

The Demon Dancer

By Mary Jo Putney

Excerpt

I studied the homeless man's corpse. He was the fifth I'd seen this day. Ragged clothes so dirty they'd clog a washing machine. A battered and long out of date Tennessee driver's license giving the poor sod's name and age. And a great big smile on his lined face.

My partner, Jamal Johnson, shook his head. "I can't believe how all these guys died smiling, Dave. I suppose it's some new street drug."

"Maybe," I said, but I didn't believe it. Besides being a New York City detective, I'm a Guardian, from a family that has the kind of powers that used to be called magic. Witch burnings a few centuries back persuaded Guardians to live under the radar. Most of us lead normal lives, gravitating to work that suited our magical talents.

Me, I'm a Guardian hunter. I'm very, very good at tracking people down, especially criminals. Equally good at dealing with them after I found them. Not surprising that I ended up a cop.

My boss is a hardass New Yorker who would scoff at the very idea of magic, but he's learned to send me out to the weird deaths, like this one. Five smiling corpses. No signs of violence.

It could just be coincidence—street people aren't the healthiest cohort—but my Guardian instincts were screaming. "Have you noticed that they've been getting younger? The first guy must have been in his seventies. Each has been a few years

younger than the one before. This poor devil is in his late fifties.”

Jamal considered. He’s no Guardian, but he’s a damned good cop. “Probably coincidence, but if some dealer has been going around handing out high dose samples, they might be taking out the weak more quickly.”

“It will be interesting to see the tox report.” I checked my watch. It was mid-evening, and technically I should have been off-duty two hours ago. Maybe after we cleared up this scene, Jamal and I could grab some Tex Mex at the restaurant down the block.

I was about to get back to work when a very, very bad feeling struck me. The kind where you drop everything and *run*.

I didn’t quite do that, but I said, “Jamal, I have to be somewhere else ASAP. Can you wrap up here and get a ride back to the station with one of the uniforms?”

He gave me a quizzical glance, but said only, “Sure. See you tomorrow.”

We’ve been partners a long time. No need to explain things. I pivoted and headed for my car, wondering what could have set off such loud alarm bells.

I parked right in front of my East Side destination—a Guardian talent that’s useful in New York is being able to find parking when needed—then took the steps of the neat brownstone three at a time. I felt as antsy as if I were the only one who could save a room full of kindergartners from certain death. Instead, I was responding to the silent distress of Bethany Sterling, one of my favorite people in the world.

Bethany swung the door to her apartment open before I could knock. No surprise there since she’s also a Guardian. She looked her normal self—petite and straight-backed

despite her years, her silver hair pulled into an elegant twist. But her deep set blue eyes showed the anxiety that had brought me running.

Giving thanks that she seemed all right, I asked, “Lady Beth, what’s wrong?”

She smiled wryly as she stood back and ushered me in. “Apparently I wasn’t shielding my worries as well as I thought. You always could read me better than anyone else.” She closed the door behind me. “You’re worried, too. Tell me about it while I make a nice pot of tea.”

Briefly I told described the dead street people while Bethany filled her electric kettle. It’s one of the British type that serious tea drinkers use because it heats water to boiling in seconds. After pushing the “on” button, she stood on tiptoe for the tin of my favorite Darjeeling tea. I reached over her head to take it from the shelf.

She isn’t a lady in the sense of an English title, but she was named for an ancestor called Lady Bethany Fox, so my brother Charlie and I like to call her Lady Beth. Not only was she English born, but the title suited her classy nature.

She warmed the teapot, then added tea leaves and poured boiling water on them. “I suspect our worries are related, David. Early this morning I sensed a strange, menacing energy sweeping into the city, and it’s getting stronger. Something is very wrong.”

“And I have the corpses to prove it. Any idea what the cause might be?”

She set out two tea cups and produced a cookie jar filled with her rich, crumbly scones. As she set them on a dainty china plate, she said, “I think a demon has come to New York.”

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