

Definitely Dead

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Extract

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DEFINITELY DEAD

CHARLAINE HARRIS



I WAS DRAPED OVER THE ARM OF ONE OF THE MOST beautiful men I'd ever seen, and he was staring into my eyes. "Think . . . Brad Pitt," I whispered. The dark brown eyes still regarded me with remote interest.

Okay, I was on the wrong track.

I pictured Claude's last lover, a bouncer at a strip joint.

"Think about Charles Bronson," I suggested. "Or, um, Edward James Olmos." I was rewarded by the beginnings of a hot glow in those long-lashed eyes.

In a jiffy, you would've thought Claude was going to hike up my long rustling skirt and yank down my low-cut push-up bodice and ravish me until I begged for mercy. Unfortunately for me—and all the other women of Louisiana—Claude batted for another team. Bosomy and blond was not

Claude's ideal; tough, rough, and brooding, with maybe a little whisker stubble, was what lit his fire.

"Maria-Star, reach in there and pull that lock of hair back," Alfred Cumberland directed from behind the camera. The photographer was a heavyset black man with graying hair and mustache. Maria-Star Cooper took a quick step in front of the camera to rearrange a stray strand of my long blond hair. I was bent backward over Claude's right arm, my invisible (to the camera, anyway) left hand desperately clutching the back of his black frock coat, my right arm raised to rest gently on his left shoulder. His left hand was at my waist. I think the pose was meant to suggest that he was lowering me to the ground to have his way with me.

Claude was wearing the black frock coat with black knee pants, white hose, and a white frothy shirt. I was wearing a long blue dress with a billowing skirt and a score of petticoats. As I've mentioned, the dress was scanty on the top-side, with the little sleeves pushed down off my shoulders. I was glad the temperature in the studio was moderately warm. The big light (it looked to my eyes like a satellite dish) was not as hot as I'd expected.

Al Cumberland was snapping away as Claude smoldered down at me. I did my best to smolder right back. My personal life had been, shall we say, *barren* for the past few weeks, so I was all too ready to smolder. In fact, I was ready to burst into flames.

Maria-Star, who had beautiful light-toast skin and curly dark hair, was standing ready with a big makeup case and brushes and combs to perform last-minute repairs. When Claude and I had arrived at the studio, I'd been surprised to find that I recognized the photographer's young assistant. I hadn't seen Maria-Star since the Shreveport packleader had been chosen a few weeks before. I hadn't had much of a chance to observe her then, since the packmaster contest had been frightening and bloody. Today, I had the leisure to see

that Maria-Star had completely recovered from being hit by a car this past January. Werewolves healed quickly.

Maria-Star had recognized me, too, and I'd been relieved when she smiled back at me. My standing with the Shreveport pack was, to say the least, uncertain. Without exactly volunteering to do so, I'd unwittingly thrown in my lot with the unsuccessful contestant for the packleader's job. That contestant's son, Alcide Herveaux, whom I'd counted as maybe more than a friend, felt I'd let him down during the contest; the new packleader, Patrick Furnan, knew I had ties to the Herveaux family. I'd been surprised when Maria-Star chatted away while she was zipping the costume and brushing my hair. She applied more makeup than I'd ever worn in my life, but when I stared into the mirror I had to thank her. I looked great, though I didn't look like Sookie Stackhouse.

If Claude hadn't been gay, he might have been impressed, too. He's the brother of my friend Claudine, and he makes his living stripping on ladies' night at Hooligans, a club he now owns. Claude is simply mouthwatering; six feet tall, with rippling black hair and large brown eyes, a perfect nose, and lips just full enough. He keeps his hair long to cover up his ears: they've been surgically altered to look rounded like human ears, not pointed as they originally were. If you're in the know supernaturally, you'll spot the ear surgery, and you'll know Claude is a fairy. I'm not using the pejorative term for his sexual orientation. I mean it literally; Claude's a fairy.

"Now the wind machine," Al instructed Maria-Star, and after a little repositioning, she switched on a large fan. Now we appeared to be standing in a gale. My hair billowed out in a blond sheet, though Claude's tied-back ponytail stayed in place. After a few shots to capture that look, Maria-Star unbound Claude's hair and directed it over one shoulder, so it would blow forward to form a backdrop for his perfect profile.

"Wonderful," Al said, and snapped some more. Maria-Star moved the machine a couple of times, causing the windstorm to strike from different directions. Eventually Al told me I could stand up. I straightened gratefully.

"I hope that wasn't too hard on your arm," I told Claude, who was looking cool and calm again.

"Nah, no problem. You have any fruit juice around?" he asked Maria-Star. Claude was not Mr. Social Skills.

The pretty Were pointed to a little refrigerator in the corner of the studio. "Cups are on the top," she told Claude. She followed him with her eyes and sighed. Women frequently did that after they'd actually talked to Claude. The sigh was a "what a pity" sigh.

After checking to make sure her boss was still fiddling intently with his gear, Maria-Star gave me a bright smile. Even though she was a Were, which made her thoughts hard to read, I was picking up on the fact that she had something she wanted to tell me . . . and she wasn't sure how I was going to take it.

Telepathy is no fun. Your opinion of yourself suffers when you know what others think of you. And telepathy makes it almost impossible to date regular guys. Just think about it. (And remember, I'll know—if you are, or if you aren't.)

"Alcide's had a hard time of it since his dad was defeated," Maria-Star said, keeping her voice low. Claude was occupied with studying himself in a mirror while he drank his juice. Al Cumberland had gotten a call on his cell phone and retreated to his office to hold his conversation.

"I'm sure he has," I said. Since Jackson Herveaux's opponent had killed him, it was only to be expected that Jackson's son was having his ups and his downs. "I sent a memorial to the ASPCA, and I know they'll notify Alcide and Janice," I said. (Janice was Alcide's younger sister, which made her a non-Were. I wondered how Alcide had explained their father's death to his sister.) In acknowledgment, I'd

received a printed thank-you note, the kind the funeral home gives you, without one personal word written on it.

"Well . . ." She seemed to be unable to spit it out, whatever was stuck in her throat. I was getting a glimpse of the shape of it. Pain flickered through me like a knife, and then I locked it down and pulled my pride around me. I'd learned to do that all too early in life.

I picked an album of samples of Alfred's work and began to flip through them, hardly looking at the photographs of brides and grooms, bar mitzvahs, first communions, twenty-fifth wedding anniversaries. I closed that album and laid it down. I was trying to look casual, but I don't think it worked.

With a bright smile that echoed Maria-Star's own expression, I said, "Alcide and I weren't ever truly a couple, you know." I might have had longings and hopes, but they'd never had a chance to ripen. The timing had always been wrong.

Maria-Star's eyes, a much lighter brown than Claude's, widened in awe. Or was it fear? "I heard you could do that," she said. "But it's hard to believe."

"Yeah," I said wearily. "Well, I'm glad you and Alcide are dating, and I have no right to mind, even if I did. Which I don't." That came out kind of garbled (and it wasn't entirely true), but I think Maria-Star got my intention: to save my face.

When I hadn't heard from Alcide in the weeks following his father's death, I'd known that whatever feelings he'd had for me were quenched. That had been a blow, but not a fatal one. Realistically, I hadn't expected anything more from Alcide. But gosh darn it, I liked him, and it always smarts when you find out you've been replaced with apparent ease. After all, before his dad's death Alcide had suggested we live together. Now he was shacking up with this young Were, maybe planning to have puppies with her.

I stopped that line of thought in its tracks. Shame on me! No point in being a bitch. (Which, come to think of it, Maria-Star actually was, at least three nights a month.)

Double shame on me.

"I hope you're very happy," I said.

She wordlessly handed me another album, this one stamped EYES ONLY. When I opened it, I realized that the Eyes were supernatural. Here were pictures of ceremonies humans never got to see . . . a vampire couple dressed in elaborate costume, posed before a giant ankh; a young man in the middle of changing into a bear, presumably for the first time; a shot of a Were pack with all its members in wolf form. Al Cumberland, photographer of the weird. No wonder he had been Claude's first choice for his pictures, which Claude hoped would launch him on a cover-model career.

"Next shot," called Al, as he hustled out of his office, snapping his phone shut. "Maria-Star, we just got booked for a double wedding in Miss Stackhouse's neck of the woods." I wondered if he'd been engaged for regular human work or for a supernatural event, but it would be rude to ask.

Claude and I got up close and personal again. Following Al's instructions, I pulled up the skirt to display my legs. In the era my dress represented, I didn't think women tanned or shaved their legs, and I was brown and smooth as a baby's bottom. But what the hey. Probably guys hadn't walked around with their shirts unbuttoned, either.

"Raise your leg like you're going to wrap it around him," Alfred directed. "Now Claude, this is your chance to shine. Look like you're going to pull your pants off at any second. We want the readers to pant when they look at you!"

Claude's portfolio of shots would be used when he entered the Mr. Romance competition, orchestrated each year by *Romantic Times Bookclub* magazine.

When he'd shared his ambition with Al (I gathered they'd met at a party), Al had advised Claude to have some

pictures made with the sort of woman that often appeared on the cover of romance novels; he'd told the fairy that Claude's dark looks would be set off by a blue-eyed blonde. I happened to be the only bosomy blonde of Claude's acquaintance who was willing to help him for free. Of course, Claude knew some strippers who would have done it, but they expected to be paid. With his usual tact, Claude had told me this on our way to the photographer's studio. Claude could have kept these details to himself, which would have left me feeling good about helping out my friend's brother—but in typical Claude fashion, he shared.

"Okay, Claude, now off with the shirt," Alfred called.

Claude was used to being asked to take off his clothes. He had a broad, hairless chest with impressive musculature, so he looked very nice indeed without his shirt. I was unmoved. Maybe I was becoming immune.

"Skirt, leg," Alfred reminded me, and I told myself that this was a job. Al and Maria-Star were certainly professional and impersonal, and you couldn't get cooler than Claude. But I wasn't used to pulling my skirt up in front of people, and it felt pretty personal to me. Though I showed this much leg when I wore shorts and never raised a blush, somehow the pulling up of the long skirt was a little more loaded with sexuality. I clenched my teeth and hiked up the material, tucking it at intervals so it would stay in position.

"Miss Stackhouse, you have to look like you're enjoying this," Al said. He peered at me from around his camera, his forehead creased in a definitely unhappy way.

I tried not to sulk. I'd told Claude I'd do him a favor, and favors should be done willingly. I raised my leg so my thigh was parallel with the floor, and pointed my bare toes to the floor in what I hoped was a graceful position. I put both hands on Claude's naked shoulders and looked up at him. His skin felt warm and smooth to the touch—not erotic or arousing.

"You look *bored*, Miss Stackhouse," Alfred said. "You're

supposed to look like you want to jump his bones. Maria-Star, make her look more . . . more." Maria darted over to push the little puff sleeves farther down my arms. She got a little too enthusiastic, and I was glad the bodice was tight.

The fact of the matter was, Claude could look beautiful and bare all day long, and I still wouldn't want him. He was grumpy and he had bad manners. Even if he'd been hetero, he wouldn't have been my cup of tea—after I'd had ten minutes' conversation with him.

Like Claude earlier, I'd have to resort to fantasy.

I thought of Bill the vampire, my first love in every way. But instead of lust, I felt anger. Bill was dating another woman, had been for a few weeks.

Okay, what about Eric, Bill's boss, the former Viking? Eric the vampire had shared my house and my bed for a few days in January. Nope, that way lay danger. Eric knew a secret I wanted to keep hidden for the rest of my days; though, since he'd had amnesia when he'd stayed at my place, he wasn't aware it was in his memory somewhere.

A few other faces popped into my mind—my boss, Sam Merlotte, the owner of Merlotte's Bar. No, don't go there, thinking about your boss naked is *bad*. Okay, Alcide Herveaux? Nope, that was a no-go, especially since I was in the company of his current girlfriend. . . . Okay, I was clean out of fantasy material and would have to fall back on one of my old fictional favorites.

But movie stars seemed bland after the supernatural world I'd inhabited since Bill came into Merlotte's. The last remotely erotic experience I'd had, oddly enough, had involved my bleeding leg getting licked. That had been . . . unsettling. But even under the circumstances, it had made things deep inside me twitch. I remembered how Quinn's bald head had moved while he cleaned my scrape in a very personal way, the firm grip his big warm fingers had had on my leg. . . .

"That'll do," Alfred said, and began snapping away. Claude put his hand on my bare thigh when he could feel my muscles begin to tremble from the effort of holding the position. Once again, a man had a hold of my leg. Claude gripped my thigh enough to give it some support. That helped considerably, but it wasn't a bit erotic.

"Now some bed shots," Al said, just when I'd decided I couldn't stand it any more.

"No," Claude and I said in chorus.

"But that's part of the package," Al said. "You don't need to undress, you know. I don't do that kind of picture. My wife would kill me. You just lie down on the bed like you are. Claude hikes up on one elbow and looks down at you, Miss Stackhouse."

"No," I said firmly. "Take some pictures of him standing by himself in the water. That would be better." There was a fake pond over in the corner, and shots of Claude, apparently naked, dripping water over his bare chest, would be extremely appealing (to any woman who hadn't actually met him).

"How does that grab you, Claude?" Al asked.

Claude's narcissism chimed in. "I think that would be great, Al," he said, trying not to sound too excited.

I started for the changing room, eager to shed the costume and get back into my regular jeans. I glanced around for a clock. I was due at work at five-thirty, and I had to drive back to Bon Temps and grab my work uniform before I went to Merlotte's.

Claude called, "Thanks, Sookie."

"Sure, Claude. Good luck with the modeling contracts." But he was already admiring himself in a mirror.

Maria-Star saw me out. "Goodbye, Sookie. It was good to see you again."

"You, too," I lied. Even through the reddish twisted passages of a Were mind, I could see that Maria-Star couldn't

understand why I would pass up Alcide. After all, the Were was handsome in a rugged way, an entertaining companion, and a hot-blooded male of the heterosexual persuasion. Also, he now owned his own surveying company and was a wealthy man in his own right.

The answer popped into my head and I spoke before I thought. "Is anyone still looking for Debbie Pelt?" I asked, much the same way you poke a sore tooth. Debbie had been Alcide's longtime on-again, off-again lover. She'd been a piece of work.

"Not the same people," Maria-Star said. Her expression darkened. Maria-Star didn't like thinking about Debbie any more than I did, though doubtless for different reasons. "The detectives the Pelt family hired gave up, said they'd be fleecing the family if they'd kept on. That's what I heard. The police didn't exactly say it, but they'd reached a dead end, too. I've only met the Pelts once, when they came over to Shreveport right after Debbie disappeared. They're a pretty savage couple." I blinked. This was a fairly drastic statement, coming from a Were.

"Sandra, their daughter, is the worst. She was nuts about Debbie, and for her sake they're still consulting people, some way-out people. Myself, I think Debbie got abducted. Or maybe she killed herself. When Alcide abjured her, maybe she lost it big-time."

"Maybe," I murmured, but without conviction.

"He's better off. I hope she stays missing," Maria-Star said.

My opinion had been the same, but unlike Maria-Star, I knew exactly what had happened to Debbie; that was the wedge that had pushed Alcide and me apart.

"I hope he never sees her again," Maria-Star said, her pretty face dark and showing a little bit of her own savage side.

Alcide might be dating Maria-Star, but he hadn't confided in her fully. Alcide knew for a fact that he would never see Debbie again. And that was my fault, okay?

I'd shot her dead.

I'd more or less made my peace with my act, but the stark fact of it kept popping back up. There's no way you can kill someone and get to the other side of the experience unchanged. The consequences alter your life.

Two priests walked into the bar.

This sounds like the opening of a million jokes. But these priests didn't have a kangaroo with them, and there was not a rabbi sitting at the bar, or a blonde, either. I'd seen plenty of blondes, one kangaroo in a zoo, no rabbis. However, I'd seen these two priests plenty of times before. They had a standing appointment to have dinner together every other week.

Father Dan Riordan, clean shaven and ruddy, was the Catholic priest who came to the little Bon Temps church once a week on Saturday to celebrate mass, and Father Kempton Littrell, pale and bearded, was the Episcopal priest who held Holy Eucharist in the tiny Episcopal church in Clarice once every two weeks.

"Hello, Sookie," Father Riordan said. He was Irish; really Irish, not just of Irish extraction. I loved to hear him talk. He wore thick glasses with black frames, and he was in his forties.

"Evening, Father. And hi to you, Father Littrell. What can I get you all?"

"I'd like Scotch on the rocks, Miss Sookie. And you, Kempton?"

"Oh, I'll just have a beer. And a basket of chicken strips, please." The Episcopal priest wore gold-rimmed glasses, and he was younger than Father Riordan. He had a conscientious heart.

"Sure." I smiled at the two of them. Since I could read their thoughts, I knew them both to be genuinely good men, and that made me happy. It's always disconcerting to

hear the contents of a minister's head and find out they're no better than you, and not only that, they're not trying to be.

Since it was full dark outside, I wasn't surprised when Bill Compton walked in. I couldn't say the same for the priests. The churches of America hadn't come to grips with the reality of vampires. To call their policies confused was putting it mildly. The Catholic Church was at this moment holding a convocation to decide whether the church would declare all vampires damned and anathema to Catholics, or accept them into the fold as potential converts. The Episcopal Church had voted against accepting vampires as priests, though they were allowed to take communion—but a substantial slice of the laity said that would be over their dead bodies. Unfortunately, most of them didn't comprehend how possible that was.

Both the priests watched unhappily as Bill gave me a quick kiss on the cheek and settled at his favorite table. Bill barely gave them a glance, but unfolded his newspaper and began to read. He always looked serious, as if he were studying the financial pages or the news from Iraq; but I knew he read the advice columns first, and then the comics, though he often didn't get the jokes.

Bill was by himself, which was a nice change. Usually, he brought the lovely Selah Pumphrey. I loathed her. Since Bill had been my first love and my first lover, maybe I would never be completely over him. Maybe he didn't want me to be. He did seem to drag Selah into Merlotte's every single date they had. I figured he was waving her in my face. Not exactly what you did if you didn't care any more, huh?

Without his having to ask, I took him his favorite beverage, TrueBlood type O. I set it neatly in front of him on a napkin, and I'd turned to go when a cool hand touched my arm. His touch always jolted me; maybe it always would. Bill had always made it clear I aroused him, and after a lifetime of no relationships and no sex, I began walking tall

when Bill made it clear he found me attractive. Other men had looked at me as if I'd become more interesting, too. Now I knew why people thought about sex so much; Bill had given me a thorough education.

"Sookie, stay for a moment." I looked down into brown eyes, which looked all the darker in Bill's white face. His hair was brown, too, smooth and sleek. He was slim and broad-shouldered, his arms hard with muscles, like the farmer he had been. "How have you been?"

"I'm fine," I said, trying not to sound surprised. It wasn't often Bill passed the time of day; small talk wasn't his strong point. Even when we'd been a couple, he had not been what you'd call chatty. And even a vampire can be a workaholic; Bill had become a computer geek. "Have things been well with you?"

"Yes. When will you go to New Orleans to claim your inheritance?"

Now I was truly startled. (This is possible because I can't read vampire minds. That's why I like vampires so much. It's wonderful to be with someone who's a mystery to me.) My cousin had been murdered almost six weeks ago in New Orleans, and Bill had been with me when the Queen of Louisiana's emissary had come to tell me about it . . . and to deliver the murderer to me for my judgment. "I guess I'll go through Hadley's apartment sometime in the next month or so. I haven't talked to Sam about taking the time off."

"I'm sorry you lost your cousin. Have you been grieving?"

I hadn't seen Hadley in years, and it would have been stranger than I can say to see her after she'd become a vampire. But as a person with very few living relations, I hated to lose even one. "A bit," I said.

"You don't know when you might go?"

"I haven't decided. You remember her lawyer, Mr. Cataliades? He said he'd tell me when the will had gone through probate. He promised to keep the place intact for me, and

when the queen's counselor tells you the place'll be intact, you have to believe it'll be untouched. I haven't really been too interested, to tell you the truth."

"I might go with you when you head to New Orleans, if you don't mind having a traveling companion."

"Gee," I said, with just a dash of sarcasm, "Won't Selah mind? Or were you going to bring her, too?" That would make for a merry trip.

"No." And he closed down. You just couldn't get anything out of Bill when he was holding his mouth like that, I knew from experience. Okay, color me confused.

"I'll let you know," I said, trying to figure him out. Though it was painful to be in Bill's company, I trusted him. Bill would never harm me. He wouldn't let anyone else harm me, either. But there's more than one kind of harm.

"Sookie," Father Littrell called, and I hurried away.

I glanced back to catch Bill smiling, a small smile with a lot of satisfaction packed into it. I wasn't sure what it meant, but I liked to see Bill smile. Maybe he was hoping to revive our relationship?

Father Littrell said, "We weren't sure if you wanted to be interrupted or not." I looked down at him, confused.

"We were a tad concerned to see you consorting with the vampire for so long, and so intently," Father Riordan said. "Was the imp of hell trying to bring you under his spell?"

Suddenly his Irish accent wasn't charming at all. I looked at Father Riordan quizzically. "You're joking, right? You know Bill and I dated for a good while. Obviously, you don't know much about imps from hell if you believe Bill's anything like one." I'd seen things *much* darker than Bill in and about our fair town of Bon Temps. Some of those things had been human. "Father Riordan, I understand my own life. I understand the nature of vampires better than you ever will. Father Littrell," I said, "you want honey mustard or ketchup with your chicken strips?"

Father Littrell chose honey mustard, in a kind of dazed way. I walked away, working to shrug the little incident off, wondering what the two priests would do if they knew what had happened in this bar a couple of months before when the bar's clientele had ganged up to rid me of someone who was trying to kill me.

Since that someone had been a vampire, they'd probably have approved.

Before he left, Father Riordan came over to "have a word" with me. "Sookie, I know you're not real happy with me at the moment, but I need to ask you something on behalf of someone else. If I've made you less inclined to listen by my behavior, please ignore that and give these people the same consideration you would have."

I sighed. At least Father Riordan tried to be a good man. I nodded reluctantly.

"Good girl. A family in Jackson has contacted me . . ."

All my alarms started going off. Debbie Pelt was from Jackson.

"The Pelt family, I know you've heard of them. They're still searching for news of their daughter, who vanished in January. Debbie, her name was. They called me because their priest knows me, knows I serve the Bon Temps congregation. The Pelts would like to come to see you, Sookie. They want to talk to everyone who saw their daughter the night she vanished, and they feared if they just showed up on your doorstep, you might not see them. They're afraid you're angry because their private detectives have interviewed you, and the police have talked to you, and maybe you might be indignant about all that."

"I don't want to see them," I said. "Father Riordan, I've told everything I know." That was true. I just hadn't told it to the police or the Pelts. "I don't want to talk about Debbie any more." That was also true, very true. "Tell them, with all due respect, there's nothing left to talk about."

"I'll tell them," he said. "But I've got to say, Sookie, I'm disappointed."

"Well, I guess it's been a bad night for me all around," I said. "Losing your good opinion, and all."

He left without another word, which was exactly what I'd wanted.