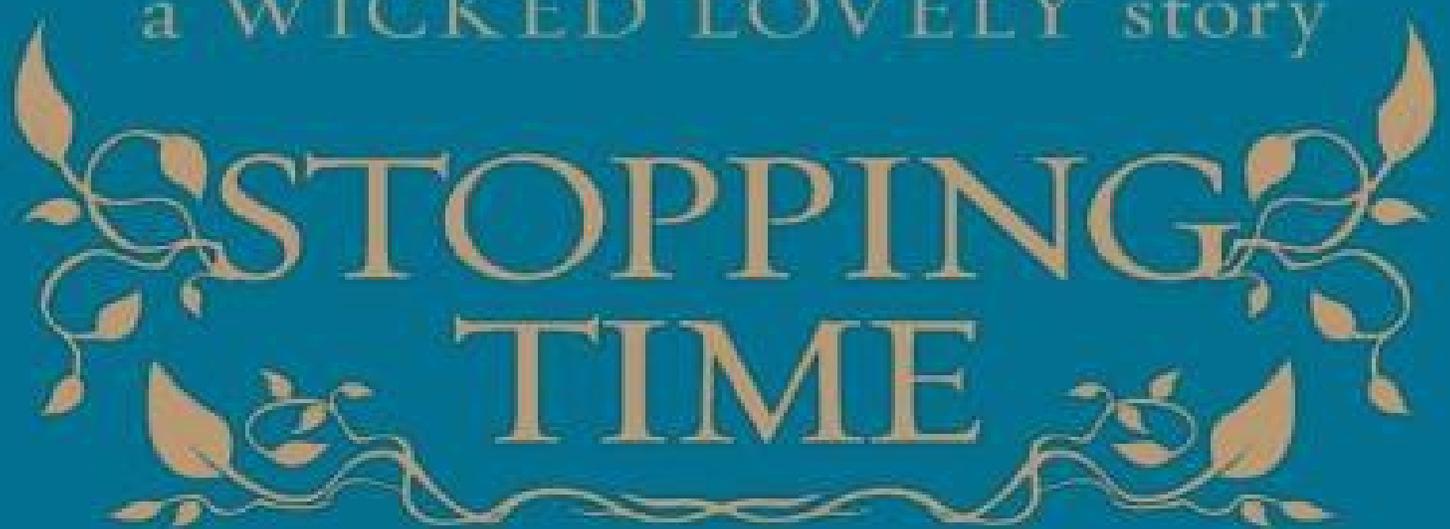


PART 1

a WICKED LOVELY story

A decorative floral border in a light beige color, featuring stylized leaves and vines that frame the title text.

STOPPING TIME

melissa marr

New York Times Bestselling Author

Stopping Time

A Short Story in the World of *Wicked Lovely*

Melissa Marr

 HarperCollins e-books

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Stopping Time

—Part 1—

Unlike some faeries, *he* didn't bother with a glamour. He sat on a bench across from the tables outside the coffee shop. Their silent late-afternoon meetings had become a routine of sorts the last few months, and each week, the temptation to speak to him grew greater—which was why she'd invited a study group to meet with her this week. Their presence was to be incentive to keep her from talking to him.

It didn't help. These together-but-not times were the closest thing she'd had to a date in months. She looked forward to seeing him, thought about it throughout the week, wondering what he'd be wearing, what he'd be reading, if this week he'd approach her.

He wouldn't. He'd promised her choices, and he wouldn't take them from her. If she spoke to him, it would be because she approached him. If she went to him, it would be of her own volition. If she wanted to stop seeing him, she could stop arriving here every week. That, too, was her choice. So far, she resisted approaching him and speaking to him. She did not, however, stop coming to the precise spot each week at the same time. They had a routine: he read whatever his book of the week was, and she studied.

And tried not to stare...or go to him...or speak to him.

She couldn't see the cover of his current book at first. His taste was eclectic in genre, but consistent in quality. She glanced at the book several times, trying for subtle, but he noticed.

He still notices everything.

With a grin, he lifted the book—one called *American Gods* this time—higher, hiding his face as a result. The extra benefit of that move was that she could look at him unabashedly while they both pretended he didn't realize she was admiring him. He appeared happier of late, far more so than when she'd left Huntsdale. Ruling the Dark Court had suited him, but advising the new Dark King seemed to suit him better. He hadn't lost his taste for indulgent clothes, though. A silk tee and tailored linen trousers flattered him without being ostentatious. The silver razor blade he'd worn before was accompanied by a small black glass vial. Without asking, she knew it was the same ink that she had in her tattoo.

Maudlin or romantic? She wasn't sure. *Both maybe.*

He lowered the book, taking away her unobserved access, and stared at her for several heartbeats. Often, he stayed invisible when he came to sit near her. This week he was very visible, though. She saw him either way, but when he was visible to others, it was extra difficult to keep her gaze off him. His visibility was an invitation of sorts, an extra temptation to approach him.

It means I could walk over and start talking to him.

"He's got it bad," one of her study partners commented.

Beside her, Michael was silent.

Leslie tore her gaze from Irial and looked at her companions. "He's an old friend."

The curiosity on their faces was obvious. She shouldn't have met them here.

"A friend you don't talk to?" Jill's voice held the doubt that the others were too polite to voice.

"What kind of friend is that?"

"One who'd move the earth for me, but"—Leslie glanced back at Irial—"not one who brings out my better side."

His mouth quirked in a just-restrained laugh.

Got to love faery hearing. Leslie watched the girls check him out—as he preened for them. It wasn't overt, but she knew him. His tendency to arrange himself to his best advantage was reflex more than choice.

“Well if you don't want him...maybe I should go say hello.” Jill flashed her teeth in what passed for a smile.

Leslie shrugged.

Of course, I want him. Everyone who looks at him wants him.

Anger rose up inside of her as Jill stood and started across the grassy lawn that separated the coffee shop and the bench where Irial waited. Worse still, it embarrassed her to admit that she felt a familiar possessive pang. Irial was *hers*. That hadn't changed, wouldn't change.

Except that it did.

When she left his world—*their world*—she'd made it change. He still watched her, not in a predatory way, or even in an intrusive way, but she'd see him around campus. While Irial watched, Niall respected her requests not to visit; instead, he sent Hounds to guard her. Occasionally Aislinn's rowan-people or the Winter Queen's lupine fey looked in on her too. Leslie was safer than she'd ever been, guarded by the denizens of three faery courts, and pretending not to notice any of them.

That was an implicit understanding: she mostly pretended they weren't there, and they pretended she wasn't ignoring their presence. Sometimes ignoring the fey made her feel a kinship with Aislinn. When Aislinn was mortal, she'd had to pretend not to see them. They hadn't known she had the Sight. Leslie, however, didn't need to pretend.

Except for myself...and for him.

She smiled at Irial, letting the illusion slip for a moment—and immediately regretted it. He lowered his book and leaned forward. The question in his expression made her heart ache. She didn't belong in his world, not even now that he was no longer the Dark King. Talking to him was dangerous. Being alone with him was dangerous. It was a line she couldn't cross—not and still retain her distance. If she were to be honest with herself, it was the other reason she'd invited her study group this week. She could speak to them, say things she wanted him to know without admitting she was speaking to him.

Faery logic.

He stood.

She shook her head and turned away. There were moments when she failed, when she talked to the fey, but not to Irial.

Never to him.

Jill was beside him now, and he spoke to her. No doubt he said something charming but dismissive.

Leslie stared at the page, her notes blurring as she tried to look anywhere but at Irial. Resolutely, she read over the words in her notebook. School was the one thing that helped her focus; it was how she had kept it together when she lived in Huntsdale, and it was how she had continued to hold on the past few months. She'd rather hurt and keep trying than hide from her feelings. Irial had helped her see that.

Seeing anyone else near him hurt. Seeing him hurt. *Not seeing him hurts more.* That was the challenge, the dilemma she couldn't resolve: his nearness made her feel safe, made her feel loved and valued, but it reminded her of what she couldn't have. Two faeries, arguably the two most tempting faeries in the world, loved her, and she couldn't be with either of them—not without sacrificing too much. She couldn't be a good person and be in their world. Maybe if they were part of any other faery

court or if she were a different sort of person, she could build a life with them, but the future she'd have in the Dark Court wasn't a future that she could accept. Monsters don't become house pets, and she didn't want to become a monster.

"Well"—Jill plopped down in her seat again—"that was interesting."

"What?" Leslie's heart sped. She might have the Sight, but that didn't give her faery hearing or reflexes.

"He said—and I quote—"Tell Leslie that I send my love or anything else she might need." Jill folded her arms over her chest, leaned back, and studied Leslie's expression. "Gorgeous guy, apparently loves you, and you—"

"Drop it." Leslie's calm faltered then. Her hand started shaking as she gathered up her notes. "Seriously. He's...a part of my past. He's why I moved here. To be away from him."

Michael put a hand on Leslie's arm. "Is he threatening—"

"No. He isn't here to hurt me. He...he'd protect me at his own risk. Our situation is just"—she looked in Irial's direction and caught his gaze—"complicated. I needed space."

She didn't look back at her study group. No one spoke, and she couldn't think of anything else to say. The awkwardness of the situation was more than she wanted to deal with. *How do I say that I love and am loved by...Dark Kings? Faeries? Monsters?* There weren't words to explain—and the only one there who deserved her explanation already knew it.

She stood. "I'll catch you in class."

She slung her bag over her shoulder and walked away. She paused after she passed him and whispered, "Good night, Irial."

"Be safe, love. I'll be here if you need me," he promised her. There was no censure in his words; he gave her the reassurances he knew she needed: that he loved her, that he protected her, and that he did so from a distance.

Faeries don't lie, he'd once told her, *so listen carefully to what we actually say*.

By every mortal standard, the worst faeries in the world were those in the Dark Court. They fed on the baser emotions; they engaged in activities that the other—also amoral—faery courts repudiated. They were also the only ones she truly trusted or understood.

Irial watched her walk away until he was sure that she was within sight of her guards. She grew stronger every week. If any mortal could've survived the Dark Court, it was his Leslie. Her strength awed him, even as it manifested in choosing to continue loving two faeries but to be with neither of them. Few mortals had the mettle that she did.

But being strong didn't mean that she should hurt. If he had his way, she'd spend the rest of her life cosseted. *And that life would be as long as Niall's*. Irial had learned centuries ago that the world didn't always bend to his will. *Unfortunately*.

After he was sure Leslie was far enough away that she wouldn't think he was stalking her, he walked away from the coffee shop. There were always guards near enough to hear her if she cried out for help. He'd prefer that there were guards walking alongside her, but she would suffer more for that. Their visible presence saddened her, so the guards had been ordered not to crowd her. *At least not all of the time*. It was a delicate dance, watching her but not being too present. In this, as in so many other things, Leslie was an anomaly. She accepted their guardianship, but not their omnipresence. She accepted their love, but not their companionship.

Everything on her terms or not at all. Just like Niall.

He walked only a block before he saw Gabriel leaning against his steed, which was currently in

the form of a deep-green classic Mustang. If Irial asked, Gabriel could spout off the year, engine, and modifications his steed was currently adopting, and for a moment, Irial considered doing just that. It would be more entertaining than a lecture.

Gabriel pushed away from the car. “What are you doing?”

Irial shrugged. “Checking on her.”

“And if Niall finds out...your *king* who told you to stay away from her? What do you think he’ll say?” Gabriel joined him, walking in the direction Irial had already been going. The car didn’t follow.

“I suppose he’d be angry.” Irial smiled to himself. Angry Niall was far more fun than sulking Niall. If it wasn’t so counterproductive, Irial’d spend more time actively trying to provoke his new king. *My only king*. Sometimes the fact that he had a king amused Irial to perverse degrees. After centuries of leading the Dark Court, he was monarch no more. He’d returned to what he was before, a Gancanagh, fatally addictive to mortals, solitary by nature—except that Irial had never really been one to follow anyone’s conventions but his own. Rather than resume solitary status, as was typical of former Dark Kings or Queens, he swore fealty and stayed in his court as advisor to his new king.

Gabriel scowled at him. “Seriously, Iri, you can’t see her if you want to stay in the court...and you know he needs you. You don’t expect him to put up with this, do you?”

“I wasn’t planning to tell him. Are *you* planning on spilling my secrets?” Irial stopped and stepped in front of his friend and former advisor. “Tell him the things I do when I’m not dutifully awaiting his attention?”

“Don’t be an ass.” Gabriel punched Irial. The force of it knocked Irial backward. Blood trickled from Irial’s lip. The Hound had always hit with enough force to draw blood. Several garish rings on his hand assured that every punch would wound—or leave behind distinct bruises.

“Now that you’ve made your point”—Irial licked the blood from his lips—“tell me: have you found her father? Or the wretch?”

Gabriel shook his head. “Niall didn’t want you knowing about that.”

“Niall doesn’t always get what he wants though, does he?” Irial watched a pair of coeds sizing Gabriel up. He spared them a smile that had them changing their path to approach—until Gabriel snarled at them.

The moment evoked a longing for simpler days, when he’d first met Niall and the three of them had traveled together. Various Hounds and Dark Court fey joined them here or there, but Gabriel was always with them to keep Irial safe. Niall was an innocent of sorts: he’d had no idea that he traveled with the Dark King, no idea that he himself was a Gancanagh. He was young and foolish, trusting and forgiving.

Until he met me.

Gabriel shrugged. His loyalty was to his Hounds first and then to the Dark King. A former Dark King, friend or not, fell somewhere after that. “I’m not disobeying my king, Iri, not even for you. If he wants to tell you, he will. Come on. Let’s go back to Huntsdale before he—”

“No.” Irial wasn’t in the mood to argue, at least not with Gabriel. The Hound was obstinate on his best days. “I’m not with Leslie, so you don’t need to intercede for the king. Unless he sent you after me?”

Gabriel held out his bare arms where Irial’s commands had once been written out, where Niall’s would now appear. “There are no orders here.”

“So go.”

Gabriel shook his head. “I thought *he* was an ass when he was with the Summer Court and trying

to stay away from you, but you're both a pain these days. Either work your shit out or walk away from the court, Iri, because this isn't how you obey your king *or* work anything out with the one you claim to love."

Irial didn't answer. There wasn't anything to say. His feelings for Niall and his feelings for Leslie were tangled together. He wanted Leslie to live surrounded by the protection of the Dark Court, indulged and cosseted while she lived out her mortal life. He wanted Niall to woo her and bring her home. He couldn't truly have a relationship with either of them, but he'd done what he could to make them safe to have one with each other. If they were together, he'd have both of his beloveds in one house. It was the closest to a relationship with them that he thought possible. It was also what would make them happiest. They were just too damn difficult to take the obvious path.

Which is part of why I love them.

Leslie let herself into the building, wishing for a moment that Irial had walked her home or followed her. She knew she was safe, knew that her building was secure, knew the logical things that should make her feel okay. She still had panic attacks, though. Her therapist assured her that she was making great progress, but the hypervigilance was worse at night. *And in close spaces. And in strange spaces. And in the dark when I am alone.* Sometimes, she thought about inviting her faery guardians in so she wasn't alone. *My very own monsters to chase away the fears.*

Now that she felt her own emotions, she wished she could give him the ones that left her shaking in cold sweats from nightmares she barely remembered. She wished she could give him the edge of the bad emotions—to nourish him and to let her get sleep.

It didn't work like that, though. Since she'd severed her connection to Irial, she was left with mere mortal solutions. She went into her apartment, turned the door lock, but not the bolt. *Not yet.* She flicked on a light and then another. Then she checked each window. She opened the closets, peered under the bed, and pushed the shower curtain aside. It was obvious that no one would fit under the bed: there was no room. It was impossible to hide behind the shower curtain: it was gathered. Still, if she didn't check, she'd be unable to rest. Once she was confident that she was alone, she turned the bolt.

Her pepper spray stayed in reach though. *Always.* Her phone was in reach too. The therapist, the girls in group, they talked about the difference between being cautious and being unwell. They claimed that she was being rational, that caution wasn't bad, but she didn't feel very rational.

"I'm afraid," she whispered. "But it's okay to be afraid. It's normal. I'm normal."

Silently she fixed a salad and took it into the living room. She slipped a DVD into the machine, so the silence wasn't as weighty. The opening of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, a show that she'd found on DVD and loved, made her smile. It was a strange security blanket, but it never failed to remind her that she could be strong. *That I am strong.*

The phone rang. She picked it up. No one was there. She laid it down. It rang again.

"Hello?"

Again, no one was there.

Twice more it rang. *Unknown Caller* her readout showed. Every time, the caller didn't speak. It wasn't the first time she'd had weird calls. It had happened a few times the past month. Logic said it was nothing, but caution meant she was feeling twitchy.

Resolutely, she ignored the next few calls. Her door buzzer went off twice. She paced as the calls continued for almost thirty more minutes.

So when the phone rang again after ten minutes of silence, she was frazzled. "What? Who do you

think you are?”

“Leslie? Are you okay?” Niall was on the other end of the line. “I don’t...are you all right?”

“I’m sorry.” She put her hand over her mouth, trying not to let her hysterical burst of laughter out, and walked to the door again. It was secure. She was safe in her apartment.

“What’s going on?”

For a moment, she didn’t want to tell him. Whoever was harassing her wasn’t a faery. Very few of them even used phones, and none of them would have her number. *Or reason to call.* This was a human problem.

Not a faery issue. Not Niall’s issue.

“Talk to me?” he asked. “Please?”

So she did.

When she was done, Niall was silent for so long that she wondered if they’d been disconnected. Her heart beat too loudly as she clutched her phone. “Niall?”

“Let me come stay there or send someone. Just until we—”

“I can’t. We’ve talked about this.” Leslie sank down onto her sofa. “If there were a faery threat, it would be different.”

“*Any* threat is unacceptable, Leslie,” he interrupted, with a new darkness in his voice. It was the unflinching power of the Dark King, and she liked it. “You don’t need to deal with this. Let me—”

“No.” She closed her eyes. “I’ll change the number. It’s probably just some drunk misdialing.”

“And if it’s not?”

“I’ll go to the police.” She pulled a blanket over her as if it would stop the shivering that had started. “It’s not a Dark Court concern.”

“*You* are a Dark Court concern, and that’s not going to change,” Niall reminded her gently. “Your safety and your happiness will always be our concern. Irial and I both—”

“If doing so negates my happiness, will you still interfere, Niall?”

Niall was silent for several moments. Only his measured breathing made clear that he was still listening. Finally he said, “You are a difficult person to reason with sometimes.”

“I know.” Her grip on the phone loosened a little. For all of the passions that drove him, Niall would do his best to let her have her distance. On that, he and Irial seemed to agree. Of course, if she so much as hinted that she wanted them to intervene, people could die at a word. The reality of that power wasn’t something she liked to ponder overmuch. Instead, she asked, “Talk to me about something else?”

Niall, however, wasn’t eager to let the topic drop, not entirely. “You know I want to respect your need to be away from us, but Gabe is in the area. He had to see someone. If you needed anyone...”

“What I need is a friend who talks to me so I can think about something good.” Leslie stretched out on the sofa, pepper spray in reach on the coffee table, Buffy staking monsters on the television, and Niall’s voice in her ear. “Be my friend? Please? Talk to me?”

He sighed. “There was a new exhibit at the gallery I was telling you about last month.”

Niall wouldn’t ignore the issue, but he would cooperate to a degree. And knowing he was out there protecting her made Leslie feel a little safer too. *They both are.* She felt guilty sometimes for the way they both continued to try to take care of her, but she also knew that having the protection of the Dark Kings was all that kept her safe from being drawn back into faery politics or becoming a victim of the strong solitary faeries. There were those who would happily destroy her if they learned that she was beloved of both the current Dark King and the last Dark King.

For a breath she hoped that whoever called, if they were trying to upset her, was a faery. If it was

a faery, Irial or Niall would find out. They would fix it.

The reality of how easily she could sanction violence made her pause. *That*, she thought, *is exactly why I can't come back to either of you*. She forced the thought aside. Friendship was all she could have with them, and even that was tenuous. She kept barriers in place: no speaking to Irial, no seeing Niall, and no touching either one of them. At first, she'd thought she could put them in her past and that they would forget about her, and maybe someday they would reach that point.

"Did you buy anything this time?" she asked.

"What? You think I can't go to a gallery without buying something?" His voice was teasing, sweet, calming.

"I do."

"Three prints," he said.

She laughed, letting herself enjoy the comfort he offered. "*Someone* has a problem."

"Oh, but you should see them," he began, and then he told her about each print in loving detail, and then about others he saw but didn't buy, and by the time he was done, she was smiling and yawning and able to sleep.

Irial saw the boy, Michael, lurking outside the building. He stayed to the shadows, making it obvious that he was trying to be stealthy. He stood in a spot where the streetlights didn't eliminate the cover of darkness, yet still had a clear line of sight to the entrance to the building. The mortal had a large cup of coffee, a jacket, and dark clothes. The combination made Irial aware that the boy intended to stay there for some time.

Why? He'd seemed tense earlier, and Irial hadn't missed the glares aimed at him. The glares were not unwarranted; jealousy was a mortal trait. Setting up watch outside Leslie's building seemed overreactive. *Usually*. Irial spared himself a wry smile. *Watching over her is overreactive unless it's me doing it or ordering it*. The difference was that Irial knew the horrors that existed in the world around them—had, in fact, ordered horrors committed—so his cautious streak where Leslie was concerned was logical.

"Why are you here?" he asked.

Michael startled.

He wasn't fey, nor did he have the Sight, so Irial made himself visible. At this hour, Leslie wouldn't be coming outside. *And if she did...* Irial smiled. She wouldn't expect him to act any differently. Leslie saw him for who he was, for what he was, and loved him still. Despite being what nightmares are made of, Irial wasn't frightening to her.

It wasn't Leslie who saw him, though. Between one step and the next, he made himself seen to another mortal. If Michael had been a threat, Irial wouldn't do so.

The boy swallowed nervously, took a step backward, and blinked several times. To his credit, he didn't run or scream or do anything awkward. It spoke well of Leslie's character judgment that she'd selected the mortal as a friend.

"What are you doing here?" Irial asked as gently as he could. "Why are you at this place? At this hour? Hiding in the dark?"

"Checking on her." The mortal straightened his shoulders, stood still enough to almost hide his trembling. "What *are* you? You just *appeared*. Right? You did."

"I did." Irial repressed a smile at the boy's bravery. Many mortals did not handle the shock of seeing the impossible become manifest. Leslie had chosen well when she'd made friends with this one.

“It doesn’t matter. I won’t let you hurt her,” Michael said.

Irial waited. Silence often proved to be more incentive than questions.

“I saw you earlier. Everyone did. You’re the one stalking her,” Michael accused.

Irial let the shadows around him shift visibly, let his wings become seen. “No, I’m *visiting* her, watching out for her. She knows where I am. She expects me to be here. Does she know you’re here?”

“No.” The boy’s gaze flickered nervously to the ground, back to Irial, and then to the building. “I worry, though. She’s so...fragile.”

“No one will hurt her. *Ever.*” Irial shook his head. “Once, I was the King of Nightmares. Now, I’m something else. No matter what I am, I’ll be here keeping her safe as long as we both live.”

Michael narrowed his gaze. “You’re not human.”

“She is,” Irial said. “And she needs human friends...like you.”

“Michael.” The boy held out his hand. “I’m Michael.”

“Irial.” Irial shook the mortal’s hand. “I know. I watch when you can’t see me too. You care for her.”

Michael didn’t reply, but he didn’t need to. Irial had watched the mortal talk to her, escort her to her building, say things that made her smile. He was a good human. Unfortunately for him, he was also half in love with Leslie, ready to protect her from threats. Irial had seen that clearly several weeks ago when he’d watched them walking at night. If Irial cared overmuch for humans, he’d feel sympathy for the boy; as it was, Irial was practical: Michael’s emotions made him useful.

“Tell me why you are here,” Irial encouraged.

“Someone’s been calling her at weird hours,” Michael blurted. “After the way you were watching her, I thought maybe it was you. She says not to worry, but she...I just...”

“I understand.” Irial smiled and dropped an arm around the boy’s shoulders. “These are the sorts of things I’d like you to tell me, Michael. Come sit with me.”

Michael glanced at her building. “Shouldn’t we...you at least...*stay here?*”

“I have a flat across the street for when I’m in town.” Irial led the boy to a nondescript building. “That way I’m close if she needs me. If not me, there are others near enough to hear her should she call for us.”

“Oh.” Michael looked at him for a moment. His gaze was assessing, albeit far too trusting.

In another era, in another life, walking off blindly with a Gancanagh was foolish. *Perhaps it still is.* Irial meant the boy no harm. He was merely a tool, a useful resource. Leslie was what mattered. But for one other in all the world, everyone else was fair game for whatever he needed in order to assure her happiness and safety.

When Leslie woke the next morning, she was still holding the phone. She didn’t hear a dial tone, so she asked, “Hello?”

“Good morning,” Niall said.

“You stayed on the phone while I *slept?*” She sat up.

Niall laughed. “You don’t talk in your sleep.”

“I snore.”

“A little,” he admitted. “But I liked being there to hear it.”

“Weirdo.” She felt safe, though. Having him there—even only on the phone—made her feel protected. “I’m glad you were...here.”

“I wish I was really *there.*”

“I...I know.” She never knew the right words to reply to such things. They all fell short, partly

because they weren't the whole truth. She wanted to be with him—and Irial—but doing so would mean being in the Dark Court.

They stayed silent. She heard him breathing, heard him waiting for something she couldn't give him.

"We should stop talking." She clutched the phone. "I can't...I'm not...I need time to live, and your court..."

"I know." His voice was gentle. "You're too good to live here with us."

"I didn't say that!" She felt the tears threaten. She missed them, missed Niall, Irial, Gabriel, Ani, Tish, Rabbit...her court, her *family*.

"I said it," Niall murmured. "I love you."

"You too," she whispered.

"Be safe. If you need anything—"

"I know." She disconnected then. What she needed was to let go; what she wanted was to hold on tighter. Irial was addictive to touch, and Niall had to stay with his court. Being with Irial would kill her. Being with Niall would mean living in the Dark Court. She couldn't have a normal mortal life in the middle of the Dark Court; she couldn't let herself become the person she would be if she lived there. She wasn't ever going to be anything other than human, and humans didn't thrive in their world. They died.

Self-pity doesn't fix a thing, she lectured.

So she got up and got ready for class, and she knew that somewhere out there in the streets faeries watched to guard her, that Irial waited somewhere to protect her, that farther away Niall waited to listen and help her believe in herself. She was not alone, but she was still lonely.

Irial followed Leslie without her knowing. It felt wrong to hide himself from her, but he was quick enough to slip out of sight when she turned to glance over her shoulder.

"I'm sorry, love," he whispered each time. It felt too near to a lie, but if she saw him following her so closely she would be alarmed. They'd never spoken any agreement, but he kept himself out of sight except for their once-a-week silent meetings. If she saw him so near, she'd know that he'd learned of her disquieting calls or she'd suspect that something else was amiss. He'd rather not upset her if he could avoid doing so.

When she went into the red brick building, he waited and watched the courtyard. Mortals fascinated him far more now that he was a Gancanagh again. Their flirty laughs and knowing smiles, their defiant gazes and inviting postures—it was not an easy thing to resist so much potential. He didn't remember being so easily intrigued by them, but it had been a lifetime since he was a Gancanagh. Being Dark King had nullified that for him, just as it now did for Niall.

Niall...who would beat me half to death if I indulged.

Irial grinned at the thought. It had been too long since Niall had been willing to fight with him. Perhaps when this matter was resolved, he'd tell the Dark King that he'd been pondering enjoying some sport with mortals.

Business before fun.

So Irial waited until Leslie was safely in the building and then he went to find Gabriel. Her class lasted for not quite an hour, but he'd be back well before that. It wouldn't take long to find someone who could locate Gabriel. Then, they'd need to decide if Niall should be involved in locating whoever was upsetting Leslie or if the matter could be handled with more discretion.

Class had only just begun when Leslie felt the vibrations from her phone. The professor had a strict “no phones in class” policy, so she tried to ignore the phone, but after the fourth time, she began to worry. It rang silently in her pocket. Text messages came in, making it vibrate again.

Carefully, she slid it out of her pocket and glanced at the message.

“Time’s up,” the first message read.

She didn’t know the number it came from.

The second one read, “If you want Them exposed ignore me. If not come down NOW.”

Them? There weren’t a lot of threats that would make her panic, but danger to Irial or Niall was near the top of the list. The threats were vague. There was no reason to assume that the *Them* meant Irial and Niall. She shivered.

The third text added, “I know WHAT they are.”

Her hand tightened on the phone for a moment, and then she shoved it into her pocket, got up, and walked out of class. There was no way she was going to keep her regular routine if someone was out there threatening her. Her hands were shaking as she accessed her voice mail. *Faeries don’t leave creepy messages. Faeries don’t text threats.* She knew it wasn’t a faery.

She stepped into the sunlight outside the building and saw him—her mystery harasser.

Cherub-pretty and too familiar, her brother sat on one of the tables in the small courtyard outside Davis Hall. His feet were on the bench, and he had one arm across his middle. His unzipped jacket covered his hand; the other hand rested on his knee. He didn’t stand when he saw her approaching, but there was little likelihood that she’d be offering him a sisterly embrace. Despite the irritation of seeing him, it was almost a relief. She might not like him, might not have anything but loathing left for him, but he was her brother.

“What the hell, Ren?” She folded her arms over her chest to hide the shaking. “You think you’re funny calling and—”

“No.” Ren grinned. “I think I’m smart. You get spooked, and your little friends will show up. Do you know how much I can get paid once I prove that there are *monsters* living around us?”

He stood, his arm still against his chest.

Leslie forced a laugh. “Monsters? Really?” She gestured around her. “The only monster I see is *you*.”

For an odd moment, she realized that it was true: No Dark Court faeries were in sight. *Because I’m supposed to be in class.* She thought about screaming. One of them was surely in hearing range. *He’s my brother.* If they came, if they saw him near her, they’d hurt him. Despite everything, that wasn’t her first choice.

“Your boyfriend wasn’t human, Les.” Ren stepped forward, grabbed her arm, and pulled her closer. When they were near enough that it looked like they should embrace, he let go and pulled his jacket open. Inside, he held a gun, hidden from view by both the jacket and her proximity. “Scream or fight, and I’ll shoot you, Sis.”

Leslie stared at the gun for a long moment. She knew nothing about guns, nothing about make or model, nothing about their effect on faeries. When she pulled her gaze away, she looked at her brother’s face. “Why?”

“Nothing personal.” Ren smiled, and it wasn’t a reassuring look. “You think I *like* working with low-end dealers? I can make a pretty sum if I collect a freak. Business is business.”

“I don’t know what you think they are—”

“Don’t care. Smile, now.” Ren dropped his arm over her shoulders and started walking. She felt the gun muzzle pressing against her side.

“This is a mistake.” Leslie didn’t look around. *He’s my brother. He won’t actually shoot me.* Ren was a lot of things, had done horrific things, but he’d never had the stomach to dirty his hands directly. Like everything in his life, he half-assed this too.

“Let’s go home, Les.” Ren kissed her cheek and reminded her, “Smile. I’m not intending to shoot you if I don’t have to. You’re just bait.”

She smiled, trying her best to look convincing. “Why?”

“Met a guy. He had a business offer.” Ren lifted one shoulder in a shrug. “I saw the pictures. You were living like a freaking celebrity. Looked like you were having a killer time....” He paused and laughed at his own weak joke. “The man who pays more gets the prize. Your old man wants to ante up, I don’t shoot him or take him in. He doesn’t want to pay, I go with the original plan.”

Blackmail Irial? The thought of it was ludicrous: Irial would kill Ren. Maybe Niall would find a solution, but Niall wasn’t nearby. For all she knew, Irial wasn’t either. She saw him once a week. *Last night.* Today, he was who knew where. *This isn’t their fault, not their problem.* If they got hurt because of her, she wouldn’t be able to recover from that.

Leslie stumbled.

Ren pulled her tighter to him and shoved the gun tighter into her side. “Don’t be stupid. You’re not strong enough to escape *or* fast enough to outrun a bullet.”

“I’m...not. I *tripped*, Ren.” She tried to keep the waver from her voice.

What do I do?

Letting him into her home seemed stupid. Calling out for help seemed dangerous. Her brother had been behind the horrors she couldn’t forget. *If I call for them, they’ll kill him.* Once, she had wanted to believe he was sick, that he could get well if he got help. *Addiction is a disease*, that’s what she’d reminded herself. It didn’t mean the things he’d done, the thing he was currently doing, were okay, though. *Not every addict wants to get well.*

“We’ll go to your place, and you can call them,” Ren said. “He can pay me more, or I can take him to them. His choice.”

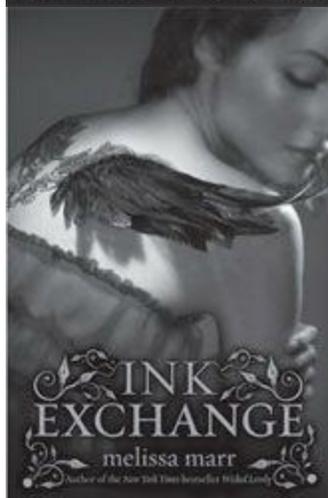
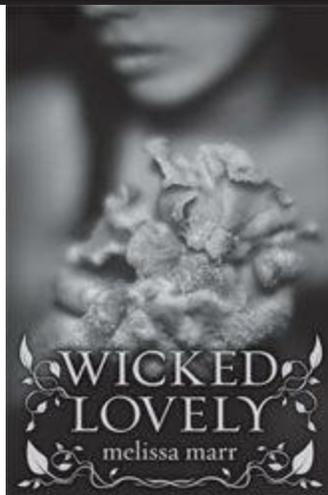
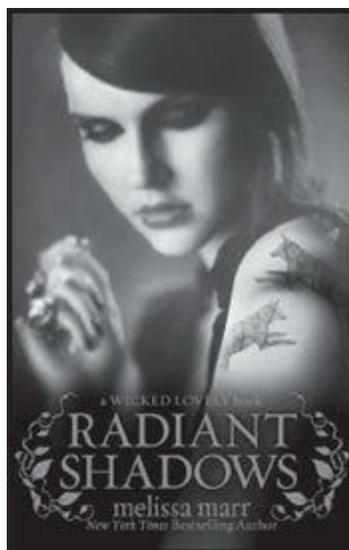
Leslie felt numb as she walked with her brother. If she called Niall, help would come. Irial would know too. Gabriel would know. *And my brother will die.* If she didn’t call, she wasn’t sure what would happen. Niall would call her sooner or later; Irial would notice when she wasn’t at the coffee shop; and the guards would notice. Neither Dark King would invade her privacy—unless she was in danger. She knew that. *What would happen if Ren shot them? If he knows what they are, what sort of bullets does he have?* She thought about seeing Niall when he was sick from steel exposure. If the bullets were iron or steel, if that entered a faery’s body—any other than a regent—it would be horrific. Leslie wasn’t ready to make the decisions she felt like she had to make, nor was she able to ignore them. Ren was here.

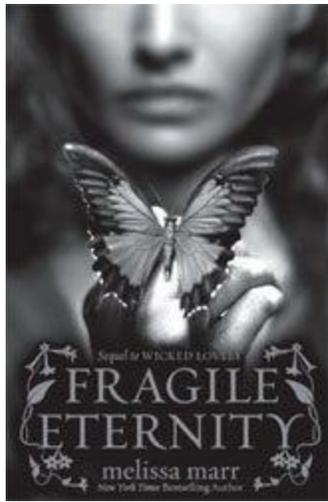
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