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By Stephanie Garber

The *Caraval* Series

Caraval

Legendary

Finale

Spectacular

The *Once Upon a Broken Heart* Series

Once Upon a Broken Heart

The Ballad of Never After

A Curse for True Love

Alchemy of Secrets

LEGENDARY

STEPHANIE
GARBER



Seven Years Ago

While some rooms on the estate had monsters hiding beneath the beds, Tella swore her mother's suite concealed enchantment. Hints of emerald light dusted the air as if fairies came to play whenever her mother left. The room smelled of flowers plucked from secret gardens, and even when there wasn't a breeze, the sheer curtains billowed around the magnificent canopy bed. Above, a citrine chandelier greeted Tella with the musical sounds of kissing glass, making it easy for her to imagine the suite was a bewitched portal to another world.

Tella's tiny feet made no sound as she tiptoed across thick ivory carpets to her mother's dresser. Quickly, she stole a look over her shoulder and then snatched her mother's jewelry box. Slick and heavy in Tella's hands, the box was made of mother-of-pearl and covered in spider-webbed gold filigree; Tella liked to pretend it was also charmed, for even when her fingers were dirty, they fortunately never left prints.

Tella's mother didn't mind if her daughters played with her dresses or tried on her fancy slippers, but she'd asked them not to touch this box, which only made it more irresistible to Tella.

Scarlett could spend her afternoons daydreaming about

traveling shows like Caraval, but Tella liked to have *real* adventures.

Today she pretended a wicked queen was holding a young elfin prince captive, and to save him, she needed to steal her mother's opal ring, Tella's favorite piece of jewelry. The milky stone was raw and rough, shaped like a starburst, with sharp tips that sometimes pricked her fingers. But when Tella held the opal up toward the light, the stone sparked, covering the room in embers of luminescent cherry, gold, and lavender that hinted at magic curses and rebel pixie dust.

Sadly, the brassy band was too large for Tella's finger, though every time she opened the box, she still slipped it on in case she'd grown. But this day, right as Tella slid on the ring, she noticed something else.

The chandelier above her stilled as if it, too, had been caught by surprise.

Tella knew every item in her mother's jewelry case by heart: a carefully folded velvet ribbon edged in gold, blood-red scarlet earrings, a tarnished silver bottle that her mother claimed held angel tears, an ivory locket that wouldn't open, a jet wristlet that looked as if it belonged on the arm of a witch rather than her mother's elegant wrist.

The only item Tella never touched was the dirty-gray sachet, which smelled of moldy leaves and charnel-sweet death. *It keeps the goblins away*, her mother once teased. It kept Tella away as well.

But today, the ugly little purse flickered, drawing Tella toward it. One moment it looked like a bundle of rot and smelled of decay. A blink later, in its place rested a gleaming deck of cards, tied with a delicate satin ribbon. Then, in

a flash, it was back to the nasty pouch before it transfigured into the cards again.

Abandoning her play mission, Tella quickly grabbed the silky cord and lifted the deck from the box. Instantly they stopped shifting.

The cards were so very, very pretty. Such a dark hue of nightshade they were almost black, with tiny hints of gold flecks that sparkled in the light, and swirly strands of deep red-violet embossing that made Tella think of damp flowers, witches' blood, and *magic*.

These were nothing like the flimsy black-and-white cards her father's guards had taught her to play betting games with. Tella sat down on the carpet. Her nimble fingers tingled as she untied the ribbon and flipped over the first card.

The young woman pictured reminded Tella of a captive princess. Her lovely white dress was shredded, and her tear-shaped eyes were as pretty as polished sea glass, but so sad they hurt to look at. Most likely because her head was caged in a rounded globe of pearls.

The words *The Maiden Death* were written at the bottom at the card.

Tella shuddered. She did not like the name, and she was not fond of cages, even pearly ones. Suddenly she had the feeling that her mother would not want her seeing these cards, but that didn't stop Tella from turning over another.

The name at the bottom of this one was *The Prince of Hearts*.

It showed a young man with a face made of angles, and lips as sharp as two knife blades. One hand near his pointed chin clasped the hilt of a dagger, and red tears fell from

his eyes, matching the blood staining the corner of his narrow mouth.

Tella flinched as the prince's image flickered, there and gone, the same way the foul sachet had wavered earlier.

She should have stopped then. These cards were definitely not toys. Yet a part of her felt as if she was meant to find them. They were more real than the evil queen or the elfin prince of her imagination, and Tella dared to think that perhaps they would lead her on a genuine adventure.

The next card felt especially warm against her fingers as Tella turned it over.

The Oracle.

She did not know what the strange name meant, and unlike the other cards, this one did not appear to be violent. The edges were covered in ornate swirls of molten gold, and the center was silver like a mirror – no, it *was* a mirror. The shining middle reflected Tella's honey-blond curls and her round hazel eyes. But when Tella looked closer, the image was wrong. Tella's pink lips were trembling, and fat tears were running down her cheeks.

Tella never cried. Not even when her father used harsh words, or Felipe ignored her in favor of her older sister.

'I wondered if I'd find you in here, my little love.' Her mother's soft soprano filled the room as she swept inside. 'What adventures are you having today?'

As her mother bent toward the carpet where Tella sat, her hair fell around her clever face in elegant rivers. Her locks were the same dark brown as Scarlett's, but Tella shared her mother's olive skin, which gleamed as if she'd

been kissed by the stars. Though just then Tella watched her mother turn moonstone pale as her eyes latched on to the upturned images of the Maiden Death and the Prince of Hearts.

'Where did you find these?' Her mother's sweet voice remained, but her hands swiftly snatched the cards, giving Tella the impression she'd done something very wrong. And while Tella often did things she wasn't supposed to, usually her mother didn't mind. She'd gently correct her daughter, or occasionally tell her how to get away with her little crimes. It was her father who was easily angered. Her mother was the soft breath of air that blew out his sparks before they could ignite into flames. But now her mother looked as if she wanted to start a fire and use the cards for kindling.

'I found them in your jewelry box,' Tella said. 'I'm sorry. I didn't know they were bad.'

'It's all right.' Her mother ran a hand over Tella's curls. 'I didn't mean to frighten you. But even I don't like to touch these cards.'

'Then why do you have them?'

Her mother concealed the cards inside the skirts of her gown before setting the box on a high shelf by the bed, beyond Tella's reach.

Tella feared the conversation was over as it undoubtedly would have been with her father. But her mother didn't ignore questions from her daughters. Once the box was tucked safely away, her mother folded herself onto the carpet beside Tella.

'I wish I'd never found these cards,' she whispered, 'but

I will tell you about them if you swear to never touch this deck, or another deck like this, again.'

'I thought you told Scarlett and I never to swear.'

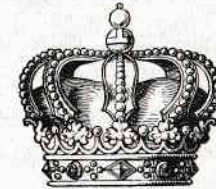
'This is different.' A corner of her mother's smile returned, as though Tella was being let in on a very special secret. It was always this way: when her mother chose to focus her glittering attention on Tella alone, she made Tella feel as if she were a star and the world revolved around only her. 'What have I always told you about the future?'

'Every person has the power to write her own,' Tella said.

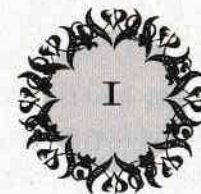
'That's right,' her mother said. 'Your future can be whatever you wish. We all have the power to choose our own destiny. But, my sweet, if you play with those cards, you give the Fates pictured inside them the opportunity to shift your path. People use Decks of Destiny, similar to the one you just touched, to predict the future, and once a future is foretold, that future becomes a living thing, and it will fight very hard to bring itself about. This is why I need you to never touch those cards again. Do you understand?'

Tella nodded, though she didn't truly understand; she was still at that tender age when the future seemed too far away to be real. It also did not escape her notice that her mother never said where the cards came from. And that made Tella's fingers clench a little tighter around the one still in her hand.

In her haste to pick up the deck, Tella's mother hadn't noticed the third card Tella had turned over. The one still in her possession. The Aracle. Tella carefully hid it beneath her crisscrossed legs as she said, 'I swear to never touch a deck like this again.'



Isla de los Sueños



Tella was no longer floating.

She was on the damp ground, feeling far, far away from the bright, sparkly thing she'd been the evening before. Back when Legend's private isle had radiated amber-tipped light, which breathed enchantment and wonder, along with a hint of deception. A delectable combination. And Tella had reveled in it. During the party to celebrate the end of Caraval, she had danced until her slippers were stained with grass and sipped flutes of bubbly wine until she'd practically floated.

But now she was facedown on the cold, hard forest floor.

Not daring to open her eyes, she groaned and brushed bits of nature from her hair, wishing some of the other remnants from last night could be as easily swept away. Everything reeked of stale liquor, pine needles, and mistakes. Her skin itched and crawled, and the only thing worse than the spinning in her head was the twisted soreness in her back and neck. Why had she thought falling asleep outside was a brilliant idea?

'Argh.' Someone grunted the not-quite-satisfied sound of a person on the verge of waking up.

Tella opened her eyes, peered to the side, and then closed her lids immediately. *Dirty saints.*

She was not alone.

Amid the towering trees and the untamed greens of the forest floor, Tella had flashed open her eyes just long enough to glimpse a dark head of hair, bronzed skin, a scarred wrist, and a boy's hand covered with a black rose tattoo.

Dante.

It all rushed back in a surge of blurry memories. The feeling of Dante's experienced hands wrapped around her hips. His kisses on her neck, her jaw, then her mouth as their lips became intimately acquainted.

What in all the hells had she been thinking?

Of course, Tella knew exactly what her thoughts had been during the Caraval performers' party the night before. The world had tasted like magic and starshine, like granted wishes and dreams come true, yet beneath it all, death still coated Tella's tongue. No matter how much champagne she drank, or how warm the air grew from dancing, Tella still shivered from the chilling recollection of how it had felt to die.

Her jump from Legend's balcony had not been an act of despair; it had been a leap of faith. But for just one night she hadn't wanted to think about it, or why it mattered. She wanted to celebrate her success, to forget everything else. And Dante had looked like the perfect way to do both. He was attractive, he could be charming, and it had been too long since she had been properly kissed. And, saints, did Dante know how to kiss.

With another groan, he stretched beside her. His large hand landed on her lower back, warm and firm, and far more tempting than it should have been.

Tella told herself she needed to escape before he woke. But even asleep, Dante was so good with his hands. He idly ran his fingers up her spine to her neck, lazily digging into her hair just enough to make her back arch.

His fingers stilled.

Dante's breathing grew suddenly quiet in a way that told Tella he was now awake as well.

Swallowing a curse, she hastily pushed up from the ground, away from his stilled, skilled fingers. She didn't care if he saw her sneaking off; it would be far less uncomfortable than exchanging any forced pleasantries before one of them became bold enough to make an excuse for why he or she needed to rush away. Tella had kissed enough young men to know that anything said by a boy right before or directly after she kissed him could not be believed at all. And she really needed to leave.

Tella's memories might have been blurry, yet somehow she couldn't manage to forget the letter she'd received before things became interesting with Dante. A stranger, face hidden underneath the cloak of night, had slid the note in her pocket and disappeared before she could follow. She wanted to reread the message right away, but considering what she owed the *friend* who'd sent it, she did not think that would be very wise. She needed to return to her room.

Damp earth and spiked tree needles snuck between her toes as she began to slink away. She must have lost her slippers somewhere, but she didn't want to waste time searching for them. The forest was tinged with indolent honey light and punctuated by heavy snores and murmurs