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STEPHANIE
GARBER

FINALE

A
CARAVAL
NOVEL



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A Caraval Novel

STEPHANIE GARBER



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For Sarah and Jenny—

I don't need tickets to Caraval because both of you have already made so many of my dreams come true.



Every story has four parts: the beginning, the middle, the almost-ending, and the true ending. Unfortunately, not everyone gets a true ending. Most people give up at the part of the story where things are the worst, when the situation feels hopeless, but that is where hope is needed most. Only those who persevere can find their true ending.

BEFORE THE BEGINNING

Scarlett Dragna's bedroom was a palace built of wonder and the magic of make-believe. But to a person who'd forgotten how to imagine, it might have just looked like a disaster of dresses. Garnet-red gowns littered the ivory carpets, while cerulean frocks hung from the corners of the iron canopy bed, swinging gently as a gust of salty wind snuck in from the open windows. The sisters sitting on the bed didn't seem to notice the breeze, or the person who entered the room with it. This new figure slipped inside quiet as a thief, making no noise as she crept toward the bed where her daughters were playing.

Scarlett, her eldest, was busy straightening the petal-pink petticoat resting on her shoulders like a cape, as her younger sister, Donatella, wrapped a strand of creamy lace across her face as if it were an eye patch.

Their voices were high and light and morning-bright, in the way that only children's voices can be. Just the sound of them was magic, melting the harsh midday sunlight into bits of luminous butterscotch that danced around their heads like stardust halos.

Both of them appeared angelic until Tella announced, "I'm a pirate, not a princess."

Their mother's mouth warred between smiling and frowning. Her youngest daughter was so much like her. Tella had the same rebel heartbeat and adventurous spirit. It was a double-edged gift that had always given her mother so much hope, as well as fear that Tella might make the same mistakes she had.

“No,” Scarlett said, more headstrong than usual. “Give it back, that’s my crown! I can’t be a queen without a crown.”

Their mother’s frown won as she edged closer to the bed. Scarlett was generally less combative than Tella, but both girls’ mouths twisted stubbornly as their hands wrapped around opposite ends of a pearl necklace.

“Find a new crown, it’s my pirate treasure!” Tella gave a fantastic yank and pearls flew across the room.

Pop!

Pop!

Pop!

The mother caught one, deftly capturing it between two delicate fingers. The tiny globe was as pink as her daughters’ cheeks, now that both girls had finally looked up to see her.

Scarlett’s hazel eyes were already turning glassy; she had always been more sensitive than her sister. “She broke my crown.”

“A true queen’s power isn’t in her crown, my little love. It’s here.” Her mother placed a hand over her heart. Then she turned to Tella.

“Are you going to tell me that I don’t need treasure to be a pirate? Or that my greatest treasure is right here?” Tella put a tiny hand over her heart, mimicking her mother.

If Scarlett had done it, their mother would have imagined the gesture to be sincere, but their mother could see the devilry in Tella’s eyes. Tella had a spark that could either set the whole world ablaze, or give it much-needed light.

“I would actually say your greatest treasure is sitting across from you. There is nothing quite so precious as the love of a sister.” With that, the mother picked up her daughters’ hands and squeezed.

If there had been a clock in the room, it would have stopped. Occasionally, there are minutes that get extra seconds. Moments so precious the universe stretches to make additional room for them, and this was one of them. People don’t get pauses like these very often. Some people never receive them at all.

These little girls didn’t know this yet, because their stories hadn’t begun, not really. But soon their stories would take off, and when they did, these

sisters would need every stolen moment of sweetness they could find.

THE BEGINNING

Donatella

The first time Legend appeared in Tella's dreams, he looked as if he'd just stepped out of one of the stories people told about him. As Dante, he'd always dressed in shades as black as the rose tattooed on the back of his hand. But tonight, as Legend, he wore a seduction-red double-breasted tailcoat lined in gold, accented by a matching cravat, and his signature top hat.

Shiny locks of black hair peeked out from beneath the brim of the hat, sheltering coal-dark eyes that brightened when he looked at her. His eyes glittered more than the twilit waters surrounding their intimate boat. This was not the flat, cold look he'd given Tella two nights ago, right after he'd rescued her from a deck of cards and then callously abandoned her. Tonight he was smiling like a wicked prince, escaped from the stars, ready to spirit her up into the heavens.

Uninvited butterflies took flight in Tella's stomach. He was still the most beautiful liar she'd ever seen. But Tella wasn't about to let Legend bewitch her the same way he had during Caraval. She smacked the top hat right off of his pretty head, rocking the tiny vessel beneath them.

He captured the hat with ease, fingers moving so fast she'd have thought he'd anticipated her response if he weren't sitting across from her, near enough for Tella to see a muscle tic along his smooth jawline. The two of them might have been in a dream, where the twinkling sky turned murky

purple around the edges as if nightmares lurked close, but Legend was as sharp as precise pen strokes and as vibrant as a freshly cut wound.

“I thought you’d be happier to see me,” he said.

She gave him her most vicious glare. Her hurt from the last time she’d seen him was still too raw to hide. “You walked away—you left me on those steps when I couldn’t even move. Jacks carried me back to the palace.”

Legend’s lips slashed into a frown. “So you’re not going to forgive me for that?”

“You haven’t said that you’re sorry.”

If he had, she would have forgiven him. She *wanted* to forgive him. She wanted to believe Legend wasn’t all that different from Dante, and that she was more than just a game piece he wanted to play with. She wanted to believe he’d left her that night because he’d been scared. But rather than looking regretful for what he’d done, he appeared irritated that she was still angry with him.

The sky grew darker as writhing purple clouds bisected the crescent moon, severing it into two pieces that floated across the sky like a fractured smile.

“I had somewhere I needed to be.”

Her hopes sank at the coolness in his voice.

Around them the air turned sooty as fireworks burst above their heads, shattering into brilliant glimmers of pomegranate red, reminding her of the fiery display from two nights ago.

Tella glanced up to see the sparks dance into an outline of Elantine’s palace—*Legend’s* palace now. She actually admired the fact that Legend had convinced Valenda that he was the true heir to the throne of the Meridian Empire. But at the same time, the deception reminded her that Legend’s life was made of games on top of games. Tella didn’t even know if he desired the throne for its power, if he wanted the prestige, or if he merely wished to pull off the greatest performance the empire had ever seen. Maybe she would never know.

“You didn’t have to be so cold and cruel about the way you left,” she said.

Legend took a heavy breath and a sudden rush of hungry waves lapped against the boat. The vessel rocked down a narrow canal that fed them into a glowing ocean. “I told you, Tella, I’m not the hero in your story.”

But instead of leaving now, he was leaning closer. The night grew warmer as he looked into her eyes the way she’d wanted him to the last time they’d parted. He smelled of magic and heartbreak, and something about the combination made her think that despite what he claimed, he wanted to be her hero.

Or maybe he just wanted her to continue to want him.

Caraval might have been over, but here Tella was, inside of a dream with Legend, floating over waters of stardust and midnight while fireworks continued to fall from the sky as if the heavens wanted to crown him.

Tella tried to turn the fireworks off—this *was* her dream, after all—but Legend seemed to be the one in control of it. The more she fought against the dream, the more enchanted it became. The air grew sweeter and the colors grew brighter as mermaids with tropical teal braids and pearly pink tails leaped out of the water and waved at Legend before diving back in.

“You are so full of yourself,” she said. “I never asked you to be my hero.”

She and Legend had both made sacrifices two nights ago—she’d doomed herself to captivity inside of a Deck of Destiny, in part to keep him safe, and he’d freed the Fates to rescue her. His actions were the most romantic thing anyone had ever done for her. But Tella wanted more than to be romanced. She wanted the real him.

But she wasn’t even sure if a real Legend existed. And if he did, she doubted he let people close enough to see him.

He’d placed his top hat back on his head and he truly did look handsome, almost achingly so. But he also appeared far more like the idea of Legend than a genuine person, or the Dante she’d known and fallen in love with.

Tella’s heart constricted. She’d never wanted to fall in love with anyone. And in that moment she hated him, for making her feel *so* many things for him.

A final firework burst into the sky, turning the entire dreamscape the most brilliant shade of blue she'd ever seen. It looked like the color of wishes come true and fantasies made real. And as the fireworks fell, they played music so sweet, sirens would have been jealous.

He was trying to dazzle her. But dazzle was a lot like romance—fantastic while it lasted, but it never lasted long enough. And Tella still wanted more. She didn't want to become another nameless girl in the many stories told about Legend, a girl who fell for everything he said, just because he leaned across a boat and looked at her with stars dancing in his eyes.

"I didn't come here to fight with you." Legend's hand lifted, as if he might reach for her, but then his long fingers dipped over the low side of the boat and idly played with the midnight waters. "I wanted to see if you received my note, and ask if you wanted the prize for winning Caraval."

She pretended to think as she recalled every word of the letter by heart. He'd given her hope he still cared by wishing her happy birthday and offering her the prize. He said he'd be waiting for her to come and collect it. But one thing he'd not said was that he was sorry for any of the ways he'd hurt her.

"I read the message," Tella said, "but I'm not interested in the prize. I'm done with games."

He laughed, low and painfully familiar.

"What's so funny?"

"That you're pretending our games are over."