

The Nightmare Affair

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A Tom Doherty Associates Book
NEW YORK

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THE NIGHTMARE AFFAIR

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A Tor Teen Book
Published by Tom Doherty Associates, LLC
175 Fifth Avenue
New York, NY 10010

www.tor-forge.com

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ISBN 978-0-7653-3333-9 (hardcover)
ISBN 978-1-4668-0067-0 (e-book)

First Edition: March 2013

Printed in the United States of America

0 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Scene of the Crime

Breaking and entering wasn't as easy as it looked in the movies. Especially not from the second story of a house in the suburbs. Yet there I was, perched on the ledge by my tippy toes and tugging on the stupid window that refused to budge even though I could see it wasn't locked. My feet were starting to cramp.

I gave the window another hard tug, and it came free at once, smacking the top of the frame with a loud thump. The force of it knocked me off balance, and I tumbled inside, landing on my face.

Way to go, Dusty, I thought.

But it could've been worse. Might've gone the other way.

Panicked by the noise I was making, I sat up, certain the bedroom's occupant would be coming at me with a baseball bat any second. My heart felt like a jackhammer trying to break its way through my chest. I froze, listening for movement but heard only the soft sounds of someone sleeping.

I looked up and saw a huge bed towering over me. A repugnant smell, like the inside of a gym locker, filled my nose. I glanced down and realized I was sitting on a pile of clothes, including what appeared to be several pairs of dirty boxer shorts. *Gross.*

I stood and tugged the bottom of my fitted black tee down around my hips, taking a deep breath. I could smell the person's dreams from here. Those dreams were the reason I'd broken in. I wasn't some criminal or weirdo who liked watching people sleep or anything. I was just an average sixteen-year-old girl who happened to be the offspring of a normal human father and a mother who was a Nightmare.

Literally.

She was one of those mythic creatures who sat on your chest while you were asleep and gave you bad dreams, the kind where you woke up struggling to breathe. Some stories said that Nightmares were demons (not true), while others said they were "hags," as in scary old women who lived in the forest and abducted lost kids to cook for supper (more true, although I didn't recommend saying so to my mother).

Only kidding. Moira Nimue-Everhart didn't eat children, but she did eat the stuff dreams were made of—*fictus*. Nightmares had to dream-feed to live, including me.

I approached the side of the bed. The occupant was lying on his stomach. Go figure. The subject—I refused to think of him as a victim—was almost always on his stomach. At least this guy didn't sleep in the buff, too. Not that

the red boxers hid much. The sight of his naked back stunned me. It was so *perfect*. Even in the darkness, I could see the muscles outlining the backside of his ribs. More muscles bulged in his arms.

He was by far the sexiest dream-subject I'd encountered, and I fought off an urge to run away. Not that I preferred my subjects to be ugly or anything, but something in the middle would've been all right.

Trying to ignore the more interesting bits of that naked body, I reached over and gently took hold of the guy's arm. One soft tug and he rolled over. When I saw his face, I almost cried out in alarm.

Eli Booker.

A sensation of weightlessness came over me from the shock of recognition, as if I were on a roller coaster that had just plunged over the first hill.

Then I really did try to run away, even though I knew it was pointless. I made it as far as the window before something that felt like invisible tentacles grabbed hold of my body and pulled me back to the bedside. I sagged against it in defeat, knowing better than to fight The Will. It was too powerful a spell. No, not just a spell, more a *law*, like gravity. The magickind government created The Will to prevent magical misbehavior. It kept fairies from stealing babies, witches from turning people into toads, and for a Nightmare like me, it determined whose dreams I fed on, when, and how much.

Basically The Will says, "Jump," and Dusty says, "You got it."

The invisible grip on my body eased, and I shook off the unpleasant feeling of being manhandled by a magical spell. Trying to ignore the trembling in my knees, I looked down at that familiar face once again.

Eli Booker was the hottest guy at my old high school, maybe in all of Chickery, Ohio, itself. He was a sophomore like me, but his hair was black and his eyes cornflower blue. Tall and with a face so handsome even old ladies swooned at the sight of it, he was the guy every girl crushed on. Didn't hurt that he had a bit of a bad-boy, daredevil reputation, either. My eyes dropped to the scorpion tattoo on the left side of his chest. I'd heard rumors that he had one but this was the first time I'd seen proof. I wondered how he'd gotten it.

I forced my eyes away, aware of how quickly my heart was beating. So, yeah, even I had wasted a daydream or two fantasizing about him, and now I had to kneel on his chest and enter his dream.

Great. Who knew The Will had such a sense of humor?

Still, I wasn't about to sit on him half-naked like that. I grabbed the sheet lying rumped at the foot of the bed and swung it over him. Eli sighed as the sheet touched him, and my heart leaped into my throat. I held my breath, expecting the worst.

When he didn't wake, I screwed up my courage and climbed onto the bed. If I didn't, The Will would start nagging me to get on with it. If I resisted too long, the spell would get physical again. I planted my feet on either side of Eli's arms and squatted down until the majority of

my body weight rested on his muscular chest. Trust me, it *was* as strange as it sounded and even stranger being the person doing it. Once I was in position, an ache burned inside me like a terrible, desperate thirst. My body craved the fectus it needed to replenish my magic.

A soft moan escaped Eli's throat, but this time I didn't panic. Once a Nightmare was in place around a victim . . . er . . . subject, the magic kicked in, rendering the person powerless, even to wake. Which was why a girl like me, five foot four and 115 pounds, could sit on top of a sleeping boy without his knowing. *Thank goodness for the little things.*

I closed my eyes and exhaled, placing my fingers against his forehead. Bright light burst inside my mind like professional-grade fireworks as my consciousness left my body and entered the dream world of Eli Booker.

I knew at once something was different. I might be new to the Nightmare gig, not having come into my powers until a couple of months ago, but I'd done this enough to worry at the strange intensity of the colors swirling around me as the dream world came into focus. Most dreams were gray and foggy, old black-and-white horror movies, the kind with wide-angled shots of the rickety castle. This one was in full Technicolor. I felt like Dorothy first stepping out of her house into the Land of Oz.

I stood in the middle of a cemetery, surrounded by crumbling headstones and mausoleums thick with ivy. It was nighttime, but the full moon overhead shone bright enough that I could see the dark green of the ivy and the

way its leaves stirred in the faint breeze. The murmur of voices echoed eerily around me, and for a moment I thought they might be ghosts. Then I turned and saw a bunch of police officers milling about with flashlights in hand. The presence of cops didn't surprise me; Eli's dad was a detective.

I looked around, trying to find Eli. With so many people, tombs, and trees scattered about the place, he could be anywhere. But I had to find him quick. Rule *número uno* in dream-walking: always know the subject's location. It was absolutely essential not to have any physical contact with the dreamer. Touching them would break all the enchantments holding them in the dream and make them wake up. It was a lesson I'd learned the painful way.

Not seeing Eli anywhere, I flew into the air to get a bird's-eye view. I spotted him at last on the other side of a supersized mausoleum, the kind reserved for an entire family's worth of dead bodies. He looked strange, dressed up in a fancy gray suit with an obnoxious orange-and-blue necktie. It was the kind of thing his father wore when he gave statements to the local news channels about cases, and I guessed Eli was dreaming that he was a detective. I grinned. The whole thing was sort of sweet, like a kid playing dress-up. And totally out of character for someone like Eli, a guy who I imagined thought of himself as way too cool and rebellious to want to grow up and be like his dad. Or at least a guy too cool to admit it.

I lowered myself to the ground, a safe distance away

from Eli. One of the best things about dream-walking was that reality was flexible. I could fly, change my appearance, you name it. Usually the first thing I did when arriving in a dream was to replace my frizzy red hair with sleek, straight platinum. Not this time though. I was too distracted by the dream's strangeness for vanity.

My gaze fell on the name etched in the stone above the doorway of the nearest mausoleum—KIRKWOOD. This wasn't any old graveyard Eli was dreaming about, but Coleville Cemetery, the local burial place for magickind. Only that was impossible. Coleville was located on the grounds of Arkwell Academy—*my* high school. It was a school for magickind, with twelve-foot-high, magically enforced fences and security-guarded gates, and completely inaccessible to ordinaries. Eli *couldn't* have been here before.

Yet somehow he must've been. The details were too good. The place looked exactly like it did in real life, right down to the bell tower in the distance and the odd placement of statues and stone benches among the grave markers. Coleville wasn't just a cemetery, but a local recreational spot for Arkwell students and teachers, sort of like the campus green, only with dead people.

The heady scent of lilac bushes and jasmine tickled my nose. Even the smells were right on. They were so real, for a moment I almost forgot I was in a dream.

That was impossible, too. Dreams were never so close to reality. Most were like trips through the funhouse, complete with distorted images, naked people—usually the

dreamer himself—and disturbing settings like public rest rooms that resembled torture chambers.

I focused on Eli, trying to ignore my growing unease. He was talking to some of the uniformed officers, a serious look on his face. He kept gesturing behind him to where some more cops stood circled around something. Curiosity got the better of me, and I walked over.

Sprawled on the ground lay a pale-faced girl with bright blond hair, the kind I would've killed for in real life. Only, it looked as if someone *had* killed her. She was perfectly still, her eyes open but staring at nothing. Dark, purplish bruises rimmed her throat like a grotesque tattoo.

A thrill of fear went through me, and I covered my mouth to muffle a scream. It was Rosemary Vanholt, one of the fairies who attended Arkwell Academy. And she wasn't just any fairy; she was the daughter of Consul Vanholt, the head of the Magi Senate. A lot of the politicians' kids went to Arkwell. The magickind capital city of the United States was located nearby on a hidden island somewhere in the middle of Lake Erie. The lake itself was one of the most magical places in America.

She's like the president's daughter. And someone had *murdered* her.

"It's just a dream," I whispered. It was possible Eli had seen Rosemary around town or that he knew her. Seniors like her were required to hang around ordinaries for practice sometimes. That was the whole point of a place like Arkwell, to teach magickind how to live undetected in the human world.

Sure, that made sense, but it didn't explain the Coleville setting. There wasn't one for that.

On the verge of a freak-out, I turned around, trying to put more distance between me and Rosemary's body.

In my horror I hadn't realized that Eli had moved. He now stood less than a yard away from me, so tall and physically imposing he might as well have been a brick wall in the path.

"Crap," I whispered, sidestepping to avoid him. My foot caught on a tombstone, and I stumbled but managed to swerve my momentum left, barely missing a collision. Too close for comfort, I hurried past Eli, heading for a safe distance.

Something touched my arm, and I shrieked as a jolt of pain went through my entire existence. I turned to see Eli's gaze fixed on my face, his hand gripping my arm. The world around me began to slip away, the colors melting like fresh paint in the rain. Then my consciousness was hurled out of the dream back into my body hard enough that I screamed again—for real this time. I let go of Eli's forehead and grabbed my own, trying to stop my brains from rolling around like marbles inside my skull.

The pressure helped for a moment, but then Eli sat up and shoved me. I tumbled off the bed, landing on my back. I tried to take a breath, found I couldn't, and panicked, arms and legs thrashing. Eli's bewildered face appeared over me. He grabbed me by the shoulders and hauled me to my feet as easily as if I weighed nothing at all.

As soon as I was upright, my wind came back. So did my senses, and I cast the corrector spell like I'd been taught to do in moments like this. "Aphairein!"

The spell struck Eli, then *bounced*, hitting me instead. The corrector spell worked like an undo button on a computer, but it wasn't meant to be self-administered. Instead of undoing my actions, it slammed into me with the force of a battering ram. Eli still had hold of my shoulders, and both of us went crashing to the ground this time. He landed on top of me so hard I felt like I'd been sat on by an elephant.

"Get off," I said, struggling to breathe. I cast another spell at him, but it bounced, too. *What the—?*

Eli rolled off me and stood up. When I realized he'd been lying on top of me in only his red boxers, I blushed from head to toe. My skin was so hot I thought I'd turn to ash any second.

"Who the hell are you?" Eli pointed at me, his chest muscles flexing in a way that made me want to giggle.

I resisted the urge and leaped to my feet. We were close enough to the window that the moonlight shone full on my face.

Eli made a choking sound. "I know *you*. What are you doing here? And what's wrong with your eyes? They're . . . *glowing?*"

I groaned inwardly, ashamed that this hot boy who'd probably never noticed me before was now seeing the worst of me, and there was nothing I could do to stop it. *Stupid, stupid, unreliable magic*. In the daytime, Night-

mares looked as human as anybody else, our unusually pale eyes strange but not alarming. At night, our eyes glowed white. The glamour I usually wore to hide the glow must've come undone.

“What kind of *freak* are you?” Eli said.

I glared at him, ignoring the sting of his words. “At least I’m not the freak dreaming about dead girls.”

He gaped. “How do you know that?”

Uh . . . More embarrassed than any one person should ever have to be, I decided it was time to make a break for it. I could hear loud footsteps outside his door and knew I had about two seconds to escape. His dad was a cop; I was certain he would shoot me first and regret later.

I ran to the open window. Rule number two in dream-feeding: always have an escape route. I climbed over the edge, grabbed hold of the ivy-covered drainpipe, and slid down as quickly as I dared. Thank goodness for all those gymnastic lessons when I was younger. Normally, I would've used a glider spell to get down, but with my magic misfiring, I couldn't risk it.

As my feet touched the ground, I looked up to see Eli staring down at me, mouth open. I stuck my tongue out at him. Then I turned and sprinted up the sidewalk.

A few minutes later, I slowed to an easier pace. I had a few blocks to go until I reached McCloud Park, where I'd stowed my bicycle in some bushes. Would've been nice to have a car or motorcycle for these late-night dream-feeding adventures—hell, I wouldn't have turned down a moped—but my chances of getting any kind of motorized vehicle

were slim to zero. Arkwell was a boarding school with a strict no-student-vehicles policy.

I spotted my bicycle sitting between some bushes where I'd left it and dropped down to a walk. If Eli or his dad hadn't caught up to me by now, they probably weren't going to.

Should've known better than to trust my luck.

An enormous black sedan rounded the corner into the parking lot, and I froze as the beam of headlights struck me. It came to a stop, and all the doors opened in unison. Four hairy-looking men in matching gray suits stepped out.

Four *werewolves*, to be precise. Local law enforcement for magickind.