



Living Dead in Dallas (Sookie Stackhouse/True Blood, Book 2)

By Charlaine Harris

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Soon, Sookie's in Dallas using her telepathic skills to search for a missing vampire. She's supposed to interview certain humans involved. There's just one condition: The vampires must promise to behave—and let the humans go unharmed. Easier said than done. All it takes is one delicious blonde and one small mistake for things to turn deadly...

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Editorial Review

Review

Praise for #1 *New York Times* bestselling author Charlaine Harris's Sookie Stackhouse novels

"It's the kind of book you look forward to reading before you go to bed, thinking you're only going to read one chapter, and then you end up reading seven."—Alan Ball, executive producer of *True Blood*

"Vivid, subtle, and funny in her portrayal of southern life."—*Entertainment Weekly*

"Charlaine Harris has vividly imagined telepathic barmaid Sookie Stackhouse and her small-town Louisiana milieu, where humans, vampires, shapeshifters, and other sentient critters live...Her mash-up of genres is delightful, taking elements from mysteries, horror stories, and romances."—*Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*

"The series continues to be inventive and funny with an engaging, smart, and sexy heroine."—*The Denver Post*

"Blending action, romance, and comedy, Harris has created a fully functioning world so very close to our own, except, of course, for the vamps and other supernatural creatures."—*The Toronto Star*

About the Author

Charlaine Harris is the #1 *New York Times* bestselling author of the Sookie Stackhouse and Midnight, Texas, fantasy/mystery series and the Aurora Teagarden, Harper Connelly, and Lily Bard mystery series. Her books have inspired HBO's *True Blood*, NBC's *Midnight, Texas*, and the Aurora Teagarden movies for Hallmark Movies & Mysteries. She has lived in the South her entire life.

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Andy Bellefleur was as drunk as a skunk. This wasn't normal for Andy believe me, I know all the drunks in Bon Temps. Working at Sam Merlotte's bar for several years has pretty much introduced me to all of them. But Andy Bellefleur, native son and detective on Bon Temps's small police force, had never been drunk in Merlotte's before. I was mighty curious as to why tonight was an exception.

Andy and I aren't friends by any stretch of the imagination, so I couldn't ask him outright. But other means were open to me, and I decided to use them. Though I try to limit employing my disability, or gift, or whatever you want to call it, to find out things that might have an effect on me or mine, sometimes sheer curiosity wins out.

I let down my mental guard and read Andy's mind. I was sorry.

Andy had had to arrest a man that morning for kid-napping. He'd taken his ten-year-old neighbor to a place in the woods and raped her. The girl was in the hospital, and the man was in jail, but the damage that had been dealt was irreparable. I felt weepy and sad. It was a crime that touched too closely on my own past. I liked Andy a little better for his depression.

"Andy Bellefleur, give me your keys," I said. His broad face turned up to me, showing very little comprehension. After a long pause while my meaning filtered through to his addled brain, Andy fumbled in the

pocket of his khakis and handed me his heavy key ring. I put another bourbon-and-Coke on the bar in front of him. "My treat," I said, and went to the phone at the end of the bar to call Portia, Andy's sister. The Bellefleur sib-lings lived in a decaying large white two-story antebellum, formerly quite a showplace, on the prettiest street in the nicest area of Bon Temps. On Magnolia Creek Road, all the homes faced the strip of park through which ran the stream, crossed here and there by decorative bridges for foot traffic only; a road ran on both sides. There were a few other old homes on Magnolia Creek Road, but they were all in better repair than the Bellefleur place, Belle Rive. Belle Rive was just too much for Portia, a lawyer, and Andy, a cop, to maintain, since the money to support such a home and its grounds was long since gone. But their grandmother, Caroline, stubbornly refused to sell.

Portia answered on the second ring.

"Portia, this is Sookie Stackhouse," I said, having to raise my voice over the background noise in the bar.

"You must be at work."

"Yes. Andy's here, and he's three sheets to the wind. I took his keys. Can you come get him?"

"Andy had too much to drink? That's rare. Sure, I'll be there in ten minutes," she promised, and hung up.

"You're a sweet girl, Sookie," Andy volunteered un-expectedly.

He'd finished the drink I'd poured for him. I swept the glass out of sight and hoped he wouldn't ask for more.

"Thanks, Andy," I said. "You're okay, yourself."

"Where's boyfriend?"

"Right here," said a cool voice, and Bill Compton appeared just behind Andy. I smiled at him over Andy's drooping head. Bill was about five foot ten, with dark brown hair and eyes. He had the broad shoulders and hard muscular arms of a man who's done manual labor for years. Bill had worked a farm with his father, and then for himself, before he'd gone to be a soldier in the war. That would be the Civil War.

"Hey, B.!" called Charlsie Tooten's husband, Mi-cah. Bill raised a casual hand to return the greeting, and my brother, Jason, said, "Evening, Vampire Bill," in a perfectly polite way. Jason, who had not exactly welcomed Bill into our little family circle, had turned over a whole new leaf. I was sort of mentally holding my breath, waiting to see if his improved attitude was permanent.

"Bill, you're okay for a bloodsucker," Andy said judiciously, rotating on his bar stool so he could face Bill. I upgraded my opinion of Andy's drunkenness, since he had never otherwise been enthusiastic about the acceptance of vampires into America's mainstream society.

"Thanks," Bill said dryly. "You're not too bad for a Bellefleur." He leaned across the bar to give me a kiss. His lips were as cool as his voice. You had to get used to it. Like when you laid your head on his chest, and you didn't hear a heartbeat inside. "Evening, sweet-heart," he said in his low voice. I slid a glass of the Japanese-developed synthetic B negative across the bar, and he knocked it back and licked his lips. He looked pinker almost immediately.

"How'd your meeting go, honey?" I asked. Bill had been in Shreveport the better part of the night.

"I'll tell you later."

I hoped his work-related story was less distressing than Andy's. "Okay. I'd appreciate it if you'd help Portia

get Andy to her car. Here she comes now," I said, nodding toward the door.

For once, Portia was not wearing the skirt, blouse, jacket, hose, and low-heeled pumps that constituted her professional uniform. She'd changed to blue jeans and a ragged Sophie Newcomb sweatshirt. Portia was built as squarely as her brother, but she had long, thick, chest-nut hair. Keeping it beautifully tended was Portia's one signal that she hadn't given up yet. She plowed single-mindedly through the rowdy crowd.

"Well, he's soused, all right," she said, evaluating her brother. Portia was trying to ignore Bill, who made her very uneasy. "It doesn't happen often, but if he decides to tie one on, he does a good job."

"Portia, Bill can carry him to your car," I said. Andy was taller than Portia and thick in body, clearly too much of a burden for his sister.

"I think I can handle him," she told me firmly, still not looking toward Bill, who raised his eyebrows at me.

So I let her get one arm around him and try to hoist him off the stool. Andy stayed perched. Portia glanced around for Sam Merlotte, the bar owner, who was small and wiry in appearance but very strong. "Sam's bartending at an anniversary party at the country club," I said. "Better let Bill help."

"All right," the lawyer said stiffly, her eyes on the polished wood of the bar. "Thanks very much."

Bill had Andy up and moving toward the door in seconds, in spite of Andy's legs tending to turn to jelly. Micah Tooten jumped up to open the door, so Bill was able to sweep Andy right out into the parking lot.

"Thanks, Sookie," Portia said. "Is his bar tab settled up?"

I nodded.

"Okay," she said, slapping her hand on the bar to signal she was out of there. She had to listen to a chorus of well-meant advice as she followed Bill out the front door of Merlotte's.

That was how Detective Andy Bellefleur's old Buick came to sit in the parking lot at Merlotte's all night and into the next day. The Buick had certainly been empty when Andy had gotten out to enter the bar, he would later swear. He'd also testify that he'd had been so pre-occupied by his internal turmoil that he'd forgotten to lock the car.

At some point between eight o'clock, when Andy had arrived at Merlotte's, and ten the next morning, when I arrived to help open the bar, Andy's car acquired a new passenger.

This one would cause considerable embarrassment for the policeman.

This one was dead.

I shouldn't have been there at all. I'd worked the late shift the night before, and I should've worked the late shift again that night. But Bill had asked me if I could switch with one of my coworkers, because he needed me to accompany him to Shreveport, and Sam hadn't objected. I'd asked my friend Arlene if she'd work my shift. She was due a day off, but she always wanted to earn the better tips we got at night, and she agreed to come in at five that afternoon.

By all rights, Andy should've collected his car that morning, but he'd been too hung over to fool with getting Portia to run him over to Merlotte's, which was out of the way to the police station. She'd told him she would pick him up at work at noon, and they'd eat lunch at the bar. Then he could retrieve his car.

So the Buick, with its silent passenger, waited for discovery far longer than it should have.

I'd gotten about six hours' sleep the night before, so I was feeling pretty good. Dating a vampire can be hard on your equilibrium if you're truly a daytime person, like me. I'd helped close the bar, and left for home with Bill by one o'clock. We'd gotten in Bill's hot tub together, then done other things, but I'd gotten to bed by a little after two, and I didn't get up until almost nine. Bill had long been in the ground by then.

I drank lots of water and orange juice and took a multivitamin and iron supplement for breakfast, which was my regimen since Bill had come into my life and brought (along with love, adventure, and excitement) the constant threat of anemia. The weather was getting cooler, thank God, and I sat on Bill's front porch wearing a cardigan and the black slacks we wore to work at Merlotte's when it was too cool for shorts. My white golf shirt had Merlotte's bar embroidered on the left breast.

As I skimmed the morning paper, with one part of my mind I was recording the fact that the grass was definitely not growing as fast. Some of the leaves appeared to be beginning to turn. The high school football stadium might be just about tolerable this coming Friday night.

The summer just hates to let go in Louisiana, even northern Louisiana. Fall begins in a very halfhearted way, as though it might quit at any minute and revert to the stifling heat of July. But I was on the alert, and I could spot traces of fall this morning. Fall and winter meant longer nights, more time with Bill, more hours of sleep.

So I was cheerful when I went to work. When I saw the Buick sitting all by its lonesome in front of the bar, I remembered Andy's surprising binge the night before. I have to confess, I smiled when I thought of how he'd be feeling today. Just as I was about to drive around in back and park with the other employees, I noticed that Andy's rear passenger door was open just a little bit. That would make his dome light stay on, surely? And his battery would run down. And he'd be angry, and have to come in the bar to call the tow truck, or ask someone to jump him so I put my car in park and slid out, leaving it running. That turned out to be an optimistic error.

I shoved the door to, but it would only give an inch. So I pressed my body to it, thinking it would latch and I could be on my way. Again, the door would not click shut. Impatiently, I yanked it all the way open to find out what was in the way. A wave of smell gusted out into the parking lot, a dreadful smell. Dismay clutched at my throat, because the smell was not unknown to me. I peered into the backseat of the car, my hand covering my mouth, though that hardly helped with the smell.

"Oh, man," I whispered. "Oh, shit." Lafayette, the cook for one shift at Merlotte's, had been shoved into the backseat. He was naked. It was Lafayette's thin brown foot, its toenails painted a deep crimson, that had kept the door from shutting, and it was Lafayette's corpse that smelled to high heaven.

I backed away hastily, then scrambled into my car and drove around back behind the bar, blowing my horn. Sam came running out of the employee door, an apron tied around his waist. I turned off my car and was out of it so quick I hardly realized I'd done it, and I wrapped myself around Sam like a static-filled sock.

"What is it?" Sam's voice said in my ear. I leaned back to look at him, not having to gaze up too much since Sam is a smallish man. His reddish gold hair was gleaming in the morning sun. He has true-blue eyes, and they were wide with apprehension.

"It's Lafayette," I said, and began crying. That was ridiculous and silly and no help at all, but I couldn't help it. "He's dead, in Andy Bellefleur's car."

Sam's arms tightened behind my back and drew me into his body once more. "Sookie, I'm sorry you saw it," he said. "We'll call the police. Poor Lafayette."

Being a cook at Merlotte's does not exactly call for any extraordinary culinary skill, since Sam just offers a few sandwiches and fries, so there's a high turnover. But Lafayette had lasted longer than most, to my surprise. Lafayette had been gay, flamboyantly gay, makeup-and-long-fingernails gay. People in northern Louisiana are less tolerant of that than New Orleans people, and I expect Lafayette, a man of color, had had a doubly hard time of it. Despite or because of his difficulties, he was cheerful, entertainingly mischievous, clever, and actually a good cook. He had a special sauce he steeped hamburgers in, and people asked for Burgers Lafayette pretty regular.

"Did he have family here?" I asked Sam. We eased apart self-consciously and went into the building, to Sam's office.

"He had a cousin," Sam said, as his fingers punched 9-1-1. "Please come to Merlotte's on Hummingbird Road," he told the dispatcher. "There's a dead man in a car here. Yes, in the parking lot, in the front of the place. Oh, and you might want to alert Andy Bellefleur. It's his car."

I could hear the squawk on the other end of the line from where I stood.

Danielle Gray and Holly Cleary, the two waitresses on the morning shift, came through the back door laughing. Both divorced women in their mid-twenties, Danielle and Holly were lifelong friends who seemed to be quite happy working their jobs as long as they were together. Holly had a five-year-old son who was at kindergarten, and Danielle had a seven-year-old daughter and a boy too young for school, who stayed with Danielle's mother while Danielle was at Merlotte's. I would never be any closer to the two women who, after all, were around my age because they were careful to be sufficient unto themselves.

"What's the matter?" Danielle asked when she saw my face. Her own, narrow and freckled, became instantly worried.

"Why's Andy's car out front?" Holly asked. She'd dated Andy Bellefleur for a while, I recalled. Holly had short blond hair that hung around her face like wilted daisy petals, and the prettiest skin I'd ever seen. "He spend the night in it?"

"No," I said, "but someone else did."

"Who?"

"Lafayette's in it."

"Andy let a black queer sleep in his car?" This was Holly, who was the blunt straightforward one.

"What happened to him?" This was Danielle, who was the smarter of the two.

"We don't know," Sam said. "The police are on the way."

"You mean," Danielle said, slowly and carefully, "that he's dead."

"Yes," I told her. "That's exactly what we mean."

"Well, we're set to open in an hour." Holly's hands settled on her round hips. "What are we gonna do about that? If the police let us open, who's gonna cook for us? People come in, they'll want lunch."

"We better get ready, just in case," Sam said. "Though I'm thinking we won't get to open until sometime this afternoon." He went into his office to begin calling sub-stitute cooks.

It felt strange to be going about the opening routine, just as if Lafayette were going to mince in any minute with a story about some party he'd been to, the way he had a few days before. The sirens came shrieking down the county road that ran in front of Merlotte's. Cars crunched across Sam's gravel parking lot. By the time we had the chairs down, the tables set, and extra silver-ware rolled in napkins and ready to replace used settings, the police came in.

Merlotte's is out of the city limits, so the parish sher-iff, Bud Dearborn, would be in charge. Bud Dearborn, who'd been a good friend of my father's, was gray-haired now. He had a mashed-in face, like a human Pe-kinese, and opaque brown eyes. As he came in the front door of the bar, I noticed Bud was wearing heavy boots and his Saints cap. He must have been called in from working on his farm. With Bud was Alcee Beck, the only African American detective on the parish force. Al-cee was so black that his white shirt gleamed in contrast. His tie was knotted precisely, and his suit was absolutely correct. His shoes were polished and shining.

Bud and Alcee, between them, ran the parish at least some of the more important elements that kept it functional. Mike Spencer, funeral home director and par-ish coroner, had a heavy hand in local affairs, too, and he was a good friend of Bud's. I was willing to bet Mike was already out in the parking lot, pronouncing poor Lafayette dead.

Bud Spencer said, "Who found the body?"

"I did." Bud and Alcee changed course slightly and headed toward me.

"Sam, can we borrow your office?" Bud asked. With-out waiting for Sam's response, he jerked his head to indicate I should go in.

"Sure, go right ahead," my boss said dryly. "Sookie, you okay?"

"Fine, Sam." I wasn't sure that was true, but there wasn't anything Sam could do about it without getting into trouble, and all to no avail. Though Bud gestured to me to sit down, I shook my head as he and Alcee settled themselves in the office chairs. Bud, of course, took Sam's big chair, while Alcee made do with the better extra chair, the one with a little padding left.

"Tell us about the last time you saw Lafayette alive," Bud suggested.

I thought about it.

"He wasn't working last night," I said. "Anthony was working, Anthony Bolivar."

"Who is that?" Alcee's broad forehead wrinkled. "Don't recognize the name."

"He's a friend of Bill's. He was passing through, and he needed a job. He had the experience." He'd worked in a diner during the Great Depression.

"You mean the short-order cook at Merlotte's is a vampire?"

"So?" I asked. I could feel my mouth setting stubborn, and my brows drawing in, and I knew my face was getting mad. I was trying hard not to read their minds, trying hard to stay completely out of this, but it wasn't easy. Bud Dearborn was average, but Alcee projected his thoughts like a lighthouse sends a signal. Right

now he was beaming disgust and fear.

In the months before I'd met Bill, and found that he treasured that disability of mine my gift, as he saw it I'd done my best to pretend to myself and everyone else that I couldn't really "read" minds. But since Bill had liberated me from the little prison I'd built for myself, I'd been practicing and experimenting, with Bill's encouragement. For him, I had put into words the things I'd been feeling for years. Some people sent a clear, strong message, like Alcee. Most people were more off-and-on, like Bud Dearborn. It depended a lot on how strong their emotions were, how clear-headed they were, what the weather was, for all I knew. Some people were murky as hell, and it was almost impossible to tell what they were thinking. I could get a reading of their moods, maybe, but that was all.

I had admitted that if I was touching people while I tried to read their thoughts, it made the picture clearer like getting cable, after having only an antenna. And I'd found that if I "sent" a person relaxing images, I could flow through his brain like water.

There was nothing I wanted less than to flow through Alcee Beck's mind. But absolutely involuntarily I was getting a full picture of Alcee's deeply superstitious re-action to finding out there was a vampire working at Merlotte's, his revulsion on discovering I was the woman he'd heard about who was dating a vampire, his deep conviction that the openly gay Lafayette had been a disgrace to the black community. Alcee figured some-one must have it in for Andy Bellefleur, to have parked a gay black man's carcass in Andy's car. Alcee was wondering if Lafayette had had AIDS, if the virus could have seeped into Andy's car seat somehow and survived there. He'd sell the car, if it were his.

If I'd touched Alcee, I would have known his phone number and his wife's bra size.

Bud Dearborn was looking at me funny. "Did you say something?" I asked.

"Yeah. I was wondering if you had seen Lafayette in here during the evening. Did he come in to have a drink?"

"I never saw him here." Come to think of it, I'd never seen Lafayette have a drink. For the first time, I realized that though the lunch crowd was mixed, the night bar patrons were almost exclusively white.

"Where did he spend his social time?"

"I have no idea." All Lafayette's stories were told with the names changed to protect the innocent. Well, actually, the guilty.

"When did you see him last?"

"Dead, in the car."

Bud shook his head in exasperation. "Alive, Sookie."

"Hmmm. I guessthree days ago. He was still here when I got here to work my shift, and we said hello to each other. Oh, he told me about a party he'd been to." I tried to recall his exact words. "He said he'd been to a house where there were all kinds of sex hijinks going on."

The two men gaped at me.

"Well, that's what he said! I don't know how much truth was in it." I could just see Lafayette's face as he'd told me about it, the coy way he kept putting his finger across his lips to indicate he wasn't telling me any

names or places.

"Didn't you think someone should know about that?" Bud Dearborn looked stunned.

"It was a private party. Why should I tell anyone about it?"

But that kind of party shouldn't happen in their parish. Both men were glaring at me. Through compressed lips, Bud said, "Did Lafayette tell you anything about drugs being used at this get-together?"

"No, I don't remember anything like that."

"Was this party at the home of someone white, or someone black?"

"White," I said, and then wished I'd pled ignorance. But Lafayette had been really impressed by the homethough not because it was large or fancy. Why had he been so impressed? I wasn't too sure what would constitute impressive for Lafayette, who had grown up poor and stayed that way, but I was sure he'd been talking about the home of someone white, because he'd said, "All the pictures on the walls, they all white as lilies and smiling like alligators." I didn't offer that comment to the police, and they didn't ask further.

When I'd left Sam's office, after explaining why Andy's car had been in the parking lot in the first place, I went back to stand behind the bar. I didn't want to watch the activity out in the parking lot, and there weren't any customers to wait on because the police had the entrances to the lot blocked off.

Sam was rearranging the bottles behind the bar, dust-ing as he went, and Holly and Danielle had plunked themselves down at a table in the smoking section so Danielle could have a cigarette.

"How was it?" Sam asked.

"Not much to it. They didn't like hearing about An-thony working here, and they didn't like what I told them about the party Lafayette was bragging about the other day. Did you hear him telling me? The orgy thing?"

"Yeah, he said something to me about that, too. Must have been a big evening for him. If it really happened."

"You think Lafayette made it up?"

"I don't think there are too many biracial, bisexual parties in Bon Temps," he said.

"But that's just because no one invited you to one," I said pointedly. I wondered if I really knew at all what went on in our little town. Of all the people in Bon Temps, I should be the one to know the ins and the outs, since all that information was more or less readily avail-able to me, if I chose to dig for it. "At least, I assume that's the case?"

"That's the case," Sam said, smiling at me a little as he dusted a bottle of whiskey.

"I guess my invitation got lost in the mail, too."

"You think Lafayette came back here last night to talk more to you or me about this party?"

I shrugged. "He may have just arranged to meet some-one in the parking lot. After all, everyone knows where Merlotte's is. Had he gotten his paycheck?" It was the end of the week, when Sam normally paid us.

"No. Maybe he'd come in for that, but I'd have given it to him at work the next day. Today."

"I wonder who invited Lafayette to that party."

"Good question."

"You don't reckon he'd have been dumb enough to try to blackmail anyone, do you?"

Sam rubbed the fake wood of the bar with a clean rag. The bar was already shining, but he liked to keep his hands busy, I'd noticed. "I don't think so," he said, after he'd thought it over. "No, they sure asked the wrong person. You know how indiscreet Lafayette was. Not only did he tell us that he went to such a party and I'm betting he wasn't supposed to he might have wanted to build more on it than the other, ah, partici-pants, would feel comfortable with."

"Like, keep in contact with the people at the party? Give them a sly wink in public?"

"Something like that."

"I guess if you have sex with someone, or watch them having sex, you feel pretty much like you're their equal." I said this doubtfully, having limited experience in that area, but Sam was nodding.

"Lafayette wanted to be accepted for what he was more than anything else," he said, and I had to agree.

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Users Review

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