

DEAD IN THE FAMILY

by Charlaine Harris

March – The First Week

"I feel bad that I'm leaving you like this," Amelia said. Her eyes were puffy and red. They'd been that way, off and on, ever since Tray Dawson's funeral.

"You have to do what you have to do," I said, giving her a very bright smile. I could read the guilt and shame and ever-present grief roiling around Amelia's mind in a ball of darkness. "I'm lots better," I reassured her. I could hear myself babbling cheerfully along, but I couldn't seem to stop. "I'm walking okay, and the holes are all filled in. See how much better?" I pulled down my jeans waistband to show her a spot that had been bitten out. The teeth marks were hardly perceptible, though the skin wasn't quite smooth and was visibly paler than the surrounding flesh. If I hadn't had a huge dose of vampire blood, the scar would've looked like a shark had bitten me.

Amelia glanced down and hastily away, as if she couldn't bear to see the evidence of the attack. "It's just that Octavia keeps emailing me and telling me I need to come home and accept my judgment from the witches' council, or what's left of it," she said in a rush. "And I need to check all the repairs to my

house. And since there are a few tourists again, and people returning and rebuilding, the magic store's reopened. I can work there part time. Plus, as much as I love you and I love living here, since Tray died"

"Believe me, I understand." We'd gone over this a few times.

"It's not that I blame you," Amelia said, trying to catch my eyes.

She really didn't blame me. Since I could read her mind, I knew she was telling me the truth.

Even I didn't totally blame myself, somewhat to my surprise.

It was true that Tray Dawson, Amelia's lover and a Were, had been killed while he'd been acting as my bodyguard. It was true that I'd requested a bodyguard from the Were pack nearest me because they owed me a favor and my life needed guarding. However, I'd been present at the death of Tray Dawson at the hands of a sword-wielding fairy, and I knew who was responsible.

So I didn't feel guilty, exactly. But I felt heartsick about losing Tray, on top of all the other horrors. My cousin Claudine, a full-blooded fairy, had also died in the Fae War, and since she'd been my real, true fairy godmother, I missed her in a lot of ways. And she'd been pregnant.

I had a lot of pain and regret of all kinds, physical and mental. While Amelia carried an armful of clothes downstairs, I stood in her bedroom, gathering myself. Then I braced my shoulders and lifted a box of bathroom odds and ends. I descended the stairs carefully and slowly, and I made my way out to her car. She turned from depositing the clothes across the boxes already stowed

in her trunk. "You shouldn't be doing that!" she said, all anxious concern. "You're not healed yet."

"I'm fine."

"Not hardly. You always jump when someone comes into the room and surprises you, and I can tell your wrists hurt," she said. She grabbed the box and slid it into the back seat. "You still favor that left leg, and you still ache when it rains. Despite all that vamp blood."

"The jumpiness'll get better. As time passes, it won't be so fresh and at the front of my mind," I told Amelia. (If telepathy had taught me anything, it was that people could bury the most serious and painful of memories, if you gave them enough time and distraction). "The blood is not just any vampire's. It's Eric's blood. It's strong stuff. And my wrists are a lot better." I didn't mention that the nerves were jumping around in them like hot snakes just at this moment a result of their having been tied together tightly for several hours. Dr. Ludwig, physician to the supernatural, had told me the nerves -- and the wrists -- would be back to normal -- eventually.

"Yeah, speaking of the blood." Amelia took a deep breath and steeled herself to say something she knew I wouldn't like. Since I heard it before she actually voiced it, I was able to brace myself. "Had you thought about . . .

Sookie, you didn't ask me, but I think you better not have any more of Eric's blood. I mean, I know he's your man, but you got to think about the

consequences. Sometimes people get flipped by accident. It's not like it's a math equation."

Though I appreciated Amelia's concern, she'd trespassed into private territory. "We don't swap," I said. *Much*. "He just has a sip from me at, you know . . . the happy moment." These days Eric was having a lot more happy moments than I was, sadly. I kept hoping the bedroom magic would return; if any male could perform sexual healing, that male would be Eric.

Amelia smiled, which was what I'd been aiming for. "At least . . ." She turned away without finishing the sentence, but she was thinking, *At least you feel like having sex*.

I didn't so much feel like having sex as I felt like I ought to keep trying to enjoy it, but I definitely didn't want to discuss that. My ability to cast aside control, which is the key to good sex, had been pinched out of existence during the torture. I'd been absolutely helpless. I could only hope that I'd recover in that area, too. I knew Eric could feel my lack of completion. He'd asked me several times if I was sure I wanted to engage in sex. Nearly every time, I said yes, operating on the bicycle theory. Yes, I'd fallen off. But I was always willing to try to ride it again.

"So, how's the relationship doing?" she said. "Aside from the whoopee."

Every last thing was in Amelia's car. She was stalling, dreading the moment when she actually got into her car and drove away.

It was only pride that was keeping me from bawling all over her.

"I think we're getting along pretty well," I said with a great effort at sounding cheerful. "I'm still not sure what I feel as opposed to what the bond is making me feel." It was kind of nice to be able to talk about my supernatural connection to Eric, as well as my regular old man-woman attraction. Even before my injuries during the Fae War, Eric and I had established what the vampires called a blood bond, since we'd exchanged blood several times. I could sense Eric's general location and his mood, and he could feel the same things about me. He was always faintly present in the back of my mind – sort of like turning on a fan or an air filter to provide a little buzz of noise that would help you get to sleep. (It was good for me that Eric slept all day, because I could be by myself at least part of the time. Maybe he felt the same way after I went to bed at night?) It wasn't like I heard voices in my head or anything -- at least not more than usual. But if I felt happy, I had to check to make sure it was me and not Eric who felt happy. Likewise for anger; Eric was big on anger, controlled and carefully banked anger, especially lately. Maybe he was getting that from me. I was pretty full of anger myself these days.

I'd forgotten all about Amelia. I'd stepped right into my own trough of depression.

She snapped me out of it. "That's just a big fat excuse," she said tartly. "Come on, Sookie. You love him, or you don't. Don't keep putting off thinking about it by blaming everything on your bond. Wah, wah, wah. If you hate the bond so much, why haven't you explored how you can get free of it?" She took

in the expression on my face, and the irritation faded out of her own. "Do you want me to ask Octavia?" she asked in milder voice. "If anyone would know, she would."

"Yes, I'd like to find out," I said, after a moment. I took a deep breath. "You're right, I guess. I've been so depressed I've put off making any decisions, or acting on the ones I'd already made. Eric's one of a kind. But I find him . . . a little overwhelming." He was a strong personality, and he was used to being the big fish in the pond. He also knew he had infinite time ahead of him.

I did not.

He hadn't brought that up yet, but sooner or later, he would.

"Overwhelming or not, I love him," I continued. I'd never said it out loud. "And I guess that's the bottom line."

"I guess it is." Amelia tried to smile at me, but it was a woeful attempt. "Listen, you keep that up, the self-knowledge thing." She stood for a moment, her expression frozen into the half smile. "Well, Sook, I better get on the road. My dad's expecting me. He'll be all up in my business the minute I get back to New Orleans."

Amelia's dad was rich, powerful, and had no belief in Amelia's power at all. He was very wrong not to respect her witchcraft. Amelia had been born with the potential for the power in her, as every true witch is. Once Amelia had some more training and discipline, she was going to be really scary – scary on

purpose, rather than because of the drastic nature of her mistakes. I hoped her mentor, Octavia, had a program in place to develop and train Amelia's talent.

After I waved Amelia down the driveway, the broad smile dropped from my face. I sat on the porch steps and cried. It didn't take much for me to be in tears these days, and my friend's departure was just the trigger now. There was so much to weep about.

My sister-in-law Crystal had been murdered. My brother's friend Mel had been executed. Tray and Claudine and Clancy the vampire had been killed in the line of duty. Since Crystal, like Claudine, had been pregnant, that added two more deaths to the list.

Probably that should have made me long for peace above all else. But instead of turning into the Bon Temps Gandhi, in my heart I held the knowledge that there were plenty of people I wanted dead. I wasn't directly responsible for most of the deaths that were scattered in my wake, but I was haunted by the feeling that none of them would have happened if it weren't for me. In my darkest moments -- and this was one of them -- I wondered if my life was worth the price that had been paid for it.

March –End of the First Week

My cousin Claude was sitting on the front porch when I got up on a cloudy brisk morning a few days after Amelia's departure. Claude wasn't as skilled at masking his presence as my great-grandfather Niall had been. Because Claude was fae, I couldn't read his mind -- but I could tell his mind was there, if that isn't too obscure a way to put it. I carried my coffee out to the porch, though the air was nippy, because drinking that first cup on the porch had been one of my favorite things to do before I . . . before the Fae War.

I hadn't seen my cousin in weeks. I hadn't seen him during the Fae War, and he hadn't contacted me since the death of Claudine.

I'd brought an extra mug for Claude, and I handed it to him. He accepted it silently. I'd considered the possibility he might throw it in my face. His unexpected presence had thrown me off course. I had no idea what to expect. The breeze lifted his long black hair, tossed it around like rippling ebony ribbons. His caramel eyes were red-rimmed.

"How did she die?" he said.

I sat on the top step. "I didn't see it," I said, hunching over my knees.

"We were in that old building Dr. Ludwig was using as a hospital. I think Claudine was trying to stop the other fairies from coming down the corridor to get into the room where I was holed up with Bill and Eric and Tray." I looked over at Claude to make sure he knew the place, and he nodded. "I'm pretty sure

that it was Breandan who killed her, because one of her knitting needles was stuck in his shoulder when he busted into our room.”

Breandan, my great-grandfather’s enemy, had also been a prince of the fae. Breandan had believed that humans and the fae should not consort. He’d believed that to the point of fanaticism. He’d wanted the fae to completely abstain from their forays into the human world, despite the fae’s large financial stake in mundane commerce and the products it had produced . . . products that helped them blend in to the modern world. Breandan had especially hated the occasional taking of human lovers, a fae indulgence, and he’d hated the children born as a result of such liaisons. He’d wanted the fae separate, walled away into their own world, consorting only with their own kind.

Oddly enough, that’s what my great-grandfather had decided to do after defeating the fairy who believed in this apartheid policy. After all the bloodshed, Niall concluded that peace among the fae and safety for humans could be reached only if the fae blocked themselves into their world. Breandan had achieved his ends by his own death. In my worst moments, I thought that Niall’s final decision had made the whole war unnecessary.

“She was defending you,” Claude said, pulling me back into the moment. There was nothing in his voice. Not blame, not anger, not a question.

“Yeah.” That had been part of her job, defending me, by Niall’s orders.

I took a long sip of coffee. Claude's sat untouched on the arm of the porch swing. Maybe Claude was wondering if he should kill me. Claudine had been his last surviving sibling.

"You knew about the pregnancy," he said finally.

"She told me right before she was killed." I put down my mug and wrapped my arms around my knees. I waited for the blow to fall. At first I didn't mind all that much, which was even more horrible.

Claude said, "I understand Neave and Lochlan had hold of you. Is that why you're limping?" The change of subject caught me off guard.

"Yeah," I said. "They had me for a couple of hours. Niall and Bill Compton killed them. Just so you know – it was Bill who killed Breandan, with my grandmother's iron trowel." Though the trowel had been in my family's tool shed for decades, I associated it with Gran.

Claude sat, beautiful and unreadable, for a long time. He never looked at me directly or drank his coffee. When he'd reached some inner conclusion, he rose and left, walking down the driveway toward Hummingbird Road. I don't know where his car was parked. For all I knew, he'd walked all the way from Monroe, or flown over on a magic carpet. I went into the house, sank to my knees right inside the door, and cried. My hands were shaking. My wrists ached.

The whole time we'd been talking, I'd been waiting for him to make his move.

I realized I wanted to live.

March – The Second Week

JB said, "Raise your arm all the way up, Sookie!" His handsome face was creased with concentration. Holding the five-pound weight, I slowly lifted my left arm. Geez Louise, it hurt. Same with the right.

"Okay, now the legs," JB said, when my arms were shaking with strain. JB wasn't a licensed physical therapist, but he was a personal trainer, so he'd had practical experience helping people get over various injuries. Maybe he'd never faced an assortment like mine, since I'd been bitten, cut, and tortured. But I hadn't had to explain the details to JB, and he wouldn't notice that my injuries were far from typical from those incurred in a car accident. I didn't want any speculation going around Bon Temps about my physical problems -- so I made the occasional visits to Dr. Amy Ludwig, who looked suspiciously like a hobbit, and I enlisted the help of JB du Rone, who was a good trainer but dumb as a box of rocks.

JB's wife, my friend Tara, was sitting on one of the weight benches. She was reading *What to Expect When You're Expecting*. Tara, almost five months pregnant, was determined to be the best mother she could possibly be. Since JB was willing but not bright, Tara was assuming the role of Most Responsible Parent. She'd earned her high school spending money as a babysitter, which gave her some experience in child care. She was frowning as she turned the pages, a look familiar to me from our school years.

"Have you picked a doctor yet?" I said, after I'd finished my leg lifts. My quads were screaming, particularly the damaged ones in my left leg. We were in the gym where JB worked, and it was after hours, because I wasn't a member. JB's boss had okayed the temporary arrangement to keep JB happy. JB was a huge asset to the gym; since he'd started working, new female clients had increased by a noticeable percentage.

"I think so," said Tara. "There were four choices in this area, and we interviewed all of them. I've had my first appointment with Dr. Dinwiddie, here in Clarice. I know it's a little hospital, but I'm not high-risk, and it's so close."

Clarice was just a few miles from Bon Temps, where we all lived. You could get from my house to the gym in less than twenty minutes.

"I hear good things about him," I said, the pain in my quads making stuff start to slide around inside my head. My forehead broke out in a clammy sweat. I was used to thinking of myself as a fit woman, and mostly I'd been a happy one. There were days now when it was all I could do to get out of bed and get in to work.

"Sook," JB said, "Look at the weight on here." He was grinning at me.

For the first time, I registered that I'd done ten extensions with ten more pounds than I'd been using.

I smiled back at him. It didn't last long, but I knew I'd done something good.

"Maybe you'll babysit for us some time," Tara said. "We'll teach the baby to call you Aunt Sookie."

I'd be a courtesy aunt. I'd get to take care of a baby. They trusted me. I found myself planning on a future.

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