

*An excerpt from, “Fugue Macabre: Bone Dance  
by C.J. Parker*

Chapter One

With the precision of a sharply honed blade, and with each stroke of the paddles, the pirogue style boat sliced through the murky Louisiana bayou waters, sending ripples outward until they met the soggy banks. The hush of the swamp surrounded shapeshifter, Bobbie Luckman, with a peaceful lull, belying what lay inside its thick tree-lined canopy.

To the untrained ear, the silence was complete, but she easily discerned sounds only someone raised in the bayou would notice, the rustle of leaves being disturbed by footsteps and the creak of a limb being pushed aside.

At the age of four, on a day much like this one, her father had taken Bobbie fishing near here. Like today, a breeze painted the gulf with white caps, filling the air with the scent of fresh oysters. She could almost taste their cool saltiness on her tongue.

Bobbie’s father taught her the ways of the shifters and the laws that were never to be broken. She hung on every word as if her life had depended on it. Now those teachings might not only keep her alive, but her friends, necromancer, Tabatha Gray, and firestarter, Rhonda Meads, as well. Her stomach roiled with indecision. Should she change her mind about taking them to her village deep in the bayous lining the Gulf of Mexico? She had no doubts her clansmen wouldn’t be quick to accept Outsiders in their midst.

The existence of shapeshifters was to be hidden from humans at all costs. Her clan had become a hodgepodge of stray shifters, from cats, to birds, from snakes to wolves. They had grown to be accepting of one another and their differences, but an Outsider was a whole other matter. She hoped once her clansmen understood Rhonda and Tabatha were as different from the Outsiders as the shifters were, they would accept her friends into their fold.

Her need to have them with her grew stronger. Having been gone from home so long, and living with the humans so closely, Bobbie no

longer knew if she would fit in and needed Tabatha's quiet strength and Rhonda's sometimes annoying innocence. They would win but only together. If nothing else, the last few months had taught her that. But what were they exactly, the three of them? Warriors? Protectors? Vigilantes? Bobbie's heart squeezed painfully at the question, not knowing an acceptable answer.

Tabatha sat at the bow of the boat, Tabatha's grandfather's journal lying open in her lap. Her silver-blond hair fluttered in the breeze, and her brow furrowed above cool blue eyes that held a hint of sadness.

Bobbie glanced behind her at Rhonda. Staring into the distance toward shore, Rhonda's expression was a mixture of awe and trepidation. Her hair fluttered in the breeze sending long tendrils of red curls whipping about her face. She chipped at the half-gone nail polish as her gaze snapped from one area of woodland to another. Rhonda's cheeks reddened, and her lids lowered to hide her tawny colored eyes when she noticed Bobbie's perusal.

Bobbie placed the oars beside her. The boat drifted by a stand of reeds where Bobbie noticed the shadowed outline of someone hiding in the tall grass. Bobbie's nerves stood on end as she readied herself for what may come. "Who's there? Show yourself."

A slender girl in her mid-teens sprang up from behind the tall reeds, laughed and ran toward the tree line behind her. Graceful and willowy, her golden blond hair was cut short and spiked in the back. Buck-naked except for a cache of gold jewelry around her neck, in mid-stride she shifted into a spotted snow leopard. With a feline hiss, the girl ran up a tree, sat on the highest limb, bared her sharp teeth in a comical Cheshire cat sneer and flipped her tail at them.

Tabatha grinned before returning her attention back to the journal she'd been reading earlier. This was not something new to Tabatha or Rhonda, having seen Bobbie shift several times already. "Someone you know?"

"Who was that?" Rhonda's eyes were filled with curiosity.

"I don't know, but I'm sure we'll find out." Bobbie took a deep breath, releasing it slowly.

This could be nothing or just the beginning. The restlessness in her stomach turned into gut wrenching dread. She rested the oar in its bracket and ran splayed fingers through her windblown hair. "There'll be a clan meeting tonight. I'm sure I'll get reacquainted with everyone. You're going to be shunned 'til I can convince them you're not the basic run-of-the-mill humans and therefore beneath them."

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When neither Rhonda nor Tabatha displayed any emotion over her comment, she continued, “Our term for human is *Karepey*. It’s a combination of Creole and the Geechee language, meaning ‘folk of little value.’ And most shifters consider themselves the superior creatures of the world.”

Tabatha’s eyebrow rose. “Superior in what way?”

“We’ve been around nearly since the beginning of time. We’ve been chased down and killed to near extinction, been used as the boogiemer in stories told to make children behave, romanticized and villainized in novels since man learned to write. Wolves were hunted to extinction in some areas because someone thought they were werewolves. But we’ve not only survived but flourished. I guess they think after all we’ve been through and we’re still here, we are the better at survival.”

Bobbie kicked off her sandals when the pirogue’s bow met the shoreline with a muddy slurp. “Wait until I pull you to solid ground before getting out. Swamp mud can be treacherous. See that gator?” She pointed toward the creature with its eyes and snout barely above the water line watching them twenty feet away. “He’s waiting for one of us to slip and fall.”

Rhonda gasped. “He looks like a log.”

“To him, you look like dinner.”

Dust and dried leaves flew across the shoreline as an oversized raven descended from the sky, shifting from a massive ebony body of feathers to sun-bronzed skin moments before he landed behind Bobbie. She turned to see the nude glory of her childhood friend, Kangee.

Bobbie’s gaze skimmed the taut skin covering his pectorals and rippled stomach to the vee between his legs and his impressive... *Whoa. Very impressive indeed. When did that happen?*

A fleeting memory of roughhousing in the bayou with a much younger Kangee flitted across her thoughts, clothing nothing more than a nuisance, their nudity unimportant to them. Now a grown man—in all aspects of the word—stood before her. Her breath caught before she forced her eyes to meet his. Bobbie realized how much she’d missed Kangee. His childish pranks, silly jokes, but most of all she missed his touch, the feel of his breath on her face when he leaned close to whisper in her ear.

He grasped the edge of the boat and gave a hard tug, nearly tossing Rhonda and Tabatha into the water.

Bobbie, grateful for the distraction, clenched her fist and hit him in the chest. “Behave, Captain Kangaroo, or I’ll pluck your tail feathers and make earrings out of them.”

He bowed, his chocolate-brown gaze never leaving hers. “As you wish, Madam Luckman.” His voice flowed over her like warm silk.

“And stop calling me Captain Kangaroo.” He lowered his voice to a rumbling growl.

“Then, cut the crap. I’m in no mood for it.” Bobbie drew in a calming breath. Getting angry with Kangee would only lead to an argument and lord knows that would take more time than she could spare. “I suppose you’ve told everyone we have company. Did you by any chance tell them they’re—?”

“I told them nothing.” His dark eyes were as angry as his tone. “The lookouts reported when you came into sight. They aren’t exactly planning a party in honor of your return.”

Shocked at Kangee’s anger, Bobbie waved him away. “I’m going home. I’m tired. My friends and I have been through hell.”

She tossed their backpacks out of the boat onto a mound next to a stand of weeds. Bobbie’s disappointment built as she drew several deep breaths to stifle her emotions. She kicked a piece of driftwood across the shore to the tree line trying to send some of her frustration flying with it.

“While the rest of you sat on your butts and complained that I wasn’t protecting you, we’ve been dealing with the troublemakers. They sent a damned hit man after us—we killed him. Rhonda dug up enough evidence to bring down their little club and put them away for a very long time. Tabatha’s fiancé is working on that. Then while we’re trying to decide what to do next, you come to New Orleans and demand I come home.”

She stepped so close to Kangee her chin nearly touched his massive chest. “I came home so get off your holier-than-thou pedestal, fly boy.”

Kangee’s eyebrow lifted to an impossibly high arch. “The Tree Lady requested I escort you home, but I believe you can find your way.” He did an about-face, took four long striding steps and shifted before flinging himself into the air, to vanish above the trees.

Tabatha shook her head and stepped out of the boat. “Hell’s blazes. I’ll never get used to seeing people shift like that. He makes it look so natural, so beautiful.”

“To us it is natural. Just as you were born to raise the dead and Rhonda to start a fire with a mere thought, we can shift.”

“You were awful to him.” Rhonda smiled wickedly. “And he’s so cute. What a body.”

Yes, *what a body*. Bobbie snorted. “I didn’t notice. Besides, if I were nice to him he’d think I was up to no good. Come on.” She grabbed the backpacks and tossed Rhonda’s and Tabatha’s to them. “I’m ready for something soft to lie on and a lot of anything cold to drink.”

They’d taken no more than ten steps when Bobbie came up short in front of a cypress with *Kangee Loves Bobbie* etched into its bark. A memory of him working diligently at carving their names into the wood both warmed and saddened Bobbie. “Damn.”

“What?” Rhonda jumped behind Tabatha and glanced around them, wide eyed. “What’s wrong?”

Bobbie swallowed hard. “When I left, this tree was nearly half a mile from shore. It can’t be more than thirty feet now.”

“So?”

Tabatha drew a deep breath. “In a normal year, Louisiana loses twenty to twenty-five square miles of coastline. I read that over seventy-nine square miles were lost during Hurricane Katrina.”

“For heaven’s sake, Bobbie, you scared me.” Rhonda huffed. “I thought something was after us.”

“I’d think what Tab said would scare you more.” Bobbie led them farther into the swamps.

The branches of the woodland spread over their heads in a broken canopy of varying shades of green from the leaves of the massive oaks, sweet gums, and pines allowing dappled sunlight along the pathway. Spanish moss hung above them like crocheted ecru ornaments. Birds’ trills drifted from one limb to another and snapping twigs could be heard as the swamp occupants edged closer in curiosity. An occasional deer crossed their path and numerous opossums, raccoons, and armadillos peeked out from shadows.

Bobbie lifted her nose into the breeze, drawing in the scents of the forest, composting leaves, pine needles, the dry earthy scent of cedar bark and damp soil. It smelled of home, family and memories. “I swore when I left this place, I’d never come back. But, I’ve missed it. It’s feeding me like...” She heard the emotion in her own voice and glanced back at her friends. “Sorry.”

Tabatha gazed at her surroundings. “I understand. It’s like a pain has been healed, a hunger satisfied.”

Rhonda sat on a worm-eaten sweet gum trunk lying across their path. "I'm not going any farther until you tell us what we're walking into."

She crossed her arms and lifted her chin. "I know we ran and you didn't have time to tell us anything. You say Tabatha and I aren't going to be welcome here. Well, your cute friend and the little cat girl don't seem too happy to see you back here either. I think we should know the rest. Why do you think this place will be any safer than home? And who are these people you say are waiting for you?"

Bobbie turned, not understanding Rhonda's impatience. "You still don't get it, do you?" As much as they'd been through together, the death and destruction the Guardians had put in their path, Rhonda still didn't see the whole picture.

An errant tear escaped Rhonda's eye, and she brushed it away with the back of her hand. "Oh, I understand the Guardians want us dead, and we ain't done nothing to them, except exist. But these are your people, aren't they?"

"I know you're scared. Hell, Tabatha and I are, too. And I know I'm adding to your fears by dragging you through the muck to a strange place. But you did insist on coming, or I'd have left you behind." Bobbie placed her fingertips under Rhonda's chin and lifted her face. "I'm not going to let anything happen to you. As much as I hate it, I'm their queen. They can disagree with me, but they have to follow the ancient rules. Number four reads, no harm can come to anyone under the protection of the ruling Moran. As long as I'm alive, you're safe."

"Then, we'd better keep you alive." Tabatha smiled. "I'm ready if you are."

Rhonda nodded. "How much farther?"

"Not far at all. If you spit toward the west, you'd wet a rooftop."

Rhonda wrinkled her nose. "Okay, well, that's just gross."

An unnatural silence beset the small clearing. The trees trembled and leaves fell from their branches in a blizzard-like fury.

Bobbie tensed and pulled her knife from the waistband of her jeans. She could sense the intruders' wariness and smell the sulfur odor of their fear. Gooseflesh ran up her arms.

Tabatha quickly dumped the items from the side pocket of her backpack onto the ground before grasping a vial. Bobbie waited. She didn't have to ask what Tabatha was doing. She was about to conjure up another of her grandfather's spells to protect them.

Rhonda picked up one of the glass tubes. "What is this anyway?"

“They’re filled with salt, sage, and the ashes of an ancient oak.” Tabatha’s hands were a flurry of motion as she enclosed herself, Bobbie and Rhonda in a circle of the white and gray mixture before forming four symbols, a six-point star facing north, a blazing fire toward the south, a quarter moon for the west and the sun with an overlying quarter moon for the east. Mumbling a chant, she tossed the remaining mixture in an arc above their heads.

A coyote sprang from overhead and landed at the edge of the circle. He sniffed the substance, snarled and paced the edge before he charged. He hit the protective shield with a jolt. The still air swallowed his howl of fury as a cougar pounced from the treetops, landing with a thud against the invisible arc above.

Bobbie’s stomach twisted with anger that her own kind would attack her upon her arrival home. With that wave of anger came the sting of pity for the coyote as he cried out in pain from another attempt.

“More of your friends?” The strain of trying to keep her hold on the magic showed on Tabatha’s face.

Bobbie shook her head, but she was damn sure going to find out who these interlopers were. “I don’t recognize them. They aren’t from my clan.”

“Enough!” A voice tore through the woodland. The attackers crouched low, their furry bellies in the mud, before running away.

Rhonda’s eyes widened. “What in the name of sanity was that?”

“The Tree Lady.” Bobbie sheathed her blade. She waited as Tabatha shuffled her feet over the area destroying the protective circle and grinding the symbols into the mud with the heel of her shoe. “That was impressive. How’d you do that?”

Tabatha laughed softly. “Page sixteen of the journal. It’s called the protective dome. Pretty neat, huh?”

“Yeah, pretty neat.” Bobbie led the way through another twenty feet of trees and brush. When she broke into a clearing with Rhonda and Tabatha at her side, the frenzied activity around the common ground stopped. Women hanging laundry paused midway to the line, a man raking the fire pit leaned against his rake and stared in their direction, children halted their play. Bobbie’s attention shifted to the people gathered in a cluster near the council hut, nothing more than a rough-hewn shack on the outskirts of the village, but sacred to the Moran clan. Every person in the village stood before them naked as the day they were born. She groaned. “They knew we were coming, so

my bet is they think you'll run screaming into the swamp. Don't give them the satisfaction of knowing they got to you."

"You mean their nudity?" Tabatha shrugged. "I'm a doctor, remember? I've seen a lot of naked people. If those men knew the body parts I've dissected, they'd run screaming."

"Good grief." Rhonda's gaze dropped to the lower extremities of the men. "The men are so...um..."

"Yeah." Bobbie laughed. "Shapeshifter men are definitely...um..." Bobbie snapped her fingers, drawing Rhonda's attention. "Get your fill now. When you meet them, look them in the eyes."

Bobbie's scrutiny settled over the scene and pain hit her squarely in the chest. The Houerv house, once a small green structure, was double in size and had been painted off-white with lavender shutters and a dark purple roof. Her brother, Elsu's home faced the center of the clearing instead of the marsh to the south. Each roof held new solar panels providing them with electricity for the modern trappings they had become accustomed to. All the homes sat on twenty-foot stilts raising them above the flood range. Her parents' lot stood empty and her heart quaked as if it were sobbing, the pain becoming nearly unbearable. The hum of a few remaining generators clicking on and off ran through her like a welcoming chant.

*Home, home, home.*

"I'm home," she whispered brokenly.

But everything was different. The atmosphere hung like a cloak of dense fog. The hot metal scent of anger moved around her in a suffocating heat. Strongest of all, though, was the heavy weight of grief that hovered over the village threatening to crush their very existence. Her whole family was dead!

*My brother murdered only because he came to New York to find me.*

Tabatha gave her hand a squeeze. "Stand strong."

Bobbie swallowed hard and straightened her spine. Tabatha was right, she had to give the appearance of strength, though her soul quaked. "Walk at my side, not behind me. They'll know I've accepted you as equals. Ready?"

Forcing a smile, Bobbie strolled to the ancient oak centering the village and shading them from the noontime sun. The double row of stilted houses stood around them like guardians against the outside world, their dark windows glaring down on them. Coming face to face with the other shifters, she calmly waited as dozens of questions and accusations ran their course through the gathering men and women.

Then, squatting on the ground, she gestured for her friends to follow suit.

“Why have you brought Outsiders here?” Demanded a thin man in his late twenties whom Bobbie didn’t recognize.

“Please, sit.” Bobbie waited until everyone was settled in a haphazard circle around her. “We, and all others like us, are in mortal danger. This is Tabatha Gray.” She waved to her right then nodded toward her left. “And this is Rhonda Meads. They are to be treated with the same respect they’ve shown me. They are my friends, my sisters.”

A collective gasp grew among the listeners. To call someone your sister was a great honor not given lightly. “Together we eliminated the Guardians’ destroyer. Thanks to Rhonda, we’ve gathered evidence that might shut down the ring of thugs. I’ve brought my sisters with me to help fight the battle ahead of us.”

The stranger jumped to his feet. “You know Outsiders aren’t welcome here. Who are you to break this law?” He stood six feet tall, with a thin waist, slender hips and lifeless brown hair hanging over broad shoulders. Narrowing his copper eyes to mere slits, his features twisted with what she assumed was anger. Still Bobbie refused to acknowledge his comments, not wanting to give him the satisfaction of knowing he had her attention.

Her gaze traveled from one visage to the next, gauging expressions. Some were neutral and some friendly, still others were angry or sullen. Two childhood friends stood in the middle of the crowd. Mary’s expression softened when their gazes met. Bobbie winked and rolled her eyes. Sadie looked at her husband’s reaction before copying his stern demeanor.

“I demand an answer.” The shout reverberated around the compound.

Fighting to remain calm, Bobbie rose to her feet. “Who are you to ask? Aren’t you an Outsider?”

The man snorted. “I am Cuda, and *you* are the Outsider here. Leave this place. We don’t want you here. We want no woman leading us.”

Bobbie sniffed his acid scent, recognizing him as the coyote that’d attacked them in the woodland.

He snarled.

She smiled sweetly. “Bite me, little man.” Bobby turned away.

A few villagers screamed a warning. A stinging gust of wind heated by the flames of magic raked along her skin and blew her hair away from her face.

The interloper leapt to attack, but fell to the ground, fingers clawing at the air as he struggled to draw a breath.

The shimmer of magic glistened around Tabatha in hues of blue and silver as she stared down at the struggling man.

“Let him go, Tabatha.” Bobbie watched as her attacker inhaled greedily. Bobbie’s pulse quickened, blood rushing through her veins like molten lava. She grabbed him by the upper arm and yanked him toward her, hissing like a snake about to strike. “I ought to rip you to pieces. Do not cross me, or you will pay dearly. I may be a woman, but I am the last of the Moran bloodline. I rule here.”

She flung him to the ground and confronted Tabatha. “Don’t ever do that again. This is my home, my people. I will fight my own battles.”

Tabatha gave a barely negligible shrug. “Sorry. Didn’t mean to step on toes. I saw him attack and reacted.”

Her gaze darted behind Bobbie and before she knew what was happening, Tabatha grabbed her arm and spun her around in time to see the newcomer shift from man to coyote. Bobbie spread her feet and braced herself for the attack.

He crouched. His lips drew back in a bare toothed growl and drool ran from his jowls in rivulets of slime.

“Enough!” An authoritative voice shouted from the treetops. “Everyone back to what you were doing. Now!”

Cuda slunk away from Bobbie, snarled, and shifted to human form. “This is not over, woman. We will finish this.”

“Yes, we will. In good time.” Bobbie turned her attention in the direction the voice had come.

All eyes pivoted to the huge oak centering the village. On the porch of a house built in its massive limbs stood an elderly lady. A gush of wind lifted her gray floor-length frock and whisked the brown sash tied around her thin waist like a living whip sending her ankle-length, silver-white hair swirling out in a gigantic halo.

Bobbie’s heart reached out to the old woman who had been a mother to her when her own had died. The Tree Lady wrapped gnarled fingers around a long, blue-beaded necklace dangling from her neck, stilling its swinging motion.

“Madam Luckman, come.” She bowed and swung her hand in a sweeping gesture toward the rope ladder leading up to her domain.

**Bobbie returned the woman's bow. "That, my dear friends, is the Tree Lady." She winked at Rhonda and smiled. "We have been summoned."**