

Barnes & Nobles Edition

THE HOLLOW *Inn for Travelers, Adventurers,* *and Those Searching for* *Happily Ever After*

There was a time, not too long ago, when the only place in the world Evangeline Fox wanted to be was in her father's curiosity shop. For so long, she believed she could neer love any place as much as she had loved that shop, with its magical little bell on the door, its crates full of oddities and the endless memories of her parents that lived between its wondrous walls.

The curiosity shop hadn't simply felt like home—it had felt like a part of her. And yet when Jacks told Evangeline that together they could go *anywhere*, the curiosity shop was not the place that came to mind.

"Let's go to the Hollow," she'd said.

He'd looked taken aback and perhaps a little nervous—it was difficult to be sure with the bruises and cuts fresh on his face from his fight with the Valors. But even without considering his depression, Evangeline sensed that Jacks was as anxious about losing her as she was about losing him.

He had meant it when he'd said. "*I'm never going to let you out of my sight.*"

When they were in the Hollow, he was never far from her. Sometimes when she was reading or napping or feeding the little dragons outside, she'd turn to find him there, leaning lazily against a wall or tree, watching her shamelessly.

Evangeline thought she would grow used to his presence, to Jacks sauntering into rooms or to waking up beside him every morning. But even after some months, seeing him smile still managed to give her a flutter of surprise.

Being with Jacks was strange in the same delightful way it's strange to experience a warm day in the middle of winter or to find a surprise meteor shower upon looking up at the sky.

It shouldn't have been possible to love him more than she already did. But she supposed that every day she was a little bit different than she had been the day before, and she imagined it was that little bit that fell more deeply in love with him each day.

Evangeline could happily have stayed ensconced with Jacks alone inside the Hollow forever, among the cheerful flowers, the friendly little dragons, and the lingering magic. The Hollow was not the same as it had been when the mirth stone had lived inside the clock in the hall. But it was also not as bereft as Evangeline had first thought it might be after she'd taken the stone.

It seemed that when Evangeline had first taken the mirth stone from the clock, the Hollow had grieved. It had been robbed of its precious stone. Then its only two visitors in forever had decided to abruptly leave, without so much as a goodbye.

Upon Evangeline's and Jacks's initial return to the inn, the Hollow had actually been quite frosty. Doors often slammed shut. Windows stuck. Wardrobes refused to open. Faucets yielded only icy water.

"I think it's cross with us," Jacks had said. "Give it a few days. It will warm up."

The wall had rattled then.

"If it doesn't, we'll leave," Jacks added, tossing a dart up in the air as he spoke. "We can build a new inn—a better one."

Jacks caught his dart, then threw it, purposefully missing the board and sinking the dart's sharp tip into the wall instead.

Doors stopped slamming after that. Windows no longer stuck, and wardrobes were more eager to open.

As the days went on, the Hollow became friendlier and friendlier. Fresh flowers started to appear on the tables. Evangeline found new logs in the fireplaces every morning at dawn and whenever she drew a bath the water was always perfectly warm.

The Hollow wanted them to stay.

Soon it became apparent that it wanted others to stay there as well. The *No Vacancy* sign kept falling off the Hollow's main sign welcoming travellers and adventurers.

Jacks was quick to reattach the little *No Vacancy* sign. But after three weeks of the sign tumbling to the ground and getting stuck in the mud, Evangeline had taken the Hollow's not-so-subtle hint that it was ready to reopen for guests.

And so it was that on a sunshiny morning that smelled of honeysuckle and strawberries, Evangeline marched out to the welcome sign with two buckets of paint: buttermilk white and a lovely, shimmering dragon-treasure gold.

The *No Vacancy* sign had already fallen to the ground, and Evangeline left it there as she dipped her brush into the buttermilk.

Carefully she painted over the old welcome sign, and then once it was dried, she carefully rewrote the sign with her dragon-treasure gold.

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When she painted the comma between *travelers* and *adventurers*, Evangeline felt the final broken heart scar on her wrist begin to tingle.

She didn't hear him approach.

Jacks's footsteps were always preternaturally soft. But she heard him make a disappointed noise somewhere between a grunt and a sigh as she finished painting her last three words.

"That's not going to work at all," he muttered.

"Why not?" Evangeline spun around.

Jacks was dressed in olive-green trousers and a cream shirt that was rolled up at the sleeves and only halfway buttoned. His golden hair tousled, and as always, her heart did a little flip when she looked up at him.

"What's wrong?" she asked. She was rather proud of her handiwork with the sign—she'd been practicing painting her letters and she thought they'd turned out rather nicely.

Jacks frowned, sullen lips turning down at the corners. "I think it will attract too many people."

She laughed. "That is the entire point of an inn, silly."

His frown deepened. Possibly at being called silly.

This made Evangeline smile wider.

Then Jacks was taking hold of the ribbon around her waist and tugging her closer to him. She'd noticed before that he couldn't go very long without touching her. Tucking hair behind her ear, toying with the straps of her gown, coming up behind her and pressing kisses to the back of her neck as he wrapped his cool arms around her and whispered things that often made her blush.

"I don't want anyone here but you," he murmured. Then in one of his lightning-fast moves, he deftly stole the paintbrush from her fingers.

"What are you doing?" she squeaked as Jacks released her waist and swished the brush across the sign, adding two letters right before the word *happily*.

"There," he said smugly, "it's fixed now."

Evangeline scowled, as did the little blue dragon who'd been perched happily on the sign. The greeting on the sign, still swinging from Jacks handiwork, now read:

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"No one will come if it says that," Evangeline said.

"Don't be so pessimistic." Jacks carelessly dropped the brush back in the bucket. "People will still come. They'll just be a little cursed if they dare to stay here."

He showed off a dimple as his smile returned. Clearly he liked the idea of cursing their guests. Although Evangeline imagined what Jacks *really* enjoyed was tormenting her.

She had to admit, she actually liked it when he teased and tormented her. She had once told Jacks that she would gladly take an uneventful happily ever after, but truthfully she would much rather have this life with Jacks, which would never be uneventful.

Evangeline still believed in happily ever afters, of course, and she hoped to have lots of happiness with Jacks. But she was less certain about the uneventful part. She no longer wanted to sit quietly at the end of a story. She wanted to keep stepping into new ones. She wanted to love, to discover, and to feel. She wanted a life that felt like running through a field of wildflowers and then finding a gate at the end that led into an enchanted unknown. And she wanted to do it all with Jacks by her side.

Waterstones Edition

Second Chances

Dragons chased butterflies.

Leaves swayed in the breeze.

It was a beautiful day in the Magnificent North. A nearly perfect day. Evangeline hated to sneak away from Jacks. In fact, a part of her hoped that he had catch her before she did.

Jacks had meant it when he'd said, "*I'm never going to let you out of my sight.*"

Her Prince of Hearts was never far from her, except for when she went to pick apples. Jacks never so much as tossed an apple any more.

Weeks ago, Evangeline had found a lovely grove, brimming with fragrant trees that were somehow perpetually full of sweet apples, as well as pink and white apple blossoms.

Jacks had hung a swing from one of her favourite trees, but Evangeline didn't use it much as Jacks preferred to avoid the apple grove altogether.

She didn't sense him follow her as she walked to the tree with the swing, where she had tucked away a very particular basket.

Still, she checked cautiously over her shoulder.

A lone apple from a nearby tree fell softly to the ground and Evangeline imagined a fox might come by and pick it up later, as they were quite fond of apples.

Quickly, she lifted the lid of the wicker basket and pulled out the truth stone that she had tucked inside. It glowed butter-scotch yellow, still as bright and beautiful as the day she had found it in Glendora Slaughterwood's grave.

The stone no longer had a chain attached, so Evangeline tucked it into her pocket. She would have carried it in her hand, but she had a bit of a ways to walk, and she knew that if she were to encounter anyone, they would be immediately drawn to the magical stone.

Even though the Valory Arch was unlocked, and the four stones could never again be used together to turn back time, the individual stones still held their powers. Honora Valor had loaned Evangeline this particular stone a while back, but she hadn't been ready to use it until today.

To be honest, she still wasn't quite ready to use it, but she feared if she didn't do this now, she might never do it.

Evangeline quickened her pace just as she sensed the footsteps behind her.

She wasn't sure when Jacks had started following her.

Until now he'd been exceptionally silent. But she could sense it was him. She could feel it in the tingling of her skin as she entered the tunnel that would take her to the Tree of Souls.

As she went further down the tunnel, she kept waiting for Jacks to ask what she was doing or to draw her attention so that she would stop. But perhaps Jacks had finally figured out that Evangeline loved to argue with him, and therefore he was keeping quiet because he knew it would be a more effective means of frustrating her.

"I know you're there," she said at last.

She might have turned around to face him, but she'd finally reached the end of the tunnel. Evangeline was now standing inside the enormous cavern that was home to the Tree of Souls, and she found that she did not like the idea of having the uncanny tree at her back.

She could feel its heartbeat thump-thump-thumping under the ground as she drew nearer. Jacks finally came up to her side. He was dressed in dark olive green trousers and a cream shirt that was rolled up at the sleeves and only halfway buttoned. His golden hair was tousled, and his smile was crooked when she looked up at him.

"So, you've decided to sacrifice me?" he asked.

"I would never do that!"

"I know." His eyes turned teasing, sparking with little flecks of silver. "I've seen what a mess you become when I'm not around."

"Is that why you followed me?"

"No. I followed you because I'm incredibly jealous and I don't like the idea of you visiting Apollo—"

Jacks broke off abruptly when he saw the glowing truth stone in Evangeline's hand. "Where did you get that?"

"Honora Valor let me borrow it."

"Why?" he asked dubiously.

Evangeline would have loved to have said something cryptic like, *You'll see*. But having the truth stone meant that she had little choice but to be honest.

"The last time Honora visited, I told her about something I'd been wanting to do, and she told me the truth stone could help. Honora said that the stone doesn't just force people to tell the truth. Under the right circumstances it can also be used to *write the truth*."

Evangeline took her dagger from her belt and pricked the tip of a finger until it welled with blood.

Jacks gave the blood a wary look. "Little Fox... tell me you're not planning on opening that tree and letting Apollo out."

"I'm not—not exactly."

Jacks quickly snatched her wrist before she could press any of the blood from her hand to the tip of the truth stone. "He tried to sacrifice you," Jacks growled. "He's a monster."

"I'm not saying that Apollo was a good person," Evangeline said. "I just keep thinking that you've changed, and it makes me feel as if he should get a chance to change as well."

"I think he's already gotten everything he deserves," Jacks grumbled. "And if it wasn't for you, I would never have changed. I wouldn't have been foolish enough to end up stuck in a tree, but I guarantee I deserved something similar."

Evangeline saw a rare flash of regret cast a shadow across Jacks's beautiful face.

She was tempted to try and wipe away the shadows with her fingers, but one hand held the truth stone and the other was coated in blood and held captive by Jacks.

"I am thankful that we do not all get what we deserve," she said softly. "And maybe you are right. Maybe this is all that Apollo will ever deserve. But I just keep thinking that had we never wronged him, he might not have ended up here. He was

cursed three times—or four times, depending on what actually counts as a curse. And while I don't believe that justifies any of the terrible things he did, we still helped make him into a villain.”

“I’ve cursed a lot of people.” Jacks reeled her in as he spoke, slowly tugging Evangeline towards him and trapping her bloody hand so that it was behind him as he leaned in closer and whispered, “They don’t all become villains, Little Fox.” His lips brushed hers, taunting, teasing.

“Stop trying to distract me,” she murmured.

“I’ll never stop trying to distract you.” Jacks playfully nipped her lower lip and then he kissed her, far less playfully.

The tree’s leaves rustled behind them.

Evangeline pulled back and saw the outline of Apollo’s face, trapped in the tree and scowling at them from the trunk.

“You only did that because Apollo is watching!”

“Not just because of Apollo.” Jacks’s eyes gleamed wickedly.

Evangeline untangled herself from Jacks with a tiny huff. Then, before he could grab her, she pricked her finger once more until it bled again.

“All I’m doing is giving Apollo another chance,” Evangeline said. “Honora told me that with a bit of magic blood, the truth stone can be used to write a new prophecy.”

“I would have thought you’ve learned your lesson about prophecies.” This time Jacks merely folded his arms across his chest as Evangeline wet the tip of the truth stone with her blood and then painted words onto the Tree of Souls:

If your soul be brave and your love be true, then by your spilled blood may the trapped prince in this tree be freed for you.

“Does it have to rhyme to work?” asked Jacks, one eyebrow raised.

“No. I just wanted it to rhyme. I think it sounds more official that way. But the intent is what really matters. According to Honora, that’s often why prophecies can be so tricky—sometimes the intent isn’t quite clear.”

“What was your intent?” Jacks asked.

“That Apollo can be freed, but only by the spilled blood of his true love.”

“That’s all?” Jacks warily lifted an eyebrow. “No catch? The bastard just gets out if his true love stumbles in here and bleeds on the tree?”

Evangeline nodded.

Jacks shook his head. “I think you're being far too kind.”

A second later, the truth stone was gone from her and Jacks was spilling his own blood on it.

“What are you doing?” she asked.

“You said we were responsible for Apollo becoming a villain. I’m just doing my part, to help with the prophecy that will fix it.”

Jacks used his blood to hastily paint more words onto the tree, on the side opposite to where Evangeline had written her prophecy.

She shook her head as she read his words. “You just added a timeline and another curse. You’re not supposed to curse true love!”

Jacks shrugged insouciantly. “He’s evil, and now he’s immortal. If he ever does get released from the tree and he wants to stay out, it only seems fair he has to earn it.”

“What you’ve written doesn't seem fair. It seems impossible.”

Jacks replied with a cocky grin that showed off both of his dimples, “I thought you believed nothing was impossible for true love, Little Fox?”

Owlcrate Edition

AURORA VALOR'S STAB AT EVER AFTER

Aurora Valor was many things. She was clever, she was selfish, she was pretty—extremely pretty, extraordinarily pretty. She was also brave, and calculating. But she was never clueless.

Not like Evangeline Fox.

Although now Aurora wondered if perhaps she should have been more clueless. Perhaps she'd relied on her sister Vesper's visions of the future a little too much. Maybe it was time for her to be reckless, to do something that would bring about a future that was completely unknown to her.

Aurora stepped closer to the Tree of Souls.

Its branches rustled. She couldn't tell if it was greeting her or was possibly about to hurt her.

"Hello," she said softly.

Trees and plants usually liked Aurora. Flowers always bloomed when she walked through, dropping leaves over muddy paths so that she wouldn't ruin the hems of her gowns.

But this tree, with its unnerving heartbeat pulsing through the ground, did not seem glad to see her.

She looked at all the faces trapped inside its trunk. So many faces, all watching her with eyes that seemed either sad or judgmental. When she found Apollo's striking face, he seemed to glare at her with more venom than the rest. But really, he should have known better than to trust her. Back when Aurora had been a princess of the Magnificent North, she'd been warned by both parents only to ever trust her family.

Of course now her family was hunting her.

She shouldn't have been here at all; she should have fled as far south as she could go. But she really didn't like the heat, and she had been unable to resist seeing if Jacks and Evangeline really were happy. Maybe they were bickering, or perhaps Jacks had grown tired of Evangeline Fox and her endless hope. But when Aurora had found the pair living in the Hollow, they had seemed stupidly in love.

Aurora knew it was wretched of her, but she wanted to destroy that love. She wanted to take it away so that Evangeline hurt the same way she did.

Aurora held out a dagger in her hand, ready to strike the tree and drink its blood to find out if maybe, in exchange for her immortality, it would take the life of Jacks.

But Aurora wasn't quite able to do it. She wasn't entirely certain the tree would take Jacks, and she didn't want to end up like Apollo. She also noticed something that she had not seen the last time she'd been there.

"What's this?" she murmured, and then she cautiously stepped closer to where someone had written these words on the trunk:

*If your soul be brave and
your love be true,
then by your spilled blood
may the trapped prince in this tree
be freed for you.*

Aurora contemplated the words for only a second. The prophecy must have been written as a means to free Apollo, and while she didn't particularly care about seeing him ever again, she knew his return would upset Evangeline and Jacks. Hopefully even end them.

Aurora felt a rush as she took the blade in her hand and dug it into her palm. She'd come here to be reckless, and now she was doing just that. For while she hadn't

seen this prophecy before, she knew enough about prophecies to be certain that there had to be more to this than one met the eye.

Blood welled up from the cut in her hand, and then it spilled.

Drop. Drop. Drop.

Three perfect circles of red hit the ground. Then for good measure Aurora pressed her bleeding hand to the tree. And then she hoped. It was probably the wrong sort of hoping, since there wasn't really any love in it. But after a moment of hoping and bleeding, she felt a shift in the cavern. The air seemed to spark. She could hear it sizzle. Then she could feel the bark of the tree pulse beneath her palm. *Thump. Thump. Thump.*

Aurora quickly removed her hand and took a cautious step back, watching as the tree continued to pulse. *Thump. Thump. Thump.*

She held her breath.

But nothing happened.

After a few seconds, the tree's heart no longer beat so fast. She could feel it thumping under her feet, but barely.

It must simply have been excited about her blood.

"I didn't really expect it to work," Aurora muttered.

Then she heard a coughing sound coming from the other side of the tree, followed by a grunt.

Aurora quickly rounded the tree's massive trunk.

Rising up from the ground was a young man dressed in only a pair of loose pants. His shoes were gone, as was his shirt—and for a second, she couldn't help but stare. This young man must have just come out of the tree. His hair was long, his eyes were a little wild, and he was clearly no Apollo.

"Who are you?" she asked.

The young man looked up and slowly cocked his head. "You don't know who I am?"

Aurora shook her head.

The stranger gave her a smile that was a little more feral than friendly. "That will make this a lot more fun."