

A CURSE FOR  
TRUE  
LOVE



THE #1 NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING SERIES BY  
STEPHANIE GARBER

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# A Curse For True Love

Stephanie Garber



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*For anyone who's ever hoped for a second chance*

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## PART IV

### *Happily Ever After*

# Chapter 1

## 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 doorknob 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!"

# Chapter 2

## Evangeline

Voices echoed against the walls of stretching bookshelves as the library erupted with noise. Guards in armor vowed to find the criminal Lord Jacks, while polished courtiers and robed scholars shot out questions like showers of arrows.

“How long have you been alive, Your Highness?”

“How did you return from hell, Lord Prince?”

“Why did Lord Jacks steal your memories?” This inquiry, from an older courtier, was directed at Evangeline and punctuated by a narrow-eyed glare.

“Enough,” Apollo cut in. “I did not tell you about the horror my wife has gone through so that she could be attacked with questions she has no idea how to answer. I shared this information because I want Lord Jacks found, dead or alive. Although right now, I would prefer him dead.”

“We won’t fail you!” shouted the guards.

More declarations involving justice and Jacks rattled the ancient library shelves and pounded against Evangeline’s head, and suddenly it was all too much. The noise, the questions, the flood of unfamiliar faces, Apollo’s tale of going through hell.

More was said, but the words turned to ringing in her ears.

Evangeline wanted to cling to Apollo—he was all she had in this new reality. But he was also a powerful prince, which made him feel less like hers and more like everyone else’s. She was afraid to bother him with more questions, though she had so many. She still didn’t even know where she was.



From where she stood, Evangeline could see an oval window seat tucked under an arch of bookshelves. The window was a soft pale blue glass, and outside were full green needle trees as tall as towers covered in a picturesque layer of snow. It rarely snowed in Valenda, and never as thick as this, as if the world were a cake and the snow was dollops of thick white frosting.

As she had noticed before, the fashion here was different as well. The guards looked like knights from old tales, and the courtiers wore formal clothing similar to Apollo's. Men were dressed in doublets, while women wore elaborate velvet gowns with off-the-shoulder necklines and dropped waists decorated with brocade belts or strings of pearls.

Evangeline had never seen people dressed like this. But she'd heard stories.

Her mother had been born in the Magnificent North, and she'd told Evangeline countless tales about this land, fairytales that made it sound as if it were the most enchanted place in all the world.

Unfortunately, Evangeline felt far from enchanted at this moment.

Apollo met her gaze then and turned away from the shrinking crowd surrounding them. It seemed people had already left to spread word that Prince Apollo was back from the dead. And why wouldn't they? Evangeline never heard of someone coming back from the dead. A thought that made her feel quite small as she stood next to him.

Only a few people remained, but Apollo ignored them all as he gazed into Evangeline's eyes. "There's nothing for you to be afraid of."

"I'm not afraid," she lied.

"You're looking at me differently." He smiled at her then, a smile so charming she wondered how she hadn't immediately known what he was.

"You're a prince," she squeaked.

Apollo grinned wider. "Is that a problem?"

"No, I . . . just—" Evangeline almost said she'd never imagined herself married to a prince.

But of course she had. Only her imaginings weren't as elaborate as this. This was beyond every pastel dream she had ever had of royalty and castles and faraway places. But she would have traded it all to remember just how she'd gotten here, how she'd fallen in love and married this man and lost what felt like part of her heart.

It hit her then. In fairytales, there was always a price for magic. Nothing came without a cost; peasants who turned into princesses always had to pay. And suddenly Evangeline wondered if her lost memories were the price she had paid for all of this.

Had she traded her memories, along with part of her heart, to be with Apollo? Could she have been that foolish?

Apollo's smile softened, turning from teasing to reassuring. When he spoke, his words were gentler as well, as if he sensed part of what she was feeling. Or maybe it was just that he knew her well, even though she did not know him. He did have her name tattooed over his heart.

"It will all be all right," he said quietly, firmly. "I know it's a lot to take in. I hate to leave you, but there are a few things I need to take care of and, while I do that, my guards are ready to escort you to your suite. But I'll try not to leave you alone for long. I promise, there is nothing more important to me than you."

Apollo pressed another kiss to her hand and gave her one last look before he marched off, followed by his personal guards.

Evangeline stood there feeling suddenly alone and bursting with more questions than she had answers for. If Apollo had just come back from the dead, how did he already know what had happened to her? Maybe he was wrong about this Lord Jacks stealing her memories, and Evangeline was right about having foolishly traded them—which left her wondering if she could trade them back.

This question haunted her as she followed the guards that Apollo had assigned her through the castle. They didn't say much, but they did tell Evangeline that Apollo's castle was called Wolf Hall. It had been built by the first king of the Magnificent North, the famed Wolfric Valor, making her think of all her mother's Northern stories.

Compared to where Evangeline had grown up, the North felt incredibly old, as if every stone beneath her feet held a secret of a bygone era.

One hallway was lined with doors that all had the most elaborate handles. One was shaped like a little dragon, another looked like fairy wings, and then there was a wolf's head wearing a pretty flower crown. These were the types of handles that tempted her to pull them and made her suspect they might be a little alive, like the bell that had hung outside the door to her father's curiosity shop.

Evangeline felt an arrow of grief at the thought of it—not just the bell, but the shop and her parents and everything that she had lost. It was a dizzying torrent that hit her so suddenly she wasn't aware she'd stopped moving until a guard with a thick red mustache leaned close and said, "Are you all right, Your Highness? Do you need one of us to carry you?"

"Oh no," Evangeline said, instantly mortified. "My feet work just fine. It's just so much to take in. What is this hall?"

"This is the Valors' wing. Most people think these were the rooms of

the Valor children, although no one knows for sure. These doors have stayed locked ever since they died.”

*But you could open us.*

The strange voice sounded as if it came from one of the doors. Evangeline looked at each of her guards, but none of them appeared to have heard it. So she pretended she hadn't heard it, either. Evangeline was in a difficult situation as it was. She didn't need to make things worse for herself by saying she heard voices coming from inanimate objects.

Thankfully it didn't happen again. When the guards finally stopped in front of a pair of ornate double doors, the jeweled doorknobs sparkled but didn't say a word. There was only a gentle whoosh as they opened up to the most opulent suite of rooms that Evangeline had ever seen.

It was all so lovely that she felt as if harps should be playing and birds should be singing. Everything was glittering and golden and covered in flowers. There were boughs of harlequin lilies framing the two-story fireplace and vines of white starmires curling around the bedposts. Even the great copper tub Evangeline spied in the bathing room beyond was full of flowers—the steaming water inside was violet and covered in soft white and pink petals.

Evangeline walked to the bath and dipped her fingers in the water. Everything was *perfect*.

Even the maids who entered to help her bathe and dress were all perfectly lovely. There were also a surprising number of them, nearly a dozen. They had sweet voices and gentle hands that helped her into a gown as delicate as a whisper.

The dress was an off-the-shoulder confection of blush tulle with sheer sleeves adorned with dark pink ribbons. The same ribbons lined the low neckline of the gown before twirling into little rosebuds that covered the bust of the fitted bodice. The skirt flowed and fluttered down to Evangeline's toes. A maid completed the look by braiding Evangeline's rose-gold hair into a crown and then decorating it with a circlet of gilded flowers.

“If I do say so myself, you look lovely, Your Highness.”

“Thank you—”

“Martine,” the maid supplied before Evangeline had to fumble around to try to find the name. “I'm also from the Meridian Empire originally. His Highness the prince thought having me here might help you adjust a bit more.”

“It sounds as if the prince is very thoughtful.”

“I think, when it comes to you . . . he tries to think of everything.”

Martine smiled, but the bit of hesitation in her words gave Evangeline a second of pause, a flutter of a feeling that said Apollo was too good to be true. That all of this was.

When Evangeline was alone and looked in the mirror, she saw the reflection of a princess. This was everything she could have wanted.

Yet she didn't feel like a princess.

She felt like the idea of a princess, with the dress and the prince and the castle, and yet she also felt *without*. She felt as if she were simply wearing a costume, that she'd stepped into a role that she could simply step out of, only there wasn't anywhere else to step to. Because she also didn't feel like the girl she'd been before, the eternally hopeful girl who believed in fairytales, love at first sight, and happily ever afters.

If she had been that girl, it might have been easier to accept all of this, to not want to ask so many questions.

But something had happened to that girl—to *her*. And Evangeline couldn't help but think it went beyond her missing memories.

Her heart still hurt, as if it had been broken and only jagged bits remained. She put a hand on it, as if to keep more pieces from breaking off. And once again, she was struck with the inescapable feeling that among everything she'd forgotten was one thing more important than all the rest, more important than anything.

There was something absolutely vital she needed to tell someone. But no matter how hard she tried, she could not remember what it was or who it was she needed to tell.