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## Wicked Lovely

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First Edition



For Loch, Dylan, and Asia,
who believed in me even when I didn't,
and
the memories of John Marr Sr. and Marjorie Marr,
whose presences linger and give me strength
when I would falter



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The Summer King knelt before her. "Is this what you freely choose, to risk winter's chill?"

She watched him—the boy she'd fallen in love with these past weeks. She'd never dreamed he was something other than human, but now his skin glowed as if flames flickered just under the surface, so strange and beautiful she couldn't look away. "It's what I want."

"You understand that if you are not the one, you'll carry the Winter Queen's chill until the next mortal risks this? And you'll warn her not to trust me?" He paused, glancing at her with pain in his eyes.

She nodded.

"If she refuses me, you will tell the next girl and the next"—he moved closer—"and not until one accepts, will you be free of the cold."

"I do understand." She smiled as reassuringly as she could, and then she walked over to the hawthorn bush. The

leaves brushed against her arms as she bent down and reached under it.

Her finger wrapped around the Winter Queen's staff. It was a plain thing, worn as if countless hands had clenched the wood. It was those hands, those other girls who'd stood where she now did, she didn't want to think about.

She stood, hopeful and afraid.

Behind her, he moved closer. The rustling of trees grew almost deafening. The brightness from his skin, his hair, intensified. Her shadow fell on the ground in front of her.

He whispered, "Please. Let her be the one. . . . "

She held the Winter Queen's staff—and hoped. For a moment she even believed, but then ice pierced her, filled her like shards of glass in her veins.

She screamed his name: "Keenan!"

She stumbled toward him, but he walked away, no longer glowing, no longer looking at her.

Then she was alone—with only a wolf for companionship—waiting to tell the next girl what a folly it was to love him, to trust him.



SEERS, or Men of the SECOND SIGHT, . . . have very terrifying Encounters with [the FAIRIES, they call *Sleagh Maith*, or the Good People].

—The Secret Commonwealth by Robert Kirk and Andrew Lang (1893)

"Four-ball, side pocket." Aislinn pushed the cue forward with a short, quick thrust; the ball dropped into the pocket with a satisfying clack.

Her playing partner, Denny, motioned toward a harder shot, a bank shot.

She rolled her eyes. "What? You in a hurry?"

He pointed with the cue.

"Right." Focus and control, that's what it's all about. She sank the two.

He nodded once, as close as he got to praise.

Aislinn circled the table, paused, and chalked the cue. Around her the cracks of balls colliding, low laughter, even the endless stream of country and blues from the jukebox kept her grounded in the real world: the human world, the *safe* world. It wasn't the only world, no matter how much Aislinn wanted it to be. But it hid the other world—the ugly one—for brief moments.

"Three, corner pocket." She sighted down the cue. It was a good shot.

Focus, Control.

Then she felt it: warm air on her skin. A faery, its toohot breath on her neck, sniffed her hair. His pointed chin pressed against her skin. All the focus in the world didn't make Pointy-Face's attention tolerable.

She scratched: the only ball that dropped was the cue ball.

Denny took the ball in hand. "What was that?"

"Weak-assed?" She forced a smile, looking at Denny, at the table, anywhere but at the horde coming in the door. Even when she looked away, she heard them: laughing and squealing, gnashing teeth and beating wings, a cacophony she couldn't escape. They were out in droves now, freer somehow as evening fell, invading her space, ending any chance of the peace she'd sought.

Denny didn't stare at her, didn't ask hard questions. He just motioned for her to step away from the table and called out, "Gracie, play something for Ash."

At the jukebox Grace keyed in one of the few not-countryor-blues songs: Limp Bizkit's "Break Stuff." MELISSA MARR 5

As the oddly comforting lyrics in that gravelly voice took off, building to the inevitable stomach-tightening rage, Aislinn smiled. If I could let go like that, let the years of aggression spill out onto the fey. . . She slid her hand over the smooth wood of the cue, watching Pointy-Face gyrate beside Grace. I'd start with him. Right here, right now. She bit her lip. Of course, everyone would think she was utterly mad if she started swinging her cue at invisible bodies, everyone but the fey.

Before the song was over, Denny had cleared the table.

"Nice." Aislinn walked over to the wall rack and slid the cue back into an empty spot. Behind her, Pointy-Face giggled—high and shrill—and tore out a couple strands of her hair.

"Rack 'em again?" But Denny's tone said what he didn't: that he knew the answer before he asked. He didn't know why, but he could read the signs.

Pointy-Face slid the strands of her hair over his face.

Aislinn cleared her throat. "Rain check?"

"Sure." Denny began disassembling his cue. The regulars never commented on her odd mood swings or unexplainable habits.

She walked away from the table, murmuring good-byes as she went, consciously not staring at the faeries. They moved balls out of line, bumped into people—anything to cause trouble—but they hadn't stepped in her path tonight, not yet. At the table nearest the door, she paused. "I'm out of here."

One of the guys straightened up from a pretty combination shot. He rubbed his goatee, stroking the gray-shot hair. "Cinderella time?"

"You know how it is—got to get home before the shoe falls off." She lifted her foot, clad in a battered tennis shoe. "No sense tempting any princes."

He snorted and turned back to the table.

A doe-eyed faery eased across the room; bone-thin with too many joints, she was vulgar and gorgeous all at once. Her eyes were far too large for her face, giving her a startled look. Combined with an emaciated body, those eyes made her seem vulnerable, innocent. She wasn't.

None of them are.

The woman at the table beside Aislinn flicked a long ash into an already overflowing ashtray. "See you next weekend."

Aislinn nodded, too tense to answer.

In a blurringly quick move, Doe-Eyes flicked a thin blue tongue out at a cloven-hoofed faery. The faery stepped back, but a trail of blood already dripped down his hollowed cheeks. Doe-Eyes giggled.

Aislinn bit her lip, hard, and lifted a hand in a last half wave to Denny. *Focus*. She fought to keep her steps even, calm: everything she wasn't feeling inside.

She stepped outside, lips firmly shut against dangerous words. She wanted to speak, to tell the fey to leave so she didn't have to, but she couldn't. *Ever*. If she did, they'd know her secret: they'd know she could see them.

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The only way to survive was to keep that secret; Grams taught her that rule before she could even write her name: *Keep your head down and your mouth closed.* It felt wrong to have to hide, but if she even hinted at such a rebellious idea, Grams would have her in lockdown—homeschooled, no pool halls, no parties, no freedom, no Seth. She'd spent enough time in that situation during middle school.

Never again.

So—rage in check—Aislinn headed downtown, toward the relative safety of iron bars and steel doors. Whether in its base form or altered into the purer form of steel, iron was poisonous to fey and thus gloriously comforting to her. Despite the faeries that walked her streets, Huntsdale was home. She'd visited Pittsburgh, walked around D.C., explored Atlanta. They were nice enough, but they were too thriving, too alive, too filled with parks and trees. Huntsdale wasn't thriving. It hadn't been for years. That meant the fey didn't thrive here either.

Revelry rang from most of the alcoves and alleys she passed, but it wasn't ever as bad as the thronging choke of faeries that cavorted on the Mall in D.C. or at the Botanical Gardens in Pittsburgh. She tried to comfort herself with that thought as she walked. There were less fey here—less people, too.

Less is good.

The streets weren't empty: people went about their business, shopping, walking, laughing. It was easier for them: they didn't see the blue faery who had cornered several

winged fey behind a dirty window; they never saw the faeries with lions' manes racing across power lines, tumbling over one another, landing on a towering woman with angled teeth.

To be so blind... It was a wish Aislinn had held in secret her whole life. But wishing didn't change what was. And even if she could somehow stop seeing the fey, a person can't un-know the truth.

She tucked her hands in her pockets and kept walking, past the mother with her obviously exhausted children, past shop windows with frost creeping over them, past the frozen gray sludge all along the street. She shivered. The seemingly endless winter had already begun.

She'd passed the corner of Harper and Third—almost there—when they stepped out of an alley: the same two faeries who'd followed her almost every day the past two weeks. The girl had long white hair, streaming out like spirals of smoke. Her lips were blue—not lipstick blue, but corpse blue. She wore a faded brown leather skirt stitched with thick cords. Beside her was a huge white wolf that she'd alternately lean on or ride. When the other faery touched her, steam rose from her skin. She bared her teeth at him, shoved him, slapped him: he did nothing but smile.

And he was devastating when he did. He glowed faintly all the time, as if hot coals burned inside him. His collarlength hair shimmered like strands of copper that would slice her skin if Aislinn were to slide her fingers through MELISSA MARR 9

it—not that she would. Even if he were truly human, he wouldn't be her type—tan and too beautiful to touch, walking with a swagger that said he knew exactly how attractive he was. He moved as if he were in charge of everyone and everything, seeming taller for it. But he wasn't really that tall—not as tall as the bone-girls by the river or the strange tree-bark men that roamed the city. He was almost average in size, only a head taller than she was.

Whenever he came near, she could smell wildflowers, could hear the rustle of willow branches, as if she were sitting by a pond on one of those rare summer days: a taste of midsummer in the start of the frigid fall. And she wanted to keep that taste, bask in it, roll in it until the warmth soaked into her very skin. It terrified her, the almost irresistible urge to get closer to him, to get closer to any of the fey. *He* terrified her.

Aislinn walked a little faster, not running, but faster. Don't run. If she ran, they'd chase: faeries always gave chase.

She ducked inside The Comix Connexion. She felt safer among the rows of unpainted wooden bins that lined the shop. *My space*.

Every night she'd slipped away from them, hiding until they passed, waiting until they were out of sight. Sometimes it took a few tries, but so far it had worked.

She waited inside Comix, hoping they hadn't seen.

Then he walked in—wearing a glamour, hiding that glow, passing for human—visible to everyone.

That's new. And new wasn't good, not where the fey were

concerned. Faeries walked past her—past everyone—daily, invisible and impossible to hear unless they willed it. The really strong ones, those that could venture further into the city, could weave a glamour—faery manipulation—to hide in plain sight as humans. They frightened her more than the others.

This faery was even worse: he had donned a glamour between one step and the next, becoming suddenly visible, as if revealing himself didn't matter at all.

He stopped at the counter and talked to Eddy—leaning close to be heard over the music that blared from the speakers in the corners.

Eddy glanced her way, and then back at the faery. He said her name. She saw it, even though she couldn't hear it.

No.

The faery started walking toward her, smiling, looking for all the world like one of her wealthier classmates.

She turned away and picked up an old issue of *Nightmares and Fairy Tales*. She clutched it, hoping her hands weren't shaking.

"Aislinn, right?" Faery-boy was beside her, his arm against hers, far too close. He glanced down at the comic, smiling wryly. "Is that any good?"

She stepped back and slowly looked him over. If he was trying to pass for a human she'd want to talk to, he'd failed. From the hems of his faded jeans to his heavy wool coat, he was too uptown. He'd dulled his copper hair to sandy-blond, hidden that strange rustle of summer, but even in his

human glamour, he was too pretty to be real.

"Not interested." She slid the comic back in place and walked down the next aisle, trying to keep the fear at bay, and failing.

He followed, steady and too close.

She didn't think he'd hurt her, not here, not in public. For all their flaws, the fey seemed to be better behaved when they wore human faces. Maybe it was fear of the steel bars in human jails. It didn't really matter why: what mattered was that it was a rule they seemed to follow.

But when Aislinn glanced at him, she still wanted to run. He was like one of the big cats in the zoo—stalking its prey from across a ravine.

Deadgirl waited at the front of the shop, invisible, seated on her wolf's back. She had a pensive look on her face, eyes shimmering like an oil slick—strange glints of color in a black puddle.

Don't stare at invisible faeries, Rule #3. Aislinn glanced back down at the bin in front of her calmly, as if she'd been doing nothing more than gazing around the store.

"I'm meeting some people for coffee." Faery-boy moved closer. "You want to come?"

"No." She stepped sideways, putting more distance between them. She swallowed, but it didn't help how dry her mouth was, how terrified and tempted she felt.

He followed. "Some other night."

It wasn't a question, not really. Aislinn shook her head. "Actually, no."