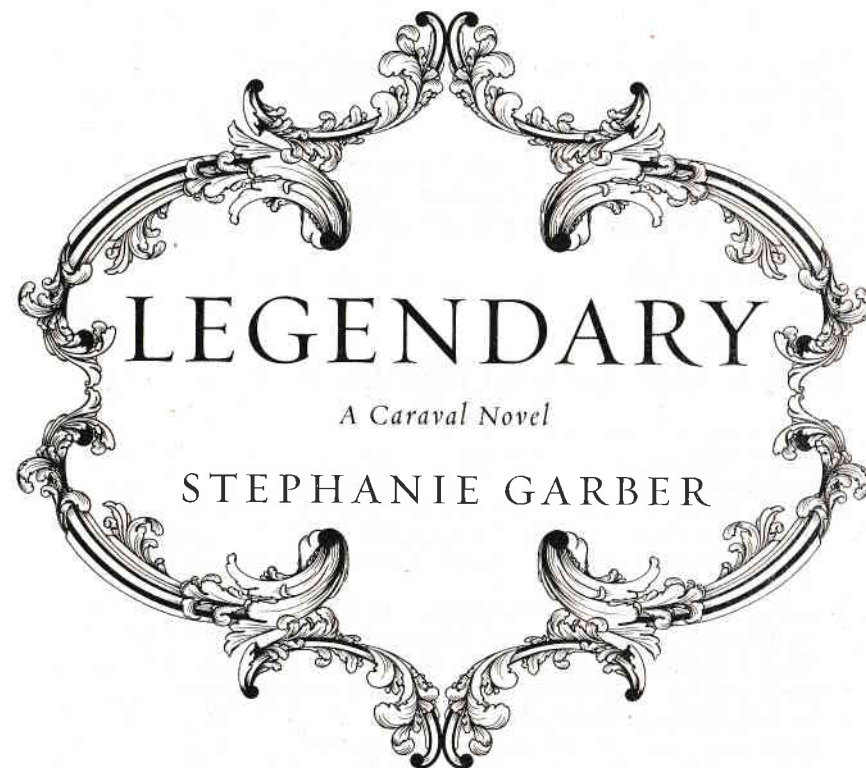


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Caraval



LEGENDARY

A Caraval Novel

STEPHANIE GARBER



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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 spiderwebbed 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, bloodred 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 of 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 Aracle.

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 mother's 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.

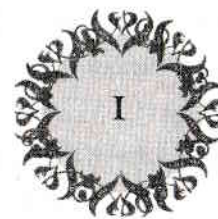
In her haste to pick up the deck, Tella's mother hadn't noticed the third card Tella had turned over. The one still in her possession. The Aracle. Tella carefully hid it beneath her crisscrossed legs as she said, "I swear to never touch a deck like this again."

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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 suc-

cess, 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 into 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 that made Tella think she and Dante weren't the only ones who'd passed out under the stars. She didn't care if any of them saw her sneaking away from the pretty boy, but she didn't want anyone telling her sister.

Dante had been more than a little nasty to Scarlett during Caraval. He worked for Legend, so it had only been an act—but although Caraval was over, it was still somewhat difficult to weed out the bits of fact from fiction. And Tella didn't want her sister further hurt because Tella had chosen to have some fun with a boy who'd been so cruel to Scarlett during the game.

Thankfully the world remained asleep as Tella reached the edge of the forest, and then, Legend's turreted house.

Even now, with Caraval officially ended, and all the candles and lanterns inside unlit, the mansion still breathed wisps of beguiling ember-glow light, reminding Tella of tricks yet to be played.

Until yesterday, this estate had contained the entire world of Caraval. Its grand wooden doors had led visitors to elegant balconies draped with lush red curtains, which surrounded a city made of canals, streets that had minds of their owns, and uncanny shops full of

magical pleasures. But in the brief time since the game had ended, the turreted house had shrunk in size and the ephemeral wonderland hidden within its walls had disappeared, leaving behind only the parts that would normally belong inside of a grand house.

Tella trotted up the closest staircase. Her room was on the second floor. With a rounded robin's-egg-blue door, it was easy to find. It was also impossible to miss Scarlett and Julian, standing next to it, holding on to each other as if they'd forgotten how to say the word *good-bye*.

Tella was glad her sister had finally lost herself in some happiness. Scarlett deserved every joy in the Empire, and Tella hoped it would last. She'd heard Julian didn't have a reputation for stringing girls along, he never carried on relationships after Caraval, and he'd not even been scripted to stay with Scarlett after bringing her to Legend's isle. But he lied for a living, which made it difficult for Tella to trust him. Yet, as the pair stood there with their arms wrapped around each other, and their heads leaning closer together, they looked like two halves of the same heart.

Their eyes stayed locked as Tella crept around them toward her room.

"Is that a yes?" Julian murmured.

"I need to talk to my sister," Scarlett said.

Tella halted in front of the door. She swore the letter in her pocket grew suddenly heavy, as if impatient to be read again. But if Julian had just asked Scarlett what Tella had hoped, then Tella needed to be a part of this conversation.

"What is it you want to talk to me about?" Tella interrupted.

Scarlett pulled back from Julian, but his hands remained wrapped around her waist, weaving through the blushing ribbons of her dress, clearly not ready to let her go. "I asked your sister if you'll both go with us to Valenda for Empress Elantine's seventy-fifth birthday celebration. There will be another Caraval and I have two tickets." Julian winked.

Tella tossed her sister a grin. This was exactly what she'd hoped for. Although a part of her still couldn't believe the rumors she'd heard over the past week were true, Caraval only occurred once a year, and she'd never known of two games being played so close together. But Tella supposed even Legend made exceptions for the empress.

Tella continued to look at her sister hopefully. "I'm surprised this is even a question!"

"I thought you didn't like Elantine's Day because it always overshadowed your birthday."

Tella wobbled her head as she weighed her answer. Her true reasons for wanting to go had little to do with Elantine's Day, although her sister was correct. For as long as Elantine had been empress of the Meridian Empire, her birthday had been a holiday, Elantine's Day, which was ushered in with a full week of parties and dances, bended rules, and broken laws. On the girls' home isle of Trisda, this holiday was only celebrated for one day, on the thirty-sixth day of the Growing Season, but it still overshadowed Tella's birthday, which had the misfortune of occurring the day afterward.

"It will be worth it to visit Valenda," Tella said. "When do we leave?"

"Three days," Julian answered.

Scarlett puckered her mouth. "Tella, we need to discuss this first."

"I thought you've always wanted to go to the capital, to see all its ancient ruins and the carriages that float through the sky, and this will be the party of the century! What's there to talk about?"

"The count."

Julian's brown skin went gray.

Tella's face might have done the same.

"The count lives in Valenda, and we can't let him see you," Scarlett said.

Scarlett was the overly cautious sister, but Tella couldn't blame her for this reservation.

Count Nicolas d'Arcy was Scarlett's former fiancé whom Scarlett's father had arranged for her to marry. Before Caraval, Scarlett had only written him letters, but she'd believed herself in love with him. She'd also thought the count would keep both her and Tella safe—until Scarlett met him during Caraval and learned what a despicable human being he was.

Scarlett was right to worry about the count. If Scarlett's former fiancé discovered Tella was alive, he could send word to their father—who believed Tella was dead—and it would shatter everything.

But things would also fall apart if Tella didn't go with Legend and his performers to the Empire's capital city of Valenda. She might not have had the chance to reread the letter from her friend, but she knew