,” he said.

“Same here,” I agreed, to my own surprise.