

## CHAPTER ONE

I had just pushed the last remnants of Hollandaise soaked spinach toward the wedge of artichoke I'd reserved for my final bite of Eggs Sardou, when my phone vibrated loudly on the tabletop. I cursed silently, noted the caller's identity, and tapped the "End Call" icon on my screen. I continued my meal in stubborn defiance, savoring its textures and flavors. A trickle of thick yellow liquid escaped to my chin. I dabbed it clean with the napkin I had tucked into my collar, and chuckled to myself as I imagined the caller's reaction to having been rejected.

The phone buzzed again, this time with a text directing me to "call me asap."

I sighed, took a final slug of chicory, and signaled Jacqui the waitress to charge my account and include my usual 22 percent tip. Then I rose slowly, squeezed my ample frame inelegantly between the tightly spaced tables, and lumbered outside.

It was a bright August morning, and the heat was already thick and close. I squinted at my phone, cupped my right hand over my eyes to cut the glare, and stabbed at the screen.

"Bru, where are you?" the voice on the other end answered mid-ring.

"It's Sunday morning, where the hell do you think I am?"

"Oh, right. Sorry. Atchafalaya?"

"Katie's."

"Ah! Seafood Omelet? Sausage Frittata?"

"Neither. Eggs Sardou. Is there a point to this call?"

“Yes. Listen, I just caught a strange one. Can I convince you to come take a look?”

The caller was Detective Thibodaux “Bo” Duplessis of the New Orleans Police Department, Property Crimes Section, my childhood pal and lifelong friendly antagonist. I own an antiques store on Magazine Street and from time-to-time Bo turns to me for help when a valuable object goes missing.

“Where are you and what’s so strange that you thought to call me?”

“I’m at a cemetery. There’s been a break-in and possibly a grave robbery that might be up your alley. I’d really like to get your take.”

“A grave robbery? In what universe would that be up my alley?”

“Let’s just say there might be some historical intrigue involved. I thought maybe you could help me sort it out. I’m just a couple minutes from you. How about I swing by and pick you up?”

“Did it ever occur to you that I might have something better to do?”

“Nah, I know you better than that. I’m jumping in the cruiser now.”

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I stood on Iberville Street directly across from Katie’s Restaurant, feigning rapt interest in a message on my phone, when Bo pulled up in his unmarked black Dodge Charger.

“Hey brother, hop on in,” Bo barked, leaning across the front seat to open the passenger side door.

Betraying no haste, I slipped my phone into my pants pocket, stepped gingerly off the curb, hooked my right arm to the car's roof, and gradually lowered myself into the passenger seat. I swept the cords from Bo's police radio out of the way, grunting emphatically as I pulled the door shut and strained for my seatbelt. Yanking the handkerchief from my breast pocket, I tamped at the beads of sweat forming on my forehead. My method acting performance may have been a bit over the top, but I was trying to make a point.

"Sorry to put you out like this," Bo said. "I know you don't have much spare time on account of your three-course brunch and the Sunday crosswords. Am I cutting into nap time?"

"Actually, I'm entertaining tonight, so I don't have all day," I said.

"Don't worry, we won't be long, I promise."

There was a short silence.

"So! How are you doing?" Bo asked.

"About as well as could be expected given it looks like I'm about to pass up a relaxing afternoon for some morbid tale from the crypt."

"Aw, c'mon Bru, when're you not relaxing is what I'd like to know."

"Whenever I'm around you, for starters."

Bo chuckled. He enjoys my curmudgeonly streak, maybe because it's a useful foil for his own leap-before-looking approach to life. Beneath my sometimes-gruff exterior, he knows I value our relationship more than I like to let on. Not to mention, if you make your living investigating the theft of valuable objects, it doesn't hurt to have one of the city's more knowledgeable antiques dealers as a trusted resource.

“What’ve you been up to?” Bo asked. “Haven’t seen you for a couple weeks.”

“Usual routine. Everything good with Angie and the kids?”

“All good, other than I just found out Little Bo’s going to need braces. There goes another three, four grand. Can’t never seem to get ahead.”

I nodded knowingly, although as a lifelong bachelor who has never had to support anyone other than myself, I am aware that my commiseration can come across as more pro forma than heartfelt.

“They grow up fast, I guess. Everybody off to a good start in school?”

“Yeah, I think so. Looks like Sophie’s gonna kill it, but that’s nothing new.”

Sophie is Bo’s middle child, in eighth grade now, and a bookworm after my own heart. Little Bo is a sophomore in high school. He’s all boy, a lot like his dad at the same age, antsy and athletic. Monique, the youngest, is beginning the sixth grade. She reminds me more of her mom, fiery with a pronounced independent streak.

We turned right on Canal, crossed Carrollton and were heading into the residential Mid-City neighborhood between Carrollton and City Park Avenue, where lollipop palm trees and crucifix shaped trolley poles embellish the wide neutral ground. I guessed our destination must be one of the half dozen or so cemeteries a bit further up the way, probably St. Patrick’s or Greenwood.

“Are you going to tell me about this grave robbery and why on earth you need me?”

“I wish it was that simple,” Bo exhaled deeply. “Truth is, we’re not sure what we’re dealing with. Ever hear of Crypt 1083-A?”

“No. Is that a Stephen King novel?”

“No. It’s from the Girod Street Cemetery.”

Girod Street is the Protestant cemetery that fell into disrepair and was deconsecrated and built over back in the fifties. It was near where the Superdome is now. Back when the Saints had all those losing seasons, folks said it was on account of the site being cursed.

“You know what happened to all the remains?” Bo asked.

“No, I don’t think so,” I said. “I assume they contacted the families and offered the opportunity to relocate.”

“Yes, and I suppose a few families did, but not many. It couldn’t have been easy tracking down descendants in a lot of cases. Anyway, what ended up happening is they scooped up the remains, packed ’em in drums and sent them to Saint John out here on Canal.”

“Okay, I guess that’s interesting, but what’s the history lesson got to do with our little expedition?”

Bo smiled and pointed up ahead as an imposing, two-story Art Deco structure came into view along the right side of Canal, running the full length of the block. If I didn’t know what it was, I might have mistaken it for a military fortification of some kind.

“That’s Hope Mausoleum,” Bo said. “It was started back in the thirties, and they kept adding on to it until now it surrounds the cemetery. Basically, Saint John Cemetery is the courtyard of the mausoleum.”

“Yeah, I know, I’ve been out here before,” I said. “Took in a lot of water during Katrina, as I recall.”

“Yes, it did.”

Bo swung into a curbside space near the mausoleum’s entrance, and we climbed out of the vehicle, Bo quick and catlike, me unhurriedly and with a conspicuous show of effort.

Despite my love of history and old things, I detest cemeteries, and even more so mausoleums. At least outside there is vegetation, maybe a squirrel or two scurrying around, signs of life. Inside is just the cold sterility of death.

“So, here’s the deal,” Bo explained, as we approached the broad granite entranceway. “The Girod Street remains are in Crypt 1083-A, which is basically just a crawl space under the ground floor. Last night somebody tore open a hole in the floor and crept around in there among all the bones and dirt.”

“Sounds like a messy business.”

“It gets messier. Most of the remains are unidentified and packed up in drums, but it turns out there were six caskets that hadn’t been opened, and they were put in there too. They’re commemorated on a plaque I’ll show you. All prominent types from the 1800s, five men and one woman. It was the woman’s casket that got broken into.”

I arched my eyebrows.

“So, let me get this straight. You’re thinking somebody went to the trouble of breaking into this fortress of a building, busted open the crawl space, dragged themselves around in the dirt and the dust and the bones, just to peek into or maybe snatch an item from this lady’s death box?”

“That’s what it looks like.”

“Can’t be necrophilia if it’s just bones, right?”

“I wouldn’t think so, but who knows. Can’t rule out anything at this stage. You’ve got a dirty mind, you know that?”

“So, I’ve been told. Can you tell if anything was taken?”

“We’re not sure. The Crime Scenes Unit says that based on some bits of decomposing material, it looks like she had on a velvet dress. There wasn’t any jewelry, so possibly that’s what they were after. There were also some small pieces of brittle paper that had some writing on them we couldn’t make out. They’re taking them back to the lab to do their magic and see what they can come up with.”

“Who was this woman?”

“Her name is Jane Placide. She was a leading actress back in her day, apparently. Died in the Yellow Fever outbreak of 1835, at age thirty-one.”

“I’ve heard of her,” I said. “She appeared on all the big stages of the antebellum south. Quite the celebrity in her day, I imagine. Why on earth would somebody be interested in her remains?”

“That’s where you come in my man,” Bo grinned. “I thought maybe you could do a little research for us.”

“Not really my area of expertise.”

“Yeah, I know, but you’ve got the skill set, and once you pick up the scent, you don’t give up. I like that about you.”

“Please.”

“No, seriously. Tell you what, I’ll sweeten the pot. Dinner on Friday. You name the dish and I’ll see that Angie makes it.”

“Alright, whatever,” I relented. “I’ll do some research, make a few calls, but no promises beyond that. And you tell Angie to make whatever she damn well pleases.”

“Thanks, Bru, you da man! Before we go, let me show you the crime scene.”

I followed Bo through two sets of bronze doors into an open-air corridor lined with the marble facades of crypts stacked three high in both directions. A cool breeze funneled in from the cemetery, and I recognized too well the clammy sensation beginning to creep through me as we turned right and strode silently through the grimly sanitized passageway. We proceeded maybe 20 yards to the end of the hall, then turned left down another crypt-lined corridor until we came to a wide marble staircase. Crime scene tape surrounded the area at the base of the stairs, in the middle of which was a small, jagged hole cut into the marble floor. Bo spoke with police personnel processing the scene, while I took note of a plaque on the wall opposite the stairway. It was made of a darker, almost roseate marble, and read as follows:

IN LOVING MEMORY OF THOSE ONCE  
INTERRED IN THE GIROD STREET CEMETERY  
(FOUNDED 1822) WHOSE MORTAL REMAINS  
WERE REMOVED AND RE-ENTOMBED IN THIS  
BUILDING BY CHRIST CHURCH CATHEDRAL  
(EPISCOPAL) A. D. 1957. AND OF

REV. JAMES F. HULL D. D.        1797-1833  
RECTOR OF CHRIST CHURCH    1816-1830  
REV. WILLIAM T. LEACOCK D. D. 1797-1884  
RECTOR OF CHRIST CHURCH    1852-1882



RICHARD RELF 1776-1857  
A WARDEN OF CHRIST CHURCH FOR 52 YEARS  
REV. JOHN HENRY KLEINHAGEN 1815-1885  
PIONEER EVANGELICAL AND LUTHERAN PASTOR  
GLENDY BURKE 1806-1879  
MERCHANT BANKER LEADING CITIZEN  
JANE PLACIDE 1804-1835  
DISTINGUISHED ACTRESS  
WHOSE REMAINS LIE IN CRYPT 1083-A

AYE, 'TIS A HOLY RITE,  
REMEMBRANCE OF THE DEAD,  
THAT WILL NOT LET OBLIVION'S BLIGHT  
AROUND THE GRAVE BE SHED

Turning back to the crime scene, I couldn't believe how small the opening was.

"Bo, who the hell could fit in that space? Are you looking for Tom Thumb? I don't think I could get my leg through there, much less the rest of me."

"Yeah, me neither. Definitely narrows the field, doesn't it? We had to find a couple really small female officers to get in there for us."

"Can't say I envy them that job."

"No. They're still collecting evidence, but we already know a few things."

According to Bo, the cops had determined there were at least two burglars, with probably a third on lookout and they knew what they were doing. The crime scene team found footprints and scratch marks on the mausoleum's rear wall, facing Iberville, indicating that the intruders had scaled the wall using a grappling hook, and then dropped down the other side into the

cemetery, artfully avoiding the video surveillance cameras set up around the perimeter of the building. They pried open the heavy bronze doors facing the cemetery on the Canal Street side, and then bore into the crypt. Bo said they probably used a small hydraulic breaker hammer, which is like a jackhammer but quieter.

“More than likely, we’re looking at professionals,” Bo said. “I’m sure they cased the place in advance. Getting inside without being seen and opening the crypt without waking the dead takes knowledge and skill. Pun intended.”

I groaned.

“And then the fact that they seem to have known exactly what they were looking for,” Bo continued. “It all screams contract job.”

“But why? What could be buried with Jane Placide that would explain someone hiring a team of pros to do all this?”

“I know, it doesn’t add up,” Bo said. “C’mon, I want to show you one more thing.”

“Okay but I need to get home to get ready for tonight.”

“No worries, this will be quick.”

Bo took me outside to the cemetery and pointed to a series of 15 headstones salvaged from Girod Street and affixed to the exterior wall of the mausoleum, facing in toward Saint John’s. Jane Placide’s was one of the older ones, and badly cracked, but we could still make out the writing:

Sacred

To the memory of

JANE PLACIDE  
Died May 16, 1835  
Aged 31 yrs

“We talked to the mausoleum’s archivist, and she said that most of the Girod Street records are lost or unreadable,” Bo said, “but she was able to confirm that Jane Placide had been interred in a free-standing mausoleum and it had this verse engraved on it. And before you ask, no, she never married.”

Bo handed me a slip of paper:

*TO THE MEMORY OF JANE PLACIDE*  
*There’s not an hour of day, or dreamy night but I am with thee;*  
*There’s not a wind but whispers o’er thy name.*  
*And not a flower that sleeps beneath the moon,*  
*but in its hues of fragrance tells a tale of thee.*

“Sounds like she had an admirer,” I said. “I’ll see what I can turn up about her love life. What else do you want to know about?”

“Anything and everything,” Bo said. “Life story. Friends, enemies, love life. What she owned. Who she knew, what she knew. We’ve got nothing to go on here, so literally, whatever you can find.”