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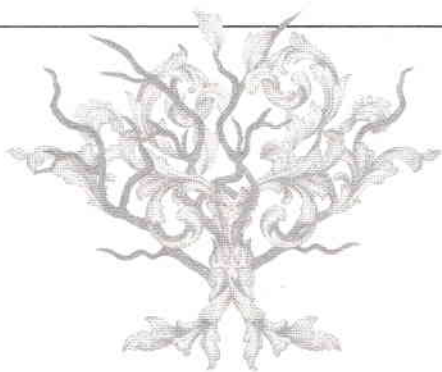
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PART IV



*Happily
Ever After*



Evangeline

Evangeline Fox always believed she'd find herself inside of a fairytale one day. As a young girl, whenever a new shipment of curiosities would come into her father's shop, Evangeline would immediately rush to the crates. She would examine each item inside and ask herself, *Could this be it?* Could this be the object that would thrust her into a fantasy?

Once there had been an enormous crate with only a door-knob inside. The knob was an exquisite jeweled green and sparkled in the light like magic. Evangeline was convinced that if she attached it to the right door, it would open up to another world and her fairytale would begin.

The doorknob, sadly, never opened up to anything out of

the ordinary. But Evangeline never gave up hope that someday she'd find herself *elsewhere*.

Hoping and imagining and believing in magic had always been like breathing to Evangeline. And yet it was suddenly very difficult to breathe as she finally found herself *elsewhere*, wrapped in the arms of a handsome young man who said he was her husband.

Husband. The word made her head spin. *How? How? How?* She was too overwhelmed to ask more than that one word. In fact, she couldn't even manage to speak it aloud.

If she wasn't being held, Evangeline might have crumpled back onto the floor. It was too much to take in and too much to lose all at once.

One of the last things she remembered was sitting with her father as he died at home. But even that memory was ragged around the edges. As if his death were part of a faded portrait, only it wasn't just faded—pieces of it had also been ruthlessly ripped away. She couldn't clearly remember the months before her father's death or anything that had happened afterward. She didn't even recall how he'd caught the fever that had killed him.

All she knew was that, like her mother, her father was gone—and he had been for some time.

"I know this must be frightening. I imagine you feel alone, but you're not, Evangeline." The stranger who'd said he was her husband held her tighter.

He was tall, the sort of tall that made Evangeline feel small as he held her close enough for her to feel that he was shaking,

too. She didn't imagine he was as terrified as she was, but clearly he didn't feel as confident as he looked. "You have me—and there is nothing I wouldn't do for you."

"But I don't remember you," she said. She was a little reluctant to pull away. But it was all so overwhelming. *He* was overwhelming.

A deep line formed between the stranger's brows as she pulled back. But he replied patiently, his voice low and soothing as he said, "My name is Apollo Acadian."

Evangeline waited again for a flare of recognition, or even just a tiny spark. She needed something familiar, something to hold on to that would keep her from collapsing back onto the ground, and Apollo looked at her as if he wanted to be that. No one had ever looked at her with so much intensity.

He made her think of a hero from a fairytale. Broad shouldered with a strong jaw, dark smoldering eyes, and clothing that spoke of the sort of wealth that conjured images of treasure chests and castles. He wore a high-collared dark red coat with rich gold embroidery covering the cuffs and the shoulders. Beneath it was some sort of doublet—at least she thought that was what it was called. The men at home in Valenda dressed quite differently.

But clearly, she wasn't there anymore. The thought brought a new wave of panic that made her words come out in a rush.

"How did I come to be here? How did we meet? Why don't I remember you?" she asked.

"Your memories were stolen by someone who's been trying

to tear us apart.” Something flickered in Apollo’s brown eyes, although if it was anger or pain, she couldn’t tell.

Evangeline wished she could remember him. But the harder she tried, the worse she felt. Her head hurt and her chest felt hollowed out, as if she’d lost more than just her memories. For a second the agony was so deep and so brutal, she clutched her heart, half expecting to find a jagged hole. But there was no wound. Her heart was still there; she could feel it beating. Yet for a devastating moment, Evangeline imagined that it shouldn’t have been, that her heart was supposed to be as broken as she felt.

Then it hit her, not a feeling but a thought—a sharp, fragmented one.

She had something important to tell someone.

Evangeline couldn’t remember what it was, but she felt as if her entire world depended on this one thing she needed to share. Just thinking about it made her blood rush. She tried to remember what this *something* was that she needed to say and who it was she needed to tell—could it be this Apollo person?

Could this be why her memories had been stolen?

“Why is someone trying to tear us apart?” Evangeline asked.

She might have thrown out even more questions. She might have asked once more how they’d met and how long they’d been married, but Apollo suddenly looked nervous.

He shot a furtive glance over Evangeline’s shoulder before quietly saying, “It’s complicated.”

She followed his gaze to the strange wooden door she’d been

curled up against. On either side of the door were two warrior angels made of stone, although they looked more lifelike than stone carvings were supposed to. Their wings were outstretched and spattered in dried blood. The sight of it brought another pang in her chest, as if her body still remembered even though her mind had forgotten.

“Do you know what happened here?” she asked.

For a split second something crossed Apollo’s face that almost looked like guilt, but it might have just been sadness. “I promise, I’ll answer every question you have. But now we need to get out of here. We need to leave before he comes back.”

“Who is *he*?”

“The villain who erased all of your memories.” Apollo took Evangeline’s hand, holding her firmly as he quickly led her from the room with the door and the warrior angels.

Grainy late-morning light lit shelves of manuscripts tied up with ribbons and tassels. It appeared they were in an ancient library, although the books looked newer the farther they ventured.

Floors changed from dusty stone to gleaming marble, ceilings grew taller, the light became sharper, manuscripts turned into leather-bound volumes. Evangeline once again tried to search for something familiar in the late-morning glow. Something that might make her remember. Her head was clearer now, but nothing was familiar.

She was truly elsewhere, and it seemed she had been for long enough to meet heroes and villains, and to find herself in a battle between them.

“Who was he?” she pressed. “The one who stole my memories?”

Apollo’s steps faltered. Then they picked up faster than before. “I promise I will tell you everything, but we should get out of here—”

“Oh my!” someone exclaimed.

Evangeline turned to see a woman in white robes standing between the shelves of books. The woman—some kind of a librarian, Evangeline supposed—brought a hand to her mouth as she stared. Her expression was one of awe, eyes wide and unwavering as they latched on to Apollo.

Another librarian strode into the hall. This one gasped, then promptly fainted, dropping a stack of books as the first librarian yelled, “It’s a miracle!”

More librarians and scholars came forward, all crying out similar exclamations.

Evangeline curled toward Apollo as they were quickly surrounded. First by the librarians, then by servants and courtiers. Finally, by wide-chested guards in shining armor who rushed in, no doubt drawn by all of the clamor.

The room they were in was at least four stories tall, but suddenly it felt small and suffocating as more and more unfamiliar people closed in on them.

“He’s back . . .”

“He’s alive . . .”

“It’s a miracle!” they all repeated, voices turning reverent as tears began to glisten down cheeks.

Evangeline didn’t know what was happening. She felt as if

she were witnessing the sort of thing that usually took place in a church. Was it possible she had married a saint?

Looking up at Apollo, she tried to remember his surname. *Acadian*, that was what he'd told her. She couldn't recall a single story about an Apollo Acadian, but clearly there were stories. Upon meeting him, she'd imagined he was some kind of hero, but the crowd looked at him as if he was even more.

"Who are you?" Evangeline whispered.

Apollo brought her hand to his lips and pressed a kiss to her knuckles that made her shiver. "I am the one who will never let anyone harm you again."

A few nearby people sighed as they overheard the words.

Then Apollo raised his free hand toward the rumbling crowd in a gesture that universally meant *quiet*.

Those gathered immediately fell into a hush. Some even dropped to their knees.

It was uncanny to see so many people fall quiet so quickly—they didn't even seem to breathe as Apollo's voice rang out over their heads.

"I can see that some of you are having a difficult time believing your eyes. But what you're seeing is real. I'm alive. When you leave this room, tell everyone you see that Prince Apollo died and then went through hell to get back here."

Prince. Evangeline barely had time to process the word and everything that came with it—for almost as soon as Apollo spoke, he released Evangeline's hand and swiftly took off his velvet doublet, followed by his linen shirt.

Several of those gathered gasped, including Evangeline.

Apollo's chest was flawless, smooth and carved in muscles, and over his heart was a vibrant tattoo of two swords in the shape of a heart with a name in the center: *Evangeline*.

Until that moment, everything had felt a bit like a fever dream she might have woken up from. But her name on his chest felt permanent in a way that Apollo's words had not. He wasn't a stranger. He knew her intimately enough to mark her name across his heart.

He turned around then, showing off another sight that stunned not only her, but the entire crowd. Apollo's beautiful, proud, straight back was covered in a web of violent scars.

"These marks are the price I paid to return!" he cried. "When I say I went through hell, I mean it. But I had to come back. I had to right the wrongs done in my absence. I know many believe that it was my brother, Tiberius, who killed me, but it was not."

Shocked whispers moved through the crowd.

"I was poisoned by a man I thought to be a friend," Apollo roared. "Lord Jacks is the man who killed me. Then he stole the memories of my bride, Evangeline. I will not rest until Jacks is found and he pays for his crimes with his life!"