

NIGHTSHADE'S REQUIEM

Other Books by Anthony Hains

Birth Offering

Dead Works

The Disembodied

Sweet Aswang

The Torment

Sleep in the Dust of the Earth

NIGHTSHADE'S REQUIEM

Nightshade Chronicles
Book 1

Anthony Hains

1

Cole Gets Taken for a Ride

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September 1962
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THE BLOOD SEEPING DOWN THE back of his throat had slowed considerably, so that crappy taste in his mouth wasn't as bad anymore. Still, he kept getting remnants of the metallic flavor whenever he swallowed, and it was disgusting.

His reflection in the car window was hard to see because of the late-afternoon sun. Whenever the car made its way under the shade of trees lining the road, however, he could catch glimpses of his face and shock of black hair in the glass. These brief images displayed swaths of deep red smears crusted across his lips and cheeks. Even his chin had smudges that reminded him of a goatee. The crimson around his nostrils added to the effect.

All this courtesy of Bruce, his foster father.

"That'll teach you to lie," Bruce had said after knocking him to the kitchen floor for the second time. Droplets of

blood sprayed the linoleum. Bruce grabbed him hard enough to practically yank off his T-shirt. It was up around his armpits, and splotches of red were rapidly spreading over the dull white.

“Just get him out of here. Damn kid gives me the creeps. His lies and his heathen rituals,” Dorie screamed at her husband. She tossed a packed suitcase in the general direction of the back door where it landed with a dull thud. “For cripes’ sake, Bruce, you’re getting blood everywhere. Don’t make me more work. Just go.”

Dorie was beet red. Her eyes were blazing mad, and her piercing stare was meant to shake him to his very core. It didn’t. The impact was spoiled by strands of colorless hair spiking haphazardly from pink curlers that bobbed with each word she yelled. If his mouth hadn’t been hurting so much, he’d probably smile—maybe even laugh.

“You dirty little creep. Think you can do your nasty little things with Bobbi Anne and talk your stupid lies? You think you can curse this family?”

Bobbi Anne stood well behind her mother in the den off the kitchen. Her hands were clutched together with knuckles gleaming white from the pressure. Her teddy-bear eyes, naturally round and cute under normal conditions, bulged in panic. He thought they might burst out of her skull.

The car swooped unexpectedly down a lengthy hill and his stomach dropped. He usually enjoyed the sensation of feeling suspended in midair, but not now. He couldn’t get his mind off the fear in Bobbi Anne’s eyes.

The first time he’d seen her look so scared was when the hulking shadow materialized in Bobbi Anne’s bedroom doorway and strode silently over to her bed. Bobbi Anne,

unable to budge in the slightest, gaped at the approaching shadow over the bed covers. The shadow paused just a moment and tossed the covers off the girl with a snap. Bobbi Anne whimpered once, then went silent as the shadow touched her and did things to her.

He stole his way back up the stairs to his room, counting to four with each step. If there was any creak or snap of the wood, he would need to return to a lower stair and start again. He made absolutely sure this didn't happen.

Bobbi Anne was nine. Two years younger than him. No, his birthday was just around the corner. That would make him three years older.

He told his foster mother what he saw, but she didn't believe it. In fact, they thought *he* was the shadow-thing that entered Bobbi Anne's room and did the nasty things. Bobbi Anne insisted it wasn't him, but under increasingly intense pressure from both her parents, she revised her story. He was slapped again and again over the next few days. And kept locked in his room where he counted words in a book instead of reading. If he ended with an even number, he was okay and the bad things stayed behind the walls. If he ended with an odd number, then he'd have to start again. If an image of the bad things came to his mind, he'd have to think of words with an even number of letters and keep his thoughts on something pleasant like rainbows and puffy clouds. *Heaven* was one of his favorites: H-E-A-V-E-N—spelling and counting while imagining a rainbow. If another bad thing entered his mind, his panic soared and he'd have to start the ritual anew.

For three days he kept this up. Then he was told he was being removed from foster care and placed in the asylum in the country. With the crazy people and the perverts.

"I hope they shock your brains out. That's what they do there."

Bobbi Anne whispered she was sorry through his closed door the day before he left, and he whispered back that it was okay. She was scared because the shadow that hurt her would still be in the house after he left. There was nothing he could do to help her anymore.

After a few more parting swats in the kitchen he was able to get off the floor. He picked up the suitcase that his foster mother had thrown and got into the car.



Eight months with Bruce and Dorie and he'd hated every minute. He wasn't sure how he got there or why them in particular. It just happened.

"You can't stay here at your Nana's house no more." The lady who said this was from something called Social Services.

"How come?" He couldn't see why not. He had been always *here*.

"Why, child, Ruby... well, she's gone to heaven."

He looked back at Nana's cabin from his perch on the hood of the lady's Ford Fairlane. The car had two colors, white on the top and robin's egg blue on the sides. He liked how it looked. It was certainly better than Nana's old clunker, which was just brown and full of rust.

Inside the cabin, two deputies were talking loud enough that he could tell they were talking but not loud enough that he could make out the words. The door was partly opened, and he saw Nana lying on her cot near the stove. She hadn't moved the entire time the deputies had been inside. That surprised him. With guests in the house, she should've been up and about, chatting away and preparing something to eat.

The only sounds came from the deputies, who were standing out of sight because of the smell. At least that's what the deputies said.

He was confused. Though Nana hadn't gotten up from the cot for some days now, she'd asked him to prepare meals and wash up just like she always did. But now the deputies said she'd been dead for days.

For days. Good God, she was starting to rot.

He'd heard one of the deputies say this very thing.

He tried to explain that she'd talked to him this morning. But no dice. The preacher showed up after breakfast wondering if anything was wrong (he hadn't seen Nana in a while). The preacher was welcomed inside, and his eyes sprung open wide as one of Nana's dinner plates. The preacher called the sheriff and then all these people came over. Nana hadn't talked a single word since and it was now well after lunch.

"Where will I go?"

"We'll find a nice foster home for you."

He hated to leave Nana. She'd taught him other stuff besides preparing meals and washing up. Her cabin was in the country and well up the mountain. The nearest neighbor was a half mile away. There'd been plenty of coon hunting before their hound passed. She'd showed him how to snare rabbits. He'd skin, clean, and cook the animals. Then there was fishing. They went to the market in town, too, but the trip was long and Nana drove slower than molasses. She earned money mending clothes and sewing. People loved her crochet patterns.

There was always something new to see and understand.

He learned how to recognize wild plants and use them as medicine. She taught him which could be eaten and which

were poisonous. He discovered how animals mated and made babies.

Most importantly, she taught him the rituals to keep the demons from coming out of their hiding places.



The gate had square brick pillars that reached higher than the roof of the car. Wrought-iron gates painted black were attached to the pillars by giant hinges. The tops of the gates contained row after row of sharp spikes that, in the hands of someone like a gladiator, could kill somebody easily. The gates probably squeaked when they swung open, but since they were already ajar he didn't know for sure.

The hour-long ride was completed in silence. The only words out of Bruce's mouth came while the news was on the car radio and he muttered something about that "fucking Kennedy."

That was fine with him. Bruce just bossed him around. *Hurry up. Get dressed. Clean this up. Help me do this.* Dorie was a little better. She baked cookies and let him watch TV sometimes. She got cranky, though, and would yell all the time when she was in a sour mood. Sometimes she'd spend days on end in the bedroom. Bruce wouldn't come home much when this happened. So it was up to him to take care of Bobbi Anne. Doing that was okay since Nana had already taught him what he needed to know.

Bobbi Anne was fun. He liked having a little sister. But she had nightmares, probably about the dark shape that hurt her. When he told Dorie what he saw, she screamed and cried. Bruce called him a liar. *Liar, liar, liar.* Bruce slapped him over and over. A couple of times he punched instead of slapping. Later that night he lay in bed hurting all over. Dorie

and Bruce were hollering at each other, but then they quieted down. He heard Dorie climb the stairs to the attic, where his bed was, after looking in on Bobbi Anne. Dorie walked to his bed and lay down beside him. She said he was handsome. She smelled of liquor. He tried to forget what happened next.

The next day Dorie and Bruce called him wicked and dirty. He was the one who touched Bobbi Anne. (No, no!) He'd cast a spell on Dorie to make her do what she did. (What? No!)

Raised by a witch. What do you expect?

Bruce's '58 Olds 88 swung sharply into the driveway of Saint Edward's State Asylum. The car rolled, and he found himself sliding on his butt across the front seat toward Bruce. He grabbed the armrest to stop himself, but his leg touched Bruce right at the moment he stopped sliding.

"Get off me, you little bastard." Bruce shoved him back toward the passenger side while driving, swinging the wheel with his left hand.

"Sorry," he whispered.

Bruce seized a handful of his shirt while slowing the Olds in the circular drive near the front door. As the car halted, Bruce turned and pushed his face into his.

"Not one word. You hear me? Or I'll kill you. Don't think I won't."

Bruce released the shirt and smoothed out the wrinkles with the palm of his hand just as a lady in a brilliant white uniform approached the passenger side. Everything about her was crisp and spotless. She opened the door and stepped aside so he could step out. The lady was plump and not much taller than he was. Her big doughy arms wrapped around a clipboard held to her chest. Her white cap had a lot of folds and points, which meant she was a nurse. He expected her to

be stern like his fourth-grade teacher, with glaring eyes and a frown. But she was smiling and her eyes twinkled. Strange, since she was about to lock him up in a mental ward.

“Oh dear.” She rubbed a thumb on the dried blood on his cheek. “Looks like we had a nosebleed.”

“Tripped over his luggage,” Bruce said from behind the car as he unloaded the suitcase.

“My.” The nurse flipped through some papers on the clipboard. “And you must be?”

“Cole Nightshade.”

“Well. Welcome, Cole. We’ll take care of you. We’re one big happy family here.”

Cole heard a hushed snicker behind the nurse. He searched for the source and didn’t see anyone, mostly because his attention was drawn away by the scope of Saint Edwards. The building was huge. There were four floors with tall windows. The upper floor had all kinds of gables and spires.

Cole knew his demons were here and maybe other mean things. His heart started beating like a bass drum in a marching band. The sensation that something lurked just beyond his view—ready to claw or burst its way onto the scene—was overpowering. The pressure escalated, and only he could keep his world on an even keel. He focused on the trees in front of the building. As long as he counted an even number, he’d be fine. The tension would ease. There were eight. Phew.

With his heartbeat slowing, Cole glanced around. He was surprised at the number of people walking around outside. Big men with white shirts and white pants strolled slowly. They appeared to be keeping an eye on other people, all adults, who wore what looked like pajamas. The ones in pajamas were doing yardwork on the wide spread of lawn that surrounded the main building.

A throat-clearing sound came from the direction of the previous snicker. Cole could spot the source now that he had become attentive to his surroundings. An old colored man was raking a patch of lawn just a stone's throw away. He winked at Cole and pointed toward the sky. He silently mouthed something that Cole didn't understand. His suspicions about the setting started growing again.

Cole's heart leapt in his chest just like a startled rabbit. He counted windows to gain control and lost track at eleven. Odd number, not good.

"Now that's enough funny stuff, Lambert."

For a second, Cole thought the nurse might've been mad, but her lips smiled around her words and the old man chuckled. He resumed his raking until the nurse turned away and walked two steps toward Bruce, who by this time had dropped Cole's suitcase on the curb. Lambert gazed at Cole and raised his eyebrows. He pointed again to the sky and formed the words for Cole again. This time, he understood.

Watch out.

Frowning, Cole looked up. He should've started over counting windows, but his eyes followed the old man's finger. At first he saw nothing. Then he spotted an object launched from a window on the top floor, or maybe even the roof right above the main entrance where he was standing. It took a moment for the thing to come into view. It was a doll with something like a ribbon trailing in the breeze behind it. When the doll smacked the steps in front of the main door, it made a squishy noise and splattered all over. It didn't bounce like he'd expect a plastic toy to do. Then he saw why.

It was a baby.

Cole gasped, but he was the only one. No one else seemed to notice. The people in pajamas listlessly kept doing the

yardwork. The men in white kept strolling. The nurse and Bruce were arguing.

“My wife filled out all them forms. I ain’t coming in. He’s yours.”

“Mr. Asbury, you need to at least sign the admission form and let us inventory his belongings.”

“I’ll sign it right here. We don’t give a shit about his clothes. He ain’t coming back. The boy ain’t right.”

The nurse sighed and shuffled some of her papers to find the admissions form. She handed it to Bruce who, much to Cole’s amazement, started reading it while leaning his hip against the Olds. Given how jumpy Bruce was acting, Cole had expected him to just sign the form and hightail it out of there.

The baby still oozed blood and sludge on the stairs. A howl pierced the air like a razor from somewhere above. Cole jerked his head upward to see someone diving from where the baby had been thrown moments before. This was a young woman or a teenage girl, he could see that clearly. The body descended in slow motion, twirling as it went. Cole thought she looked like a ballerina dancing on her way down. She was completely upside down when she hit the concrete. Her head smashed like a hardboiled egg. Her weight must’ve lent a little more force to both the arc of her fall and her landing than the baby’s. She was farther down the steps at impact and rolled down the remaining steps.

Her body landed within a few feet of Cole. He scampered backwards and only stopped when his rump pressed against the car. Head swiveling in all directions, Cole didn’t see a single soul who seemed to notice the gruesome wreckage in front of him.

The nurse was looking at him strangely. He kept waiting

for her to react, but she just turned back to Bruce, who was still going on and on about something. A breeze kicked up, and a flock of blackbirds landed on the lawn a safe distance away. Just like that Bruce and the nurse were finished.

“Get off the car, boy.” Bruce practically broke his neck getting to the driver’s-side door. His former foster father’s hands fumbled with the handle like he’d never used one in his life. Fingernails clicked the metal under it.

Cole pushed himself off the car with his butt. He gazed at Bruce.

“Mind yourself.” Bruce mouthed the words.

Cole glared and mouthed *Fuck you* in return. He’d never said it before, didn’t know he had it in him, but it felt good. Bruce looked startled and stumbled into the car. He drove off without looking at Cole.

The whole thing was so strange that he nearly forgot about the splattered remains of the mother and baby in front of him. He swerved back to the mess, but it was gone.

Of course.

Still, he shuddered and counted his fingers on both hands while tapping his thumbs. Eight, still good.

A lanky teenage boy was staring at him from the top of the steps. His pants were a light blue, not like the all-white getup of the guards, or whatever they were called. That meant he was a patient. He wore a white T-shirt, though. And the sleeves were rolled up practically to his armpits. His hair seemed to be cut in the remnants of a flattop. His thumbs were hooked into his waistband. Cole thought he looked cool.

The teenager nodded at him.

Cole nodded back. The kid had been standing next to Lambert. Cole had a sense they’d been talking.

“Good, Kenny, you’re here,” the nurse said. She had appeared right next to Cole without him even knowing. She was a quiet walker. “You ready to come with me to show Cole around?”

“Yes, ma’am, I’ll be delighted.” He smiled a huge smile. One front tooth was positioned slightly behind the other.

“Wonderful.” The nurse rotated and stepped in front of Cole. “We haven’t been properly introduced. I’m Nurse Stern.” She held her smile, but now it seemed faked. Her eyes were like a cloudy day. They didn’t have any twinkles at the corners like people did when they were happy.

Cole stuck out his hand like he was taught. Nurse Stern ignored it. He let his hand slide down to his side.

“Time for you to be checked in. Pick up your suitcase and follow me. Kenny will inform you about life on the pediatric ward. Right, Kenny?” Nurse Stern looked over her shoulder.

“Yes, ma’am. I’ll teach him all he needs to know.” Kenny smiled again, and Cole’s knees nearly buckled. Something about his words was scary.

As he followed the nurse and boy up the steps and past Lambert, the old colored man whispered, “You be watchful, Cole. Listen to Kenny and you’ll be fine.”