

Club Dead

Charlaine Harris

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CLUB DEAD

CHARLAINE HARRIS



Chapter 1

Bill was hunched over the computer when I let myself in his house. This was an all-too-familiar scenario in the past month or two. He'd torn himself away from his work when I came home, until the past couple of weeks. Now it was the keyboard that attracted him.

'Hello, sweetheart,' he said absently, his gaze riveted to the screen. An empty bottle of type O TrueBlood was on the desk beside the keyboard. At least he'd remembered to eat.

Bill, not a jeans-and-tee kind of guy, was wearing khakis and a plaid shirt in muted blue and green. His skin was glowing, and his thick dark hair smelled like Herbal Essence. He was enough to give any woman a hormonal surge. I kissed his neck, and he didn't react. I licked his ear. Nothing.

I'd been on my feet for six hours straight at Merlotte's Bar, and every time some customer had under-tipped, or some fool had patted my fanny, I'd reminded myself that in a short while I'd be with my boyfriend, having incredible sex and basking in his attention.

That didn't appear to be happening.

I inhaled slowly and steadily and glared at Bill's back. It was a wonderful back, with broad shoulders, and I had planned on seeing it bare with my nails dug into it. I had counted on that very strongly. I exhaled, slowly and steadily.

'Be with you in a minute,' Bill said. On the screen, there was a snapshot of a distinguished man with silver hair and a dark tan. He looked sort of Anthony Quinn-type sexy, and he looked powerful. Under the picture was a name, and under that was some text. 'Born 1756 in Sicily,' it began. Just as I opened my mouth to comment that vampires *did* appear in photographs despite the legend, Bill twisted around and realized I was reading.

He hit a button and the screen went blank.

I stared at him, not quite believing what had just happened.

'Sookie,' he said, attempting a smile. His fangs were retracted, so he was totally not in the mood in which I'd hoped to find him; he wasn't thinking of me carnally. Like all vampires, his fangs are only fully extended when he's in the mood for the sexy kind of lust, or the feeding-and-killing kind of lust. (Sometimes, those lusts all get kind of snarled up, and you get your dead fang-bangers. But that element of danger is what attracts most fang-bangers, if you ask me.) Though I've been accused of being one of those pathetic creatures that hang around vampires in the hope of attracting their attention, there's only one vampire I'm involved with (at least voluntarily) and it was the one sitting right in front of me. The one who was keeping secrets from me. The one who wasn't nearly glad enough to see me.

'Bill,' I said coldly. Something was Up, with a capital *U*. And it wasn't Bill's libido. (Libido had just been on my Word-A-Day calendar.)

'You didn't see what you just saw,' he said steadily. His dark brown eyes regarded me without blinking.

'Uh-huh,' I said, maybe sounding just a little sarcastic. 'What are you up to?'

'I have a secret assignment.'

I didn't know whether to laugh or stalk away in a snit. So I just raised my eyebrows and waited for more. Bill was the investigator for Area 5, a vampire division of Louisiana. Eric, the head of Area 5, had never given Bill an 'assignment' that was secret from me before. In fact, I was usually an integral part of the investigation team, however unwilling I might be.

'Eric must not know. None of the Area 5 vampires can know.'

My heart sank. 'So – if you're not doing a job for Eric, who are you working for?' I knelt because my feet were so tired, and I leaned against Bill's knees.

'The queen of Louisiana,' he said, almost in a whisper.

Because he looked so solemn, I tried to keep a straight face, but it was no use. I began to laugh, little giggles that I couldn't suppress.

'You're serious?' I asked, knowing he must be. Bill was almost always a serious kind of fellow. I buried my face on his thigh so he couldn't see my amusement. I rolled my eyes up for a quick look at his face. He was looking pretty pissed.

'I am as serious as the grave,' Bill said, and he sounded so steely, I made a major effort to change my attitude.

'Okay, let me get this straight,' I said in a reasonably

level tone. I sat back on the floor, cross-legged, and rested my hands on my knees. 'You work for Eric, who is the boss of Area 5, but there is also a queen? Of Louisiana?'

Bill nodded.

'So the state is divided up into Areas? And she's Eric's superior, since he runs a business in Shreveport, which is in Area 5.'

Again with the nod. I put my hand over my face and shook my head. 'So, where does she live, Baton Rouge?' The state capital seemed the obvious place.

'No, no. New Orleans, of course.'

Of *course*. Vampire central. You could hardly throw a rock in the Big Easy without hitting one of the undead, according to the papers (though only a real fool would do so). The tourist trade in New Orleans was booming, but it was not exactly the same crowd as before, the hard-drinking, rollicking crowd who'd filled the city to party hearty. The newer tourists were the ones who wanted to rub elbows with the undead; patronize a vampire bar, visit a vampire prostitute, watch a vampire sex show.

This was what I'd heard; I hadn't been to New Orleans since I was little. My mother and father had taken my brother, Jason, and me. That would have been before I was seven, because that's when they died.

Mama and Daddy died nearly twenty years before vampires had appeared on network television to announce the fact that they were actually present among us, an announcement that had followed on the Japanese development of synthetic blood that actually maintained a vampire's life without the necessity of drinking from humans.

The United States vampire community had let the

Japanese vampire clans come forth first. Then, simultaneously, in most of the nations of the world that had television – and who doesn't these days? – the announcement had been made in hundreds of different languages, by hundreds of carefully picked personable vampires.

That night, two and half years ago, we regular old live people learned that we had always lived with monsters among us.

'But' – the burden of this announcement had been – 'now we can come forward and join with you in harmony. You are in no danger from us anymore. We don't need to drink from you to live.'

As you can imagine, this was a night of high ratings and tremendous uproar. Reaction varied sharply, depending on the nation.

The vampires in the predominantly Islamic nations had fared the worst. You don't even want to know what happened to the undead spokesman in Syria, though perhaps the female vamp in Afghanistan died an even more horrible – and final – death. (What were they thinking, selecting a female for that particular job? Vampires could be so smart, but they sometimes didn't seem quite in touch with the present world.)

Some nations – France, Italy, and Germany were the most notable – refused to accept vampires as equal citizens. Many – like Bosnia, Argentina, and most of the African nations – denied any status to the vampires, and declared them fair game for any bounty hunter. But America, England, Mexico, Canada, Japan, Switzerland, and the Scandinavian countries adopted a more tolerant attitude.

It was hard to determine if this reaction was what the

vampires had expected or not. Since they were still struggling to maintain a foothold in the stream of the living, the vampires remained very secretive about their organization and government, and what Bill was telling me now was the most I'd ever heard on the subject.

'So, the Louisiana queen of the vampires has you working on a secret project,' I said, trying to sound neutral. 'And this is why you have lived at your computer every waking hour for the past few weeks.'

'Yes,' Bill said. He picked up the bottle of TrueBlood and tipped it up, but there were only a couple of drops left. He went down the hall into the small kitchen area (when he'd remodeled his old family home, he'd pretty much left out the kitchen, since he didn't need one) and extracted another bottle from the refrigerator. I was tracking him by sound as he opened the bottle and popped it into the microwave. The microwave went off, and he reentered, shaking the bottle with his thumb over the top so there wouldn't be any hot spots.

'So, how much more time do you have to spend on this project?' I asked – reasonably, I thought.

'As long as it takes,' he said, less reasonably. Actually, Bill sounded downright irritable.

Hmmm. Could our honeymoon be over? Of course I mean figurative honeymoon, since Bill's a vampire and we can't be legally married, practically anywhere in the world.

Not that he's asked me.

'Well, if you're so absorbed in your project, I'll just stay away until it's over,' I said slowly.

'That might be best,' Bill said, after a perceptible pause, and I felt like he'd socked me in the stomach. In a flash, I

was on my feet and pulling my coat back over my cold-weather waitress outfit – black slacks, white boat-neck long-sleeved tee with ‘Merlotte’s’ embroidered over the left breast. I turned my back to Bill to hide my face.

I was trying not to cry, so I didn’t look at him even after I felt Bill’s hand touch my shoulder.

‘I have to tell you something,’ Bill said in his cold, smooth voice. I stopped in the middle of pulling on my gloves, but I didn’t think I could stand to see him. He could tell my backside.

‘If anything happens to me,’ he continued (and here’s where I should have begun worrying), ‘you must look in the hiding place I built at your house. My computer should be in it, and some disks. Don’t tell anyone. If the computer isn’t in the hiding place, come over to my house and see if it’s here. Come in the daytime, and come armed. Get the computer and any disks you can find, and hide them in my hidey-hole, as you call it.’

I nodded. He could see that from the back. I didn’t trust my voice.

‘If I’m not back, or if you don’t get word from me, in say . . . eight weeks – yes, eight weeks, then tell Eric everything I said to you today. And place yourself under his protection.’

I didn’t speak. I was too miserable to be furious, but it wouldn’t be long before I reached meltdown. I acknowledged his words with a jerk of my head. I could feel my ponytail switch against my neck.

‘I am going to . . . Seattle soon,’ Bill said. I could feel his cool lips touch the place my ponytail had brushed.

He was lying.

‘When I come back, we’ll talk.’

Somehow, that didn't sound like an entrancing prospect. Somehow, that sounded ominous.

Again I inclined my head, not risking speech because I was actually crying now. I would rather have died than let him see the tears.

And that was how I left him, that cold December night.

The next day on my way to work, I took an unwise detour. I was in that kind of mood where I was rolling in how awful everything was. Despite a nearly sleepless night, something inside me told me I could probably make my mood a little worse if I drove along Magnolia Creek Road: so sure enough, that's what I did.

The old Bellefleur mansion, Belle Rive, was a beehive of activity, even on a cold and ugly day. There were vans from the pest control company, a kitchen design firm, and a siding contractor parked at the kitchen entrance to the antebellum home. Life was just humming for Caroline Holliday Bellefleur, the ancient lady who had ruled Belle Rive and (at least in part) Bon Temps for the past eighty years. I wondered how Portia, a lawyer, and Andy, a detective, were enjoying all the changes at Belle Rive. They had lived with their grandmother (as I had lived with mine) for all their adult lives. At the very least, they had to be enjoying her pleasure in the mansion's renovation.

My own grandmother had been murdered a few months ago.

The Bellefleurs hadn't had anything to do with it, of course. And there was no reason Portia and Andy would share the pleasure of this new affluence with me. In fact, they both avoided me like the plague. They owed me, and

they couldn't stand it. They just didn't know how *much* they owed me.

The Bellefleurs had received a mysterious legacy from a relative who had 'died mysteriously over in Europe somewhere,' I'd heard Andy tell a fellow cop while they were drinking at Merlotte's. When she dropped off some raffle tickets for Gethsemane Baptist Church's Ladies' Quilt, Maxine Fortenberry told me Miss Caroline had combed every family record she could unearth to identify their benefactor, and she was still mystified at the family's good fortune.

She didn't seem to have any qualms about spending the money, though.

Even Terry Bellefleur, Portia and Andy's cousin, had a new pickup sitting in the packed dirt yard of his double-wide. I liked Terry, a scarred Viet Nam vet who didn't have a lot of friends, and I didn't grudge him a new set of wheels.

But I thought about the carburetor I'd just been forced to replace in my old car. I'd paid for the work in full, though I'd considered asking Jim Downey if I could just pay half and get the rest together over the next two months. But Jim had a wife and three kids. Just this morning I'd been thinking of asking my boss, Sam Merlotte, if he could add to my hours at the bar. Especially with Bill gone to 'Seattle,' I could just about live at Merlotte's, if Sam could use me. I sure needed the money.

I tried real hard not to be bitter as I drove away from Belle Rive. I went south out of town and then turned left onto Hummingbird Road on my way to Merlotte's. I tried to pretend that all was well; that on his return from Seattle – or wherever – Bill would be a passionate lover again, and Bill would treasure me and make me feel

valuable once more. I would again have that feeling of belonging with someone, instead of being alone.

Of course, I had my brother, Jason. Though as far as intimacy and companionship goes, I had to admit that he hardly counted.

But the pain in my middle was the unmistakable pain of rejection. I knew the feeling so well, it was like a second skin.

I sure hated to crawl back inside it.