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Opening extract from

Black Bones

Written by

E. E. Richardson

Published by

Barrington Stoke Ltd

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Black Bones

by

E. E. Richardson

Teen title

Barrington Stoke

Chapter One

The Skull in the Box

There was a skull on Tony's desk when he got to work.

He didn't realise it at first. The skull was in a plain brown box. It looked like any other parcel that might come into the shop. He made a cup of coffee before he opened it.

When he took the lid off, he saw the skull.

It was shaped like a human skull, but he could see that it wasn't one. The teeth were too sharp. The bones were black, not white. And it had big curly horns, like a ram's.

Tony looked at it for a while. "Huh," he said. Then he got up and went into the front room of the shop.

The shop was still and quiet at this time of day. It was just gone half past two in the afternoon. The shop did most of its trade after dark. It was Tony's father's shop, and it sold magic. Not just card tricks and fake wands. The real thing.

The front room of the shop was packed with stuff. There were piles of old books on the floor. Rows of jars and bottles round the walls.

There was a glass case full of silver rings, and a wall hung with mirrors.

And those were just the most normal-looking things.

Some of the things Tony's dad sold made the skull look nice. But his dad wasn't here right now. He was off on a world tour, looking for new kinds of spells. He'd been gone for two weeks.

So where had the skull come from?

Tony went over to the front till. There was only one shop assistant. She was a part-time art student called Jazz. She had blue hair and at least three tattoos.

"Hey, Jazz," Tony said.

"Yeah?" Jazz didn't look up from the till.

"You know my birthday's not till June, right?" he said.

She just looked puzzled. "Huh?"

Tony gave a sigh. "Why is there a skull on my desk?" he asked.

"Is it a skull?" Jazz said with a blank look.

"It's a skull," he said. "A black one. With horns."

"Well, it's not from me," she said. "Some woman left it for you."

He tried to think who would leave him an evil skull. "Was it one of my ex girlfriends?" he asked.

Jazz let out a snort. "Ha. No way," she said. "She had far too much class to go out with you."

"Hey, I have class," Tony said. "I have lots of class."

"Yeah, right. Sure you do." Jazz rolled her eyes. She held up a printed card. "She left this."

Tony took the card and read it. It said,

Robin Smith

Myths and Folk Tales

Reed College

He knew where Reed College was. It was on the other side of town. But he didn't know Robin Smith.

"Never heard of her," he said with a frown. "Why would a woman I don't know leave me a skull?"

Jazz gave a bored shrug. "Don't look at me," she said. "I just work here."

There was a phone number on the card. Tony went back into the office to look for his mobile. He had to dig around in the piles of junk to find it.

It turned out to be under a T-shirt on the floor. He picked it up and called the number on the card.

"Hello?" said a woman's voice. She sounded quite posh.

"Hi, this is Tony," he said. "Um, do I know you?"

There was a short pause. "This is Robin," the woman said. "Do I know *you*?"

Tony put his feet up on the desk next to the skull. "Well, I don't know," he said, looking at it. "Do you give black skulls to a lot of people?"

"Oh!" the woman said. "You're from the magic shop? Sorry. I asked the girl at the till to give it to Mr Kim." She sounded cross.

"I'm Tony Kim," he said. He sat back with a sigh. "But I've got a feeling that maybe you wanted my dad."

"You're Henry Kim's son?" she said. "Oh, I see. Look, I'm sorry to be a pain, but is he there? I need to talk to him as soon as possible."

"Ah. Well, that could be a problem," Tony said. "He's not in the shop right now."

"Well, when will he be back?" she said. Her voice was a bit sharp.

"In a few weeks," Tony said.

"Oh," she said. Then she said, in her very posh voice, "Bum."

Tony did his best not to laugh. It wasn't easy. "Um, listen," he said. "If it's that important, can I help? I'm not my dad, but I know a few things."

This time there was a longer pause. "All right," Robin said. "I guess that's the best offer I'm going to get. Do you have any idea what that thing is?"

Tony poked the skull with a pen. "Nope," he said. "But it looks like black magic to me."

"Me too." Her voice was grim. "It was left at the college where I work last night. Some men in robes were doing a chant round it. They got scared off when a load of people turned up for a netball match."

Men in robes? Oh, boy. That didn't sound good.

Tony stood up. "Okay," he said into the phone. "I'm on my way."