

An excerpt from, Fugue Macabre: Ghost Dance
by C.J. Parker

Chapter One

Reporters already clogged the cemetery entrance when Detective Derek Bainbridge pulled alongside the police units sitting end to end like a funeral procession down Basin Street. He leaned his head against the steering wheel. Bile burned his throat, and his stomach cramped from fighting nausea. He knew what awaited him—another dead child and not a trace of evidence—nothing to help him find the lunatic doing this.

A sharp knock at the window drew Derek's head up with a snap. Detective Karney smiled through the glass like the brainless idiot he was. "What?" Derek shouted.

"Oh, nothing. Just wondered if you were going to get out of the car during this century. The kid is gonna start getting ripe."

Gritting his teeth, Derek opened the door and exited his SUV. Karney's dun colored eyes crinkled at the corners giving people the misguided impression he was jovial and kind, where in truth he was a mean son-of-abitch, his heart as black as his hair. "You got business here, Karney, or just sightseeing?"

"I heard the call and was nearby. I'm leaving now." Karney jerked his head toward the scene. "Don't envy you this one. The Governor's giving the Chief a lot of shit." His smile widened baring crooked, stained teeth. "And, it's gonna run downhill all over you, Bainbridge."

Derek swung the car door shut, forcing Karney to move or be knocked down. Derek made his way to the yellow crime tape stretched around an area containing eight elaborate crypts and what he knew would be the body of ten year-old Selma Fortier. Thunder rumbled overhead, echoing through St. Louis Cemetery Number One as though the occupants of this necropolis were angry over the intrusion of the living.

He surveyed the scene and pulled in a deep breath instantly regretting it. Musty scents of centuries-old tombs and ever-damp soil

intermingled with the sticky-sweet aromas of gardenias and jasmine in bloom. Summer's noontime heat settled over him in a humid, suffocating cloak, making the air seem that much more dense.

"Detective." A uniformed officer stepped up beside him struggling for a breath. Derek nodded once. "Who found her?"

Turning red-rimmed eyes to his left, the young officer indicated an old black man losing his lunch behind a grave. Sounds of his retching bounced from one tomb to another. The officer drew another deep breath. "Name's Earl Levy. Came to visit his wife and found the girl's body."

"This your first murder?"

"No, sir. First kid, though. I got a son 'bout that age."

The officer swallowed so hard Derek heard his throat clench and then release. "You okay?"

"Yeah. I nearly got sick when I saw her, though. They're not gonna let me live it down, either." He gestured with a tilt of his chin toward two detectives trying to keep the press at bay. More reporters and cameramen jammed the wrought iron entrance of the concrete wall surrounding the cemetery, shouting questions and snapping photographs.

Anger tugged at Derek's already sour stomach. Those barracudas thought of nothing but a byline, never considering those left behind. Common decency be damned, get the story. He shook his head. And people couldn't understand why cops' souls hardened?

"Don't let them fool you, kid. They've done their share of puking at crime scenes." Derek swooped under the tape and strode to the remains of the murdered child. The killer had taken the time to pose the child's nude body against a mold-blackened tomb—legs crossed at the ankles, tiny hands folded in her lap and head tilted to one side. The pose would appear peaceful had her face not been streaked with dried blood from maroon hollows where innocent eyes had once viewed her world. The girl's injuries exposed raw, bloody bone and ragged-edged flesh where her scalp belonged. As with the five children murdered before her, elaborate symbols were carved into her torso.

Mrs. Fortier's tortured expression flashed across Derek's memory and tore at his gut. For the last three days, she'd come to the station begging for answers. Having to tell the woman her baby was dead made his insides twist painfully.

A cocksure photographer from some supermarket rag made it over the wall and dashed close enough to snap a shot of the naked

victim before two officers tackled him to the ground and confiscated his camera.

Frustration and anger fueled Derek's temper. "Why don't we have a blind up? Hasn't the ME been here yet?"

The young cop's back stiffened.

"No, sir. Not yet. I roped off the area and kept everybody away. Crime scene's not been messed with."

Derek's eyes were drawn to the front of the crypt where words written in blood taunted him. Always the same enigmatic message: **Ogou La Flambo, Lieutenant of burning battlefields, gorge with this blood and grant me my revenge.**

He pivoted to his left when Detective Frank Panner, approached. Running fingers through his sandy-blond hair, Panner shouted orders to nearby men to blind the scene with tarpaulins. He glanced at Derek. "Found out what that Ogou La Flambo shit is." He flipped his cigarette beyond the cordoned area. "Voodoo head-honcho. Some war god or something."

The scenario wasn't a new one. Ten years ago a boy of thirteen had started his own Voodoo doomsday. And then there was the old woman who read Tarot cards in Jackson Square. If the death card came up during their reading, she would stalk them until she got her chance to carry out God's wishes. "You think this could be a cult gone bad?"

Frank reached into his shirt pocket and pulled out another Marlboro.

"Best motive I've heard so far. Isn't this cemetery where Marie Laveau is supposed to be planted? Maybe..." He wiggled his eyebrows, and the corners of his mouth twitched with mirth.

Derek felt the heat of rage sting his cheeks, and the pounding of his pulse inside his brain. "I'm in no mood for jokes, Frank. We have another dead kid. Or didn't you notice?"

"Yeah. Number six." Frank lit his cigarette and drew in a smoke-clogged breath. "The Governor thinks you should be replaced, you know?"

Derek's anger climbed another notch as he clenched his teeth so hard he felt a sharp pain shoot to his left eye. He brought his face so close to Frank's he smelled a mixture of peppermint and smoke on the man's breath. "I don't give a damn what the Governor thinks. Let him come out here and see these kids. Then see if he can tell me what I'm not doing to find the son-of-a-bitch doing this."

Frank held up his hands in stop-sign fashion. “Hey, man, I’m with you. Don’t kill the messenger. I’m just telling you what he said.”

Derek stepped away. “Sorry, man.”

“No need. I understand. This case is eating at everybody.”

“Have you talked to the guy who found her yet?” He took a deep breath trying to calm himself. It didn’t work.

With a shrug and a flick of his hand to dust away a smear of dirt from his shirt, Frank said, “No. Figured I’d let you talk to him first. But, Derek, do him a favor. Soften up that scowl. You look like you have a mad-on for the whole damned world.”

A shrill whistle drew their attention.

“Found something,” an officer yelled.

Detectives and officers converged on a pale yellow sheet of notepaper with two bloody orbs placed on top. Four words mocked them: She has to pay.

“Is...is that...?” The officer didn’t finish his question. “Oh, God.” He gagged and ran a few feet away before throwing up.

Frank whistled low. “You think those are the kid’s eyes?”

Derek gritted his teeth. “Bastard’s playing with us.”

Memories of a twenty-year-old unsolved murder teemed inside his skull like the buzz of a low-hanging power line. As with this one, the killer’s note baited him. The taunting message reverberated over and over like a mantra in his brain.

I couldn’t let you have her.

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