

VOODOO CHILD, BOOK ONE: ZOMBIE UPRISING

By

William Burke

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Dedicated to my sisters, Janet and Ellen who really put up with a lot.

Special thanks to my editor and proofreader Ken Darrow, M.A. his attention to detail shows on every page.

The forces of darkness are out to destroy mankind... too bad they never reckoned on facing Maggie Child.

Army Chopper pilot Maggie Child has a reputation for being fearless, professional and above all, rational. But when she's shot down over Iraq her well-ordered life spirals into a paranormal nightmare. Alone, wounded and surrounded by hostile forces Maggie is rescued from certain death by a demon straight out of *Dante's Inferno*. Then, barely alive, she's abducted by a private military corporation conducting insidious medical experiments. Her escape from their covert hellhole lands her on a Caribbean island where an evil voodoo spirit and a psychotic female dictator are conspiring to unleash an apocalyptic zombie plague. Then she uncovers the most terrifying secret of all- her own destiny. It seems Voodoo oracle has ordained her the only warrior capable of saving humanity from supernatural Armageddon... whether she wants the job or not!

But saving the world isn't a one-woman job, so she teams up with a trio of unlikely heroes. A conspiracy obsessed marijuana smuggler, a Voodoo priestess with an appetite for reality television, and a burnt out ex-mercenary. Together, they'll take on an army of the walking dead, with the fate of humanity resting in their eccentric hands.

Voodoo Child, Book One: Zombie Uprising is the first novel in a new horror series packed with supernatural thrills, rousing adventure, dark humor, Voodoo lore and *plenty* of zombie stomping action. But a word of warning; don't shoot these zombies in the head... because that just makes them mad!

It's the legions of hell versus Maggie Child... and hell doesn't have a prayer!

About the author

After two years of ghostwriting William Burke has released his first novel **VOODOO CHILD, Book One: Zombie Uprising**. It's the first installment of a new horror series chronicling the exploits of Maggie Child and her Voodoo Priestess partner Sarafina as they battle to save the island of *Fantomas* from the wrath of evil Voodoo spirits.

The author was raised on a diet of late night creature features, comic books, Mad Magazines and horror stories. As a result every volume will be packed with eccentric characters, dark humor, chills, zombies, ghosts, monsters, military hardware and plenty of stuff blowing up.

Prior to writing Voodoo Child he was the Creator and Director of the *Destination America* television series *Hauntings and Horrors*. He has also written scripts for two *Cinemax* television series *Forbidden Science* and *Lingerie*, which he also produced. He has also written magazine pieces for *Fangoria* and the *Phantom of the Movies Videoscope* among others.

William Burke began his film and television career as a perfectly respectable Video Engineer at the venerable *United Nations*. Budget cuts shifted him to becoming a Production Manager and Assistant Director on an array of New York based indie films. With that experience under his belt he relocated to Los Angeles where he eventually produced sixteen feature films and two television series for the *Playboy Entertainment Group*. After years of producing T&A extravaganzas, Kickboxing epics and Gangster Rap videos he created a self financed television pilot entitled *American Mystery Tour*. Canada's *CTV* picked up the series under the title *Creepy Canada*, which was then re-titled *Hauntings and Horrors* in the USA. Since then he has successfully produced three series for HBO/Cinemax as well as documentaries and other... stuff.

After hundreds of hours of film and television production he is basking in the freedom of the written word, where small budgets and giant egos are only memories. He lives in Toronto.

If you enjoyed the first adventure please visit www.williamburkeauthor.com where you'll find lots of interesting information about Voodoo, military hardware, along with excerpts from Sarafina's personal diary AND as a gift to readers the author will be serializing a Voodoo Child Novella.

CHAPTER ONE

Isle De Fantomas was a nation born in blood and forged in suffering. Its citizens were the descendents of slaves who, after generations in bondage, had broken their chains. These slaves, who had never known mercy, showed none to their masters. On the first night of the rebellion their scythes and cane machetes slaughtered half the slave-owning colonists; the remaining half were less fortunate.

For a brief moment the long-suffering people of Fantomas were free; but from that newfound freedom sprang even more brutal masters. For two centuries Fantomas endured an endless cycle of homegrown tyrants lusting for power. The latest of these despots, General Manuel Ortiz, followed the violent traditions of his predecessors, filling the island's cemeteries with innocent victims.

Though countless lives were lost, the human spirit endured, fueled by the people's unwavering faith in Voodoo. The citizens of Fantomas clung to their beliefs, knowing that someday the Voodoo spirits would crush their oppressors and set their children free.

Despite two centuries of bloodshed, the jungles of Fantomas remained lush and primordial; unchanged since the dawn of time. But tonight the sleeping parrots were awakened by brush rustling beneath their roosts, and they sang out a warning; men had invaded their domain.

Six armed soldiers crept through the jungle. Swarms of fruit bats circled overhead, following their path, gorging on the insects they disturbed. A bat swooped down to snatch a dragonfly hovering in front of the last man. As he slapped frantically at the invader, the startled soldier's foot landed on a dry branch; the cracking wood echoed through the jungle like a gunshot.

Their leader, Lieutenant Miguel Ortiz, spun around and glared at the man. "Quiet, you idiot!"

The soldier stood frozen under the lieutenant's stare until Ortiz turned and

continued moving forward. The men followed him cautiously, fearing their commander more than any enemy.

Lieutenant Ortiz hated the jungle. To him it was a steaming, mosquito-laden nightmare of tangled brush and poisonous snakes. But despite the discomforts, Miguel loved his job as commander of the island's *Special Operations Team*, an elite military unit the locals referred to in hushed tones as *Escuadrón de la Muerte—The Death Squad*.

Fantomas' supreme dictator, General Manuel Ortiz, had handpicked each man, entrusting them with eliminating anyone who opposed his regime. Miguel was chosen as commander in part because the general was his uncle, but it was a job he was truly born to hold. After a childhood measured in escalating acts of sadism, Miguel seemed destined for the hangman's noose. But all that changed a year ago when his uncle assumed power after a bloody military *coups d'état*. With Manuel recognizing his nephew's rare talent for brutality, Miguel instantly rose from being just another violent felon to a vital arm of national security.

Since then he'd hunted and killed dozens of potentially dangerous opponents to his uncle's regime. The fact that most were unarmed peasants or intellectuals only added to Miguel's job satisfaction.

His trained ear was attuned to the endless din of insects when he distinctly heard coughing in the distance. He gestured for his men to halt. Slipping on a pair of night vision goggles he studied the trail ahead but saw no one. He heard it again, like a man sneezing, quickly followed by another. Following the sound he looked up into the trees. A troop of *Mona Monkeys* stared down at him, their tufts of white facial hair giving them the appearance of angry old men. The sneezing sound was their warning call to other monkeys. Miguel fought the impulse to shoot them for fun. Instead he knelt down, allowing his men a moment to drink from their canteens.

His second in command, Corporal Sosa, crept forward. In hushed tones he said, "Sir, the men are nervous. We're killing a Voodoo priestess tonight and they're afraid of the spiritual consequences."

Miguel resisted the urge to strangle Sosa. "Trust me, if there's such a thing as spiritual consequences we're already going to Hell, so stop worrying." He glanced back at his men, sensing their tension. He hoped when the time came their natural bloodlust would overcome any fear, but he knew a little added incentive wouldn't hurt. "Remind them we are on a personal mission for General Ortiz, and he will probably give us each a generous bonus."

Corporal Sosa's innate greed won over any concerns. "They will be happy to hear that," he said and scuttled back to the men.

The men's fear of the priestess disgusted Miguel. To him Voodoo was the kind of superstitious horseshit that personified the old Fantomas; an impoverished land full of ignorant peasants and stinking manure. Miguel proudly embraced the modern world of social progress. To him progress meant snorting cocaine off the dashboard of his pearl white *Escalade* while listening to deafening rap music. Miguel was looking forward to tonight's mission. The target's name was Sarafina, and her lofty title of Voodoo Priestess made this a rare pleasure. Miguel had spent the last year working night and day to crush the people's will. But women like this Sarafina gave the locals hope, and that only made his job harder.

Miguel pulled a GPS unit from his pocket. It indicated that they were less than a hundred yards from their target. He stood, signaling his men to move forward.

As they drew closer to the target, Miguel heard drums and rhythmic chanting drifting through the trees.

"Do you hear that?" Corporal Sosa hissed.

"Of course, I'm not deaf," Miguel shot back.

"She was supposed to be alone but what if there are more people? What if they're armed?" Sosa whispered, nervous at the prospect of facing someone who could actually fight back.

"Armed with what, drumsticks? If there are more people we'll just kill them too." Miguel turned away, wondering if America's *Navy Seals* had to deal with this kind of whimpering. Then again, *Navy Seals* didn't recruit their men from Death Row.

Miguel crept forward till he could make out a clearing ahead. The drumming was now clear and distinct.

He reached out and slowly pulled aside the branches blocking his view. The moment he did the drums and voices fell silent, leaving only the endlessly buzzing insects; it was unnerving. *Probably just more monkeys*, he thought.

He looked ahead and his concerns melted away. The priestess stood alone in the center of her compound, surrounded by gnarled posts decorated with animal skulls and weird talismans. Burning torches cast a flickering light on the ghoulish tableau. These Voodoo trappings were eerie enough, but they couldn't hold a candle to the chapel building itself.

It was a barn-sized structure crafted from wood and mud brick standing in the shadow of a sixty-foot *Banyan tree*. Over decades, or perhaps even centuries, the ancient tree had grown into the building, entwining it in hundreds of exposed roots and vines until they merged into one organic structure. The

firelight cast moving shadows across the chapel, and its network of roots seemed to undulate like some monstrous jellyfish.

Sarafina was stirring a cooking pot suspended over an outdoor fire. The aroma drifted through the air, but it was hard to tell if she was preparing some occult potion or just the typical swill the peasants called food. She sang to herself softly in a French patois.

Miguel took a moment to admire Sarafina. She was tall, her lean body wrapped in the colorful fabric favored by priestesses. She moved with the grace of a dancer, her dark skin glowing in the firelight. Miguel found her attractive, in that peasant sort of way.

She stood and walked gracefully to her chapel, still singing. As soon as she was inside, Miguel reached into his rucksack and pulled out a satellite phone. He whispered, "General, we're in position with the target in sight. Awaiting your orders." He pressed the phone to his ear awaiting a response.

His uncle's voice came through. "Hold your position and await my instructions."

"Understood sir." After checking the ground for scorpions, Miguel sat down to wait.

CHAPTER TWO

Thirty miles away, in the wine cellar of the presidential palace, Fantomas' self-appointed *Prime Minister For Life*, General Ortiz, slipped a matching satellite phone back into the pocket of his finest dress uniform. It had been specially tailored to accommodate his girth, which had grown in proportion to his power.

He took a moment to breathe in the incense and candle scent drifting through the air. Upon taking power, his first act had been to convert this wine cellar into a private Voodoo tabernacle. Its décor mirrored his devotion to the dark side of the faith. Black candles glowed from every corner, casting a flickering light on the human skulls, bones and talismans used in his practice. In one corner sat a small cage used to hold sacrificial chickens. Next to it stood a large, iron cage used for more ... formidable sacrifices. Ancient masks, swords, paintings and other priceless Voodoo relics lined the musty brick walls.

The only incongruous item was a beautiful American woman patiently standing before the grand altar, sipping a can of Mountain Dew. The general's gaze lingered on his exquisite bride to be, knowing she would play a vital, if unwilling, role in that evening's ritual. He only hoped his precious jewel would survive the ordeal.

Yes, the woman was beautiful, but General Ortiz's most treasured possession was the ancient book of forbidden Voodoo rituals resting on the nearby altar. He couldn't resist running his fingers across its wooden cover, sensing the awesome power it held. For centuries a lineage of Voodoo priestesses had been charged with hiding this ancient volume to prevent its use but, during his triumphant military coups d'état, Ortiz had stolen it from the island's former Voodoo priestess, killing her in the process.

There was no record of when the book was written, or who the authors were, but the arcane rituals it held were so powerful that even the Voodoo spirits were forced to obey the owner's will. Unfortunately, it was written in a forgotten African dialect, which experts had deemed untranslatable. But by divine providence its ancient language had been deciphered and that night the most terrifying of all Voodoo spirits would become his servant.

The general's reverie was interrupted by a tap on his shoulder. "Excuse me, General Ortiz, *suh*." It was Ortiz's personal Voodoo priest, or *bokor*, as he preferred to be called. "I need to peruse the book for a moment if that's *awrite*." He drawled.

It took Ortiz a moment to decipher the bokor's gumbo-thick *New Orleans* accent. The general wondered why a man brilliant enough to decipher the book's language still couldn't pronounce the words *all right* properly. But Ortiz knew he was lucky to have found him. This obscure New Orleans linguistic student had succeeded where the world's most esteemed experts had failed. When Ortiz discovered the bokor was also a Voodoo priest he knew the spirits had guided his hand.

He watched as the bokor donned an ancient ritual mask. His two acolytes stood beside him like trained dogs. It occurred to Ortiz that he'd never heard the bokor's men speak a word; he admired that kind of discipline.

The bokor lit a series of black candles, which, to his specifications, had been dipped from the fat of human corpses. Every detail of the forthcoming ceremony, from the candles down to the precise placement of human skulls, had been done in accordance with the ancient book's instructions.

The general placed a hand on the bokor's shoulder and whispered, "Are you certain this will work?"

"Well," the bokor replied, his voice muted by the mask, "I've followed every detail laid out in the book, but it's been centuries since this ritual was performed."

"But the book says if you invoke the baron properly he must come, correct?"

"True"—the bokor nodded—"but Baron Kriminel has a reputation for being difficult. However, as long as the sacrifice is suitable and the bride meets with his approval, he'll do your bidding."

"Trust me; the sacrifice will be perfect," General Ortiz said, and then, glancing at his American bride to be, he added, "And the bride is too beautiful for any man or spirit to resist. Why, just look at her." He took a moment to admire his American fiancée, bathed in glowing candlelight. As supreme leader of Fantomas, women of all shapes and sizes were at his beck and call but the moment he'd seen this American goddess he was smitten. She was stunning, with long, blonde hair and a body honed to perfection. The red silk robe she wore that night highlighted every contour of her figure. Even in this dimly lit room her blue eyes gleamed and her smile radiated.

The bokor glanced at her, too preoccupied with the ritual to care about women. "She is a charmer; I'm sure the baron will be pleased."

General Ortiz gazed wistfully. "Just saying her name is like some beautiful song... *Lavonia*."

Lavonia Dawes stood in the darkened cellar surrounded by the sea of candles, skulls and the eerie statuary. She spied General Ortiz gazing at her, and lovingly blew him a kiss. On the surface she was all smiles but inside her mind was reeling. *How the hell did I wind up here, she thought, surrounded by Voodoo lunatics?*

Sensing her anxiety, General Ortiz walked over and took her hand. "You look nervous, my love."

Lavonia smiled weakly. "Well, I hate to sound stupid but I'm confused about this whole ceremony. I know that I'm marrying you upstairs, which is a dream come true, but what exactly am I marrying down here?"

Ortiz had explained this before but decided it was best to be patient. "This is a traditional Voodoo ceremony where my bride to be is symbolically married to a powerful spirit. This ceremony confirms our mutual bond with that entity who will bring us great wealth and power."

"And you believe all that?" Lavonia asked, instantly wishing she hadn't shown doubt.

But General Ortiz took no offense. "I truly do. When I began practicing Voodoo I was just a lowly private with no future. But my faith changed all that. Without the Voodoo spirits I would still be nothing." Then he smiled and threw his best *Ricardo Montalban* flair into his perfect English. "But, of course, without you, my dear, I am less than nothing."

Lavonia smiled. "Aw, aren't you the sweetest thing?" Then she pointed to a statue of Baron Kriminel. "So that's the boogie man I'm getting hitched to?"

"Yes," Ortiz said with pride, "that is Baron Kriminel, the Voodoo spirit of death and vengeance."

Lavonia gazed at the statue of Baron Kriminel. His face was a death's head skull with piercing cat's eyes, crowned with a battered top hat; it was a visage straight from a nightmare. Lavonia gave Ortiz her most naive smile. "And you promise this is all play acting, so no weird monsters are going to pop up?"

"Of course not, my darling. There's nothing to be nervous about."

"Okay," she said, and then nodded toward the bokor. "I guess he just makes me nervous." In truth, she thought the bokor was just plain creepy. The guy was a six foot, three inch African American beanpole who made Joey Ramone look like a body builder. Lavonia watched as he scuttled around in that silly mask spouting Voodoo gibberish.

"Don't worry, this is only symbolic. But remember that in a few hours we'll

be married." He patted her bottom. "So you will be battling a monster tonight after all."

Lavonia leaned against Ortiz. "Now that's a monster I look forward to finally tangling with." In truth, the thought of their honeymoon night made Lavonia throw up in her mouth a little.

"Now I must assist in the preparations." He kissed her cheek and walked back over to the bokor. *I'm lucky, he thought, to have found such a beautiful and naïve creature.*

But Lavonia's naivety was just an act. She discovered long ago that if people thought you were dumb they tended to lower their guard, revealing their true intentions. She didn't for one moment think any real monsters were coming tonight. This whole circus sounded bat-shit crazy to her, but if it made her rich beau happy, so be it.

The bokor leaned over to the general, whispering in his ear. "Have you told her what is really going to happen tonight?"

Ortiz shook his head, while giving a playful wave to Lavonia. "No, she thinks this is a symbolic ritual and nothing more."

The bokor smiled behind his mask. "That's good. According to the book Baron Kriminel likes his bride to be surprised... Actually terrified was a more accurate translation."

"Then he will be very pleased." Ortiz smiled as his bride to be threw him a kiss. "Ah, she is hopelessly devoted to me."

The bokor glanced at the portly, balding general then at the stunning, blonde woman standing nearby and thought, *Yeah she's devoted to you, at least until the money runs out.*

And the bokor was correct. Lavonia knew General Ortiz represented her only salvation from a life of endless struggle.

From birth her bitter stage mom had shanghaied her childhood, earning a fortune parading her pretty daughter through endless toddler, pre-teen and teenage beauty pageants. Lavonia was given no formal education, had no friends and was taught to see other children as competitors and enemies. Her mother told her winning was everything, and made sure losing had severe consequences.

On her eighteenth birthday, Lavonia legally severed ties with her mother, only to discover her home-schooled, pageant-hopping childhood had left her penniless and unemployable.

Undaunted, she'd made a go of it as a swimsuit model, gracing the pages of many prestigious auto parts catalogs and *Hot Rod* magazines. But now, at the

age of thirty-three, she knew her bikini and stiletto heel days were numbered. She'd had a reoccurring nightmare in which she worked out by the airport giving lap dances to *Cherry Pie*.

But then, in her hour of darkness, she received an adoring fan letter from General Ortiz inviting her to some backwater Caribbean country called Fantomas. He'd also enclosed a diamond necklace as a show of his devotion. Diminishing prospects and a love of fine jewelry inspired Lavonia to keep him on the string. When her oily suitor made the grand leap from corrupt military general to full on dictator she agreed to marry him. All she had to do to get that ring on her finger was endure this Voodoo charade.

She watched the bokor parading around on his gangly legs, barking final instructions to his acolytes in his annoying New Orleans "Yat" accent. To Lavonia his voice was like nails on a chalkboard, ushering back memories of her mother beating the Mississippi drawl out of her; an accent she felt limited her daughter's pageant-winning appeal. Lavonia knew people like her mother were the genuine monsters, more terrifying than any Voodoo hokum.

General Ortiz looked at the bokor and then glanced at his watch.

The bokor got the message, solemnly announcing, "We shall begin." He turned to the general. "Is the sacrifice ready?"

The general nodded, holding up the satellite phone. "When I give the signal the killing will be done."

This casual talk of killing innocent people had little effect on Lavonia. Like her rural accent, human empathy had been beaten out of her long ago. Ironically, being a sociopath was an ideal personality trait for a dictator's first lady.

The general keyed his satellite phone again. "Move in, and when I give the order, kill her ... but not a second before."

CHAPTER THREE

Miguel listened intently to his uncle's voice. "Yes sir, we will follow your orders." Then he added, "Uncle, let me take a moment to wish you the greatest joy on this, your wedding day... Hello?" But the general had already hung up.

Disappointed, Miguel pocketed the phone and signaled his men to advance. The men fanned out with trained precision, weapons trained on the chapel. Miguel watched as Sarafina strolled past the window carrying a lit candle. *What the hell is she doing in there?* Miguel thought.

Sarafina was preparing her nightly offerings to the spirits. But first she bowed to the framed photograph of her grandmother who had reigned as the island's high priestess for half a century. Tragically, General Ortiz's men had murdered her a year ago during the military coup. Bullet holes in the chapel walls still stood as mute testimony to that nightmarish war. Her death had thrust Sarafina into the role of high priestess at the tender age of twenty-four.

Sarafina's own mother had died in childbirth, and so her grandmother had raised her in this very chapel. She could still feel her loving presence emanating from every timber. No one knew how many generations this building had stood as the heart and soul of the community, its walls bearing witness to untold births, weddings and funerals.

Sarafina knelt before the grand altar lined with statuettes representing the Voodoo spirits. She carefully placed an offering in front of each; a flower for *Boli Shah*, candles for *Dan Petro* ... the list went on. She even offered a cigar to the dreaded Baron Kriminel. It was prudent to honor all the spirits, even the malevolent ones like Kriminel, if only to keep them at bay.

Sarafina had chosen *Gira*, *the spirit of love and fertility* as her patron. Tonight's offering to Gira was a mutton stew cooked as the spirit demanded; with so many fiery red peppers it would make the toughest man cry. Sarafina placed the steaming bowl on the altar then reached up and turned the statuette of Gira to face her. With her blood-red skin, horned head and bat-like wings,

Gira resembled a demon more than a gentle spirit of love and fertility; but to Sarafina she was beautiful.

Gira's statue always stood beside Baron Kriminel's but tradition dictated the two be placed back to back, symbolizing their tragic romance. They had been lovers for thousands of years, until Gira tired of Baron Kriminel's jealousy. The baron's broken heart drove him insane, transforming him from the messenger of peace into the ruthless spirit of death and vengeance.

Sarafina offered a blessing then fell silent, her eyes widening in amazement. Gira's statuette turned, as if moved by some unseen hand, until it faced the chapel door. She felt a chill in the night air. "Gira, are you giving me a warning?" Then Sarafina heard someone calling her name.

The soldiers held their positions twenty feet from the chapel, weapons readied. "Sarafina," Miguel shouted, "you will come out and surrender yourself to our custody!" There was no response and Miguel's patience was growing short. He had instructions to kill the priestess at a specific moment, and every second she stalled cut into his sadistic playtime. "Come out now or we will take you by force. Then I'll burn your chapel and take my anger out on your followers!" But he was met with silence. He turned to his men. "Kick the door in and grab her, but remember I want her alive!" They took a few steps toward the chapel.

Sarafina's voice cut through the night. "Stop!"

The men turned and discovered Sarafina standing behind them. Miguel was confused, certain he'd seen her at the window moments before ... but there she stood. He studied the priestess up close. She had high cheekbones and strong features that could become harsh with old age but for now were sensual and exotic. Her eyes gleamed with the reflected light of the torches.

"How dare you bring weapons onto hallowed ground?" she said. "The spirits will be offended and Sarafina cannot protect you from their wrath. You would be wise to leave while you still can." She stood, never breaking eye contact with her attackers.

Miguel saw the tension mounting in his men. "Calm down, you idiots," he barked, "she's just trying to scare you with Voodoo horseshit!"

"That kind of talk is not helping your situation at all," she said flatly.

Miguel had endured enough of her disrespect. He pulled his sidearm, drawing a bead on her head.

She didn't flinch; in fact, Miguel saw a trace of a smile as she said, "So you

are planning to kill Sarafina, yes?"

Miguel was confused for a moment until he realized Sarafina was referring to herself in the third person; something he thought only rappers did. "Oh, you'll die eventually ... after we're done with you."

"Of course," Sarafina replied, "there must be pain and bloodshed first. I can see you are a man who can only perform when a woman suffers. Her tears are your aphrodisiac, giving you a brief taste of actual manhood."

"You're a mouthy bitch!" Miguel yelled, swinging the butt of his pistol at Sarafina's head. With feline grace she arched backward and the weapon swung through empty air. It took Miguel a moment to regain his balance.

Sarafina glared at him. "You may do as you wish to me, I won't fight you. But I have one last request."

Miguel jammed his pistol under her chin and cocked it. "Your last request will be begging me to let you die!"

"I see. Then this will be Sarafina's *second* to last request. All I ask is that you bury me here among the other souls your soldiers have slaughtered." She gestured toward the rows of small mounds with handcrafted grave markings. "Look closely at the markers, maybe your men will recognize the names of the innocents they tortured and murdered ... they certainly remember you."

The soldiers looked at the buried dead surrounding them, knowing each had inflicted his share of misery, pain and death on these innocents.

Sarafina lowered her head, chanting softly. The men just stared, hypnotized by her voice.

CHAPTER FOUR

The bokor tapped his fingers on the ancient book. "It's highly irregular to have a sacrifice performed elsewhere but I suppose it will have to do."

The general nodded. "It's prudent to use the element of surprise when that sacrifice is a powerful Voodoo priestess."

The bokor nodded in agreement. Sacrificing a Voodoo priestess, who represented the powers of light to a dark spirit like Baron Kriminel, was the most powerful of all offerings. This, combined with the ancient ritual he'd translated, would evoke Baron Kriminel in the flesh for the first time. The book promised that any spirit evoked must pledge his power to the one who summoned him.

"The bride must take her place at the altar," the bokor proclaimed. "General, you will stand behind me." The bokor waited until the two were in their positions. "I must warn you that the baron is given to a certain ... disrespectful tone when he speaks. Do not show offense, because that will only anger him more."

"Got you, boss," Lavonia replied, drinking down the last of her Mountain Dew. "The spirit likes talking dirty." She stood at the altar, carefully smoothing her silk robe. Her only job in this charade was to stand there and look great, and she certainly knew how to do that.

One of the bokor's silent acolytes played a slow drumbeat in the *Petwo* rhythm; the music of the dark spirits.

The bokor began. "Aron tunatoa wito kwa wewe," he intoned in the ancient Bantu dialect he'd labored so long to decipher.

The tempo grew faster and the bokor's words shifted to song; a haunting call and response in some forgotten language, each phrase echoed by his acolytes.

Lavonia listened to the hypnotic tone, and watched as the candles flickered in time to the chanting, the flames casting moving shadows dancing across the ghoulish museum of skulls and talismans. She studied the statue of Baron Kriminel as the flickering light reflected off his cat eyes, giving them life. Lavonia's earlier dismissal ebbed away and she felt a chill creeping up her spine.

The bokor went on, his intensity rising to a fever pitch. The drumming ceased

mid beat, plunging the room into silence. Gesturing intently to the general, the bokor shouted, "Sisi kutoa kafara hii!"

The general keyed his satellite phone, "Kill her now!"

The general's voice jarred Miguel out of his trance. He wasn't sure how long he'd been standing there, transfixed by the chanting priestess. He shook his head, keyed his sat-phone and responded, "It is done, General!" He glared at his men, all still lost in the woman's voice, and shouted, "Kill her!"

The men snapped back to reality, raising their AK-47's as one.

"Yes," Sarafina said, staring coldly, "all of these dead souls have been waiting for you."

Something grabbed Miguel's ankles in a vice grip. He looked down and saw a pair of decaying human hands protruding from the ground, claspng his legs. Then a rotted, skeletal face emerged from the dirt, spewing maggots from its mouth, gaping at him with milky, dead eyes. All around him rotted bodies clawed their way from the dirt, grabbing his men. Miguel fired his pistol downward. Every bullet struck the rotting skull but the thing held fast. He turned to his left and saw dozens of shambling human silhouettes emerging from the tree line. The creatures wailed like banshees as they descended.

"Shoot them!" Miguel roared as the resurrected corpse's fingernails gouged into his legs.

The men responded, firing volleys into the attackers. The blinding muzzle flashes sprayed in every direction, illuminating brief glimpses of the oncoming horde of living dead. Ghostly wails and human screams filled the night air.

Within seconds every man had emptied his thirty round magazine and a deathly silence fell over the compound. Miguel's pistol clicked empty and he felt a searing pain in his stomach. He looked around in numb shock.

There were no rotted corpses attacking, only the bullet-riddled bodies of his own men lying around him. He clutched his bleeding stomach, knowing this witch had tricked them into killing each other. The pistol fell from his grasp as he sank to his knees staring up at the woman.

"You miserable bitch!" he choked out, spitting blood. She just stared at him with infinite calm. He clumsily reached into his belt, pulling a fresh magazine. He groped around in the dirt until he found his empty pistol then raised it. "You're still going to die!" He fumbled to reload but discovered there wasn't a pistol in his hand; instead, he was holding a writhing snake, a poisonous *Fer-de-lance*. But Miguel was no fool. "This is another trick," he spat at her with utter

certainty. Then the hissing serpent buried its fangs into his arm. His body trembled as the venom coursed through his veins. He tried to shout defiantly but his vocal cords were paralyzed. His lips moved silently as he sank to the ground and died.

The snake wriggled out of his hand, slithering peacefully between Sarafina's feet and into the jungle.

Sarafina looked down at the carnage and whispered, "Gira, please have mercy on these wretched souls." She put her hand to her side and winced; it was covered in blood. She knew a bullet had found her. She fell to her knees, dizziness sweeping over her. Then she began the agonizing crawl to her chapel.