

The  
Nightmare  
Charade

MINDEE ARNETT



A Tom Doherty Associates Book

NEW YORK

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## THE NIGHTMARE CHARADE

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## Last Kiss

I had no idea that the first kiss would be the last.

The last free one that was, the only one Eli and I didn't have to steal or keep hidden like some terrible secret.

No, I had no idea what was coming as I stood in front of the bathroom mirror and reapplied my cherry lip gloss for the fourth time.

"You know, Dusty," Selene said from outside the door where she was hanging posters on the wall of our new dorm room, two floors up from our old one. "Despite what the packaging might claim, I don't think it's actually possible to increase the size of your lips by putting on layers."

Suppressing a nervous laugh, I turned and stepped out into the living room portion of the suite. We were juniors this year, and that meant a larger dorm, complete with a private bathroom. Selene and I had plans to burn our old shower shoes in a celebratory ritual this weekend.

I fixed her with the most serious stare I could manage. "Are you sure? This is magic lip gloss, you know."

Selene snorted. "I don't believe you." She held out her hand, and I set the lipstick canister on her palm. She turned it over in her fingers, and then raised it to eye level to read the label.

“This is in French.”

“That’s because I bought it in Paris.” The memory brought a fleeting grin to my face. Despite the emotional challenges I’d faced during my summer vacation spent touring Europe—being cut off from my friends; stuck with only my mother for company; and most especially, going weeks on end without a single word from the literal boy of my dreams, Eli Booker—the physical experience had been fun. The lip balm was an impromptu purchase at a little shop called the Incantorium Emporium. It was the kind of place that only served magickind. Probably a good thing, given its location inside a secret alcove in the Paris catacombs. Nothing said magical and charming like a bunch of skeletons.

“So I gathered,” Selene said with a hint of envy in her voice. Her summer hadn’t been quite as exotic, although I would’ve traded places with her in a hot second. She’d spent the last eleven weeks hanging out with her boyfriend—late-night strolls by the lake, trips to the movies, not to mention hours of kissing, or so I guessed. Even if Selene were the kind of girl to make out and tell, she wouldn’t have chosen me as her confidant. Partially because I wasn’t thrilled about her reconciliation with my sometimes tormenter and regular jackass Lance Rathbone, but mostly because she knew all too well how little kissing I’d been doing lately.

A situation that was about to change.

A flock of butterflies took flight inside my stomach. I fought to keep the tremor out of my voice, my words coming rapidly. “Yeah, the shop owner told me it has an *amore* charm on it. At least, that’s what I thought he said. His accent was pretty thick, and I don’t think he liked me at all. He was a Mors demon and you know how they feel about Nightmares. I mean, then again, pretty much everybody hates Night—”

“Dusty.” Selene grabbed my shoulders and gave me a shake. “You’re babbling.”

I gulped, trying to settle the butterflies, but they only increased their frenzy, becoming hummingbirds instead, wings on turbo speed. “Sorry. I can’t help it. I’m nervous.”

Selene smiled. The gesture was so radiant it made my head spin, and for a second the hummingbirds froze, stunned by an unexpected onslaught of bliss. That was the trouble with having a siren for a best friend—random moments of dazedness. Not that it was her fault. She couldn’t help being beautiful and mesmerizing. No more than I could help the way my eyes glow in the dark, an aspect of my Nightmare heritage. At the moment, however, I had a feeling Selene wasn’t aware of just how much more dazzling she was being than normal. I suspected it might have something to do with Lance.

“You’ve no reason to be nervous,” Selene said, her smile easing enough to make the radiance tolerable. “You look beautiful.”

I shook my head and stepped back. “It’s not that. It’s . . .” I broke off, searching for the right words. Looks weren’t the problem. I didn’t feel beautiful, exactly, but I knew I was looking nice, slightly above my average state. My makeup was even and natural, and I’d managed to convince my frizzy red hair to lie flat for once with some help from *Magick Madam’s Hair Pomade*, another purchase from the *Incantorium Emporium*. Outfit wise, I’d opted for a pair of low-rise designer jeans and a pale pink knit top, the kind that hangs loose around the shoulders, that my mom bought me from a boutique in Italy.

No, looks weren’t the problem.

Time was.

Nearly three months had gone by since I’d last seen Eli in person. And though I had no reason to believe his feelings for me had changed, I had no proof they were the same either. We hadn’t

spoken on the phone at all, and the e-mails had been too few and too brief. I hadn't had access to my cell phone all summer—the moment our plane touched down in London, my mom confiscated it. She claimed it was because of the high international cellular charges. *Yeah right.*

That was the worst of it. None of the adults in our lives wanted us to be together. Everybody from my mother to magickind government officials were trying to keep us apart. It was the primary reason for my impromptu summer vacation abroad. But their rationale for doing so was just a stupid superstition. Eli and I were dream-seers; together we could predict the future and uncover secrets through signs and symbols in Eli's dreams, a gift that made us invaluable to the magickind government. So far we'd stopped a murderous, power-mad warlock who styled himself as the next Hitler, and we'd prevented the magickind island capital of Lyonshold from sinking into the waters of Lake Erie.

The only catch to our ability, the only *price*, came in the form of a curse—if Eli and I were to fall in love we would be doomed to destroy each other.

*I don't believe it. I refuse to believe it.*

Drawing a deep breath, I let it out slowly. "What if he's changed his mind?"

"About what?" Selene said half-laughing, half-exasperated. "About you? Not a chance."

Relief swept over me at her words and even more at the attitude behind them. She was so certain, so happy and optimistic. Not at all like the best friend that I'd left behind at the beginning of the summer. That Selene would've been careful in her reassurance, logical about the argument. Not so carefree. It was a nice change. A smile broke across my face. "Who are you and what have you done with my best friend?"

Selene blinked. In the low dorm room light, her eyes looked indigo in color. Her glossy black hair hung in a thick braid over her shoulder. “What do you mean?”

“Never mind. I just think we need to have a long talk about your summer vacation. Later.” I pulled my cell out of my front pocket and pressed the home button, lighting up the screen: 10:46 P.M. My heart rate quickened, the hummingbirds taking flight again. Eli said to meet him at 11:00. If I left now I would make it right on time, maybe even one or two minutes early. The walk would be easy since I’d opted for flats instead of heels.

But did I want to arrive right on time? Would I appear too eager? Desperate?

With my anticipation wavering toward frustration, I opened the phone to the text screen and reread Eli’s message.

I’m finally on campus. Think you can sneak out? Meet me at my dorm at 11:00?

I’d immediately typed back a yes. I didn’t have to ask him for his new room number. Selene already knew it. Lance was Eli’s roommate again this year, and he’d moved in yesterday.

“Okay,” Selene said, still puzzled. One slender dark eyebrow sat higher than the other. “Later then. Shouldn’t you be going?”

I bit my lip. “I don’t know. Should I?”

Selene cleared her throat. “So who are *you* and what have you done with *my* best friend?”

“What?”

“You’re usually not this indecisive. Normally it’s all act first, think it over later.” Opening my mouth to argue, she cut me off with a raised hand. “Go on. Eli is waiting for you. Don’t waste time pretending you feel anything less than what you actually do.”

*Speaking from experience?* I wanted to ask but didn’t. I already

knew the answer. Returning my cell to my pocket, I headed out the door. I made it five steps, debated whether or not I should brush my teeth again, then forced myself to walk down the hallway to the staircase.

The only drawback to the upperclassman dorms was the longer trek. I trotted down the last two flights of stairs, battling with nerves the whole way. I slowed as I reached the foyer. Two magically animated suits of armor stood guard at the door—Frank and Igor, or so I'd dubbed them freshman year. At the sound of my approach, they turned their faces toward me, blank empty slots inside their helmets where their eyes should have been. Having them look at you like that was creepy on a good night, but in my current nervous state it was downright terrifying. I had no idea if they would let me pass.

Technically speaking, I didn't have permission to be out after hours tonight. But I was hoping Frank and Igor wouldn't know that. I was a Nightmare, after all, and they were used to my late-night schedule. Last year, I'd been allowed out of the dorm three nights a week to dream-feed with Eli. Well, *on* Eli, to be more specific. Even though I was half human I still had to dream-feed to fuel my magic.

"Hey, guys," I said, giving a little wave. "Did you miss me?"

Blank stares.

"I'll take that as a yes."

More blank stares.

"But listen, I'm on my way to a dream-feeding session. Okay if I pass?"

Blank stares to the nth power.

A weak feeling struck my knees and sweat broke out on the back of my neck. If they didn't let me through, I was going to have a meltdown. Nervous or not, I had my heart set on seeing Eli tonight. The skin on my wrist began to warm beneath the

silver band I wore there, and it occurred to me I could always force my way through, with magic.

But a second later, they turned their sightless gazes away from me and pulled their spears fully upright. Taking that as a yes, I hurried past them.

Outside the warm day had turned to a cool night. A cloudless sky drenched in stars cast silver light over the campus. The buildings at Arkwell Academy came in an assortment of architectural styles, everything from Gothic to neoclassical to baroque. I never paid much attention to the variation before, but after nearly three months of sightseeing in Europe, I'd developed a keener eye—and vocabulary. Rather than look tacky, the effect of so many styles in one place was to make Arkwell feel like *every* place, the entire world situated in some two thousand acres.

I reached the bell tower at the center of campus without spotting anyone, but as I rounded the corner around Monmouth Tower, my heart lurched at the sight of one of the Will Guard walking down the path toward me. Crap. I didn't think these magickind versions of rent-a-cops would be back this year, not after so many of them had been in on the plan to sink Lyonshold. But it seemed I was wrong. This particular Will Guard wasn't one I'd seen before, but there was no mistaking the red tunic and black pants.

Deciding it was too late to go around, I raised my head, feigning confidence.

"What are you doing out at this hour?" the woman said, coming to a halt in front of me. I saw at once that she was witch-kind; she carried a wand made of some dark wood in her right hand. The name Bollinger was embroidered in gold across the left breast of her tunic beneath the Magi Senate crest of the tree, wand, and flame.

"I'm on my way to a dream-feeding session," I said, somehow

managing to sound steady despite the tremble in my muscles. “I’m a Nightmare.”

Bollinger stared back at me, unblinking, face expressionless.

“Um.” I bit my lower lip. “You know, a Nightmare? I have to dream-feed? Late at night? While people are sleeping?” I hadn’t meant every phrase to come out a question, but they had anyway.

The woman’s lips twisted into a frown. “I know what a Nightmare is.”

*That’s a relief*, I thought, wise enough to keep it to myself. See, Selene was wrong; I could totally think before acting.

The woman’s eyes narrowed on my face. “You’re the one who broke The Will, aren’t you?”

A chill snaked down my spine at the venom in her voice. Her dislike was clear as freshly Windexed glass. It wouldn’t be the first time someone disliked me on principle. Nightmares often provoked that reaction in other magickind, thanks to our bloody, evil history, one so violent that there were hardly any more Nightmares around. But this time I had a feeling it was more personal.

The shakiness in my muscles changed to tension—not from nerves but anticipation, like an athlete moments before the start of a competition. The skin around my left wrist began to warm again beneath the silver band, the sensation all too familiar. On the outside it looked like a thick bracelet, but on the inside, hidden beneath a glamour, it wasn’t anything so benign. I reached for the band instinctively, twisting it around on my wrist. It was hot to the touch.

“Technically, I didn’t break it. I just made it possible for it to be broken.” Speaking had been a mistake. A lie would’ve been better, but it was hard to think with the tension coursing through me, the burning in my wrist. When that happened all I wanted to do was disengage the glamour on the bracelet and reveal the sword hidden beneath it.

Not just any sword, but Bellanax, the sword of legend, sword of power. Ancient and infinitely magical, it had been known by many names over the centuries, including Excalibur and, most recently, The Will sword. Yes, this object around my wrist was what had made The Will possible. It was the power source for the spell that had once controlled and policed all magic use.

But I couldn't reveal Bellanax, no matter how much I wanted to. Few people knew I had possession of the sword, and I needed to keep it that way—if I wanted to stay alive.

Resisting the urge to break the glamour, I focused on the woman in front of me.

Her frown had become a snarl. "I don't care about technicalities. What I care about is having my job reduced to this." She waved her hand through the air as if to indicate the entire expanse of Arkwell.

I wanted to sympathize, I really did—it had to be rough to go from some cushy desk job to foot patrolling a school full of teenagers—but with Bellanax's presence pressing so hard on me at the moment, sympathy was in short supply. The sword wanted to be seen—and used.

"I'm sorry," I said, an alien coolness creeping into my voice. "It's been tough all over."

"You have no idea," Bollinger snapped. Her teeth were startlingly white in the moonlight, the incisors uneven points. She wore her mouse-brown hair in a ponytail at the nape of her neck.

I took a deep breath, let it out, then drew another. "May I go to my session?" Now my voice had a note of daring in it—as in "you don't dare tell me no." I didn't mean for it to come out that way, but it couldn't be helped. When Bellanax decided to make trouble, all bets were off. The last time it had acted out, Mom and I were eating in a seafood bar in Inverness, Scotland, and I overheard the men at the table next to us claiming that if the

Loch Ness monster was real it had to be some long-lost dinosaur. Bellanax had taken offense at the notion, and tried to get me to correct them—the Loch Ness was a wyvern not a dinosaur. It had taken all my energy to resist. The sword was a numen vessel, housing the spirit of a long-dead magickind, and that meant it had a mind and will of its own.

Bollinger swallowed, the veins in her neck working. “Yes,” she finally said. “You may go.”

“Thank you.” I moved past her without another word and without looking back. The farther away I drew from her, the spirit or power or whatever it was that made Bellanax something more than a sword, settled back into a state of dormancy. Which was exactly where I preferred it.

The longer I walked, distancing myself from the run-in, the more the woman’s reaction bothered me. I could understand her resentment, but not her hate. She acted like I was an ax murderer on death row, one who’d chopped up her family into little pieces. It wasn’t fair. *I didn’t*—the thought stopped dead in my mind as I remembered the attack on Lyonshold. We’d kept the island from sinking, but there had been casualties. One of them had even been a friend of mine. Was it really my fault? Was I responsible for breaking The Will and thereby allowing evildoers the chance to do their bad deeds?

There was no answer. Even Bellanax, who often offered opinions on such things, remained quiet.

A new kind of nervousness came over me that not even the anticipation of seeing Eli could shake. At least that was until I actually arrived outside his door. Standing before it, my heart gave a hard lurch inside my chest and then seemed to stop beating all together for a second. I didn’t know if I should knock or just go on in. Normally, I did the latter, but nothing felt normal right now.

I stood there for several moments, thinking it over. Unconsciously, I touched my fingers to the silver band, twisting it around and around on my wrist as I tried to muster my courage—knock or enter, knock or enter.

At the sound of a noise coming down the corridor, I reached for the door handle, found it unlocked, and pushed my way inside.

Familiar surroundings greeted me. Except for the larger size and bathroom, Eli's new dorm looked the same as the old one. Expensive stereo equipment and other electronics lined one whole wall, most of it belonging to Lance Rathbone whose dad was a magi senator with all the requisite income included. Band posters and several pieces of sports memorabilia decorated the rest of the walls in and around the two desk units and sofa. I was happy to see that Lance hadn't put up his girls-in-bikinis posters again. I had a feeling I could thank Selene for that one.

All of this I took in with one quick, forgotten glance before my eyes fell on the boy sitting in the chair farthest from the door. Eli's eyes were fixed on me in a penetrating stare, as if he wasn't quite sure who he was seeing. I stared back, my heart beating somewhere near my throat. The hummingbirds still filled my belly, but they seemed to have doubled in size and number.

Eli looked mostly the same as I remembered—only better, because he was here and he was real. His black hair, usually longer, was cut military short, and his skin was tanned to a golden bronze. The lights were turned down low, but even still I could clearly see the blue of his eyes, pale and startling in their color.

*Say something!* But my voice had gotten lost. And I didn't know what to say. "Hi" seemed inadequate. I had no idea what Eli was thinking, feeling. All the doubt from earlier came crashing back down on me. Here I'd thought his invite tonight was for us to rekindle the first faint sparks we'd left burning weeks

ago. But maybe instead he was just going to tell me he'd moved on, found someone else. Or even worse, that he'd decided to believe the curse again, the way he had when he first learned about it last year.

Finally, I mustered my courage and opened my mouth to speak. But then a smile broke across Eli's face. The effect was like sunlight bursting through a wall of storm clouds, sudden, undeniable proof of hope and possibilities and change.

He stood up, his presence seeming to fill the whole room. I'd forgotten how tall he was, how physically imposing. He'd put on muscle over the last few weeks, the evidence clear in the bulging, sinewy shapes visible beneath his well-worn T-shirt. He made me feel small and vulnerable, but also completely safe and protected.

"Dusty," he said, his voice deep and husky. The sound set my pulse to racing.

Two steps later and he stood before me, peering down as he raised his hands to my face, cradling the sides of my jaw, the tips of his fingers slipping into my hair.

And then his lips closed over mine. The world turned sideways for a moment, but in the next it settled into place. Into *rightness*. I kissed him back, wrapping my hands around his waist and holding on. There was no curse. No reason to worry. We were made for this.

Nothing could be more right.