

# Dead to the World

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Extract

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# DEAD TO THE WORLD

CHARLAINE HARRIS



I found the note taped to my door when I got home from work. I'd had the lunch-to-early-evening shift at Merlotte's, but since we were at the tail end of December, the day darkened early. So Bill, my former boyfriend – that's Bill Compton, or Vampire Bill, as most of the regulars at Merlotte's call him – must have left his message within the previous hour. He can't get up until dark.

I hadn't seen Bill in over a week, and our parting hadn't been a happy one. But touching the envelope with my name written on it made me feel miserable. You'd think – though I'm twenty-six – I'd never had, and lost, a boyfriend before.

You'd be right.

Normal guys don't want to date someone as strange as I am. People have been saying I'm messed up in the head since I started school.

They're right.

That's not to say I don't get groped at the bar occasionally. Guys get drunk. I look good. They forget their misgivings about my reputation for strangeness and my ever-present smile.

But only Bill has ever gotten close to me in an intimate way. Parting from him had hurt me bad.

I waited to open the envelope until I was sitting at the old, scarred kitchen table. I still had my coat on, though I'd shucked my gloves.

*Dearest Sookie – I wanted to come over to talk to you when you had somewhat recovered from the unfortunate events of earlier this month.*

'Unfortunate events,' my round rear end. The bruises had finally faded, but I had a knee that still ached in the cold, and I suspected that it always would. Every injury I had incurred had been in the course of rescuing my cheating boyfriend from his imprisonment by a group of vampires that included his former flame, Lorena. I had yet to figure out why Bill had been so infatuated with Lorena that he'd answered her summons to Mississippi.

*Probably, you have a lot of questions about what happened.*

Damn straight.

*If you'll talk to me face-to-face, come to the front door and let me in.*

Yikes. I hadn't seen that one coming. I pondered for a minute. Deciding that while I didn't trust Bill anymore, I didn't believe that he would physically harm me, I went back through the house to the front door. I opened it and called, 'Okay, come on in.'

He emerged from the woods surrounding the clearing in which my old house stood. I ached at the sight of him. Bill was broad-shouldered and lean from his life of farming the land next to mine. He was hard and tough from his years as a Confederate soldier, before his death in 1867. Bill's nose was straight off a Greek vase. His hair was dark brown and clipped close to his head, and his eyes were just as dark. He

looked exactly the same as he had while we were dating, and he always would.

He hesitated before he crossed the threshold, but I'd given him permission, and I moved aside so he could step past me into the living room filled with old, comfortable furniture and neat as a pin.

'Thank you,' he said in his cold, smooth voice, a voice that still gave me a twinge of sheer lust. Many things had gone wrong between us, but they hadn't started in bed. 'I wanted to talk to you before I left.'

'Where are you going?' I tried to sound as calm as he.

'To Peru. The queen's orders.'

'Still working on your, ah, database?' I knew almost nothing about computers, but Bill had studied hard to make himself computer literate.

'Yes. I've got a little more research to do. A very old vampire in Lima has a great fund of knowledge about those of our race on his continent, and I have an appointment to confer with him. I'll do some sight-seeing while I'm down there.'

I fought the urge to offer Bill a bottle of synthetic blood, which would have been the hospitable thing to do. 'Have a seat,' I said curtly, and nodded at the sofa. I sat on the edge of the old recliner catty-cornered to it. Then a silence fell, a silence that made me even more conscious of how unhappy I was.

'How's Bubba?' I asked finally.

'He's in New Orleans right now,' Bill said. 'The queen likes to keep him around from time to time, and he was so visible here over the last month that it seemed like a good idea to take him elsewhere. He'll be back soon.'

You'd recognize Bubba if you saw him; everyone knows

his face. But he hadn't been 'brought over' too successfully. Probably the morgue attendant, who happened to be a vampire, should have ignored the tiny spark of life. But since he was a great fan, he hadn't been able to resist the attempt, and now the entire southern vampire community shuffled Bubba around and tried to keep him from public view.

Another silence fell. I'd planned on taking off my shoes and uniform, putting on a cuddly robe, and watching television with a Freschetta pizza by my side. It was a humble plan, but it was my own. Instead, here I was, suffering.

'If you have something to say, you better go on and say it,' I told him.

He nodded, almost to himself. 'I have to explain,' he said. His white hands arranged themselves in his lap. 'Lorena and I—'

I flinched involuntarily. I never wanted to hear that name again. He'd dumped me for Lorena.

'I have to tell you,' he said, almost angrily. He'd seen me twitch. 'Give me this chance.' After a second, I waved a hand to tell him to continue.

'The reason I went to Jackson when she called me is that I couldn't help myself,' he said.

My eyebrows flew up. I'd heard *that* before. It means, 'I have no self-control,' or, 'It seemed worth it at the time, and I wasn't thinking north of my belt.'

'We were lovers long ago. As Eric says he told you, vampire liaisons don't tend to last long, though they're very intense while they are ongoing. However, what Eric did not tell you was that Lorena was the vampire who brought me over.'

'To the Dark Side?' I asked, and then I bit my lip. This was no subject for levity.

'Yes,' Bill agreed seriously. 'And we were together after that, as lovers, which is not always the case.'

'But you had broken up . . .'

'Yes, about eighty years ago, we came to the point where we couldn't tolerate each other any longer. I hadn't seen Lorena since, though I'd heard of her doings, of course.'

'Oh, sure,' I said expressionlessly.

'But I had to obey her summons. This is absolutely imperative. When your maker calls, you must respond.' His voice was urgent.

I nodded, trying to look understanding. I guess I didn't do too good a job.

'She *ordered* me to leave you,' he said. His dark eyes were peering into mine. 'She said she would kill you if I didn't.'

I was losing my temper. I bit the inside of my cheek, real hard, to make myself focus. 'So, without explanation or discussion with me, you decided what was best for me and for you.'

'I had to,' he said. 'I *had* to do her bidding. And I knew she was capable of harming you.'

'Well, you got that right.' In fact, Lorena had done her dead level best to harm me right into the grave. But I'd gotten her first – okay, by a fluke, but it had worked.

'And now you no longer love me,' Bill said, with the slightest of questions in his voice.

I didn't have any clear answer.

'I don't know,' I said. 'I wouldn't think you'd want to come back to me. After all, I killed your mom.' And there was the slightest of questions in my voice, too, but mostly I was bitter.

'Then we need more time apart. When I return, if you consent, we'll talk again. A kiss good-bye?'

To my shame, I would love to kiss Bill again. But it was such a bad idea, even wanting it seemed wrong. We stood, and I gave him a quick brush of lips to the cheek. His white skin shone with a little glow that distinguished vampires from humans. It had surprised me to learn that not everyone saw them like I did.

'Are you seeing the Were?' he asked, when he was nearly out the door. He sounded as though the words had been pulled out of him by their roots.

'Which one?' I asked, resisting the temptation to bat my eyelashes. He deserved no answer, and he knew it. 'How long will you be gone?' I asked more briskly, and he looked at me with some speculation.

'It's not a sure thing. Maybe two weeks,' he answered.

'We might talk then,' I said, turning my face away. 'Let me return your key.' I fished my keys out of my purse.

'No, please, keep it on your key ring,' he said. 'You might need it while I am gone. Go in the house as you will. My mail's getting held at the post office until I give them notice, and I think all my other loose ends are taken care of.'

So I was his last loose end. I damned up the trickle of anger that was all too ready to bubble out these days.

'I hope you have a safe trip,' I said coldly, and shut the door behind him. I headed back to my bedroom. I had a robe to put on and some television to watch. By golly, I was sticking to my plan.

But while I was putting my pizza in the oven, I had to blot my cheeks a few times.



## *Chapter 1*

The New Year's Eve party at Merlotte's Bar and Grill was finally, finally, over. Though the bar owner, Sam Merlotte, had asked all his staff to work that night, Holly, Arlene, and I were the only ones who'd responded. Charlsie Tooten had said she was too old to put up with the mess we had to endure on New Year's Eve, Danielle had long-standing plans to attend a fancy party with her steady boyfriend, and a new woman couldn't start for two days. I guess Arlene and Holly and I needed the money more than we needed a good time.

And I hadn't had any invitations to do anything else. At least when I'm working at Merlotte's, I'm a part of the scenery. That's a kind of acceptance.

I was sweeping up the shredded paper, and I reminded myself again not to comment to Sam on what a poor idea the bags of confetti had been. We'd all made ourselves pretty clear about that, and even good-natured Sam was showing signs of wear and tear. It didn't seem fair to leave it all for Terry Bellefleur to clean, though sweeping and mopping the floors was his job.

Sam was counting the till money and bagging it up so he could go by the night deposit at the bank. He was looking tired but pleased.

He flicked open his cell phone. 'Kenya? You ready to take me to the bank? Okay, see you in a minute at the back door.' Kenya, a police officer, often escorted Sam to the night deposit, especially after a big take like tonight's.

I was pleased with my money take, too. I had earned a lot in tips. I thought I might have gotten three hundred dollars or more – and I needed every penny. I would have enjoyed the prospect of totting up the money when I got home, if I'd been sure I had enough brains left to do it. The noise and chaos of the party, the constant runs to and from the bar and the serving hatch, the tremendous mess we'd had to clean up, the steady cacophony of all those brains . . . it had combined to exhaust me. Toward the end I'd been too tired to keep my poor mind protected, and lots of thoughts had leaked through.

It's not easy being telepathic. Most often, it's not fun.

This evening had been worse than most. Not only had the bar patrons, almost all known to me for many years, been in uninhibited moods, but there'd been some news that lots of people were just dying to tell me.

'I hear yore boyfriend done gone to South America,' a car salesman, Chuck Beecham, had said, malice gleaming in his eyes. 'You gonna get mighty lonely out to your place without him.'

'You offering to take his place, Chuck?' the man beside him at the bar had asked, and they both had a we're-men-together guffaw.

'Naw, Terrell,' said the salesman. 'I don't care for vampire leavings.'

'You be polite, or you go out the door,' I said steadily. I felt warmth at my back, and I knew my boss, Sam Merlotte, was looking at them over my shoulder.

'Trouble?' he asked.

'They were just about to apologize,' I said, looking Chuck and Terrell in the eyes. They looked down at their beers.

'Sorry, Sookie,' Chuck mumbled, and Terrell bobbed his head in agreement. I nodded and turned to take care of another order. But they'd succeeded in hurting me.

Which was their goal.

I had an ache around my heart.

I was sure the general populace of Bon Temps, Louisiana, didn't know about our estrangement. Bill sure wasn't in the habit of blabbing his personal business around, and neither was I. Arlene and Tara knew a little about it, of course, since you have to tell your best friends when you've broken up with your guy, even if you have to leave out all the interesting details. (Like the fact that you'd killed the woman he left you for. Which I couldn't help. Really.) So anyone who told me Bill had gone out of the country, assuming I didn't know it yet, was just being malicious.

Until Bill's recent visit to my house, I'd last seen him when I'd given him the disks and computer he'd hidden with me. I'd driven up at dusk, so the machine wouldn't be sitting on his front porch for long. I'd put all his stuff up against the door in a big waterproofed box. He'd come out just as I was driving away, but I hadn't stopped.

An evil woman would have given the disks to Bill's boss, Eric. A lesser woman would have kept those disks and that computer, having rescinded Bill's (and Eric's) invitations to

enter the house. I had told myself proudly that I was not an evil, or a lesser, woman.

Also, thinking practically, Bill could just have hired some human to break into my house and take them. I didn't think he would. But he needed them bad, or he'd be in trouble with his boss's boss. I've got a temper, maybe even a bad temper, once it gets provoked. But I'm not vindictive.

Arlene has often told me I am too nice for my own good, though I assure her I am not. (Tara never says that; maybe she knows me better?) I realized glumly that, sometime during this hectic evening, Arlene would hear about Bill's departure. Sure enough, within twenty minutes of Chuck and Terrell's gibing, she made her way through the crowd to pat me on the back. 'You didn't need that cold bastard anyway,' she said. 'What did he ever do for you?'

I nodded weakly at her to show how much I appreciated her support. But then a table called for two whiskey sours, two beers, and a gin and tonic, and I had to hustle, which was actually a welcome distraction. When I dropped off their drinks, I asked myself the same question. What had Bill done for me?

I delivered pitchers of beer to two tables before I could add it all up.

He'd introduced me to sex, which I really enjoyed. Introduced me to a lot of other vampires, which I didn't. Saved my life, though when you thought about it, it wouldn't have been in danger if I hadn't been dating him in the first place. But I'd saved his back once or twice, so that debt was canceled. He'd called me 'sweetheart,' and at the time he'd meant it.

'Nothing,' I muttered, as I mopped up a spilled piña colada and handed one of our last clean bar towels to the

woman who'd knocked it over, since a lot of it was still in her skirt. 'He didn't do a thing for me.' She smiled and nodded, obviously thinking I was commiserating with her. The place was too noisy to hear anything anyway, which was lucky for me.

But I'd be glad when Bill got back. After all, he was my nearest neighbor. The community's older cemetery separated our properties, which lay along a parish road south of Bon Temps. I was out there all by myself, without Bill.

'Peru, I hear,' my brother Jason, said. He had his arm around his girl of the evening, a short, thin, dark twenty-one-year-old from somewhere way out in the sticks. (I'd carded her.) I gave her a close look. Jason didn't know it, but she was a shape-shifter of some kind. They're easy to spot. She was an attractive girl, but she changed into something with feathers or fur when the moon was full. I noticed Sam give her a hard glare when Jason's back was turned, to remind her to behave herself in his territory. She returned the glare, with interest. I had the feeling she didn't become a kitten, or a squirrel.

I thought of latching on to her brain and trying to read it, but shifter heads aren't easy. Shifter thoughts are kind of snarly and red, though every now and then you can get a good picture of emotions. Same with Weres.

Sam himself turns into a collie when the moon is bright and round. Sometimes he trots all the way over to my house, and I feed him a bowl of scraps and let him nap on my back porch, if the weather's good, or in my living room, if the weather's poor. I don't let him in the bedroom anymore, because he wakes up naked – in which state he looks *very* nice, but I just don't need to be tempted by my boss.

The moon wasn't full tonight, so Jason would be safe. I

decided not to say anything to him about his date. Everyone's got a secret or two. Her secret was just a little more colorful.

Besides my brother's date, and Sam of course, there were two other supernatural creatures in Merlotte's Bar that New Year's Eve. One was a magnificent woman at least six feet tall, with long rippling dark hair. Dressed to kill in a skintight long-sleeved orange dress, she'd come in by herself, and she was in the process of meeting every guy in the bar. I didn't know what she was, but I knew from her brain pattern that she was not human. The other creature was a vampire, who'd come in with a group of young people, most in their early twenties. I didn't know any of them. Only a sideways glance by a few other revelers marked the presence of a vampire. It just went to show the change in attitude in the few years since the Great Revelation.

Almost three years ago, on the night of the Great Revelation, the vampires had gone on TV in every nation to announce their existence. It had been a night in which many of the world's assumptions had been knocked sideways and rearranged for good.

This coming-out party had been prompted by the Japanese development of a synthetic blood that can keep vamps satisfied nutritionally. Since the Great Revelation, the United States has undergone numerous political and social upheavals in the bumpy process of accommodating our newest citizens, who just happen to be dead. The vampires have a public face and a public explanation for their condition – they claim an allergy to sunlight and garlic causes severe metabolic changes – but I've seen the other side of the vampire world. My eyes now see a lot of things

most human beings don't ever see. Ask me if this knowledge has made me happy.

No.

But I have to admit, the world is a more interesting place to me now. I'm by myself a lot (since I'm not exactly Norma Normal), so the extra food for thought has been welcome. The fear and danger haven't. I've seen the private face of vampires, and I've learned about Weres and shifters and other stuff. Weres and shifters prefer to stay in the shadows – for now – while they watch how going public works out for the vamps.

See, I had all this to mull over while collecting tray after tray of glasses and mugs, and unloading and loading the dishwasher to help Tack, the new cook. (His real name is Alphonse Petacki. Can you be surprised he likes 'Tack' better?) When our part of the cleanup was just about finished, and this long evening was finally over, I hugged Arlene and wished her a happy New Year, and she hugged me back. Holly's boyfriend was waiting for her at the employees' entrance at the back of the building, and Holly waved to us as she pulled on her coat and hurried out.

'What're your hopes for the New Year, ladies?' Sam asked. By that time, Kenya was leaning against the bar, waiting for him, her face calm and alert. Kenya ate lunch here pretty regularly with her partner, Kevin, who was as pale and thin as she was dark and rounded. Sam was putting the chairs up on the tables so Terry Bellefleur, who came in very early in the morning, could mop the floor.

'Good health, and the right man,' Arlene said dramatically, her hands fluttering over her heart, and we laughed. Arlene has found many men – and she's been married four times – but she's still looking for Mr. Right. I could 'hear'

Arlene thinking that Tack might be the one. I was startled; I hadn't even known she'd looked at him.

The surprise showed on my face, and in an uncertain voice Arlene said, 'You think I should give up?'

'Hell, no,' I said promptly, chiding myself for not guarding my expression better. It was just that I was so tired. 'It'll be this year, for sure, Arlene.' I smiled at Bon Temp's only black female police officer. 'You have to have a wish for the New Year, Kenya. Or a resolution.'

'I always wish for peace between men and women,' Kenya said. 'Make my job a lot easier. And my resolution is to bench-press one-forty.'

'Wow,' said Arlene. Her dyed red hair contrasted violently with Sam's natural curly red-gold as she gave him a quick hug. He wasn't much taller than Arlene – though she's at least five foot eight, two inches taller than I. 'I'm going to lose ten pounds, that's my resolution.' We all laughed. That had been Arlene's resolution for the past four years. 'What about you, Sam? Wishes and resolutions?' she asked.

'I have everything I need,' he said, and I felt the blue wave of sincerity coming from him. 'I resolve to stay on this course. The bar is doing great, I like living in my double-wide, and the people here are as good as people anywhere.'

I turned to conceal my smile. That had been a pretty ambiguous statement. The people of Bon Temps were, indeed, as good as people anywhere.

'And you, Sookie?' he asked. Arlene, Kenya, and Sam were all looking at me. I hugged Arlene again, because I like to. I'm ten years younger – maybe more, since though Arlene says she's thirty-six, I have my doubts – but we've been friends ever since we started working at Merlotte's together after Sam bought the bar, maybe five years now.



'Come on,' Arlene said, coaxing me. Sam put his arm around me. Kenya smiled, but drifted away into the kitchen to have a few words with Tack.

Acting on impulse, I shared my wish. 'I just hope to not be beaten up,' I said, my weariness and the hour combining in an ill-timed burst of honesty. 'I don't want to go to the hospital. I don't want to see a doctor.' I didn't want to have to ingest any vampire blood, either, which would cure you in a hurry but had various side effects. 'So my resolution is to stay out of trouble,' I said firmly.

Arlene looked pretty startled, and Sam looked – well, I couldn't tell about Sam. But since I'd hugged Arlene, I gave him a big hug, too, and felt the strength and warmth in his body. You think Sam's slight until you see him shirtless unloading boxes of supplies. He is really strong and built really smooth, and he has a high natural body temperature. I felt him kiss my hair, and then we were all saying good night to each other and walking out the back door. Sam's truck was parked in front of his trailer, which is set up behind Merlotte's Bar but at a right angle to it, but he climbed in Kenya's patrol car to ride to the bank. She'd bring him home, and then Sam could collapse. He'd been on his feet for hours, as had we all.

As Arlene and I unlocked our cars, I noticed Tack was waiting in his old pickup; I was willing to bet he was going to follow Arlene home.

With a last 'Good night!' called through the chilly silence of the Louisiana night, we separated to begin our new years.

I turned off onto Hummingbird Road to go out to my place, which is about three miles southeast of the bar. The relief of finally being alone was immense, and I began to

relax mentally. My headlights flashed past the close-packed trunks of the pines that formed the backbone of the lumber industry hereabouts.

The night was extremely dark and cold. There are no streetlights way out on the parish roads, of course. Creatures were not stirring, not by any means. Though I kept telling myself to be alert for deer crossing the road, I was driving on autopilot. My simple thoughts were filled with the plan of scrubbing my face and pulling on my warmest nightgown and climbing into my bed.

Something white appeared in the headlights of my old car.

I gasped, jolted out of my drowsy anticipation of warmth and silence.

A running man: At three in the morning on January first, he was running down the parish road, apparently running for his life.

I slowed down, trying to figure out a course of action. I was a lone unarmed woman. If something awful was pursuing him, it might get me, too. On the other hand, I couldn't let someone suffer if I could help. I had a moment to notice that the man was tall, blond, and clad only in blue jeans, before I pulled up by him. I put the car into park and leaned over to roll down the window on the passenger's side.

'Can I help you?' I called. He gave me a panicked glance and kept on running.

But in that moment I realized who he was. I leaped out of the car and took off after him.

'Eric!' I yelled. 'It's me!'

He wheeled around then, hissing, his fangs fully out. I stopped so abruptly I swayed where I stood, my hands out in front of me in a gesture of peace. Of course, if Eric

decided to attack, I was a dead woman. So much for being a good Samaritan.

Why didn't Eric recognize me? I'd known him for many months. He was Bill's boss, in the complicated vampire hierarchy that I was beginning to learn. Eric was the sheriff of Area Five, and he was a vampire on the rise. He was also gorgeous and could kiss like a house afire, but that was not the most pertinent side of him right at the moment. Fangs and strong hands curved into claws were what I was seeing. Eric was in full alarm mode, but he seemed just as scared of me as I was of him. He didn't leap to attack.

'Stay back, woman,' he warned me. His voice sounded like his throat was sore, raspy and raw.

'What are you doing out here?'

'Who are you?'

'You known darn good and well who I am. What's up with you? Why are you out here without your car?' Eric drove a sleek Corvette, which was simply Eric.

'You know me? Who am I?'

Well, that knocked me for a loop. He sure didn't sound like he was joking. I said cautiously, 'Of course I know you, Eric. Unless you have an identical twin. You don't, right?'

'I don't know.' His arms dropped, his fangs seemed to be retracting, and he straightened from his crouch, so I felt there'd been a definite improvement in the atmosphere of our encounter.

'You don't know if you have a brother?' I was pretty much at sea.

'No. I don't know. Eric is my name?' In the glare of my headlights, he looked just plain pitiful.

'Wow.' I couldn't think of anything more helpful to say.

'Eric Northman is the name you go by these days. Why are you out here?'

'I don't know that, either.'

I was sensing a theme here. 'For real? You don't remember anything?' I tried to get past being sure that at any second he'd grin down at me and explain everything and laugh, embroiling me in some trouble that would end in me . . . getting beaten up.

'For real.' He took a step closer, and his bare white chest made me shiver with sympathetic goose bumps. I also realized (now that I wasn't terrified) how forlorn he looked. It was an expression I'd never seen on the confident Eric's face before, and it made me feel unaccountably sad.

'You know you're a vampire, right?'

'Yes.' He seemed surprised that I asked. 'And you are not.'

'No, I'm real human, and I have to know you won't hurt me. Though you could have by now. But believe me, even if you don't remember it, we're sort of friends.'

'I won't hurt you.'

I reminded myself that probably hundreds and thousands of people had heard those very words before Eric ripped their throats out. But the fact is, vampires don't have to kill once they're past their first year. A sip here, a sip there, that's the norm. When he looked so lost, it was hard to remember he could dismember me with his bare hands.

I'd told Bill one time that the smart thing for aliens to do (when they invaded Earth) would be to arrive in the guise of lop-eared bunnies.

'Come get in my car before you freeze,' I said. I was having that I'm-getting-sucked-in feeling again, but I didn't know what else to do.