

LIBRIS

We know  
books

THE BALLAD<sup>D</sup> OF  
NEVER  
AFTER

STEPHANIE GARBER



HODDER &  
STOUGHTON

LIBRIS

We know  
books

# PART I

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*A Cruelty  
of Curses*



**T**here is a door deep inside the royal library of Wolf Hall that no one has opened for centuries. People have tried to set it on fire, break it with axes, and pick its lock with magic keys. But no one has so much as left a scratch on this stubborn door. Some say it mocks them. There is a wolf's head wearing a crown emblazoned on the door's wooden center, and people have sworn the wolf smirks at their failed attempts, or bares its sharp teeth if a person even comes close to opening this unopenable door.

Evangeline Fox had once tried. She had pulled and tugged and twisted the iron knob, but the door would not budge. Not then. Not before. But she hoped it would be different now.

Evangeline was very good at hoping.

She was also rather good at opening doors. With one drop of her willing blood, she could undo any lock.

First, she needed to be sure she wasn't being watched or

followed or stalked by that deceitful, apple-eating scoundrel whose name she wouldn't even think.

Evangeline checked behind her shoulder. Her lantern's ocher glow chased the nearby shadows away, but the bulk of Wolf Hall's royal library stacks were nebulous with night.

She fidgeted nervously, and the lantern flickered. Evangeline had never been afraid of the dark before. Dark was for stars and dreams and the magic that took place in between days. Before losing her parents, she had constellation-watched with her father and listened to her mother tell stories by candlelight. And Evangeline had never been frightened.

But it wasn't actually the dark or the night that she feared. It was the spider-thin prickle crawling across her shoulder blades. It had been with her since the moment she'd stepped out of her royal suite on a mission to unlock this door, in the hopes it would lead her to a cure that would save her husband, Apollo.

The uncanny sensation was so subtle, at first she let herself think it was merely paranoia.

She wasn't being followed.

She'd heard no steps.

Until . . .

Evangeline peered into the library's dark, and a pair of inhuman eyes stared back. Silver blue and brilliant and broken-star bright. She imagined they shone just to taunt her. But Evangeline knew that even if they sparkled now, even if these eyes lit up the dark and tempted her to lower her light, she couldn't trust them. And she couldn't trust him.

*Jacks.* She tried not to think his name, but it was impossible not to as she watched him saunter out of the dim, indolent yet confident and handsome as ever. He moved as if the night should have been afraid of him.

The tingling of her shoulder blades slid over her arms, an unsettling caress that went down to her one remaining broken heart scar. The wound stung, then throbbed, as if Jacks had sunk his teeth into it again.

Evangeline clutched her lantern like a sword.

“Go away, Jacks.” It had only been two days since she’d had the guards remove him, and she’d hoped he would have stayed away longer—forever would have been ideal. “I know what you did, and I don’t want to see you.”

Jacks shoved his hands into the pockets of his trousers. His smoke-gray shirt was loosely tucked in, with sleeves shoved up lean arms and buttons missing at the throat. With his tousled hair now golden instead of seductive midnight blue, he looked more reckless stableboy than calculating Fate. But Evangeline knew she could never let herself forget what Jacks truly was. He was obsessive and driven and entirely without morals or conscience.

The stories said his kiss was deadly to all except his one true love, and as he’d searched for her, he’d left a trail of corpses. Evangeline had once been naive enough to believe that meant the Prince of Hearts understood heartbreak because his heart had broken over and over as he looked for love. But now it was crystal clear—he was the one who did the breaking, because he didn’t know how to love.

Jacks spoke softly. "I understand if you're upset—"

"If," Evangeline cut in. "You poisoned my husband!"

Jacks lifted his shoulders in an insouciant shrug. "I didn't kill him."

"That's not something you earn points for." She fought to keep her voice from cracking.

Until then, Evangeline hadn't realized that a part of her still held on to a sliver of hope that Jacks was innocent. But he wasn't even trying to deny it. He didn't care that Apollo was little more than a corpse, just as he hadn't cared when Evangeline had been turned to stone.

"You need to stop holding me to human standards," Jacks drawled. "I'm a Fate."

"That's exactly why I don't want to see you. Since I met you, my first love was turned to stone, *I* was turned to stone, then I was turned into a fugitive, multiple people have tried to murder me, and you poisoned my husband—"

"You already said that one."

Evangeline glowered.

Jacks sighed and leaned against a nearby bookshelf as if her feelings were the emotional equivalent of a sneeze—something to be gotten over quickly, or avoided simply by stepping out of the way. "I'm not going to apologize for being what I am. And you're conveniently forgetting that before we met, you were a sad orphan with a broken heart and a wicked stepsister. After I stepped in, you became the sweetheart savior of Valenda, married a prince, and became a princess."

“Those things only happened because they served your twisted interests.” Evangeline seethed. Everything he’d done for her was just so that he could use her to open the Valory Arch. “Children treat their toys better than you’ve treated me.”

Jacks’s eyes narrowed. “Then why didn’t you stab me, Little Fox? The other night in the crypt, I threw you a dagger, and I was close enough for you to use it.” His gaze sparked with fresh amusement as it lowered to her neck. To the exact place his mouth had lingered three nights ago.

She blushed at the unwanted memory of his teeth and tongue on her skin. He’d been infected with vampire venom, and she’d been infected with stupidity.

She’d stayed with him that night to keep him occupied so he wouldn’t feed on human blood and become a vampire himself. He hadn’t, but he’d fed on her sympathy instead. Jacks had told her the story of the girl who’d made his heart beat again—Princess Donatella. She was supposed to be his one true love, but instead of filling that role, Princess Donatella had chosen another and stabbed Jacks in the chest.

After hearing that story, Evangeline had started to see Jacks as the sympathetic Prince of Hearts that she had first gone to for help. But Jacks was all broken without any heart. And she needed to stop hoping that he could be more.

“I made a mistake that night in the crypt.” Evangeline banished the blush from her cheeks and looked straight into Jacks’s inhuman eyes. “But give me another chance and I won’t hesitate to stab you.”

He smirked, flashing dimples he didn't deserve. "I'm almost tempted to test that claim. But you'll have to do more than wound me if you wish to get rid of me." Jacks pulled an intensely white apple from his pocket and started tossing it. "If you *really* want me out of your life forever, help me find the missing stones and open the Valory Arch. Then I promise you'll never see me again."

"As much as I'd love that, I'm never going to open that arch for you."

"What about for Apollo?"

Evangeline felt a sharp stab of pain for the prince and another flare of anger for Jacks. "Don't you dare say his name."

Jacks grinned wider, looking oddly pleased by her anger. "If you agree to help me, I'll wake him from his suspended state."

"If you actually believe I would do that, you're delusional." Her first bargain with Jacks was the start of this entire mess. There would be no more deals with him, no more partnerships, no more anything. "I don't need you to save Apollo. I've found another way." Evangeline lifted her chin toward the sealed library door. It was still half-covered in shadow, but she swore the crowned wolf's head grinned as if it knew that she was the one who'd finally open its lock.

Jacks took one look at the door and chuckled, quiet and mocking. "You think you'll find a cure for Apollo in there?"

"I know I will."

Jacks laughed again, darker this time, and took a cheerful

bite of his apple. "Let me know when you change your mind, Little Fox."

"I won't change my—"

He was gone before she could finish. All that lingered was the echo of his ominous laughter.

But Evangeline refused to be nettled. She'd been told by an old librarian that this door led to every missing book and story about the Valors. Although the North's first royal family was human, it was widely accepted that they all possessed remarkable powers. Honora Valor, first queen of the North, was said to be the greatest healer of all time. And Evangeline had very good reason to believe that among the stories on the other side of this door were tales about her healing, which hopefully included a way to bring someone back from a state of suspended sleep.

Evangeline pulled out her dagger, a jewel-hilted blade with a few missing gems. It was actually Jacks's—the same one he'd tossed at her the night they'd spent in the crypt. He'd left it behind in the morning, and she still wasn't sure why she'd picked it up. She didn't want to keep it—not anymore—but she hadn't had time to replace it yet, and it was the sharpest thing she owned.

One prick of the dagger and her blood welled red. She pressed it to the door and whispered the words "Please open."

The lock instantly clicked. The knob easily twisted.

For the first time in centuries, the door swung open.

And Evangeline understood why Jacks had been laughing.

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Evangeline stepped through the door, and the ground beneath her crumbled as if her slippers had found crackers instead of stones. It was rather like her hope: rapidly disintegrating.

This room was supposed to hold shelves of books on the Valors, answers to her questions, a cure for Prince Apollo. But there was only a wheeze of cloudy air, wafting in swirls around a dramatically carved marble arch.

Evangeline closed her eyes and opened them as if she could blink the arch away and the precious books would appear in its place. Sadly, Evangeline's blinks did not contain magic.

Still, she refused to give up.

In the Meridian Empire, where she was from, this arch would have just been a decorative curve of carved rock, large enough to frame a set of doors. But this was the Magnificent

North, where arches were something else entirely. Here, arches were magical portals built by the Valors.

This arch had mighty angels clad in armor carved into the columns, like warriors on opposite sides of an eternal battle. One of the angels had a bowed head and a broken wing; it looked almost sad, while the other appeared angry. Both had their swords drawn and crossed over the center, warning away anyone who might wish to enter.

But Evangeline wasn't just anyone. And if anything, the forbidden nature of the arch made her want to look inside even more.

Maybe this arch was a gateway to the books and the cure that she needed for Apollo. If the old librarian was right about this room containing all the stories on the Valors, perhaps the angels were protecting the books from the story curse so that they would stay uncorrupted. Maybe all she needed to do was press her blood to one of their swords and they would politely step aside to let her enter.

She took another step, feeling a hopeful thrill as she pricked her finger on the dagger once again and pressed her welling blood to one of the angels' swords.

It lit up like a candle. Glowing gold veins spiderwebbed across the stone swords, the angels, the entire arch. It was bright and light and magical. Her skin tingled as the dust on the arch floated up and sparkled all around her like tiny bursting stars. Air that had been cold was now warm. She'd known she was meant to enter this room, to find this arch, to open—