OWL KING

Also by BEX HOGAN

Nettle

BEX
HOGAN

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ZEPHYR
An imprint of Head of Zeus

First published in the UK in 2025 by Zephyr, an imprint of Head of Zeus,
part of Bloomsbury Publishing Plc

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9 7 5 3 1 2 4 6 8

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN (HB): 9781035912681
ISBN (ePub): 9781035912650

Cover illustration © Laura El, 2025
Typeset by Ed Pickford

All internal illustrations © Shutterstock
Feathers: Juli Gin; Black feathers: ilonitta. Stories – The Owl and the Bluebird: Marzolino & Morphart Creation; The Heron: Morphart Creation; The Lark: Morphart Creation; The Wren and the Hawk: Morphart Creation & andrey oleynik; The Starling: Oleg Golovnev; The Blackbird: Marzolino. Chapters – Owl: Mashikomol; Hawk: Morphart Creation; Nightingale: lynea; Dove: Olha Saiuk; Black Swan: lynea; Bluebird: Morphart Creation; Swallow: ROS. art; Blackthorn: umiko; Elder: Jka; Flying swan: una_llenella; Goldfinch: Val_Iva; Moons (red): Arthur Balitskii; Cuckoo: Morphart Creation; Magpie: Yevheniia Lytvynovych; Lark: mart; Blackbird: Morphart Creation; Ash: N_Melanchenko; Wren: Yevheniia Lytvynovych; Oak: Morphart Creation; Crow: Yevheniia Lytvynovych; Heron: Morphart Creation; Moons (silver): Chikovnaya; Saffron: BuKate; Rowan: Alisa Pravotorova; Starling: Morphart Creation

Printed and bound in Great Britain by
CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon CR0 4YY

Bloomsbury Publishing Plc
50 Bedford Square, London, WC1B 3DP, UK
Bloomsbury Publishing Ireland Limited,
29 Earlsfort Terrace, Dublin 2, D02 AY28, Ireland

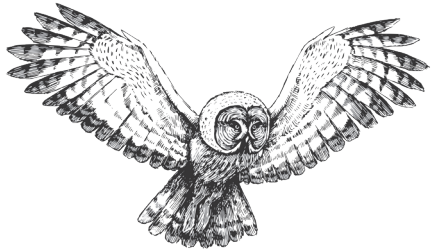
HEAD OF ZEUS LTD
5–8 Hardwick Street
London, EC1R 4RG

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For Yu-Chiao, Maria, Carole, Ruth & Tanya.
Sisters, bound not by blood, but love.





THE OWL

Once there was an owl, the great sovereign of a beautiful land.

Sharp and cunning, he was beloved by all in his kingdom. He ruled beneath the rays of the silver moon, always watchful, ever alert. An unrivalled hunter, he protected and defended his people and the Realm of Ever Moon prospered.

Content on his own, the owl had never thought of taking a queen. That changed the day he met the bluebird.

Her sheer beauty captured the owl's heart. In wisdom, in kindness, in courage, she was more than his equal. Their love was passionate, strong and true, and the kingdom readily accepted the bluebird at their king's side. Everyone believed they would rule the land together forever.

But there are few things that endure the creeping tract of time and the slow passage of faery moons.

Some say their love diminished. Others that the bluebird angered the owl and was banished to another realm. Whispers persisted of a betrayal that could not be forgiven.

All that was known for certain was that the bluebird was gone, and the owl had changed. Anger shadowed him as surely as the clouds did the moon, until light was extinguished in both the king and his once beautiful land.

The radiant silver moon was never seen again, hidden by pervading gloom as Ever Moon became Never Moon. And the owl's bright eyes, that had once made everyone feel safe, became something to fear.

For now the owl hunted another queen. Many were found, but none sufficed and soon each one mysteriously vanished, forgotten on the wind.

Yet still he hunted, always seeking the next. His subjects knew to keep hidden, to keep quiet, to keep safe.

That to survive the owl, they must evade him. That to live, they must remain invisible.



ONE

Long ago, I decided that in the absence of stars, stories would be my guide.

They had, after all, saved my life once before.

But here I was, ignoring their warnings, each step taking me closer to the danger they'd cautioned against.

Perhaps sensing my unease, Lyla slipped her hand into mine. A little of my apprehension lessened as I glanced at her.

She was staring straight ahead, her eyes fixed with determination.

For sisters, we were nothing alike, her features fine where mine were plain, her edges keen where mine were soft. Surprising perhaps, when our mother's blood bound us, but in one thing we were perfectly matched.

Our love for each other.

The journey had been long, not just in time but trepidation. Despite the peril surrounding our

impending arrival, part of me was glad that we had received a royal summons. I had enjoyed seeing beyond the copse we lived in – even if there wasn't much to see.

The Realm of Never Moon was predictably a dour place. The skies were always thick with cloud, only a ghostly glow illuminating the land. An enormous expanse of the realm was blanketed by forests, filled with withering larch and fading black poplars. The bare branches of wych elm reached to rake the clouds, their roots coiled in the dim light. Tough, invasive plants crept through the shady undergrowth. Ferns mottled brown and blighted, wood anemones forever failed to flower, fungus fed off fallen branches. Little flourished in the dereliction of Never Moon, the swathes of mist hiding its shame.

Of course, I knew from Lyla's stories that our realm hadn't always been like this. Once it had been bathed endlessly in moonlight, as glorious then as it was desolate now. Trees had thrived, the land had been lush, and I wished more than anything I could have known the kingdom then.

But that was long before my time.

'We're nearly there,' Lyla said. 'Stay close, Ilsette.'

The road was busy, as other travellers made their way to the royal court, all as unable as us to ignore the king's proclamation that every faery dwelling in the south-west quarter attend his renowned centennial Feathered Ball. No one dared refuse a tyrant.

The crowds worked to our advantage, helping us blend among the rush of bodies. To anyone else, I'm sure Lyla looked as calm and poised as ever, but I knew her too well. I could see the tension in her jaw.

We weren't the only ones walking with a sense of unease. No faery wanted to catch the eye of the king, and by coming to his court we were as good as flies buzzing around a web. It was inevitable that someone was heading to their doom, but there was no choice. The odds of taking the risk were more favourable than refusing the invitation. To do that would result in certain – and severe – punishment.

My own fears extended far beyond capturing the king's romantic attentions. Given how unwelcome my kind were in this realm, I had to avoid *anyone's* notice.

'Don't squirm,' Lyla instructed under her breath. 'It's unfaerylike and you need to fit in.'

'Sorry,' I whispered, trying to hold myself as elegantly as she did.

Then, there it was, the mist parting to reveal the Hollows.

The court loomed high in the treetops. Much was hidden behind the steep, spiky hedged walls, but towers soared higher still, surrounded by a wild and tangled canopy. Vines clawed their way up crumbling stone in a fruitless search for light. Before us, a magnificent staircase led to the vast oak doors – hundreds of feathers carved into them – that protected the city within.

Birds circled above, their cries a warning. Feathers floated to litter the steps and the air crackled with magic.

It was dark and wonderful, sinister and alluring, menacing and enticing. I felt an odd affinity with such a place – neither one thing nor another, two pieces that didn't quite fit to make a whole. I knew exactly what that was like.

'A hundred and fifty years,' Lyla muttered as we began to climb the many stairs. 'All that time keeping you hidden and now I'm escorting you straight to his door.'

'You said yourself, we can do this,' I reminded her. 'It's only one ball, then we'll return home.'

Only one ball. Only one night. We could be insignificant among a host of other faeries. And we were prepared. We'd done all we could to ensure I would pass unnoticed, that my secret would remain safe.

When at last we reached the doors, two guards were waiting to inspect our invitations. They were Hawks – the infamous king's guard, as fierce and unfriendly, I thought, as they were rumoured to be. Currently in faery form, they stood taller than the rest, their strong wings exhibiting the power they could unleash when they transformed into birds. Whatever shape they took, they were known to be lethal, the king no longer caring that they had grown overzealous with killing in his name. They commanded almost as much fear as the king himself.

'Papers,' the one to our right demanded.

Shifting discreetly so that she was in front of me, Lyla held out the invitations – two silver feathers elegantly inscribed.

I held my breath, waiting to see what would happen should the Hawk glance my way.

Would he see me for what I was?

He barely paid us any heed. 'Move on to the nests,' he said, as he ushered us through.

We didn't hesitate, Lyla steering me swiftly into the court.

'So far so good,' I said, daring a hopeful smile. She didn't return it.

'No time to grow careless,' she chided. 'The worst is yet to come.'

'It's not like you to be pessimistic,' I said, teasing her to lighten the mood.

She looked at me then, her expression stilled, not a hint of a frown visible on that perfect brown complexion. Her tone was stern, but her dark eyes betrayed her compassion. 'Keeping you safe is no joke. I have to be ready for anything. We both do.' She sighed. 'Come on, I think the nests are this way.'

I was happy to let her lead, giving me a chance to take in our new surroundings.

Over the years, Lyla had told me tales about the Hollows. But nothing had prepared me for the true spectacle of the place.

We were high, high up, in the tallest of trees, and yet still the tops soared above us, the court sprawling around them. Buildings were positioned between trunks, others within them like nests, and everywhere there were feathers. Carved into the bark, painted on the wooden walls, floating in the air like falling leaves. The world I knew was dull and dim, but here the shadows were vanquished by a million tiny lights, fireflies illuminating the darkness one flicker at a time.

Not even their glow seemed able to lighten the atmosphere though, the many inhabitants and guests rushing about unsmiling, their eyes downcast.

'Will everyone here be at the ball?' I asked Lyla, wondering how there could ever be enough room.

'I assume so,' she replied. 'The more the merrier for us. We'll lose ourselves in the crowd.'

Another faery approached, dressed in the king's colours – a tailored black suit with red lapels, cuffs and buttons. 'Welcome to the Hollows,' he said. 'Please make your way to the nests, where you may refresh yourselves before the ball.'

'Thank you,' Lyla said with a gracious nod. 'When and where might that be?'

'Listen for the toll of the bell. It will become clear where you have to go.'

Lyla thanked the faery again and we continued towards the massive tree filled with nests where other guests were being directed.

We climbed several sturdy ladders to reach a vacant nest, and I was exhausted when Lyla finally pushed open the door made of entwined twigs.

The circular room wasn't large, the walls a patchwork of sticks, moss, debris. There was no roof, just the view of the massive branch above ours. The floor was thick with feathers, inviting me to collapse into them and sleep. Lyla often forgot how tired I grew compared to her. Nonetheless, I couldn't take my eyes off the portrait hanging in front of us.

A majestic owl, its feathers black as darkest night. Red eyes saw everything even when they were simply canvas and ink.

A reminder that we could not elude him in any corner of the realm. That always he was watching. Cato, King of Never Moon, the Owl King.