

## Grave Robbers

Kristi Bradley

His bright eyes scanned the cemetery. Long fingers gripped the chain link fence as he stretched higher to scope out more of the grounds, while one of his partners dug a hole big enough for them to crawl under. They normally didn't work during daylight hours. Their little band of nocturnals preferred nights, but with the crack-down on crime lately, they had to go where the loot was easiest to lift. Turned out the dead didn't put up a fight over their earthly possessions. The living didn't take too kindly to it though, so they had to be cautious.

"Still clear."

Digger, small in stature, shoved dirt out of the way as she wriggled under the fence. Once clear, she pulled the links aside to allow their stout leader Bandit to crawl through. The third and final member of the crew was thin and lithe. Rocket slithered like a snake under the fence. Once on the property, they formed a triangle, back to back to back, searching the grounds for signs they'd been made. With a flick of his head, Bandit led the group across the grounds until they found their mark.

"Lots of guests," Digger said.

"That's a good sign, huh, Bandit?" Rocket twitched with excited energy.

"A very good sign." Their leader motioned to the grave site. "Rocket, you get ready to cause a distraction once Digger and I are in position."

He vibrated with anticipation. "Yes sir." Low to the ground, he scampered a short distance away.

Bandit and Digger crawled closer. Their heads swiveled constantly, watchful for prying eyes. Digger took position behind a tall statue. Bandit crouched behind a wide headstone, and waited.

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Moments later, the loud crash of a trash can being knocked over sent the workers scrambling toward the sound. Bandit nodded to Digger. They ran to the site. She jumped into the hole without pause. Her dexterous fingers opened the latch. The spray of flowers atop the casket fell beside the box with a soft thud when she opened the lid.

“We hit pay dirt.” Digger practically swooned. Quick work relieved the body of a two-carat diamond ring. She admired her find with a feral grin.

“Hurry up, Digger,” Bandit spat, keeping an eye out for returning workers. “Anything else worth taking?”

“Oooh,” she cooed. “A necklace.” One hard tug and the chain dangled from her greedy fingers.

“They’re coming! Let’s go,” Bandit spat.

Digger jumped from the casket as Bandit shoved the lid closed. They climbed from the hole, ran without glancing back. They met Rocket at the fence.

“Get anything good?” he asked, bouncing on his toes, black eyes glittery.

Digger extended her hand to show him the ring, sparkling in the sunlight. She tossed him the necklace. He caught it, held it high to admire the stones dangling from the chain.

“Sweet.”

They crawled under the fence and gamboled off down the street without a care in the world.

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They’d had such good luck at Elmwood Cemetery, the trio returned the next week. The man being buried today must’ve been one of those highfalutin’ rich folk. He wore a big watch with a diamond-encrusted dial. Bandit relieved him of his diamond wedding band, too. He slipped it on his finger, admiring the glint of the clear stones. It would match the ring Digger now wore on her left ring finger. He plucked another golden band from the dead man’s pinky finger to give to Rocket for his share.

They hung around the cemetery so much they soon learned the Lord’s Chapel hosted receptions that managed to keep them well fed. A little recon found the staff threw leftovers into the

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trash. Perfectly good, half-eaten food, tossed! They carted off as much as they could carry, living well off the scraps alone. They soon figured out how to stay on the grounds undetected. It amazed them how invisible they seemed to be, never getting caught. They even gave up grave robbing due to the abundance of free food. It didn't take long until every member of their little clan gained weight, became lax and lazy.

Then several weeks went by without a burial. Food dwindled. Tempers flared. Their desperation rose as if in a hot air balloon.

"Might be time to move on," Bandit growled. Or was that his stomach?

"No. These twins are gonna be born soon. I wanna stay here," Digger hissed. "And I want our children to have a home, Bandit. This place is the closest we've had to that."

"I don't wanna leave either." Rocket scratched his stubbly head. "But we gotta eat. Especially you." He pointed to Digger and her rapidly expanding belly.

"So go find us some food," she snapped. "I'll stay here and guard the camp."

"Who put you in charge?" Rocket complained. Ever since she'd gotten knocked up, she'd become a real coon to deal with.

"She's got a point." Bandit stood. "It's my job to keep her safe and fed. Let's go."

They woke Digger from a nap a short time later. "Great job guarding camp. Come on. We almost missed a funeral. They're getting ready to drop the body. Let's go. We gotta hurry." Bandit didn't wait for Digger to reply but rushed from camp.

Panting, Digger caught up. They'd lowered the casket into the ground by the time they arrived. Guests had already drifted away.

"Rocket," she said. "You're gonna hafta keep them busy for a bit. It'll take longer to do this since I've got this big belly in the way."

"Got it." He shot off to cause a distraction.

Digger and Bandit jumped into the hole once the employees were diverted. It took longer than usual to get into the casket, too. It had some special locking mechanism, but determined, they persevered until the latch gave. They shoved the lid open.

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“Nothing!” Digger shrieked.

“Whaddaya mean, nothing?” Bandit shoved her aside, cursed to find nothing of value. “Let’s get out of here. Maybe there’s a reception where we can at least get lunch. Hurry. I hear voices.”

As they climbed out, the dirt walls gave way. Digger fell onto the casket with a thud and a grunt of pain. Bandit glanced up to see the crew stomping toward them.

“Come on, Digger. Hurry!” He reached down with one arm, offered her a hand. He yanked her up. They toppled onto the grass, rolling head over heels. They raced away, sought cover in a copse of trees. No one followed.

“That was close.” Digger panted with exhaustion.

“Too close. You okay?” Bandit fussed over the little mother-to-be.

“I’m fine. Let’s go see if we can at least get some eats.”

They met up with Rocket and snuck toward the chapel.

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It wasn’t long until another funeral took place. The group watched from the shadows, waiting patiently while the few mourners drifted from the graveside.

“I’m betting this one’s thin pickings. Not many guests.” Digger swayed from side to side. Her large belly shimmied with her movement.

“Doesn’t mean they didn’t wanna be buried with something special,” Rocket argued.

“Better be something good in there, since ain’t gonna be no food served.” Bandit stepped forward for a closer look. “Let’s go.”

Rocket used his natural speed to distract the crew tasked with burying the deceased. He led them around the cemetery on a wild good chase, staying out of sight but tossing loose stones or fallen branches at them to distract. He enjoyed toying with them. *They have no idea who they were dealing with*, he thought smugly.

Digger inched toward the grave. Bandit took up the rear, watchful as she jumped into the hole. She worked the latch open.

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“I need help,” she grunted. The lid was heavy on this box. He joined her. Together they shoved the top open. “It’s empty! Not even a body.” She leapt inside, searching.

Bandit leaned over the edge, lost his balance and fell in. The top slammed closed.

Digger screeched as everything went dark. “What happened?” she cried, voice shaking.

“I think we’ve been duped,” Bandit growled.

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They were lined up, side by side, forced to watch as their little camp was torn apart. They hissed, spat and growled their discontent, but nothing they said would stop the destruction of their carefully crafted den. Their prizes were confiscated, too.

“The families will be happy to know we’ve recovered the jewelry,” one of the grave-diggers said. He crouched before one of the cages, tapped his water bottle on the wire mesh. The cap caught in the chain. Bandit grabbed hold, yanked the water bottle through the thin wire. He muttered as he twisted the cap off, took a long drink.

“Hey, he stole my water, twisted the top off, and took a drink,” Leon laughed.

“Yeah,” Tracy said, head bobbing. “Raccoons can open doors, jars, bottles, all kinds of stuff. Smart little critters.” He crouched before Digger’s cage. “We thought we had some really skilled thieves on our hands, but no. Just these little guys wreaking havoc on the dead.” He tossed a grape into her cage. She grabbed the fruit and turned her back on him as she nibbled.

The Wildlife Conservatory van drove over the Morgan Bridge that connects Dudley Street to the cemetery grounds. It parked nearby.

“Well guys,” Tracy said standing. “You had a good run here, but time to go to your new home. Your life of crime is now over. You’ll have to get used to foraging and fishing again.”