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ONE WORD ANSWER

Charlaine Harris

BUBBA the Vampire and I were raking up clippings from my newly-trimmed bushes about midnight when the long black car pulled up. I'd been enjoying the gentle scent of the cut bushes and the songs of the crickets and frogs celebrating spring. Everything hushed with the arrival of the black limousine. Bubba vanished immediately, because he didn't recognize the car. Since he changed over to the vampire persuasion, Bubba's been on the shy side.

I leaned against my rake, trying to look nonchalant. In reality, I was far from relaxed. I live pretty far out in the country, and you have to want to be at my house to find the way. There's not a sign out at the parish road that points down my driveway reading "Stackhouse home." My home is not visible from the road, because the driveway meanders through some woods to arrive in the clearing where the core of the house has stood for a hundred and sixty years.

Visitors are not real frequent, and I didn't remember ever seeing a limousine before. No one got out of the long black car for a couple of minutes. I began to wonder if maybe I should have hidden myself, like Bubba. I had the outside lights on, of course, since I couldn't see in the dark like Bubba, but the limousine windows were heavily smoked. I was real tempted to whack the shiny bumper with my rake to find out what would happen. Fortunately, the door opened while I was still thinking about it.

A large gentleman emerged from the rear of the limousine. He was six feet tall, and he was made up of circles. The largest circle was his belly. The round head above it was almost bald, but a fringe of black hair circled it right above his ears. His little eyes were round, too, and black as the hair and his suit. His shirt was gleaming white, but his tie was black without a pattern. He looked like the director of a funeral home for the criminally insane.

"Not too many people do their yard work at midnight," he commented, in a surprisingly melodious voice. The true answer that I liked to rake when I had someone to talk to, and I had company this night with Bubba, who couldn't come out in the sunlight was better left unsaid. I just nodded. You couldn't argue with his statement.

"Would you be the woman known as Sookie Stack-house?" asked the large gentleman. He said it as if he often addressed creatures that weren't men or women, but something else entirely.

"Yes, sir, I am," I said politely. My grandmother, God rest her soul, had raised me well. But she hadn't raised a fool; I wasn't about to invite him in. I wondered why the driver didn't get out.

"Then I have a legacy for you."

Legacy meant someone had died. I didn't have anyone left except for my brother Jason, and he was sitting down at Merlotte's Bar with his girlfriend Crystal. At least that's where he'd been when I'd gotten off my barmaid's job a couple of hours before.

The little night creatures were beginning to make their sounds again, having decided the big night creatures weren't going to attack.

"A legacy from who?" I said. What makes me different from other people is that I'm telepathic. Vampires, whose minds are simply silent holes in a world made noisy to me by the cacophony of human brains, make restful companions for me, so I'd been enjoying Bubba's chatter. Now I needed to rev up my gift. This wasn't a casual drop-in. I opened my mind to my visitor. While the large, circular gentleman was wincing at my ungrammatical question, I was attempting to look inside his head. Instead of a stream of ideas and images (the usual human broadcast), his thoughts came to me in bursts of static. He was a supernatural creature of some sort.

"Whom," I corrected myself, and he smiled at me. His teeth were very sharp.

"Do you remember your cousin Hadley?"

Nothing could have surprised me more than this question. I leaned the rake against the mimosa tree and shook the plastic garbage bag that we'd already filled. I put the plastic band around the top before I spoke. I could only hope my voice wouldn't choke when I answered him. "Yes, I do." Though I sounded

hoarse, my words were clear.

Hadley Delahoussaye, my only cousin, had vanished into the underworld of drugs and prostitution years before. I had her high school junior picture in my photo album. That was the last picture she'd had taken, because that year she'd run off to New Orleans to make her living by her wits and her body. My aunt Linda, her mother, had died of cancer during the second year after Hadley's departure.

"Is Hadley still alive?" I said, hardly able to get the words out.

"Alas, no," said the big man, absently polishing his black-framed glasses on a clean white handkerchief. His black shoes gleamed like mirrors. "Your cousin Hadley is dead, I'm afraid." He seemed to relish saying it. He was a man—or whatever who enjoyed the sound of his own voice.

Underneath the distrust and confusion I was feeling about this whole weird episode, I was aware of a sharp pang of grief. Hadley had been fun as a child, and we'd been together a lot, naturally. Since I'd been a weird kid, Hadley and my brother Jason had been the only children I'd had to play with for the most part. When Hadley hit puberty, the picture changed; but I had some good memories of my cousin.

"What happened to her?" I tried to keep my voice even, but I know it wasn't.

"She was involved in an Unfortunate Incident," he said.

That was the euphemism for a vampire killing. When it appeared in newspaper reports, it usually meant that some vampire had been unable to restrain his blood lust and had attacked a human. "A vampire killed her?" I was horrified.

"Ah, not exactly. Your cousin Hadley was the vampire. She got staked."

This was so much bad and startling news that I couldn't take it in. I held up a hand to indicate he shouldn't talk for a minute, while I absorbed what he'd said, bit by bit.

"What is your name, please?" I asked.

"Mr. Cataliades," he said. I repeated that to myself several times since it was a name I'd never encountered. Emphasis on the *tal*, I told myself. And a long *e*.

"Where might you hail from?"

"For many years, my home has been New Orleans."

New Orleans was at the other end of Louisiana from my little town, Bon Temps. Northern Louisiana is pretty darn different from southern Louisiana in several fundamental ways; it's the Bible Belt without the pizzazz of New Orleans, it's the older sister who stayed home and tended the farm while the younger sister went out partying. But it shares other things with the southern part of the state, too; bad roads, corrupt politics, and a lot of people, both black and white, who live right on the poverty line.

"Who drove you?" I asked pointedly, looking at the front of the car.

"Waldo," called Mr. Cataliades, "the lady wants to see you."

I was sorry I'd expressed an interest after Waldo got out of the driver's seat of the limo and I'd had a look at him. Waldo was a vampire, as I'd already established in my own mind by identifying a typical vampire brain signature, which to me is like a photographic negative, one I "see" with my brain. Most vampires are good-looking or extremely talented in some way or another. Naturally, when a vamp brings a human over, the vamp's likely to pick a human who attracted him or her by beauty or some necessary skill. I didn't know who the heck had brought over Waldo, but I figured it was somebody crazy. Waldo had long, wispy white hair that was almost the same color as his skin. He was maybe five foot eight, but he looked taller because he was very thin. Waldo's eyes looked red under the light I'd had mounted on the electric pole. The vampire's face looked corpse-white with a faint greenish tinge, and his skin was wrinkled. I'd never seen a vampire who hadn't been taken in the prime of life.

"Waldo," I said, nodding. I felt lucky to have had such long training in keeping my face agreeable. "Can I get you anything? I think I have some bottled blood. And you, Mr. Cataliades? A beer? Some soda?"

The big man shuddered, and tried to cover it with a graceful half-bow. "Much too hot for coffee or alcohol for me, but perhaps we'll take refreshments later." It was maybe sixty-two degrees, but Mr. Cataliades was indeed sweating, I noticed. "May we come in?" he asked.

"I'm sorry," I said, without a bit of apology in my voice. "I think not." I was hoping that Bubba had had the sense to rash across the little valley between our properties to fetch my nearest neighbor, my former lover Bill Compton, known to the residents of Bon Temps as Vampire Bill.

"Then we'll conduct our business out here in your yard," Mr. Cataliades said coldly. He and Waldo came around the body of the limousine. I felt uneasy when it wasn't between us anymore, but they kept their distance. "Miss Stackhouse, you are your cousin's sole heir."

I understood what he said, but I was incredulous. "Not my brother Jason?" Jason and Hadley, both three years older than I, had been great buddies.

"No. In this document, Hadley says she called Jason Stackhouse once for help when she was very low on funds. He ignored her request, so she's ignoring him."

"When did Hadley get staked?" I was concentrating very hard on not getting any visuals. Since she was older than I by three years, Hadley had been a mere twenty-nine when she'd died. She'd been my physical opposite in most ways. I was robust and blond, she was thin and dark. I was strong, she was frail. She'd had big, thickly-lashed brown eyes, mine were blue; and now, this strange man was telling me, she had closed those eyes for good.

"A month ago." Mr. Cataliades had to think about it. "She died about a month ago."

"And you're just now letting me know?"

"Circumstances prevented."

I considered that.

"She died in New Orleans?"

"Yes. She was a handmaiden to the queen," he said, as though he were telling me she'd gotten her partnership at a big law firm, or managed to buy her own business.

"The queen of Louisiana," I said cautiously.

"I knew you would understand," he said, beaming at me. " 'This is a woman who knows her vampires,' I said to myself when I met you."

"She knows this vampire," Bill said, appearing at my side in that disconcerting way he had.

A flash of displeasure went across Mr. Cataliades's face like quick lightning across the sky.

"And you would be?" he asked with cold courtesy.

"I would be Bill Compton, resident of this parish and friend to Miss Stackhouse," Bill said ominously. "I'm also an employee of the queen, like you."

The queen had hired Bill so the computer database about vampires he was working on would be her

property. Somehow, I thought Mr. Cataliades performed more personal services. He looked like he knew where all the bodies were buried, and Waldo looked like he had put them there.

Bubba was right behind Bill, and when he stepped out of Bill's shadow, for the first time I saw the vampire Waldo show an emotion. He was in awe.

"Oh my gracious! Is this El " Mr. Cataliades blurted.

"Yes," said Bill. He shot the two strangers a significant glance. "This is *Bubba*. The past upsets him very much." He waited until the two had nodded in understanding. Then he looked down at me. His dark brown eyes looked black in the stark shadows cast by the overhead lights. His skin had the pale gleam that said *vampire*. "Sookie, what's happened?"

I gave him a condensed version of Mr. Cataliades's message. Since Bill and I had broken up when he was unfaithful to me, we'd been trying to establish some other workable relationship. He was proving to be a reliable friend, and I was grateful for his presence.

"Did the queen order Hadley's death?" Bill asked my visitors.

Mr. Cataliades gave a good impression of being shocked. "Oh, no!" he exclaimed. "Her Highness would never cause the death of someone she held so dear."

Okay, here came another shock. "Ah, what kind of dear how dear did the queen hold my cousin?" I asked. I wanted to be sure I was interpreting the implication correctly.

Mr. Cataliades gave me an old-fashioned look. "She held Hadley dearly," he said.

Okay, I got it.

Every vampire territory had a king or queen, and with that title came power. But the queen of Louisiana had extra status, since she was seated in New Orleans, which was the most popular city in the United States if you were one of the undead. Since vampire tourism now accounted for so much of the city's revenue, even the humans of New Orleans listened to the queen's wants and wishes, in an unofficial way. "If Hadley was such a big favorite of the queen's, who'd be fool enough to stake her?" I asked.

"The Fellowship of the Sun," said Waldo, and I jumped. The vampire had been silent so long, I'd assumed he wasn't ever going to speak. The vampire's voice was as creaky and peculiar as his appearance. "Do you know the city well?"

I shook my head. I'd only been to the Big Easy once, on a school field trip.

"You are familiar, perhaps, with the cemeteries that are called the Cities of the Dead?"

I nodded. Bill said, "Yes," and Bubba muttered, "Uh-huh." Several cemeteries in New Orleans had above-ground crypts because the water table in southern Louisiana was too high to allow ordinary below-ground burials. The crypts look like small white houses, and they're decorated and carved in some cases, so these very old burial grounds are called the Cities of the Dead. The historic cemeteries are fascinating and sometimes dangerous. There are living predators to be feared in the Cities of the Dead, and tourists are cautioned to visit them in large guided parties, and to leave at the end of the day.

"Hadley and I had gone to St. Louis Number One that night, right after we rose, to conduct a ritual." Waldo's face looked quite expressionless. The thought that this man had been the chosen companion of my cousin, even if just for an evening's excursion, was simply astounding. "They leaped from behind the tombs around us. The Fellowship fanatics were armed with holy items, stakes, and garlic—the usual paraphernalia. They were stupid enough to have gold crosses."

The Fellowship refused to believe that all vampires could not be restrained by holy items, despite all the evidence. Holy items worked on the very old vampires, the ones who had been brought up to be devout believers. The newer vampires only suffered from crosses if they were silver. Silver would burn any vampire. Oh, a wooden cross might have an effect on a vamp if it was driven through his heart.

"We fought valiantly, Hadley and I, but in the end, there were too many for us, and they killed Hadley. I escaped with some severe knife wounds." His paper-white face looked more regretful than tragic.

I tried not to think about Aunt Linda and what she would have had to say about her daughter becoming a vampire. Aunt Linda would have been even more shocked by the circumstances of Hadley's death: by assassination, in a famous cemetery reeking of Gothic atmosphere, in the company of this grotesque creature. Of course, all these exotic trappings wouldn't have devastated Aunt Linda as much as the stark fact of Hadley's murder.

I was more detached. I'd written Hadley off long ago. I'd never thought I would see her again, so I had a little spare emotional room to think of other things. I still wondered, painfully, why Hadley hadn't come home to see us. She might have been afraid, being a young vampire, that her blood lust would rise at an embarrassing time and she'd find herself yearning to suck on someone inappropriate. She might have been shocked by the change in her own nature; Bill had told me over and over that vampires were human no longer, that they were emotional about different things than humans. Their appetites and their need for secrecy had shaped the older vampires irrevocably.

But Hadley had never had to operate under those laws; she'd been made vampire after the Great Revelation, when vampires had revealed their presence to the world.

And the post-puberty Hadley, the one I was less fond of, wouldn't have been caught dead or alive with someone like Waldo. Hadley had been popular in high school, and she'd certainly been human enough then to fall prey to all the teenage stereotypes. She'd been mean to kids who weren't popular, or she'd just ignored them. Her life had been completely taken up by her clothes and her makeup and her own cute self.

She'd been a cheerleader, until she'd started adopting the Goth image.

"You said you two were in the cemetery to perform a ritual. What ritual?" I asked Waldo, just to gain some time to think. "Surely Hadley wasn't a witch as well." I'd run across a werewolf witch before, but never a vampire spell-caster.

"There are traditions among the vampires of New Orleans," Mr. Cataliades said carefully. "One of these traditions is that the blood of the dead can raise the dead, at least temporarily. For conversational purposes, you understand."

Mr. Cataliades certainly didn't have any throwaway lines. I had to think about every sentence that came out of his mouth. "Hadley wanted to talk to a dead person?" I asked, once I'd digested his latest bombshell.

"Yes," said Waldo, chipping in again. "She wanted to talk to Marie Laveau."

"The voodoo queen? Why?" You couldn't live in Louisiana and not know the legend of Marie Laveau, a woman whose magical power had fascinated both black and white people, at a time when black women had no power at all.

"Hadley thought she was related to her." Waldo seemed to be sneering.

Okay, now I knew he was making it up. "Duh! Marie Laveau was African-American, and my family is white," I pointed out.

"This would be through her father's side," Waldo said calmly.

Aunt Linda's husband, Carey Delahoussaye, had come from New Orleans, and he'd been of French descent. His family had been there for several generations. He'd bragged about it until my whole family had gotten sick of his pride. I wondered if Uncle Carey had realized that his Creole bloodline had been enriched by a little African-American DNA somewhere back in the day. I had only a child's memory of Uncle Carey, but I figured that piece of knowledge would have been his most closely guarded secret.

Hadley, on the other hand, would have thought being descended from the notorious Marie Laveau was

really cool. I found myself giving Waldo a little more credence. Where Hadley would've gotten such information, I couldn't imagine. Of course, I also couldn't imagine her as a lover of women, but evidently that had been her choice. My cousin Hadley, the cheerleader, had become a vampire lesbian voodooienne. Who knew?

I felt glutted with information I hadn't had time to absorb, but I was anxious to hear the whole story. I gestured to the emaciated vampire to continue.

"We put the three X's on the tomb," Waldo said. "As people do. Voodoo devotees believe this ensures their wish will be granted. And then Hadley cut herself, and let the blood drip on the stone, and she called out the magic words."

"Abracadabra, please and thank you," I said automatically, and Waldo glared at me.

"You ought not to make fun," he said. With some notable exceptions, vampires are not known for their senses of humor, and Waldo was definitely a serious guy. His red-rimmed eyes glared at me.

"Is this really a tradition, Bill?" I asked. I no longer cared if the two men from New Orleans knew I didn't trust them.

"Yes," Bill said. "I haven't ever tried it myself, because I think the dead should be left alone. But I've seen it done."

"Does it work?" I was startled.

"Yes. Sometimes."

"Did it work for Hadley?" I asked Waldo.

The vampire glared at me. "No," he hissed. "Her intent was not pure enough."

"And these fanatics, they were just hiding among the tombs, waiting to jump out at you?"

"Yes," Waldo said. "I told you."

"And you, with your vampire hearing and smell, you didn't know there were people in the cemetery around you?" To my left, Bubba stirred. Even a vamp as dim as the too hastily recruited Bubba could see the sense of my question.

"Perhaps I knew there were people," Waldo said haughtily, "but those cemeteries are popular at night with criminals and whores. I didn't distinguish which people were making the noises."

"Waldo and Hadley were both favorites of the queen," Mr. Cataliades said admonishingly. His tone suggested that any favorite of the queen's was above reproach. But that wasn't what his words were saying. I looked at him thoughtfully. At the same moment, I felt Bill shift beside me. We hadn't been soul mates, I guess, since our relationship hadn't worked out, but at odd moments we seemed to think alike, and this was one of those moments. I wished I could read Bill's mind for once though the great recommendation of Bill as a lover had been that I couldn't. Telepaths don't have an easy time of it when it comes to love affairs. In fact, Mr. Cataliades was the only one on the scene who had a brain I could scan, and he was none too human.

I thought about asking him what he was, but that seemed kind of tacky. Instead, I asked Bubba if he'd round up some folding yard chairs so we could all sit down, and while that was being arranged, I went in the house and heated up some TrueBlood for the three vampires and iced some Mountain Dew for Mr. Cataliades, who professed himself to be delighted with the offer.

While I was in the house, standing in front of the microwave and staring at it like it was some kind of oracle, I thought of just locking the door and letting them all do what they would. I had an ominous sense of the way the night was going, and I was tempted to let it take its course without me. But Hadley had been my cousin. On a whim, I took her picture down from the wall to give it a closer look.

All the pictures my grandmother had hung were still up; despite her death, I continued to think of the house as hers. The first picture was of Hadley at age six, with one front tooth. She was holding a big drawing of a dragon. I hung it back beside the picture of Hadley at ten, skinny and pig-tailed, her arms around Jason and me. Next to it was the picture taken by the reporter for the parish paper, when Hadley had been crowned Miss Teen Bon Temps. At fifteen, she'd been radiantly happy in her rented white sequined gown, glittering crown on her head, flowers in her arms. The last picture had been taken during Hadley's junior year. By then, Hadley had begun using drugs, and she was all Goth: heavy eye makeup, black hair, crimson lips. Uncle Carey had left Aunt Linda some years before this incarnation, moved back to his proud New Orleans family; and by the time Hadley left, too, Aunt Linda had begun feeling bad. A few months after Hadley ran away, we'd finally gotten my father's sister to go to a doctor, and he'd found the cancer.

In the years since then, I'd often wondered if Hadley had ever found out her mother was sick. It made a difference to me; if she'd known but hadn't come home, that was a horse of one color. If she'd never known, that was a horse of a different one. Now that I knew she had crossed over and become the living dead, I had a new option. Maybe Hadley had known, but she just hadn't cared.

I wondered who had told Hadley she might be descended from Marie Laveau. It must have been someone who'd done enough research to sound convincing, someone who'd studied Hadley enough to know how much she'd enjoy the piquancy of being related to such a notorious woman.

I carried the drinks outside on a tray, and we all sat in a circle on my old lawn furniture. It was a bizarre gathering: the strange Mr. Cataliades, a telepath, and three vampires—though one of those was as addled as a vampire can be and still call himself undead.

When I was seated, Mr. Cataliades passed me a sheaf of papers, and I peered at them. The outside light was good enough for raking but not really good for reading. Bill's eyes were twenty times stronger than mine, so I passed the papers over to him.

"Your cousin left you some money and the contents of her apartment," Bill said. "You're her executor, too."

I shrugged. "Okay," I said. I knew Hadley couldn't have had much. Vampires are pretty good at amassing nest eggs, but Hadley could only have been a vampire for a very few years.

Mr. Cataliades raised his nearly invisible brows. "You don't seem excited."

"I'm a little more interested in how Hadley met her death."

Waldo looked offended. "I've described the circumstances to you. Do you want a blow-by-blow account of the fight? It was unpleasant, I assure you."

I looked at him for a few moments. "What happened to you?" I asked. This was very rude, to ask someone what on earth had made him so weird-looking, but common sense told me that there was more to learn. I had an obligation to my cousin, an obligation unaffected by any legacy she'd left me. Maybe this was why Hadley had left me something in her will. She knew I'd ask questions, and God love my brother, he wouldn't.

Rage flashed across Waldo's features, and then it was like he'd wiped his face with some kind of emotion eraser. The paper-white skin relaxed into calm lines and his eyes were calm. "When I was human, I was an albino," Waldo said stiffly, and I felt the knee-jerk horror of someone who's been unpardonably curious about a disability. Just as I was about to apologize, Mr. Cataliades intervened again.

"And, of course," the big man said smoothly, "he's been punished by the queen."

This time, Waldo didn't restrain his glare. "Yes," he said finally. "The queen immersed me in a tank for a few years."

"A tank of what?" I was all at sea.

"Saline solution," Bill said, very quietly. "I've heard of this punishment. That's why he's wrinkled, as you see."

Waldo pretended not to hear Bill's aside, but Bubba opened his mouth. "You're sure 'miff wrinkled, man, but don't you worry. The chicks like a man who's different."

Bubba was a kind vampire and well-intentioned.

I tried to imagine being in a tank of seawater for years and years. Then I tried not to imagine it. I could only wonder what Waldo had done to merit such a punishment. "And you were a favorite?" I asked.

Waldo nodded, with a certain dignity. "I have that honor."

I hoped I'd never receive such an honor. "And Hadley was, too?"

Waldo's face remained placid, though a muscle twitched in his jaw. "For a time."

Mr. Cataliades said, "The queen was pleased with Hadley's enthusiasm and childlike ways. Hadley was only one of a series of favorites. Eventually, the queen's favor would have fallen on someone else, and Hadley would have had to carve out another place in the queen's entourage."

Waldo looked quite pleased at that and nodded. "That's the pattern."

I couldn't get why I was supposed to care, and Bill made a small movement that he instantly stilled. I caught it out of the corner of my eye, and I realized Bill didn't want me to speak. Pooh on him; I hadn't been going to, anyway.

Mr. Cataliades said, "Of course, your cousin was a little different from her predecessors. Wouldn't you say, Waldo?"

"No," Waldo said. "In time, it would have been just like before." He seemed to bite his lip to stop himself from talking; not a smart move for a vampire. A red drop of blood formed, sluggishly. "The queen would have tired of her. I know it. It was the girl's youth, it was the fact that she was one of the new vampires who has never known the shadows. Tell our queen that, Cataliades, when you return to New Orleans. If you hadn't kept the privacy glass up, the whole trip, I could have discussed this with you as I drove. You don't have to shun me, as though I were a leper."

Mr. Cataliades shrugged. "I didn't want your company," he said. "Now, we'll never know how long

Hadley would have reigned as favorite, will we, Waldo?"

We were on to something here, and we were being goaded and prodded in that direction by Waldo's companion, Mr. Cataliades. I wondered why. For the moment, I'd follow his lead. "Hadley was real pretty," I said. "Maybe the queen would've given her a permanent position."

"Pretty girls glut the market," Waldo said. "Stupid humans. They don't know what our queen can do to them."

"If she wants to," Bill murmured. "If this Hadley had a knack for delighting the queen, if she had Sookie's charm, then she might have been happy and favored for many years."

"And I guess you'd be out on your ass, Waldo," I said prosaically. "So tell me, were there really fanatics in the cemetery? Or just one skinny white wrinkled fanatic, jealous and desperate?"

Then, suddenly, we were all standing, all but Mr. Cataliades, who was reaching into the briefcase.

Before my eyes, Waldo turned into something even less human. His fangs ran out and his eyes glowed red. He became even thinner, his body folding in on itself. Beside me, Bill and Bubba changed, too. I didn't want to look at them when they were angry. Seeing my friends change like that was even worse than seeing my enemies do it. Full fighting mode is just scary.

"You can't accuse a servant of the queen," Waldo said, and he actually hissed.

Then Mr. Cataliades proved himself capable of some surprises of his own, as if I'd doubted it. Moving quickly and lightly, he rose from his lawn chair and tossed a silver lariat around the vampire's head, large enough in circumference to circle Waldo's shoulders. With a grace that startled me, he drew it tight at the critical moment, pinning Waldo's arms to his sides.

I thought Waldo would go berserk, but the vampire surprised me by holding still. "You'll die for this," Waldo said to the big round man, and Mr. Cataliades smiled at him.

"I think not," he said. "Here, Miss Stackhouse."

He tossed something in my direction, and quicker than I could watch, Bill's hand shot out to intercept it. We both stared at what Bill was holding in his hand. It was polished, sharp, and wooden; a hardwood stake.

"What's up with this?" I asked Mr. Cataliades, moving closer to the long black limo.

"My dear Miss Stackhouse, the queen wanted you to have the pleasure."

Waldo, who had been glaring with considerable defiance at everyone in the clearing, seemed to deflate when he heard what Mr. Cataliades had to say.

"She knows," the albino vampire said, and the only way I can describe his voice is *heartbroken*. I shivered. He loved his queen, really loved her.

"Yes," the big man said, almost gently. "She sent Valentine and Charity to the cemetery immediately, when you rushed in with your news. They found no traces of human attack on what was left of Hadley. Only your smell, Waldo."

"She sent me here with you," Waldo said, almost whispering.

"Our queen wanted Hadley's kin to have the right of execution," Mr. Cataliades said.

I came closer to Waldo, until I was as close as I could get. The silver had weakened the vampire, though I had a feeling that he wouldn't have struggled even if the chain hadn't been made of the metal that vampires can't tolerate. Some of the fire had gone out of Waldo, though his upper lip drew back from his fangs as I put the tip of the stake over his heart. I thought of Hadley, and I wondered, if she were in my shoes, could she do this?

"Can you drive the limo, Mr. Cataliades?" I asked.

"Yes, ma'am, I can."

"Could you drive yourself back to New Orleans?"

"That was always my plan."

I pressed down on the wood, until I could tell it was hurting him. His eyes were closed. I had staked a vampire before, but it had been to save my life and Bill's. Waldo was a pitiful thing. There was nothing romantic or dramatic about this vampire. He was simply vicious. I was sure he could do extreme damage when the situation called for it; and I was sure he had killed my cousin Hadley.

Bill said, "I'll do it for you, Sookie." His voice was smooth and cold, as always, and his hand on my arm was cool.

"I can help," Bubba offered. "You'd do it for me, Miss Sookie."

"Your cousin was a bitch and a whore," Waldo said, unexpectedly. I met his red eyes.

"I expect she was," I said. "I guess I just can't kill you." My hand, the one holding the stake, dropped to my side.

"You have to kill me," Waldo said, with the arrogance of surety. "The queen has sent me here to be killed."

"I'm just gonna have to ship you right back to the queen," I said. "I can't do it."

"Get your whoremonger to do it, he's more than willing."

Bill was looking more vampiric by the second, and he tugged the stake from my fingers.

"He's trying to commit suicide by cop, Bill," I said.

Bill looked puzzled, and so did Bubba. Mr. Cataliades's round face was unreadable.

"He's trying to make us mad enough, or scared enough, to kill him, because he can't kill himself," I said. "He's sure the queen will do something much, much worse to him than I would. And he's right."

"The queen was trying to give you the gift of vengeance," Mr. Cataliades said. "Won't you take it? She may not be happy with you if you send him back."

"That's really her problem," I said. "Isn't it?"

"I think it might be very much your problem," Bill said quietly.

"Well, that just bites," I said. "You " I paused, and told myself not to be a fool. "You were very kind to bring Waldo down here, Mr. Cataliades, and you were very clever in steering me around to the truth." I took a deep breath and considered. "I appreciate your bringing down the legal papers, which I'll look over at a calmer moment." I thought I'd covered everything. "Now, if you'd be so good as to pop the trunk open, I'll ask Bill and Bubba to put him in there." I jerked my head toward the silver-bound vampire, standing in silence not a yard away.

At that moment, when we were all thinking of something else, Waldo threw himself at me, jaws open wide like a snake's, fangs fully extended. I threw myself backward, but I knew it wouldn't be enough. Those fangs would rip open my throat and I would bleed out here in my own yard. But Bubba and Bill were not bound with silver, and with a speed that was terrifying in itself, they gripped the old vampire and knocked him to the ground. Quicker than any human could wink, Bill's arm rose and fell, and Waldo's red eyes looked down at the stake in his chest with profound satisfaction. In the next second, those eyes caved in and his long thin body began the instant process of disintegration. You never have to bury a really dead vampire.

For a few long moments, we stayed frozen in the tableau; Mr. Cataliades was standing, I was on the ground on my butt, and Bubba and Bill were on their knees beside the thing that had been Waldo.

Then the limo door opened, and before Mr. Cataliades could scramble to help her out, the queen of Louisiana stepped out of the vehicle.

She was beautiful, of course, but not in a fairy-tale princess sort of way. I don't know what I expected, but she wasn't it. While Bill and Bubba scrambled to their feet and then bowed deeply, I gave her a good once-over. She was wearing a very expensive midnight-blue suit and high heels. Her hair was a rich reddish brown. Of course she was pale as milk, but her eyes were large, tilted, and almost the same brown as her hair. Her fingernails were polished red, and somehow that seemed very weird. She wore no jewelry.

Now I knew why Mr. Cataliades had kept the privacy glass up during the trip north. And I was sure that the queen had ways of masking her presence from Waldo's senses, as well as his sight.

"Hello," I said uncertainly. "I'm "

"I know who you are," she said. She had a faint accent; I thought it might be French. "Bill. Bubba."

Oooh-kay. So much for polite chitchat. I huffed out a breath and shut my mouth. No point in talking until she explained her presence. Bill and Bubba stood upright. Bubba was smiling. Bill wasn't.

The queen examined me head to toe, in a way I thought was downright rude. Since she was a queen, she was an old vampire, and the oldest ones, the ones who sought power in the vampire infrastructure, were among the scariest. It had been so long since she'd been human that there might not be much remembrance of humanity left in her.

"I don't see what all the fuss is about," she said, shrugging.

My lips twitched. I just couldn't help it. My grin spread across my face, and I tried to hide it with my hand. The queen eyed me quizzically.

"She smiles when she's nervous," Bill said.

I did, but that's not why I was smiling now.

"You were going to send Waldo back to me, for me to torture and kill," the queen said to me. Her face was quite blank. I couldn't tell if she approved or disapproved, thought I was clever or thought I was a fool.

"Yes," I said. The shortest answer was definitely the best.

"He forced your hand."

"Uh-huh."

"He was too frightened of me to risk returning to New Orleans with my friend Mr. Cataliades."

"Yes." I was getting good at one-word answers.

"I wonder if you engineered this whole thing."

"Yes" would not be the right answer, here. I maintained silence.

"I'll find out," she said, with absolute certainty. "We'll meet again, Sookie Stackhouse. I was fond of your cousin, but even she was foolish enough to go to a cemetery alone with her bitterest enemy. She counted too much on the power of my name alone to protect her."

"Did Waldo ever tell you if Marie Laveau actually rose?" I asked, too overwhelmed with curiosity to let the question go unanswered.

She was getting back in the car as I spoke, and she paused with one foot inside the limo and one foot in the yard. Anyone else would have looked awkward, but not the queen of Louisiana.

"Interesting," she said. "No, actually, he didn't. When you come to New Orleans, you and Bill can repeat the experiment."

I started to point out that unlike Hadley, I wasn't dead, but I had the sense to shut my mouth. She might have ordered me to become a vampire, and I was afraid, very afraid that then Bill and Bubba would have held me down and made me so. That was too awful to think about, so I smiled at her.

After the queen was all settled in the limo, Mr. Cataliades bowed to me. "It's been a pleasure, Miss Stackhouse. If you have any questions about your cousin's estate, call me at the number on my business card. It's clipped to the papers."

"Thanks," I said, not trusting myself to say more. Besides, one-word answers never hurt. Waldo was almost disintegrated. Bits of him would be in my yard for a while. Yuck. "Where's Waldo? All over my yard," I could say to anyone who asked.

The night had clearly been too much for me. The limo purred out of my yard. Bill put his hand to my cheek, but I didn't lean into it. I was grateful to him for coming, and I told him so.

"You shouldn't be in danger," he said. Bill had a habit of using a word that changed the meaning of his statements, made them something ambiguous and unsettling. His dark eyes were fathomless pools. I didn't think I would ever understand him.

"Did I do good, Miss Sookie?" Bubba asked.

"You did great, Bubba," I said. "You did the right thing without me even having to tell you."

"You knew all along she was in the limo," Bubba said. "Didn't you, Miss Sookie?"

Bill looked at me, startled. I didn't meet his eyes. "Yes, Bubba," I said gently. "I knew. Before Waldo got out, I listened with my other sense, and I found two blank spots in the limo." That could only mean two vampires. So I'd known Cataliades had had a companion in the back of the limousine.

"But you played it all out like she wasn't there." Bill couldn't seem to grasp this. Maybe he didn't think I'd learned anything since I'd met him. "Did you know ahead of time that Waldo would make a try for you?"

"I suspected he might. He didn't want to go back to her mercies."

"So." Bill caught my arms and looked down at me. "Were you trying to make sure he died all along, or were you trying to send him back to the queen?"

"Yes," I said.

One-word answers never hurt.
