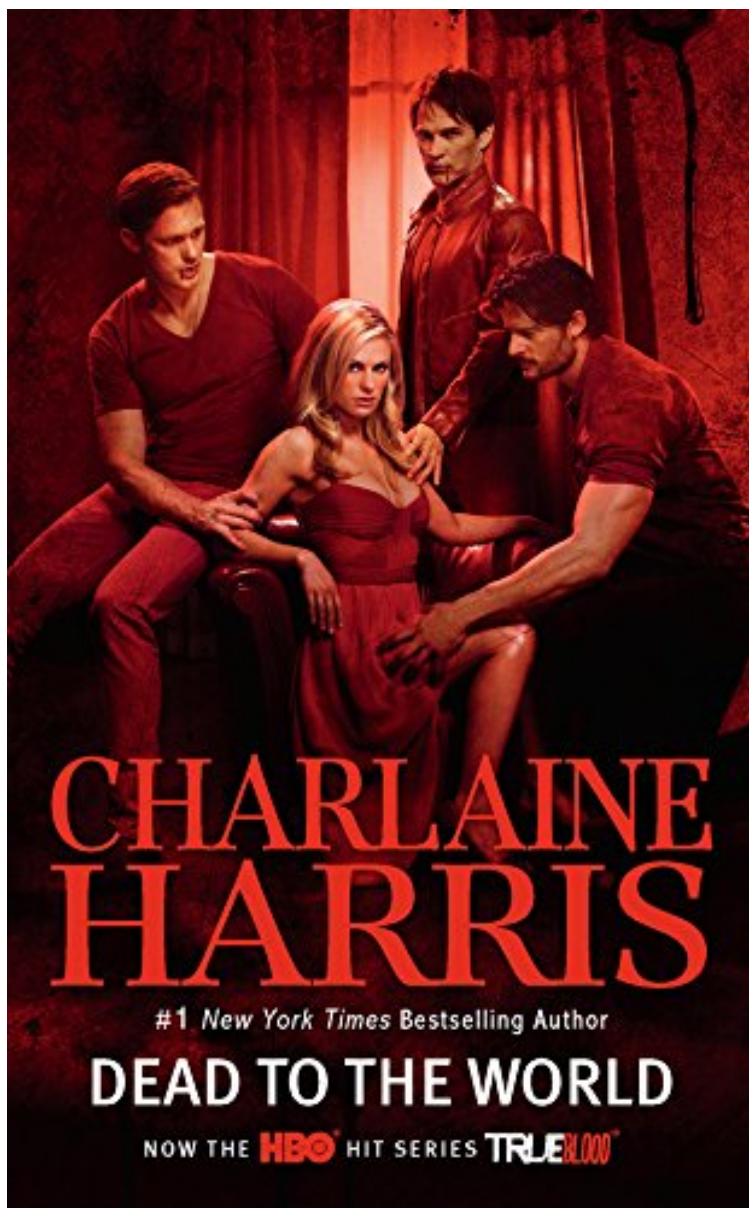


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Dead to the World



Par Charlaine Harris
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Description : Description du produitWhen cocktail waitress Sookie Stackhouse sees a naked man on the side of the road, she doesn't just drive on by. Turns out the poor thing hasn't a clue who he is, but Sookie does. It's Eric the vampire--but now he's a kinder, gentler Eric. And a scared Eric, because whoever took his memory now wants his life.

Prsentation de l'diteurPsychic Sookie Stackhouse has her hands full with an amnesiac vampire in the fourth seductive novel in the #1 New York Times bestselling series.When cocktail waitress Sookie Stackhouse sees a naked man on the side of the road, she doesnt just drive on by. Turns out the poor thing hasnt a clue who he is, but Sookie does. Its the vampire Eric Northmanbut now hes a kinder, gentler Eric. And a scared Eric,

because whoever took his memory now wants his life. Sookies investigation into why leads straight into a dangerous battle among witches, vampires, and werewolves. But a greater danger could be to Sookies heart because the kinder, gentler Eric is very difficult to resist....com

From Emma Bull's *War for the Oaks* to Laurell K. Hamilton's *Anita Blake, Vampire Hunter* series, from *The X-Files* to *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, creators are mixing old European myths and legends with modern American pop culture. Incorporating influences ranging from blaxploitation movies and erotic novels to tabloid staples like UFOs and Elvis, authors and directors are creating a new mythology for the strip-mall, tract-house, cell-phone America of the new millennium. One of the best-known and best writers of the new American mythology is Charlaine Harris. *Dead to the World* is the fourth novel in her Anthony Award-winning *Southern Vampire* series. It continues the story of psychic waitress Sookie Stackhouse, who has fallen out with her undead lover, Bill. Bill has no sooner departed for Peru, than Sookie finds the head vampire, Eric, running naked and terrified through the rural night. She helps Eric, and discovers his memory has been destroyed by a coven of unscrupulous, astonishingly powerful witches, newly arrived in her small Louisiana town, and offering a huge reward for Eric. Sookie tries to hide Eric, but her brother sees him--and immediately disappears. And Sookie finds herself caught in a war among witches, vampires, and werewolves. --Cynthia Ward

Extrait

The New Years Eve party at Merlottes 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 responded. Charlsie Tooten had said she was too old to put up with the mess we had to endure on New Years 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 Merlottes, 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 your boyfriend's 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 were-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 at 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 Bills (and Erics) 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 didnt think he would. But he needed them bad, or hed be in trouble with his boss. Ive got a temper, maybe even a bad temper, once it gets provoked. But Im 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 Bills departure. Sure enough, within twenty minutes of Chuck and Terrells gibing, she made her way through the crowd to pat me on the back. You didnt 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. Hed introduced me to sex, which I really enjoyed. Introduced me to a lot of other vampires, which I didnt. Saved my life, though when you thought about it, it wouldnt have been in danger if I hadnt been dating him in the first place. But Id saved his back once or twice, so that debt was canceled. Hed called me sweetheart, and at the time hed meant it. Nothing, I muttered, as I mopped up a spilled pia colada and handed one of our last clean bar towels to the woman whod knocked it over, since a lot of it was still in her skirt. He didnt 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 Id be glad when Bill got back. After all, he was my nearest neighbor.

The communitys 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. (Id carded her.) I gave her a close look. Jason didnt know it, but she was a shape-shifter of some kind. Theyre 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 Jasons back was turned, to remind her to behave herself in his territory. She returned the glare, with interest. I had the feeling she didnt become a kitten, or a squirrel. I thought of latching on to her brain and trying to read it, but shifter heads arent 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 weathers good, or in my living room, if the weathers poor. I dont let him in the bedroom anymore, because he wakes up naked in which state he looks very nice, but I just dont need to be tempted by my boss. The moon wasnt full tonight, so Jason would be safe. I decided not to say anything to him about his date. Everyones got a secret or two. Her secret was just a little more colorful. Besides my brothers date, and Sam of course, there were two other supernatural creatures in Merlottes Bar that New Years 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, shed come in by herself, and she was in the process of meeting every guy in the bar. I didnt know what she was, but I knew from her brain pattern that she was not human. The other creature was a vampire, whod come in with a group of young people, most in their early twenties. I didnt 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 worlds 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 Ive seen the other side of the vampire world. My eyes now see a lot of things most human beings dont 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. Im by myself a lot (since Im not exactly Norma Normal), so the extra food for thought has been welcome. The fear and danger havent. Ive seen the private face of vampires, and Ive 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. Hollys 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. Whatre 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 shes been married four times but shes still looking for Mr. Right. I could hear Arlene thinking that Tack might be the one. I was startled; I hadnt even known shed 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. Itll be this year, for sure, Arlene. I smiled at Bon Temps 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 Sams natural curly red-gold as she gave him a quick hug. He wasnt much taller than Arlene though shes at least five foot eight, two inches taller than I. Im going to lose ten pounds, thats my resolution. We all laughed. That had been Arlenes 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. Im ten years younger maybe more, since though Arlene says shes thirty-six, I have my doubts but weve been friends ever since we started working at Merlottes 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 dont want to go to the hospital. I dont want to see a doctor. I didnt 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 couldnt tell about Sam. But since Id hugged Arlene, I gave him a big hug, too, and felt the strength and warmth in his body. You think Sams 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. Sams truck was parked in front of his trailer, which is set up behind Merlottes Bar but at a right angle to it, but he climbed in Kenyas patrol car to ride to the bank. Shed bring him home, and then Sam could collapse. Hed 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 couldnt 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 passengers 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. Its 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 didnt Eric recognize me? Id known him for many months. He was Bills 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 didnt 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 know darn good and well who I am. Whats 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 didnt sound like he was joking. I said cautiously, Of course I know you, Eric. Unless you have an identical twin. You dont, right? I dont know. His arms dropped, his fangs seemed to be retracting, and he straightened from his crouch, so I felt there had been a definite improvement in the atmosphere of our encounter. You dont know if you have a brother? I was pretty much at sea. No. I dont know. Eric is my name? In the glare of my headlights, he looked just plain pitiful. Wow. I couldnt think of anything more helpful to say. Eric Northman is the name you go by these days. Why are you out here? I dont know that, either. I was sensing a theme here. For real? You dont 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 wasnt terrified) how forlorn he looked. It was an expression Id never seen on the confident Eric's face before, and it made me feel unaccountably sad. You know youre a vampire, right? Yes. He seemed surprised that I asked. And you are not. No, Im real human, and I have to know you wont hurt me. Though you could have by now. But believe me, even if you dont remember it, were sort of friends. I wont 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 dont have to kill once theyre past their first year. A sip here, a sip there, thats the norm. When he looked so lost, it was hard to remember he could dismember me with his bare hands. Id 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 Im-getting-sucked-in feeling again, but I didnt know what else to do. I do know you? he said, as though he were hesitant about getting in a car with someone as formidable as a woman ten inches shorter, many pounds lighter, and a few centuries younger. Yes, I said, not able to restrain an edge of impatience. I wasnt too happy with myself, because I still half suspected I was being tricked for some unfathomable reason. Now come on, Eric. Im freezing, and so are you. Not that vampires seemed to feel temperature extremes, as a rule; but even Eric's skin looked goosey. The dead can freeze, of course. Theyll survive if they survive almost everything but I understand its pretty painful. Oh my God, Eric, youre barefoot. Id just noticed. I took his hand; he let me get close enough for that. He let me lead him back to the car and stow him in the passenger seat. I told him to roll up the window as I went around to my side, and after a long minute of studying the mechanism, he did. I reached in the backseat for an old afghan I keep there in the winter (for football games, etc.) and wrapped it around him. He wasnt shivering, of course, because he was a vampire, but I just couldnt stand to look at all that bare flesh in this temperature. I turned the heater on full blast (which, in my old car, isnt saying much). Eric's exposed skin had never made me feel cold before when Id seen this much of Eric before, Id felt anything but. I was giddy enough by now to laugh out loud before I could censor my own thoughts. He was startled, and looked at me sideways. Youre the last person I expected to see, I said. Were you coming out this way to see Bill? Because hes gone. Bill? The vampire who lives out here? My ex-boyfriend? He shook his head. He was back to being absolutely terrified. You dont know how you came to be here? He shook his head again. I was making a big effort to think hard; but it was just that, an effort. I was worn out. Though Id had a rush of adrenaline when Id spotted the figure running down the dark road, that rush was wearing off fast. I reached the turnoff to my house and turned left, winding through the black and silent woods on my nice, level driveway that, in fact, Eric had had re-graveled for me. And that was why Eric was sitting in my car right now, instead of running through the night like a giant white rabbit. Hed had the intelligence to give me what I really wanted. (Of course, hed also wanted me to go to bed with him for months. But hed given me the driveway because I needed it.) Here we are, I said, pulling around to the back of my old house. I switched off the car. Id remembered to leave the outside lights on when Id left for

work that afternoon, thank goodness, so we werent sitting there in total darkness. This is where you live? He was glancing around the clearing where the old house stood, seemingly nervous about going from the car to the back door. Yes, I said, exasperated. He just gave me a look that showed white all around the blue of his eyes. Oh, come on, I said, with no grace at all. I got out of the car and went up the steps to the back porch, which I dont keep locked because, hey, why lock a screened-in back porch? I do lock the inner door, and after a seconds fumbling, I had it open so the light I leave on in the kitchen could spill out. You can come in, I said, so he could cross the threshold. He scuttled in after me, the afghan still clutched around him. Under the overhead light in the kitchen, Eric looked pretty pitiful. His bare feet were bleeding, which I hadnt noticed before. Oh, Eric, I said sadly, and got a pan out from the cabinet, and started the hot water to running in the sink. Hed heal real quick, like vampires do, but I couldnt help but wash him clean. The blue jeans were filthy around the hem. Pull em off, I said, knowing theyd just get wet if I soaked his feet while he was dressed. With not a hint of a leer or any other indication that he was enjoying this development, Eric shimmied out of the jeans. I tossed them onto the back porch to wash in the morning, trying not to gape at my guest, who was now clad in underwear that was definitely over-the-top, a bright red bikini style whose stretchy quality was definitely being tested. Okay, another big surprise. Id seen Eric's underwear only once before which was once more than I ought to have and hed been a silk boxers guy. Did men change styles like that? Without preening, and without comment, the vampire rewrapped his white body in the afghan. Hmm. I was now convinced he wasnt himself, as no other evidence could have convinced me. Eric was way over six feet of pure magnificence (if a marble white magnificence), and he well knew it. I pointed to one of the straight-back chairs at the kitchen table. Obediently, he pulled it out and sat. I crouched to put the pan on the floor, and I gently guided his big feet into the water. Eric groaned as the warmth touched his skin. I guess that even a vampire could feel the contrast. I got a clean rag from under the sink and some liquid soap, and I washed his feet. I took my time, because I was trying to think what to do next. You were out in the night, he observed, in a tentative sort of way. I was coming home from work, as you can see from my clothes. I was wearing our winter uniform, a long-sleeved white boat-neck T-shirt with Merlottes Bar embroidered over the left breast and worn tucked into black slacks. Women shouldnt be out alone this late at night, he said disapprovingly. Tell me about it. Well, women are more liable to be overwhelmed by an attack than men, so they should be more protected. No, I didnt mean literally. I meant, I agree. Youre preaching to the choir. I didnt want to be working this late at night. Then why were you out? I need the money, I said, wiping my hand and pulling the roll of bills out of my pocket and dropping it on the table while I was thinking about it. I got this house to maintain, my car is old, and I have taxes and insurance to pay. Like everyone else, I added, in case he thought I was complaining unduly. I hated to poor-mouth, but hed asked. Is there no man in your family? Every now and then, their ages do show. I have a brother. I cant remember if youve ever met Jason. A cut on his left foot looked especially bad. I put some more hot water into the basin to warm the remainder. Then I tried to get all the dirt out. He winced as I gently rubbed the washcloth over the margins of the wound. The smaller cuts and bruises seemed to be fading even as I watched. The hot water heater came on behind me, the familiar sound somehow reassuring. Your brother permits you to do this working? I tried to imagine Jason's face when I told him that I expected him to support me for the rest of my life because I was a woman and shouldnt work outside the home. Oh, for goodness sake, Eric. I looked up at him, scowling. Jason's got his own problems. Like being chronically selfish and a true tomcat. I eased the pan of water to the side and patted Eric dry with a dishtowel. This vampire now had clean feet. Rather stiffly, I stood. My back hurt. My feet hurt. Listen, I think what I better do is call Pam. Shell probably know whats going on with you. Pam? It was like being around a particularly irritating two-year-old. Your second-in-command. He was going to ask another question, I could just tell. I held up a hand. Just hold on. Let me call her and find out whats happening. But what if she has turned against me? Then we need to know that, too. The sooner the better. I put my hand on the old phone that hung on the kitchen wall right by the end of the counter. A high stool sat below it. My grandmother had always sat on the stool to conduct her lengthy phone conversations, with a pad and pencil handy. I missed her every day. But at the moment I had no room in my emotional palette for grief, or even nostalgia. I looked in my little address book for the number of Fangtasia, the vampire bar in Shreveport that provided Eric's principal income and served as the base of his operations, which I understood were far wider in scope. I didnt know how wide or what these other moneymaking projects were, and I didnt especially want to know. Id seen in the Shreveport paper that Fangtasia, too, had planned a big bash for the evening. Begin Your New Year with a Biteso I knew someone would be there. While the phone was ringing, I swung open the refrigerator and got out a bottle of blood for Eric. I popped it

in the microwave and set the timer. He followed my every move with anxious eyes. Fangtasia, said an accented male voice. Chow? Yes, how may I serve you? Hed remembered his phone persona of sexy vampire just in the nick of time. Its Sookie. Oh, he said in a much more natural voice. Listen, Happy New Year, Sook, but were kind of busy here. Looking for someone? There was a long, charged silence. Wait a minute, he said, and then I heard nothing. Pam, said Pam. Shed picked up the receiver so silently that I jumped when I heard her voice. Do you still have a master? I didnt know how much I could say over the phone. I wanted to know if shed been the one whod put Eric in this state, or if she still owed him loyalty. I do, she said steadily, understanding what I wanted to know. We are under . . . we have some problems. I mulled that over until I was sure Id read between the lines. Pam was telling me that she still owed Eric her allegiance, and that Eric's group of followers was under some kind of attack or in some kind of crisis. I said, Hes here. Pam appreciated brevity. Is he alive? Yep. Damaged? Mentally. A long pause, this time. Will he be a danger to you? Not that Pam cared a whole hell of a lot if Eric decided to drain me dry, but I guess she wondered if I would shelter Eric. I dont think so at the moment, I said. It seems to be a matter of memory. I hate witches. Humans had the right idea, burning them at the stake. Since the very humans who had burned witches would have been delighted to sink that same stake into vampire hearts, I found that a little amusing but not very, considering the hour. I immediately forgot what shed been talking about. I yawned. Tomorrow night, well come, she said finally. Can you keep him this day? Dawns in less than four hours. Do you have a safe place? Yes. But you get over here at nightfall, you hear me? I dont want to get tangled up in your vampire shit again. Normally, I dont speak so bluntly; but like I say, it was the tail end of a long night. Well be there. We hung up simultaneously. Eric was watching me with unblinking blue eyes. His hair was a snarly tangled mess of blond waves. His hair is the exact same color as mine, and I have blue eyes, too, but thats the end of the similarities. I thought of taking a brush to his hair, but I was just too weary. Okay, heres the deal, I told him. You stay here the rest of the night and tomorrow, and then Pam and themll come get you tomorrow night and let you know whats happening. You wont let anyone get in? he asked. I noticed hed finished the blood, and he wasnt quite as drawn as hed been, which was a relief. Eric, Ill do my best to keep you safe, I said, quite gently. I rubbed my face with my hands. I was going to fall asleep on my feet. Come on, I said, taking his hand. Clutching the afghan with the other hand, he trailed down the hall after me, a snow white giant in tiny red underwear. My old house has been added onto over the years, but it hasnt ever been more than a humble farmhouse. A second story was added around the turn of the century, and two more bedrooms and a walk-in attic are upstairs, but I seldom go up there anymore. I keep it shut off, to save money on electricity. There are two bedrooms downstairs, the smaller one Id used until my grandmother died and her large one across the hall from it. Id moved into the large one after her death. But the hidey-hole Bill had built was in the smaller bedroom. I led Eric in there, switched on the light, and made sure the blinds were closed and the curtains drawn across them. Then I opened the door of the closet, removed its few contents, and pulled back the flap of carpet that covered the closet floor, exposing the trapdoor. Underneath was a light-tight space that Bill had built a few months before, so that he could stay over during the day or use it as a hiding place if his own home was unsafe. Bill liked having a bolt-hole, and I was sure he had some that I didnt know about. If Id been a vampire (God forbid), I would have, myself. I had to wipe thoughts of Bill out of my head as I showed my reluctant guest how to close the trapdoor on top of him and that the flap of carpet would fall back into place. When I get up, Ill put the stuff back in the closet so itll look natural, I reassured him, and smiled encouragingly. Do I have to get in now? he asked. Eric, making a request of me: The world was really turned upside-down. No, I said, trying to sound like I was concerned. All I could think of was my bed. You dont have to. Just get in before sunrise. Theres no way you could miss that, right? I mean, you couldnt fall asleep and wake up in the sun? He thought for a moment and shook his head. No, he said. I know that cant happen. Can I stay in the room with you? Oh, God, puppy dog eyes. From a six-foot-five ancient Viking vampire. It was just too much. I didnt have enough energy to laugh, so I just gave a sad little snigger. Come on, I said, my voice as limp as my legs. I turned off the light in that room, crossed the hall, and flipped on the one in my own room, yellow and white and clean and warm, and folded down the bedspread and blanket and sheet. While Eric sat forlornly in a slipper chair on the other side of the bed, I pulled off my shoes and socks, got a nightgown out of a drawer, and retreated into the bathroom. I was out in ten minutes, with clean teeth and face and swathed in a very old, very soft flannel nightgown that was cream-colored with blue flowers scattered around. Its ribbons were raveled and the ruffle around the bottom was pretty sad, but it suited me just fine. After Id switched off the lights, I remembered my hair was still up in its usual ponytail, so I pulled out the band that held it and I shook my head to make it fall loose. Even my scalp seemed to relax, and I

sighed with bliss. As I climbed up into the high old bed, the large fly in my personal ointment did the same. Had I actually told him he could get in bed with me? Well, I decided, as I wriggled down under the soft old sheets and the blanket and the comforter, if Eric had designs on me, I was just too tired to care. Woman? Hmmm? What's your name? Sookie. Sookie Stackhouse. Thank you, Sookie. Welcome, Eric. Because he sounded so lost the Eric I knew had never been one to do anything other than assume others should serve him I patted around under the covers for his hand. When I found it, I slid my own over it. His palm was turned up to meet my palm, and his fingers clasped mine. And though I would not have thought it was possible to go to sleep holding hands with a vampire, that's exactly what I did.