FROM BEGINNING TO LINE 97

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) two 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 there 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 rented 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 a while 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 two hundred dollars 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!