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Fairy Dust

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Fairy Dust

I hate it when fairies come into the bar. They don't tip you worth a toot—not because they're stingy, but because they just forget. Take Claudine, the fairy who was walking in the door. Six feet tall, long black hair, gorgeous; Claudine seemed to have no shortage of cash or clothing (and she entranced men the way a watermelon draws flies). But Claudine hardly ever remembered to leave you even a dollar. And if it's lunchtime, you have to take the bowl of lemon slices off the table. Fairies are allergic to lemons and limes, like vamps are allergic to silver and garlic.

That spring night when Claudine came in I was in a bad mood already. I was angry with my ex-boyfriend, Bill Compton, a.k.a. Vampire Bill; my brother Jason had once again postponed helping me shift an armoire; and I'd gotten my property tax notice in the mail.

So when Claudine sat at one of my tables, I stalked over to her with no very happy feelings.

"No vamps around?" she asked straight away. "Even Bill?"

Vamps like fairies the way dogs like bones: great toys, good food. "Not tonight," I said. "Bill's down in New Orleans. I'm picking up his mail for him." Just call me sucker.

Claudine relaxed. "Dearest Sookie," she said.

"You want what?"

"Oh, one of those nasty beers, I guess," she said, making a face. Claudine didn't really like to drink, though she did like bars. Like most fairies, she loved attention and admiration: My boss Sam said that was a fairy characteristic.

I brought her the beer. "You got a minute?" she asked. I frowned. Claudine didn't look as cheerful as usual.

"Just." The table by the door was hooting and hollering at me.

"I have a job for you."

Though it called for dealing with Claudine, whom I liked but didn't trust, I was interested. I sure needed some cash. "What do you need me to do?"

"I need you to come listen to some humans."

"Are these humans willing?"

Claudine gave me innocent eyes. "What do you mean, Precious?"

I hated this song and dance. "Do they want to be, ah, listened to?"

"They're guests of my brother, Claude."

I hadn't known Claudine had a brother. I don't know much about fairies; Claudine was the only one I'd met. If she was typical, I wasn't sure how the race had survived eradication. I wouldn't have thought northern Louisiana was very hospitable toward beings of the fairy persuasion, anyway. This part of the state is largely rural, very Bible Belt. My small town of Bon Temps, barely big enough to have its own Walmart, didn't even see a vampire for two years after they'd announced their existence and their intention to live peaceably amongst us. Maybe that delay was good, since local folks had had a chance to get used to the idea by the time Bill showed up.

But I had a feeling that this PC vamp tolerance would vanish if my fellow townsfolk knew about Weres, and shifters, and fairies. And who knows what all else.

"Okay, Claudine, when?" The rowdy table was hooting, "Crazy Sookie! Crazy Sookie!" People only did that when they'd had too much to drink. I was used to it, but it still hurt.

"When do you get off tonight?"

We fixed it that Claudine would pick me up at my house fifteen minutes after I got off work. She left without finishing her beer. Or tipping.

My boss, Sam Merlotte, nodded a head toward the door she'd just exited. "What'd the fairy want?" Sam's a shifter, himself.

"She needs me to do a job for her."

"Where?"

"Wherever she lives, I guess. She has a brother, did you know?"

"Want me to come with you?" Sam is a friend, the kind of friend you sometimes have fantasies about. X-rated.

"Thanks, but I think I can handle Claudine."

"You haven't met the brother."

"I'll be okay."

I'm used to being up at night, not only because I'm a barmaid, but also because I had dated Bill for a long time. When Claudine picked me up at my old house in the woods, I'd had time to change from my Merlotte's outfit into some black jeans and a sage green twin set (JC Penney's on sale), since the night was chilly. I'd let my hair down from its ponytail.

"You should wear blue instead of green," Claudine said, "to go with your eyes."

“Thanks for the fashion tip.”

“You’re welcome.” Claudine sounded happy to share her style sense with me. But her smile, usually so radiant, seemed tinged with sadness.

“What do you want me to find out from these people?” I asked.

“We’ll talk about it when we get there,” she said, and after that she wouldn’t tell me anything else as we drove east. Ordinarily Claudine babbles. I was beginning to feel it wasn’t smart of me to have accepted this job.

Claudine and her brother lived in a big ranch-style house in suburban Monroe, a town that not only had a Walmart, but a whole mall. She knocked on the front door in a pattern. After a minute, the door opened. My eyes widened. Claudine hadn’t mentioned that her brother was her twin.

If Claude had put on his sister’s clothes, he could have passed for her; it was eerie. His hair was shorter, but not by a lot; he had it pulled back to the nape of his neck, but his ears were covered. His shoulders were broader, but I couldn’t see a trace of a beard, even this late at night. Maybe male fairies don’t have body hair? Claude looked like a Calvin Klein underwear model; in fact, if the designer had been there, he’d have signed the twins on the spot, and there’d have been drool all over the contract.

He stepped back to let us enter. “This is the one?” he said to Claudine.

She nodded. “Sookie, my brother Claude.”

“A pleasure,” I said. I extended my hand. With some surprise, he took it and shook. He looked at his sister. “She’s a trusting one.”

“Humans,” Claudine said, and shrugged.

Claude led me through a very conventional living room, down a paneled hall to the family room. A man was sitting in a chair, because he had no choice. He was tied to it with what looked like nylon cord. He was a small man, buff, blond, and brown-eyed. He looked about my age, twenty-six.

“Hey,” I said, not liking the squeak in my voice, “why is that man tied?”

“Otherwise, he’d run away,” Claude said, surprised.

I covered my face with my hands for a second. “Listen, you two, I don’t mind looking at this guy if he’s done something wrong, or if you want to eliminate him as a suspect in a crime committed against you. But if you just want to find out if he really loves you, or something silly like that.... What’s your purpose?”

“We think he killed our triplet, Claudia.”

I almost said, “There were three of you?” then realized that wasn’t the most important part of the sentence.

“You think he murdered your sister.”

Claudine and Claude nodded in unison. “Tonight,” Claude said.

“Okey-dokey,” I muttered, and bent over the blond. “I’m taking the gag off.”

They looked unhappy, but I slid the handkerchief down to his neck. The young man said, “I didn’t do it.”

“Good. Do you know what I am?”

“No. You’re not a thing like them, are you?”

I don’t know what he thought Claude and Claudine were, what little otherworldly attribute they’d sprung on him. I lifted my hair to show him that my ears were round, not pointed, but he still looked dissatisfied.

“Not a vamp?” he asked.

Showed him my teeth. The canines only extend when vamps are excited by blood, battle, or sex, but they’re noticeably sharp even when they’re retracted. My canines are quite normal.

“I’m just a regular human,” I said. “Well, that’s not quite true. I can read your thoughts.”

He looked terrified.

“What are you scared for? If you didn’t kill anybody, you have nothing to fear.” I made my voice warm, like butter melting on corn on the cob.

“What will they do to me? What if you make a mistake and tell them I did it, what are they gonna do?”

Good question. I looked up at the two.

“We’ll kill him and eat him,” Claudine said, with a ravishing smile. When the blond man looked from her to Claude, his eyes wide with terror, she winked at me.

For all I knew, Claudine might be serious. I couldn’t remember if I’d ever seen her eat or not. We were treading on dangerous ground. I try to support my own race when I can. Or at least get ‘em out of situations alive.

I should have accepted Sam’s offer.

“Is this man the only suspect?” I asked the twins. (Should I call them twins? I wondered. It was more accurate to think of them as two-thirds of triplets. Nah. Too complicated.)

“No, we have another man in the kitchen,” Claude said.

“And a woman in the pantry.”

Under other circumstances, I would’ve smiled. “Why are you sure Claudia is dead?”

“She came to us in spirit form and told us so.” Claude looked surprised. “This is a death ritual for our race.”

I sat back on my heels, trying to think of intelligent questions. “When this happens, does the spirit let you know any of the circumstances of the death?”

“No,” Claudine said, shaking her head so her long black hair switched. “It’s more like a final farewell.”

“Have you found the body?”

They looked disgusted. “We fade,” Claude explained, in a haughty way. So much for examining the corpse.

“Can you tell me where Claudia was when she, ah, faded?” I asked. “The more I know, the better questions I can ask.” Mind reading is not so simple. Asking the right questions is the key to eliciting the correct thought. The mouth can say anything. The head never lies. But if you don’t ask the right question, the right thought won’t pop up.

“Claudia and Claude are exotic dancers at Hooligans,” Claudine said proudly, as if she was announcing they were on an Olympic team.

I’d never met strippers before, male or female. I found myself more than a little interested in seeing Claude strip, but I made myself focus on the deceased Claudia.

“So, Claudia worked last night?”

“She was scheduled to take the money at the door. It was ladies’ night at Hooligans.”

“Oh. Okay. So you were, ah, performing,” I said to Claude.

“Yes. We do two shows on ladies’ night. I was the Pirate.”

I tried to suppress that mental image.

“And this man?” I tilted my head toward the blond, who was being very good about not pleading and begging.

“I’m a stripper, too,” he said. “I was the Cop.”

Okay. Just stuff that imagination in a box and sit on it.

“Your name is?”

“Barry Barber is my stage name. My real name is Ben Simpson.”

“Barry Barber?” I was puzzled.

“I like to shave people.”

I had a blank moment, then felt a red flush creep across my cheeks as I realized he didn’t mean whisky cheeks. Well, not facial cheeks. “And the other two people are?” I asked the twins.

“The woman in the pantry is Rita Child. She owns Hooligans,” Claudine said. “And the man in the kitchen is Jeff Puckett. He’s the bouncer.”

“Why did you pick these three out of all the employees at Hooligans?”

“Because they had arguments with Claudia. She was a dynamic woman,” Claude said seriously.

“Dynamic my ass,” said Barry the Barber, proving that tact isn’t a prerequisite for a stripping job. “That woman was hell on wheels.”

“Her character isn’t really important in determining who killed her,” I pointed out, which shut him right up. “It just indicates why. Please go on,” I said to Claude. “Where were the three of you? And where were the people you’ve held here?”

“Claudine was here, cooking supper for us. She works at Dillard’s in Customer Service.” She’d be great at that; her unrelenting cheer could pacify anyone. “As I said, Claudia was scheduled to take the cover charge at the door,” Claude continued. “Barry and I were in both shows. Rita always puts the first show’s take in the safe, so Claudia won’t be sitting up there with a lot of cash. We’ve been robbed a couple of times. Jeff was mostly sitting behind Claudia, in a little booth right inside the main door.”

“When did Claudia vanish?”

“Soon after the second show started. Rita says she got the first show’s take from Claudia and took it back to her safe, and that Claudia was still sitting there when she left. But Rita hates Claudia, because Claudia was about to leave Hooligans for Foxes, and I was going with her.”

“Foxes is another club?” Claude nodded. “Why were you leaving?”

“Better pay, larger dressing rooms.”

“Okay, that would be Rita’s motivation. What about Jeff’s?”

“Jeff and I had a thing,” Claude said. (My pirate ship fantasy sank.) “Claudia told me I had to break up with him, that I could do better.”

“And you listened to her advice about your love life?”

“She was the oldest, by several minutes,” he said simply. “But I lo—I am very fond of him.”

“What about you, Barry?”

“She ruined my act,” Barry said sullenly.

“How’d she do that?”

“She yelled, ‘Too bad your nightstick’s not bigger!’ as I was finishing up.”

It seemed that Claudia had been determined to die.

“Okay,” I said, marshaling my plan of action. I knelt before Barry. I laid my hand on his arm, and he twitched. “How old are you?”

“Twenty-five,” he said, but his mind provided me with a different answer.

“That’s not right, is it?” I asked, keeping my voice gentle.

He had a gorgeous tan, almost as good as mine, but he paled underneath it. “No,” he said in a strangled voice. “I’m thirty.”

“I had no idea,” Claude said, and Claudette told him to hush.

“And why didn’t you like Claudia?”

“She insulted me in front of an audience,” he said. “I told you.”

The image from his mind was quite different. “In private? Did she say something to you in private?” After all, reading minds isn’t like watching television. People don’t relate things in their own brains, the way they would if they were telling a story to another person.

Barry looked embarrassed and even angrier. “Yes, in private. We’d been having sex for a while, and then one day she just wasn’t interested anymore.”

“Did she tell you why?”

“She told me I was... inadequate.”

That hadn’t been the phrase she used. I felt embarrassed for him when I heard the actual words in his head.

“What did you do between shows tonight, Barry?”

“We had an hour. So I could get two shaves in.”

“You get paid for that?”

“Oh, yeah.” He grinned, but not as though something was funny. “You think I’d shave a stranger’s crotch if I didn’t get paid for it? But I make a big ritual out of it; act like it turns me on. I get a hundred bucks a pop.”

“When did you see Claudia?”

“When I went out to meet my first appointment, right as the first show was ending. She and her boyfriend were standing by the booth. I’d told them that was where I’d meet them.”

“Did you talk to Claudia?”

“No, I just looked at her.” He sounded sad. “I saw Rita, she was on her

way to the booth with the money pouch, and I saw Jeff, he was on the stool at the back of the booth, where he usually stays.”

“And then you went back to do this shaving?”

He nodded.

“How long does it take you?”

“Usually about thirty, forty minutes. So scheduling two was kind of chancy, but it worked out. I do it in the dressing room, and the other guys are good about staying out.”

He was getting more relaxed, the thoughts in his head calming and flowing more easily. The first person he’d done tonight had been a woman so bone-thin he’d wondered if she’d die while he did the shaving routine. She’d thought she was beautiful, and she’d obviously enjoyed showing him her body. Her boyfriend had gotten a kick out of the whole thing.

I could hear Claudine buzzing in the background, but I kept my eyes closed and my hands on Barry’s, seeing the second “client,” a guy, and then I saw his face. Oh, boy. It was someone I knew, a vampire named Maxwell Litton.

“There was a vamp in the bar,” I said, out loud, not opening my eyes. “Barry, what did he do when you finished shaving him?”

“He left,” Barry said. “I watched him go out the back door. I’m always careful to make sure my clients are out of the backstage area. That’s the only way Rita will let me do the shaving at the club.”

Of course, Barry didn’t know about the problem fairies have with vamps. Some vamps had less self-control when it came to fairies than others did. Fairies were strong, stronger than people, but vamps were stronger than anything else on earth.

“And you didn’t go back out to the booth and talk to Claudia again?”

“I didn’t see her again.”

“He’s telling the truth,” I said to Claudine and Claude. “As far as he knows it.” There were always other questions I could ask, but at first “hearing,” Barry didn’t know anything about Claudia’s disappearance.

Claude ushered me into the pantry, where Rita Child was waiting. It was a walk-in pantry, very neat, but not intended for two people, one of them duct-taped to a rolling office chair. Rita Child was a substantial woman, too. She looked exactly like I’d expect the owner of a strip club to look—painted, dyed brunette, packed into a challenging dress with high-

tech underwear that pinched and pushed her into a provocative shape.

She was also steaming mad. She kicked out at me with a high heel that would have taken my eye out if I hadn't jerked back in the middle of kneeling in front of her. I fell on my fundament in an ungraceful sprawl.

"None of that, Rita," Claude said calmly. "You're not the boss here. This is our place." He helped me stand up and dusted off my bottom in an impersonal way.

"We just want to know what happened to our sister," Claudine said.

Rita made sounds behind her gag, sounds that didn't seem to be conciliatory. I got the impression that she didn't give a damn about the twins' motivation in kidnapping her and tying her up in their pantry. They'd taped her mouth, rather than using a cloth gag, and after the kicking incident, I kind of enjoyed ripping the tape off.

Rita called me some names reflecting on my heritage and moral character.

"I guess that's just the pot calling the kettle black," I said, when she paused to breathe. "Now you listen here! I'm not taking that kind of talk off of you, and I want you to shut up and answer my questions. You don't seem to have a good picture of the situation you're in."

The club owner calmed down a little bit after that. She was still glaring at me with her narrow brown eyes, and straining at her ropes, but she seemed to understand a little better.

"I'm going to touch you," I said. I was afraid she might bite if I touched her bare shoulder, so I put my hand on her forearm just above where her wrists were tied to the arms of the rolling chair.

Her head was a maze of fury. She wasn't thinking clearly because she was so angry, and all her mental energy was directed into cursing at the twins and now at me. She suspected me of being some kind of supernatural assassin, and I decided it wouldn't hurt if she were scared of me for a while.

"When did you see Claudia tonight?" I asked.

"When I went to get the money from the first show," she growled, and sure enough, I saw Rita's hand reaching out, a long white hand placing a zippered vinyl pouch in it. "I was in my office working during the first show. But I get the money in between, so if we get stuck up, we won't lose so much."

"She gave you the money bag, and you left?"

“Yeah. I went to put the cash in the safe until the second show was over. I didn’t see her again.”

And that seemed to be the truth to me. I couldn’t see another vision of Claudia in Rita’s head. But I saw a lot of satisfaction that Claudia was dead, and a grim determination to keep Claude at her club.

“Will you still go to Foxes, now that Claudia’s gone?” I asked him, to spark a response that might reveal something from Rita.

Claude looked down at me, surprised and disgusted. “I haven’t had time to think of what will come tomorrow,” he snapped. “I just lost my sister.”

Rita’s mind sort of leaped with joy. She had it bad for Claude. And on the practical side, he was a big draw at Hooligans, since even on an off night he could engender some magic to make the crowd spend big. Claudia hadn’t been so willing to use her power for Rita’s profit, but Claude didn’t think about it twice. Using his inbred fairy skills to draw people to admire him was an ego thing with Claude, which had little to do with economics.

I got all this from Rita in a flash.

“Okay,” I said, standing up. “I’m through with her.”

She was happy.

We stepped out of the pantry into the kitchen, where the final candidate for murderer was waiting. He’d been pushed under the table, and he had a glass in front of him with a straw stuck in it, so he could lean over to drink. Being a former lover had paid off for Jeff Puckett. His mouth wasn’t even taped.

I looked from Claude to Jeff, trying to figure it out. Jeff had a light brown mustache that needed trimming, and a two-day growth of whiskers on his cheeks. His eyes were narrow and hazel. As much as I could tell, Jeff seemed to be in better shape than some of the bouncers I’d known, and he was even taller than Claude. But I was not impressed, and I reflected for maybe the millionth time that love was strange.

Claude braced himself visibly when he faced his former lover.

“I’m here to find out what you know about Claudia’s death,” I said, since we’d been around a corner when we’d questioned Rita. “I’m a telepath, and I’m going to touch you while I ask you some questions.”

Jeff nodded. He was very tense. He fixed his eyes on Claude. I stood behind him, since he was pushed up under the table, and put my hands on his thick shoulders. I pulled his tee shirt to one side, just a little, so my

thumb could touch his neck.

“Jeff, you tell me what you saw tonight,” I said.

“Claudia came to take the money for the first set,” he said. His voice was higher than I’d expected, and he was not from these parts. Florida, I thought. “I couldn’t stand her because she messed with my personal life, and I didn’t want to be with her. But that’s what Rita told me to do, so I did. I sat on the stool and watched her take the money and put it into the money bag. She kept some in a money drawer to make change.”

“Did she have trouble with any of the customers?”

“No. It was ladies’ night, and the women don’t give any trouble coming in. They did during the second set, I had to go haul a gal offstage who got a little too enthusiastic about our Construction Worker, but mostly that night I just sat on the stool and watched.”

“When did Claudia vanish?”

“When I come back from getting that gal back to her table, Claudia was gone. I looked around for her, went and asked Rita if she’d said anything to her about having to take a break. I even checked the ladies’ room. Wasn’t till I went back in the booth that I seen the glittery stuff.”

“What glittery stuff?”

“What we leave when we fade,” Claude murmured. “Fairy dust.”

Did they sweep it up and keep it? It would probably be tacky to ask.

“And next thing I knew, the second set was over and the club was closing, and I was checking backstage and everywhere for traces of Claudia, then I was here with Claude and Claudine.”

He didn’t seem too angry.

“Do you know anything about Claudia’s death?”

“No. I wish I did. I know this is hard on Claude.” His eyes were as fixed on Claude as Claude’s were on him. “She separated us, but she’s not in the picture anymore.”

“I have to know,” Claude said, through clenched teeth.

For the first time, I wondered what the twins would do if I couldn’t discover the culprit. And that scary thought spurred my brain to greater activity.

“Claudine,” I called. Claudine came in, with an apple in her hand. She was hungry, and she looked tired. I wasn’t surprised. Presumably, she’d worked all day, and here she was, staying up all night, and grieved, to boot.

“Can you wheel Rita in here?” I asked. “Claude, can you go get Barry?”

When everyone was assembled in the kitchen, I said, “Everything I’ve seen and heard seems to indicate that Claudia vanished during the second show.” After a second’s consideration, they all nodded. Barry’s and Rita’s mouths had been gagged again, and I thought that was a good thing.

“During the first show,” I said, going slow to be sure I got it right, “Claudia took up the money. Claude was onstage. Barry was onstage. Even when he wasn’t onstage, he didn’t come up to the booth. Rita was in her office.”

There were nods all around.

“During the interval between shows, the club cleared out.”

“Yeah,” Jeff said. “Barry came up to meet his clients, and I checked to make sure everyone else was gone.”

“So you were away from the booth a little.”

“Oh, well, yeah, I guess. I do it so often, I didn’t even think of that.”

“And also during the interval, Rita came up to get the money pouch from Claudia.”

Rita nodded emphatically.

“So, at the end of the interval, Barry’s clients have left.” Barry nodded. “Claude, what about you?”

“I went out to get some food during the interval,” he said. “I can’t eat a lot before I dance, but I had to eat something. I got back, and Barry was by himself and getting ready for the second show. I got ready, too.”

“And I got back on the stool,” Jeff said. “Claudia was back at the cash window. She was all ready, with the cash drawer and the stamp, and the pouch. She still wasn’t speaking to me.”

“But you’re sure it was Claudia?” I asked, out of the blue.

“Wasn’t Claudine, if that’s what you mean,” he said. “Claudine’s as sweet as Claudia was sour, and they even sit different.”

Claudine looked pleased and threw her apple core in the garbage can. She smiled at me, already forgiving me for asking questions about her.

The apple.

Claude, looking impatient, began to speak. I held up my hand. He stopped.

“I’m going to ask Claudine to take your gags off,” I said to Rita and Barry. “But I don’t want you to talk unless I ask you a question, okay?” They both

nodded.

Claudine took the gags off, while Claude glared at me.

Thoughts were pounding through my head like a mental stampede.

“What did Rita do with the money pouch?”

“After the first show?” Jeff seemed puzzled. “Uh, I told you. She took it with her.”

Alarm bells were going off mentally. Now I knew I was on the right track.

“You said that when you saw Claudia waiting to take the money for the second show, she had everything ready.”

“Yeah. So? She had the hand stamp, she had the money drawer, and she had the pouch,” Jeff said.

“Right. She had to have a second pouch for the second show. Rita had taken the first pouch. So when Rita came to get the first show’s take, she had the second pouch in her hand, right?”

Jeff tried to remember. “Uh, I guess so.”

“What about it, Rita?” I asked. “Did you bring the second pouch?”

“No,” she said. “There were two in the booth at the beginning of the evening. I just took the one she’d used, then she had an empty one there for the take from the second show.”

“Barry, did you see Rita walking to the booth?”

The blond stripper thought frantically. I could feel every idea beating at the inside of my head.

“She had something in her hand,” he said finally. “I’m sure of it.”

“No,” Rita shrieked. “It was there already!”

“What’s so important about the pouch, anyway?” Jeff asked. “It’s just a vinyl pouch with a zipper like banks give you. How could that hurt Claudia?”

“What if the inside were rubbed with lemon juice?”

Both the fairies flinched, horror on their faces.

“Would that kill Claudia?” I asked them.

Claude said, “Oh, yes. She was especially susceptible. Even lemon scent would make her vomit. She had a terrible time on washday until we found out the fabric sheets were lemon scented. Claudine has to go to the store since so many things are scented with the foul smell.”

Rita began screaming, a high-pitched car alarm shriek that just seemed

to go on and on. "I swear I didn't do it!" she said. "I didn't! I didn't!" But her mind was saying, "Caught, caught, caught, caught."

"Yeah, you did it," I said.

The surviving brother and sister stood in front of the rolling chair. "Sign over the bar to us," Claude said.

"What?"

"Sign over the club to us. We'll even pay you a dollar for it."

"Why would I do that? You got no body! You can't go to the cops! What are you gonna say? 'I'm a fairy, I'm allergic to lemons.'" She laughed. "Who's gonna believe that?"

Barry said weakly, "Fairies?"

Jeff didn't say anything. He hadn't known the triplets were allergic to lemons. He didn't realize his lover was a fairy. I worry about the human race.

"Barry should go," I suggested.

Claude seemed to rouse himself. He'd been looking at Rita the way a cat eyes a canary. "Good-bye, Barry," he said politely, as he untied the stripper. "I'll see you at the club tomorrow night. Our turn to take up the money."

"Uh, right," Barry said, getting to his feet.

Claudine's mouth had been moving all the while, and Barry's face went blank and relaxed. "See you later, nice party," he said genially.

"Good to meet you, Barry," I said.

"Come see the show sometime." He waved at me and walked out of the house, Claudine shepherding him to the front door. She was back in a flash.

Claude had been freeing Jeff. He kissed him, said, "I'll call you soon," and gently pushed him toward the back door. Claudine did the same spell, and Jeff's face, too, relaxed utterly from its tense expression. "Bye," the bouncer called as he shut the door behind him.

"Are you gonna mojo me, too?" I asked, in a kind of squeaky voice.

"Here's your money," Claudine said. She took my hand. "Thank you, Sookie. I think you can remember this, huh, Claude? She's been so good!" I felt like a puppy that'd remembered its potty-training lesson.

Claude considered me for a minute, then nodded. He turned his attention back to Rita, who'd been taking the time to climb out of her panic.

Claude produced a contract out of thin air. "Sign," he told Rita, and I

handed him a pen that had been on the counter beneath the phone.

“You’re taking the bar in return for your sister’s life,” she said, expressing her incredulity at what I considered a very bad moment.

“Sure.”

She gave the two fairies a look of contempt. With a flash of her rings, she took up the pen and signed the contract. She pushed up to her feet, smoothed the skirt of her dress across her round hips, and tossed her head. “I’ll be going now,” she said. “I own another place in Baton Rouge. I’ll just live there.”

“You’ll start running,” Claude said.

“What?”

“You better run. You owe us money and a hunt for the death of our sister. We have the money, or at least the means to make it.” He pointed at the contract. “Now we need the hunt.”

“That’s not fair.”

Okay, that disgusted even me.

“Fair is only part of fairy as letters of the alphabet.” Claudine looked formidable: not sweet, not dotty. “If you can dodge us for a year, you can live.”

“A year!” Rita’s situation seemed to be feeling more and more real to her by then. She was beginning to look desperate.

“Starting... now.” Claude looked up from his watch. “Better go. We’ll give ourselves a four-hour handicap.”

“Just for fun,” Claudine said.

“And, Rita?” Claude said, as Rita made for the door. She paused, looked back at him.

Claude smiled at her. “We won’t use lemons.”