



Bone
Dressing

Michelle I. Brooks

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Book Excerpt

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I let a long sigh out. Feeling the tired wash through me again. But, this time it really just washed through, without lingering deep down inside. "Look, Sarah, I get that you believe all this stuff about bad guys and reincarnation and whatnot. I just don't know that I do. But I do know that I have to go home. Hours ago. We can talk about all this another time. Promise. Just not now." Not bad for the original Little Miss Manners, huh?

"Okay, Beau. Help her up." Sarah stood up and took a step back from me.

It was obvious Beau wasn't exactly enthusiastic about this, but he played nice. "Fine. But you're gonna have to deal with this, Syd. Soon." He didn't stand up, just let go of my arms and leaned back a little.

Good, I shifted, preparing to sit up when my gaze finally hit T.J.'s for the first time. She'd been hidden behind Sarah and Beau up 'til then. I barely caught the tensing of the muscles along her sides as she leapt forward and landed on my chest.

What was it with this damn cat and my boobs? Ta-ta envy? She had eight for God's sake! Give me a break. But all of a sudden the ground started to shake – what the hell? This was the Gulf Coast, we did hurricanes not earthquakes! As my eyes widened in disbelief, the entire gravesite started to glow. The gravestone and the grass around it, as if the sun that had been missing from the sky was suddenly double-parked six feet under me. Holy-fucking-shit! "Get me out of here!" I yelled as calmly as I could manage staring straight into my own horrified reflection in T.J.'s golden eyes.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw a glance pass between Beau and Sarah. The kind of glance that books were written about. "What? What was that look for? Help me, God dammit! Do the looks later, when my ass isn't about to join the hereafter."

"Um, Syd? You're not gonna like this. And we didn't do it. Just so you know." Sarah was trying to stay focused on me, but her eyes kept jumping to Beau. Which was probably for the best, because the look of fear and trepidation in her eyes wasn't helping. Not one little bit.

"What! What am I not gonna like? What didn't you do? Because somebody sure did a whole hell of a lot of something!" T.J. started to lean in closer, gazing into my eyes the way a cobra would to lull you into a false sense of security. Oh, hell no. I rolled my eyes to the first person I found. Sarah. "You know what? Scratch that. Just get me the fuck out of here. Get me out, in one piece preferably, and all is forgiven. Whoever did whatever. Complete exoneration. No blame whatsoever. Just get me out of here, now!"

"Don't be afraid, Syd. It's just T.J. She's not gonna hurt you. You know that." Sarah was shaking her head. Not what I needed to see. "But, it's already begun now. Somehow, maybe all the blood, I'm not really sure, but the portal's been opened. It's accepted your entrance, and now it won't close without fulfilling the promise."

"What promise? I didn't promise anything! What the hell are you talking about? And can we please do something about Bagheera? She's starting to drool ... on my chest!" Okay. Maybe that was fair since I'd splattered her with spit, but a girl has to draw the line somewhere, right?

"I think it has something to do with what happened this afternoon." My eyes shifted to Beau, but even though he was facing me, his eyes were staring straight into the past. A funny little glassy glaze swept over them. "It somehow served as an invocation for Rachel. A prayer, a promise to complete the rite."

“Okay. Look. I don’t give a good God damn what Rachel Kensington thinks happened today. She’s dead. Been that way a long time now. Besides, I can’t promise something I don’t even understand. Get somebody else or, better yet, one of you do it. Just count me out.”

Sweet little Sarah stepped in again. “Syd? It has to be you. It’s about you. And, if you really want to get out of this, the quickest way is to fulfill the invocation. You just need to relive that moment in Rachel’s life when things went wonky, when they veered off course, but do it right this time.”

“Are you kidding me? I don’t even know Rachel. I don’t know a God damn thing about her, other than she’s buried with a baby and had serious hots for a guy named Jesse. How the hell would I know what needs fixing, much less how to fix it? I can’t even manage my own potholes without turning them into bottomless pits of fire. Now, stop standing there like a fucking bump on a log, Beau, and get me the hell out of this mess!” I really meant to stay angry. But, by the end my voice had forsaken me and shifted half-way to a plea. Oh, well. I was pinned down by a black panther, on top of a grave that was glowing like a giant pumpkin on Halloween, in the middle of a patch of earth that felt like it was about to eat me faster than the damn cat could. Guess one little cry for help was allowed. Yeah. Pretty much a no-brainer. Just call me the squealer.

I saw the pain in Beau’s eyes, the kind you get when someone you care about is hurting and there’s nothing you can do to stop it. But, when he spoke, there wasn’t a speck of compassion. “Why the hell are you so angry? We didn’t do this to you, Syd! So stop trying to rip my head off over it.” Tough love? Who the hell needs that!

“Oh. Yeah! Let’s see here. Why the hell should I be upset? All my friends are out scoping the shops trying to score the perfect prom dress. Meanwhile, I’m sniffing my way through the local graveyard trying to find the perfect box of bones to play dress-up in! I may not be a ruffle and frills kind of girl, but I’m thinking partially decomposed bones are just not gonna bring out the sparkle in my eyes, and they might even leak glumpy stuff on my chest. And now, I’m stuck with a one hundred pound panther glued to my boobs until I fulfill a promise I never made to begin with. And let’s not forget the ground all around me is lit up like a God damn Molotov cocktail and it feels like little old Rachel must be climbing out of her fucking grave. Did I leave anything out? Oh, yeah! Sure did. The Big Bad apparently knows what’s up and wants to introduce himself to me personally. Good enough?” So, I was a little cranky. Prom only comes once. I was due.

“Okay, Syd. First of all, it’s just your soul that’s going to reanimate the corpse. You’ll leave your body while you do it. So, no glumpy stuff on your ... on you at all.” Beau really was trying to be patient, but his exasperation with my sudden girlish whining was staining the edges of his chivalry.

“Wait just one minute. *Leave my body?* As in dead? Are you insane? This is completely nuts. I’m going home. Now. This is just too much. Too much shit. Deal me out. Now. I fold. Have a nice life, or death, or whatever the hell it is you do.”

Sarah was squatting beside me now and laid her hand on my shoulder. “Syd, I already told you T.J.’s not going to hurt you. She’s just going to lure your soul out of your body.”

“She’s gonna do what to my soul? Suck it out of me? As in, no more Syd? Are you completely insane? No! Don’t bother answering that either. I tell you what. You two just help me up and I won’t have your asses thrown in jail for the rest of your lives. All one thousand of them!” I’m pretty sure I was spitting by the end because T.J.’s face was glistening in little spots in the light now.

“I’m out of here. Move it, T.J.” I reached up to shove her off, I was tired of playing. But, things can always get worse, and that’s exactly what they did now.

Beau's hand closed around mine before I could budge T.J. an inch, and as soon as he did, all hell broke loose. The light burst out so brightly, it was like the sun was trying to shove its way out of the grave and right up my butt. At the same time, T.J. leaned into my face, touching her nose to mine, pulling the breath from my chest as easily as you'd sniff down a pumpkin pie baking on Thanksgiving Day.

"Beau, get in there. Now!" Was that Sarah's voice yelling, commanding? My hearing was fading, things were getting fuzzy around the edges, all the light was dimming.

Suddenly, I felt Beau. Warm and strong and next to me from shoulder to toe. And yelling in my ear. I could tell he was yelling from the way his face moved in my peripheral vision, but still the words barely made it to my brain. "Syd! I've got you. I'm here with you. Don't let go, Baby. Whatever you do, just don't let go!" He clamped his other hand on top of the same hand he was already holding, so that my hand was completely wrapped within his, and touched his cheek to mine.

Was he certifiably insane? Of course I wasn't letting go – they'd have to pry his hand out of my cold dead fingers with a crowbar before I let go. Instinctively, my fingers clutched onto his, threading their way through his in a jumbled mess.

Still, this was a game I didn't want to play. The ground was buckling underneath me so violently that I knew I'd be pulled straight through to China any second! Wasn't my mom supposed to call me in for dinner right about now? Isn't that what happened in normal families? They rescued each other from shit like ... well, maybe not shit quite like this, but soft shit anyway.

Of course, I didn't have that family to hide behind. I just had me. Just the way I wanted it. Right? Of course, there were three other mammals touching me at the moment. Maybe they were more than a bag of strangers I happened across one night. More than just a pack of pot-stirring trouble-makers. They were right here with me, for me. And they were here by choice even if I wasn't. "But, I really don't want to do this! What if I only make things worse? What happens then? I don't know what the hell I'm supposed to do! I'm the ruling Queen of Mass Mayhem and Destruction, remember?" I yelled out with my last bit of strength, my last shred of me, but I don't know if the words actually found sound.

Impossibly, the maelstrom of chaos jumped up the Richter scale again. Beau's grip tightened, his forehead glued to mine, our bodies melding into one. Huge chunks of dirt started shooting up around us, but there was an endless supply. More dirt just kept bubbling up as if it was being manufactured at full speed in Rachel's coffin. The light was suddenly so intense, so concentrated, I knew it could destroy everything within its reach. My eyes were wide open, aching in the blindingly bright light. Light so bright that I could practically see right through Beau, Sarah, even T.J. Turning them into ethereal guardians, eyes glowing radiantly. Hair and fur was flying in the gusts of whirling wind created by the bedlam exploding on all sides of us.

Sarah's mouth started chanting words I was sure I wouldn't have understood even if I had been able to hear them. And T.J. just kept on sucking down the damn Sydney cream pie like there was no tomorrow. And maybe, just maybe, there wasn't.

But, whether there was or wasn't, wouldn't be answered. The last whisper of air was snatched from my screaming, grasping lungs, and with it my soul slipped from my body, flying down the rabbit hole.

And just like that, I was only one more lifeless collection of tissue and bones in a graveyard filled with them. The only difference was that my body was still warm, had a shitload of trouble waiting for it at home, a whole other shitload of trouble waiting for it at school, and an essay due in economics in the morning.

I would have one hell of an excuse though ... sure beats the pants off of "my dog ate my paper". I should remember to smear my homework in some of the glumpy stuff. After all, if a picture's worth a thousand words, what could beat a little show and tell? And no matter what Sarah said, when you taught a roach to play dead there was glumpy stuff, much less when you decided to play dress up with worm-infested corpses.

Yeah, I was dressing for the occasion ... bone dressing.

I wish I'd thought to bring some paper towels, but I guess Wet Wipes would have been better anyway.