

CHARLAINE
HARRIS

DEAD RECKONING

GOLLANCZ

LONDON

Chapter 1

The attic had been kept locked until the day after my grandmother died. I'd found her key and opened it that awful day to look for her wedding dress, having the crazy idea she should be buried in it. I'd taken one step inside and then turned and walked out, leaving the door unsecured behind me.

Now, two years later, I pushed that door open again. The hinges creaked as ominously as if it were midnight on Halloween instead of a sunny Wednesday morning in late May. The broad floorboards protested under my feet as I stepped over the threshold. There were dark shapes all around me, and a very faint musty odor—the smell of old things long forgotten.

When the second story had been added to the original Stackhouse home decades before, the new floor had been divided into bedrooms,

but perhaps a third of it had been relegated to storage space after the largest generation of Stackhouses had thinned out. Since Jason and I had come to live with my grandparents after our parents had died, the attic door had been kept locked. Gran hadn't wanted to clean up after us if we decided the attic was a great place to play.

Now I owned the house, and the key was on a ribbon around my neck. There were only three Stackhouse descendants—Jason, me, and my deceased cousin Hadley's son, a little boy named Hunter.

I waved my hand around in the shadowy gloom to find the hanging chain, grasped it, and pulled. An overhead bulb illuminated decades of family castoffs.

Cousin Claude and Great-Uncle Dermot stepped in behind me. Dermot exhaled so loudly it was almost a snort. Claude looked grim. I was sure he was regretting his offer to help me clean out the attic. But I wasn't going to let my cousin off the hook, not when there was another able-bodied male available to help. For now, Dermot went where Claude went, so I had two for the price of one. I couldn't predict how long the situation would hold. I'd suddenly realized that morning that soon it would be too hot to spend time in the upstairs room. The window unit my friend Amelia had installed in one of the bedrooms kept the living spaces tolerable, but of course we'd never wasted money putting one in the attic.

"How shall we go about this?" Dermot asked. He was blond and Claude was dark; they looked like gorgeous bookends. I'd asked Claude once how old he was, to find he had only the vaguest idea. The fae don't keep track of time the same way we do, but Claude was at least a century older than me. He was a kid compared to Dermot; my great-uncle thought he was seven hundred years my senior. Not a wrinkle, not a gray hair, not a droop anywhere, on either of them.

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Since they were much more fairy than me—I was only one-eighth—we all seemed to be about the same age, our late twenties. But that would change in a few years. I would look older than my ancient kin. Though Dermot looked very like my brother, Jason, I'd realized the day before that Jason had crow's-feet at the corners of his eyes. Dermot might not ever show even that token of aging.

Pulling myself back into the here and now, I said, "I suggest we carry things down to the living room. It's so much brighter down there; it'll be easier to see what's worth keeping and what isn't. After we get everything out of the attic, I can clean it up after you two leave for work." Claude owned a strip club in Monroe and drove over every day, and Dermot went where Claude went. As always . . .

"We've got three hours," Claude said.

"Let's get to work," I said, my lips curving upward in a bright and cheerful smile. That's my fallback expression.

About an hour later, I was having second thoughts, but it was too late to back out of the task. (Getting to watch Claude and Dermot shirtless made the work a lot more interesting.) My family has lived in this house since there have been Stackhouses in Renard Parish. And that's been well over a hundred and fifty years. We've saved things.

The living room began to fill up in a hurry. There were boxes of books, trunks full of clothes, furniture, vases. The Stackhouse family had never been rich, and apparently we'd always thought we could find a use for anything, no matter how battered or broken, if we kept it long enough. Even the two fairies wanted to take a break after maneuvering an incredibly heavy wooden desk down the narrow staircase. We all sat on the front porch. The guys sat on the railing, and I slumped down on the swing.

"We could just pile it all in the yard and burn it," Claude suggested.

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He wasn't joking. Claude's sense of humor was quirky at best, minuscule the rest of the time.

"No!" I tried not to sound as irritated as I felt. "I know this stuff is not valuable, but if other Stackhouses thought it ought to be stored up there, I at least owe them the courtesy of having a look at all of it."

"Dearest great-niece," Dermot said, "I'm afraid Claude has a point. Saying this debris is 'not valuable' is being kind." Once you heard Dermot talk, you knew his resemblance to Jason was strictly superficial.

I glowered at the fairies. "Of course to you two most of this would be trash, but to humans it might have some value," I said. "I may call the theater group in Shreveport to see if they want any of the clothes or furniture."

Claude shrugged. "That'll get rid of some of it," he said. "But most of the fabric isn't even good for rags." We'd put some boxes out on the porch when the living room began to be impassable, and he poked one with his toe. The label said the contents were curtains, but I could only guess what they'd originally looked like.

"You're right," I admitted. I pushed with my feet, not too energetically, and swung for a minute. Dermot went in the house and returned with a glass of peach tea with lots of ice in it. He handed it to me silently. I thanked him and stared dismally at all the old things someone had once treasured. "Okay, we'll start a burn pile," I said, bowing to common sense. "Round back, where I usually burn the leaves?"

Dermot and Claude glared at me.

"Okay, right here on the gravel is fine," I said. The last time my driveway had been graveled, the parking area in front of the house, outlined with landscape timbers, had gotten a fresh load, too. "It's not like I get a lot of visitors."

By the time Dermot and Claude knocked off to shower and change

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for work, the parking area contained a substantial mound of useless items waiting for the torch. Stackhouse wives had stored extra sheets and coverlets, and most of them were in the same ragged condition as the curtains. To my deeper regret, many of the books were mildewed and mouse-chewed. I sighed and added them to the pile, though the very idea of burning books made me queasy. But broken furniture, rotted umbrellas, spotted place mats, an ancient leather suitcase with big holes in it . . . no one would ever need these items again.

The pictures we'd uncovered—framed, in albums, or loose—we placed in a box in the living room. Documents were sorted into another box. I'd found some old dolls, too. I knew from television that people collected dolls, and perhaps these were worth something. There were some old guns, too, and a sword. Where was *Antiques Roadshow* when you needed it?

Later that evening at Merlotte's, I told my boss Sam about my day. Sam, a compact man who was actually immensely strong, was dusting the bottles behind the bar. We weren't very busy that night. In fact, business hadn't been good for the past few weeks. I didn't know if the slump was due to the chicken processing plant closing or the fact that some people objected to Sam being a shapeshifter. (The two-natured had tried to emulate the successful transition of the vampires, but it hadn't gone so well.) And there was a new bar, Vic's Redneck Roadhouse, about ten miles west off the interstate. I'd heard the Redneck Roadhouse held all kinds of wet T-shirt contests, beer pong tournaments, and a promotion called "Bring in a Bubba Night"—crap like that.

Popular crap. Crap that raked in the customers.

Whatever the reasons, Sam and I had time to talk about attics and antiques.

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“There’s a store called Splendide in Shreveport,” Sam said. “Both the owners are appraisers. You could give them a call.”

“How’d you know that?” Okay, maybe that wasn’t so tactful.

“Well, I do know a few things besides tending bar,” Sam said, giving me a sideways look.

I had to refill a pitcher of beer for one of my tables. When I returned, I said, “Of course you know all kinds of stuff. I just didn’t know you were into antiques.”

“I’m not. But Jannalynn is. Splendide’s her favorite place to shop.”

I blinked, trying not to look as disconcerted as I felt. Jannalynn Hopper, who’d been dating Sam for a few weeks now, was so ferocious she’d been named the Long Tooth pack enforcer—though she was only twenty-one and about as big as a seventh grader. It was hard to imagine Jannalynn restoring a vintage picture frame or planning to fit a plantation sideboard into her place in Shreveport. (Come to think of it, I had no idea where she lived. Did Jannalynn actually have a house?)

“I sure wouldn’t have guessed that,” I said, making myself smile at Sam. It was my personal opinion that Jannalynn was not good enough for Sam.

Of course, I kept that to myself. Glass houses, stones, right? I was dating a vampire whose kill list would top Jannalynn’s for sure, since Eric was over a thousand years old. In one of those awful moments you have at random, I realized that everyone I’d ever dated—though, granted, that was a short list—was a killer.

And so was I.

I had to shake this off in a hurry, or I’d be in a melancholy funk all evening.

“You have a name and phone number for this shop?” I hoped the

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antiques dealers would agree to come to Bon Temps. I'd have to rent a U-Haul to get all the attic contents to Shreveport.

"Yeah, I got it in my office," Sam said. "I was talking to Brenda, the female half of the partnership, about getting Jannalynn something special for her birthday. It's coming right up. Brenda—Brenda Hesterman—called this morning to tell me she had a few things for me to look at."

"Maybe we could go see her tomorrow?" I suggested. "I have things piled all over the living room and some out on the front porch, and the good weather won't last forever."

"Would Jason want any of it?" Sam asked diffidently. "I'm just saying, family stuff."

"He got a piecrust table around a month ago," I said. "But I guess I should ask him." I thought about it. The house and its contents were mine, since Gran had left it to me. Hmmmm. Well, first things first. "Let's ask Ms. Hesterman if she'll come give a look. If there's pieces that are worth anything, I can think about it."

"Okay," Sam said. "Sounds good. Pick you up tomorrow at ten?"

That was a little early for me to be up and dressed since I was working the late shift, but I agreed.

Sam sounded pleased. "You can tell me what you think about whatever Brenda shows me. It'll be good to have a woman's opinion." He ran a hand over his hair, which (as usual) was a mess. A few weeks ago he'd cut it real short, and now it was in an awkward stage of growing back. Sam's hair is a pretty color, sort of strawberry blond; but since it's naturally curly, now that it was growing out it couldn't seem to pick a direction. I suppressed an urge to whip out a brush and make sense out of it. That was not something an employee should do to her boss's head.

Kennedy Keyes and Danny Prideaux, who worked for Sam part-

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time as substitute bartender and bouncer, respectively, came in to climb on two of the empty barstools. Kennedy is beautiful. She was first runner-up to Miss Louisiana a few years ago, and she still looks like a beauty pageant queen. Her chestnut hair's all glossy and thick, and the ends wouldn't dare to split. Her makeup is meticulous. She has manicures and pedicures on a regular basis. She wouldn't buy a garment at Wal-Mart if her life depended on it.

A few years ago her future, which should have included a country club marriage in the next parish and a big inheritance from her daddy, had been derailed from its path when she'd served time for manslaughter.

Along with pretty nearly everyone I knew, I figured her boyfriend had had it coming, after I saw the pictures of her face swelling black-and-blue in her mug shots. But she'd confessed to shooting him when she called 911, and his family had a little clout, so there was no way Kennedy could walk. She'd gotten a light sentence and time off for good behavior, since she'd taught deportment and grooming to the other inmates. Eventually, Kennedy had done her time. When she'd gotten out, she'd rented a little apartment in Bon Temps, where she had an aunt, Marcia Albanese. Sam had offered her a job pretty much right after he met her, and she'd accepted on the spot.

"Hey, man," Danny said to Sam. "Fix us two mojitos?"

Sam got the mint out of the refrigerator and set to work. I handed him the sliced limes when he was almost through with the drinks.

"What are you all up to tonight?" I asked. "You look mighty pretty, Kennedy."

"I finally lost ten pounds!" she said, and when Sam deposited her glass in front of her, she lifted it to toast with Danny. "To my former figure! May I be on the road to getting it back!"

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Danny shook his head. He said, “Hey! You don’t need to do anything to look beautiful.” I had to turn away so I wouldn’t say, *Awww*. Danny was one tough guy who couldn’t have grown up in a more different environment than Kennedy—the only experience they’d had in common was jail—but boy, he was carrying a big torch for her. I could feel the heat from where I stood. You didn’t have to be telepathic to see Danny’s devotion.

We hadn’t drawn the curtains on the front window yet, and when I realized it was dark outside, I started forward. Though I was looking out from the bright bar to the dark parking lot, there were lights out there, and something was moving . . . moving fast. Toward the bar. I had a slice of a second to think *Odd*, and then caught the flicker of flame.

“Down!” I yelled, but the word hadn’t even gotten all the way out of my mouth when the window shattered and the bottle with its fiery head landed on a table where no one was sitting, breaking the napkin holder and scattering the salt and pepper shakers. Burning napkins flared out from the point of impact to drift down to the floor and the chairs and the people. The table itself was a mass of fire almost instantly.

Danny moved faster than I’d ever seen a human move. He swept Kennedy off her stool, flipped up the pass-through, and shoved her down behind the bar. There was a brief logjam as Sam, moving even faster, grabbed the fire extinguisher from the wall and tried to leap through the pass-through to start spraying.

I felt heat on my thighs and looked down to see that my apron had been ignited by one of the napkins. I’m ashamed to say that I screamed. Sam swiveled around to spray me and then turned back to the flames. The customers were yelling, dodging flames, running

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into the passage that led past the bathrooms and Sam's office through to the back parking lot. One of our perpetual customers, Jane Bodehouse, was bleeding heavily, her hand clapped to her lacerated scalp. She'd been sitting by the window, not her usual place at the bar, so I figured she'd been cut by flying glass. Jane staggered and would have fallen if I hadn't grabbed her arm.

"Go that way," I yelled in her ear, and shoved her in the right direction. Sam was spraying the biggest flame, aiming at the base of it in the approved manner, but the napkins that had floated away were causing lots of little fires. I grabbed the pitcher of water and the pitcher of tea off the bar and began methodically tracking the flames on the floor. The pitchers were full, and I managed to be pretty effective.

One of the window curtains was on fire, and I took three steps, aimed carefully, and tossed the remaining tea. The flame didn't quite die out. I grabbed a glass of water from a table and got much closer to the fire than I wanted to. Flinching the whole time, I poured the liquid down the steaming curtain. I felt an odd flicker of warmth behind me and smelled something disgusting. A powerful gust of chemicals made a strange sensation against my back. I turned to try to figure out what had happened and saw Sam whirling away with the extinguisher.

I found myself looking through the serving hatch into the kitchen. Antoine, the cook, was shutting down all the appliances. Smart. I could hear the fire engine in the distance, but I was too busy looking for yellow flickers to feel much relief. My eyes, streaming with tears from the smoke and the chemicals, were darting around like pinballs as I tried to spot flames, and I was coughing like crazy. Sam had run to retrieve the second extinguisher from his office, and he returned holding it ready. We rocked from side to side on our feet, ready to leap into action to extinguish the next flicker.

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Neither of us spotted anything else.

Sam aimed one more blast at the bottle that had caused the fire, and then he put down the extinguisher. He leaned over to plant his hands on his thighs and inhaled raggedly. He began coughing. After a second, he bent down to the bottle.

“Don’t touch it,” I said urgently, and his hand stopped halfway down.

“Of course not,” he said, chiding himself, and he straightened up. “Did you see who threw it?”

“No,” I said. We were the only people left in the bar. I could hear the fire engine getting closer and closer, so I knew we had only a minute more to talk to each other alone. “Coulda been the same people who’ve been demonstrating out in the parking lot. I don’t know that the church members are into firebombs, though.” Not everyone in the area was pleased to know there were such creatures as werewolves and shapeshifters following the Great Reveal, and the Holy Word Tabernacle in Clarice had been sending its members to demonstrate at Merlotte’s from time to time.

“Sookie,” Sam said, “sorry about your hair.”

“What about it?” I said, lifting my hand to my head. The shock was setting in now. I had a hard time making my hand mind my directions.

“The end of your ponytail got singed,” Sam said. And he sat down very suddenly. That seemed like a good idea.

“So that’s what smells so bad,” I said, and collapsed on the floor beside him. We had our backs against the base of the bar, since the stools had gotten scattered in the melee of the rush out the back door. My *hair* was burned off. I felt tears run down my cheeks. I knew it was stupid, but I couldn’t help it.

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Sam took my hand and gripped it, and we were still sitting like that when the firefighters rushed in. Even though Merlotte's is outside the city limits, we got the official town firefighters, not the volunteers.

"I don't think you need the hose," Sam called. "I think it's out." He was anxious to prevent any more damage to the bar.

Truman La Salle, the fire chief, said, "You two need first aid?" But his eyes were busy, and his words were almost absentminded.

"I'm okay," I said, after a glance at Sam. "But Jane's out back with a cut on her head, from the glass. Sam?"

"Maybe my right hand got a little burned," he said, and his mouth compressed as if he was just now feeling the pain. He released my hand to rub his left over his right, and he definitely winced this time.

"You need to take care of that," I advised him. "Burns hurt like the devil."

"Yeah, I'm figuring that out," he said, his eyes squeezing shut.

Bud Dearborn came in as soon as Truman yelled, "Okay!" The sheriff must have been in bed, because he had a thrown-together look and was minus his hat, a reliable part of his wardrobe. Sheriff Dearborn was probably in his late fifties by now, and he showed every minute of it. He'd always looked like a Pekinese. Now he looked like a gray one. He spent a few minutes going around the bar, watching where his feet went, almost sniffing the disarray. Finally he was satisfied and came up to stand in front of me.

"What you been up to now?" he asked.

"Someone threw a firebomb in the window," I said. "None of my doing." I was too shocked to sound angry.

"Sam, they aiming for you?" the sheriff asked. He wandered off without waiting for an answer.

Sam got up slowly and turned to reach his left hand to me. I

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gripped it and he pulled. Since Sam's much stronger than he looks, I was on my feet in a jiffy.

Time stood still for a few minutes. I had to think that I was maybe a bit in shock.

As Sheriff Dearborn completed his slow and careful circuit of the bar, he arrived back at Sam and me.

By then we had another sheriff to deal with.

Eric Northman, my boyfriend and the vampire sheriff of Area Five, which included Bon Temps, came through the door so quickly that when Bud and Truman realized he was there, they jumped, and I thought Bud was going to draw his weapon. Eric gripped my shoulders and bent to peer into my face. "Are you hurt?" he demanded.

It was like his concern gave me permission to drop my bravery. I felt a tear run down my cheek. Just one. "My apron caught fire, but I think my legs are okay," I said, making a huge effort to sound calm. "I only lost a little hair. So I didn't come out of it too bad. Bud, Truman, I can't remember if you've met my boyfriend, Eric Northman from Shreveport." There were several iffy facts in that sentence.

"How'd you know there was trouble here, Mr. Northman?" Truman asked.

"Sookie called me on her cell phone," Eric said. That was a lie, but I didn't exactly want to explain our blood bond to our fire chief and our sheriff, and Eric would never volunteer any information to humans.

One of the most wonderful, and the most appalling, things about Eric loving me was that he didn't give a shit about anyone else. He ignored the damaged bar, Sam's burns, and the police and firefighters (who were keeping track of him from the corners of their eyes) still inspecting the building.

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Eric circled me to evaluate the hair situation. After a long moment, he said, "I'm going to look at your legs. Then we'll find a doctor and a beautician." His voice was absolutely cold and steady, but I knew he was volcanically angry. It rolled through the bond between us, just as my fear and shock had alerted him to my danger.

"Honey, we have other things to think about," I said, forcing myself to smile, forcing myself to sound calm. One corner of my brain pictured a pink ambulance screeching to a halt outside to disgorge emergency beauticians with cases of scissors, combs, and hair spray. "Dealing with a little hair damage can wait until tomorrow. It's a lot more important to find out who did this and why."

Eric glared at Sam as if the attack were Sam's responsibility. "Yes, his bar is far more important than your safety and well-being," he said. Sam looked astonished at this rebuke, and the beginnings of anger flickered across his face.

"If Sam hadn't been so quick with the fire extinguisher, we'd all have been in bad shape," I said, keeping up with the calm and the smiling. "In fact, both the bar and the people in it would have been in a lot more trouble." I was running out of faux serenity, and of course Eric realized it.

"I'm taking you home," he said.

"Not until I talk to her." Bud showed considerable courage in asserting himself. Eric was scary enough when he was in a *good* mood, much less when his fangs ran out as they did now. Strong emotion does that to a vamp.

"Honey," I said, holding on to my own temper with an effort. I put my arm around Eric's waist, and tried again. "Honey, Bud and Truman are in charge here, and they have their rules to follow. I'm okay." Though I was trembling, which of course he could feel.

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“You were frightened,” Eric said. I felt his own rage that something had happened to me that he had not been able to prevent. I suppressed a sigh at having to babysit Eric’s emotions when I wanted to be free to have my own nervous breakdown. Vampires are nothing if not possessive when they’ve claimed someone as theirs, but they’re also usually anxious to blend into the human population, not cause any unnecessary waves. This was an overreaction.

Eric was mad, sure, but normally he was also quite pragmatic. He knew I wasn’t seriously hurt. I looked up at him, puzzled. My big Viking hadn’t been himself in a week or two. Something other than the death of his maker was bothering him, but I hadn’t built up enough courage to ask him what was wrong. I’d cut myself some slack. I’d simply wanted to enjoy the peace we’d shared for a few weeks.

Maybe that had been a mistake. Something big was pressing on him, and all this anger was a by-product.

“How’d you get here so quick?” Bud asked Eric.

“I flew,” Eric said casually, and Bud and Truman gave each other a wide-eyed look. Eric had had the ability for (give or take) a thousand years, so he disregarded their amazement. He was focused on me, his fangs still out.

They couldn’t know that Eric had felt the swell of my terror the minute I’d seen the running figure. I hadn’t had to call him when the incident was over. “The sooner we get all this settled,” I said, baring my teeth right back at him in a terrible smile, “the sooner we can leave.” I was trying, not so subtly, to send Eric a message. He finally calmed down enough to get my subtext.

“Of course, my darling,” he said. “You’re absolutely right.” But his hand took mine and squeezed too hard, and his eyes were so brilliant they looked like little blue lanterns.

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Bud and Truman looked mighty relieved. The tension ratcheted down a few notches. Vampires = drama.

While Sam was getting his hand treated and Truman was taking pictures of what remained of the bottle, Bud asked me what I'd seen.

"I caught a glimpse of someone out in the parking lot running toward the building, and then the bottle came through the window," I said. "I don't know who threw it. After the window broke and the fire spread from all the lit napkins, I didn't notice anything but the people trying to leave and Sam trying to put it out."

Bud asked me the same thing several times in several different ways, but I couldn't help him any more than I already had.

"Why do you think someone would do this to Merlotte's, to Sam?" Bud asked.

"I don't understand it," I said. "You know, we had those demonstrators from the church in the parking lot a few weeks ago. They've only come back once since then. I can't imagine any of them making a—was that a Molotov cocktail?"

"How do you know about those, Sookie?"

"Well, one, I read books. Two, Terry doesn't talk about the war much, but every now and then he does talk about weapons." Terry Bellefleur, Detective Andy Bellefleur's cousin, was a decorated and damaged Vietnam veteran. He cleaned the bar when everyone was gone and came in occasionally to substitute for Sam. Sometimes he just hung at the bar watching people come in and out. Terry did not have much of a social life.

As soon as Bud declared himself satisfied, Eric and I went to my car. He took the keys from my shaking hand. I got in the passenger side. He was right. I shouldn't drive until I'd recovered from the shock.

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Eric had been busy on his cell phone while I was talking to Bud, and I wasn't totally surprised to see a car parked in front of my house. It was Pam's, and she had a passenger.

Eric pulled around back where I always park, and I scrambled out of the car to hurry through the house to unlock the front door. Eric followed me at a leisurely pace. We hadn't exchanged a word on the short drive. He was preoccupied and still dealing with his temper. I was shocked by the whole incident. Now I felt a little more like myself as I went out on the porch to call, "Come in!"

Pam and her passenger got out. He was a young human, maybe twenty-one, and thin to the point of emaciation. His hair was dyed blue and cut in an extremely geometric way, rather as if he'd put a box on his head, knocked it sideways, then trimmed around the edges. What didn't fit inside the lines had been shaved.

It was eye-catching, I'll say that.

Pam smiled at the expression on my face, which I hastily transformed into something more welcoming. Pam has been a vampire since Victoria was on the English throne, and she's been Eric's right hand since he called her in from her wanderings in northern America. He's her maker.

"Hello," I said to the young man as he entered the front door. He was extremely nervous. His eyes darted to me, away from me, took in Eric, and then kind of strafed the room to absorb it. A flicker of contempt crossed his clean-shaven face as he took in the cluttered living room, which was never more than homey even when it was clean.

Pam thumped him on the back of his head. "Speak when you're spoken to, Immanuel!" she growled. She was standing slightly behind him, so he couldn't see her when she winked at me.

"Hello, ma'am," he said to me, taking a step forward. His nose twitched.

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Pam said, "You smell, Sookie."

"It was the fire," I explained.

"You can tell me about it in a moment," she said, her pale eyebrows shooting up. "Sookie, this man is Immanuel Earnest," she said. "He cuts hair at Death by Fashion in Shreveport. He's brother to my lover, Miriam."

That was a lot of information in three sentences. I scrambled to absorb it.

Eric was eyeing Immanuel's coiffure with fascinated disgust. "*This* is the one you brought to correct Sookie's hair?" he said to Pam. His lips were pressed together in a very tight line. I could feel his skepticism pulsing along the line that bound us.

"Miriam says he is the best," Pam said, shrugging. "I haven't had a haircut in a hundred fifty years. How would I know?"

"Look at him!"

I began to be a little worried. Even for the circumstances, Eric was in a foul mood. "I like his tattoos," I said. "The colors are real pretty."

Aside from his extreme haircut, Immanuel was covered with very sophisticated tattoos. No "MOM" or "BETTY SUE" or naked ladies; elaborate and colorful designs extended from wrists to shoulders. He'd look dressed even when he was naked. The hairdresser had a flat leather case tucked under one of his skinny arms.

"So, you're going to cut off the bad parts?" I said brightly.

"Of your hair," he said carefully. (I wasn't sure I'd needed that particular reassurance.) He glanced at me, then back down at the floor. "Do you have a high stool?"

"Yes, in the kitchen," I said. When I'd rebuilt my burned-out kitchen, custom had made me buy a high stool like the one my gran had perched on while she talked on the old telephone. The new phone

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was cordless, and I didn't need to stay in the kitchen when I used it, but the counter simply hadn't looked right without a stool beside it.

My three guests trailed behind me, and I dragged the stool into the middle of the floor. There was just enough room for everyone when Pam and Eric sat on the other side of the table. Eric was glowering at Immanuel in an ominous way, and Pam was simply waiting to be entertained by our emotional upheavals.

I clambered up on the stool and made myself sit with a straight back. My legs were smarting, my eyes were prickly, and my throat was scratchy. But I forced myself to smile at the hairstylist. Immanuel was real nervous. You don't want that in a person with sharp scissors.

Immanuel took the elastic band off my ponytail. There was a long silence while he regarded the damage. He wasn't thinking good thoughts. My vanity got hold of me. "Is it very bad?" I asked, trying to keep my voice from quavering. Reaction was definitely getting the upper hand, now that I was safe at home.

"I'm going to have to take off about three inches," he said quietly, as if he were telling me a relative was terminally ill.

To my shame, I reacted much the same way as if that had been the news. I could feel tears well up in my eyes, and my lips were quivering. *Ridiculous!* I told myself. My eyes slewed left when Immanuel set his leather case on the kitchen table. He unzipped it and took out a comb. There were also several pairs of scissors in special loops and an electric trimmer with its cord neatly coiled. Have hair care, will travel.

Pam was texting with incredible speed. She was smiling as though her message were pretty damn funny. Eric stared at me, thinking many dark thoughts. I couldn't read 'em, but I could sure tell he was unhappy in a major way.

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I sighed and returned my gaze to straight ahead. I loved Eric, but at the moment I wanted him to take his broodiness and shove it. I felt Immanuel's touch on my hair as he began combing. It felt strange when he reached the end of its length, and a little tug and a funny sound let me know that some of my burned hair had fallen to the floor.

"It's damaged beyond repair," Immanuel murmured. "I'll cut. Then you wash. Then I cut again."

"You must quit this job," Eric said abruptly, and Immanuel's comb stopped moving until he realized Eric was talking to me.

I wanted to throw something heavy at my honeybun. And I wanted it to smack him right in his stubborn, handsome head. "We'll talk later," I said, not looking at him.

"What will happen next? You're too vulnerable!"

"We'll talk *later*."

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Pam look away so Eric wouldn't see her smirk.

"Doesn't she need something around her?" Eric snarled at Immanuel. "Covering her clothes?"

"Eric," I said, "since I'm all smelly and smoky and covered with fire extinguisher stuff, I don't think keeping my clothes free of burned hair is a big deal."

Eric didn't snort, but he came close. However, he did seem to pick up on my feeling that he was being a total pain, and he shut up and got a hold on himself.

The relief was tremendous.

Immanuel, whose hands were surprisingly steady for someone cooped up in a kitchen with two vampires (one remarkably irritable) and a charred barmaid, combed until my hair was as smooth as it

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could be. Then he picked up his scissors. I could feel the hairdresser focusing completely on his task. Immanuel was a champion at concentration, I discovered, since his mind lay open to me.

It really didn't take long. The burned bits drifted to the floor like sad snowflakes.

"You need to go shower now and come back with clean, wet hair," Immanuel said. "After that, I'll even it up. Where's your broom, your dustpan?"

I told him where to find them, and then I went into my bedroom, passing through it to my own bathroom. I wondered if Eric would join me, since I knew from past experience that he liked my shower. The way I felt, it would be far better if he stayed in the kitchen.

I pulled off my smelly clothes and ran the water as hot as I could stand it. It was a relief to step into the tub and let the heat and wetness flow over me. When the warm water hit my legs, it stung. For a few moments I wasn't appreciative or happy about anything. I just remembered how scared I'd been. But after I'd dealt with that, I had something on my mind.

The figure I'd spotted running toward the bar, bottle in hand—I couldn't be completely sure, but I suspected it had not been human.

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