



Wicked as They Come (A Blud Novel Series Book 1)

By Delilah S. Dawson

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First in a steampunk-tinged paranormal romance series in which a woman is transported to a world filled with vampires and magic.

When nurse Tish Everett forced open the pesky but lovely locket she found at an estate sale, she had no idea she was answering the call of Criminy Stain, from the far off land of Sang. He'd cast a spell for her, but when she's transported right to him, she's not so sure she's ready to be under the spell of another man. (It didn't go so well last time with controlling, abusive, domineering Jeff.) If only Criminy wasn't so deliciously rakish....

Half the inhabitants of Sang are Pinkies—human—and the other half are Bludmen, who in Tish's world would be called vampires. But they don't mess with any of the bat/coffin/no sunlight nonsense. They're rather like you and me, just more fabulous, long living, and mostly indestructible. (They're also very good kissers.) But when the evil Mayor of Manchester (formerly Bludchester) redoubles his efforts to rid Sang of the Bludmen once and for all, stealing Tish's locket in hopes of traveling back to her world himself for reinforcements, Criminy and Tish must battle ghosts, sea monsters, wayward submarines, a secret cabal, and thundering Bludmares to get the locket back and allow Tish to return home...but has she found love with Criminy? Could she stay in Sang forever?

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I was the one who found Mrs. Stein's body two weeks ago. Now here I was, pawing through her things, finally free to explore her creepy old house. It wasn't personal, though—I had barely known her. And the estate sale was probably her idea, anyway, one last attempt to infuriate her children.

The second I saw the sign, I had to stop. She had been surprisingly paranoid for a hospice patient, and I had never seen anything of her historic Victorian home beyond the downstairs bedroom where she had chosen to spend her remaining days. The chance to explore was just too interesting to pass up. Plus, I'd said good-bye to most of my worldly possessions when I left Jeff, and I had an hour to kill until my next patient.

I was starting over from scratch and didn't have the money or the lifestyle for priceless antiques, but I always had room for treasure. Knickknacks, odd paintings, or costume jewelry would help liven up my empty apartment. Best of all, though, the sun-dappled attic upstairs was wall-to-wall books. For me, that was heaven.

When I first saw the chain hanging from the top of the old tome, I didn't know what to think. I tugged it up. As the flat locket slid from between the pages, I got a little rush of excitement, like when pulling the prize out of a box of cereal. Sure, it was tarnished and grimy, but it was a prize nonetheless. Maybe my luck was finally changing.

I let the locket dangle in a sunbeam, charmed by its age and strangeness. I could picture it shining on some young lady's neck, part of an epic story full of romance and a Prince Charming who didn't turn out to be an overbearing, soul-sucking jerk. Not that I was bitter or anything. I just wanted to start over fresh, make that good-bye really mean something positive.

It's funny how a relationship can sneak up on you like that. It starts with a whirlwind courtship, dozens of roses and poetry and dancing. He buys you a toothbrush, gives you a drawer. You move in. You give in on little things, just to make him happy. The curtains. Your hair, which he thinks you should grow out. Then it's bigger things. The checkbook. Your job. And the one big-big thing, the baby that you lose, the gift he wasn't ready to give you. His relief at your pain kills something inside you, the hardest goodbye of all.

And then one day, you realize that you're basically a plaything and property to a man who's charmed you out of your pants and into the perfect wedding ring he had picked out before he even met you. That he's not making plans with you, he's making you fit into his plans, no matter what the cost. You realize that you've become a paper doll with paper thoughts, that it was all too easy to give up control. And then one night, he hits you, and you pull your dignity off the floor and kick the bastard to the curb.

You say good-bye. And then you leave. And then you get somewhere else and learn how to say hello again.

"Hello," I said to the locket, trying it out.

Just looking at it made me happy in a way I had forgotten. A feeling of hope, of indulgence. I'd forgotten how good it felt to choose something for myself, to see an object and say, "I'm going to make that mine."

It was pretty in such a Gothic, old-fashioned way. One side had a large, flat stone—maybe a ruby or maybe just glass. And the other side of the oval had indecipherable writing around the edge with a compass rose in the center. I breathed on the metal and rubbed it on my scrub pants, but its secrets remained safe under eons of muck.

Just as I was about to head downstairs to pay for the locket, a little old lady appeared at my elbow and said, "Excuse me, miss. Can you read this?"

"I'd be glad to try," I said with a smile.

She handed me a crusty old saltcellar, and I read the smudged grease-pencil price. I was like a magnet for old people. Maybe because I was accustomed to helping them at work. Maybe because I looked kind. Or maybe because every time I looked at an elderly person, I thought of my grandmother and couldn't help smiling.

Taking care of my grandmother was one of my greatest joys and greatest sorrows. I got to be with her and help her, take care of all of the nursing tasks that she would be mortified to impose on a stranger. But I also had to watch her die, and it broke my heart. With my mom gone and my dad remarried across the country, she was all the family I had. The hours I spent with her every day were precious to me, and I couldn't believe how much time I had lost with her by wasting time with Jeff in Birmingham.

This old lady had the same sort of fire that made my grandmother special, a mix of manners and moxie that I hoped I had inherited. Watching her eyes narrow at the offending saltcellar reminded me of going antiques shopping with Nana when I was little, popping jelly beans one by one as she haggled. Still, I didn't have much time until I was expected at Mr. Rathbin's house, and after that, I had four more hospice patients waiting. Old people get really cranky when you're late.

I was just opening my mouth to apologize and slip away when my beeper went off. It was my case manager, followed by 911.

"Excuse me," I said, rushing past the surprised old woman and down the narrow staircase.

"Must be a doctor," I heard her remark to someone else before I was out of earshot.

Coulda, woulda, shoulda, I thought, remembering the night that Jeff tore up my applications to medical school and threw them into the trash. Then I corrected myself.

I can still be a doctor if I want to. Nothing's stopping me, dammit. I can be anything and anyone I want to be. No one's going to tell me what to be ever again.

Back in my car, I reached into my pocket for my cell phone to call the office. Instead, I found the locket. Staring at it, I reminded myself that I was not a thief, that I had never stolen anything in my life . . . on purpose.

But something I couldn't explain kept me from going back inside and making things right. The busy woman running the estate sale probably didn't even know the locket existed. And the recently deceased Mrs. Stein wouldn't miss it. There wasn't a price on it. Still, I couldn't help imagining police cars with blinking lights surrounding my little sedan in the driveway as officers with guns ordered me to put my hands up. So much of the last three years of my life had been based on fear.

I tugged the chain over my head and pulled my long dark hair out from under it. I couldn't help giving myself a sly grin in the pull-down mirror. The locket was heavy, and it hung exactly over my heart, much lower than most of my necklaces. I tucked it under my T-shirt and scrub top, enjoying the dull weight against my skin and wondering what sort of metal lurked under the tarnish. Maybe once it was cleaned, I could have the chain shortened.

Or maybe I'd keep it a secret, just because I could.

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