

ONCE UPON A BROKEN HEART



THE #1 NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER BY
STEPHANIE GARBER



ONCE
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BROKEN
HEART

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GARBER



PLATIRON
BOOKS

1771-1787

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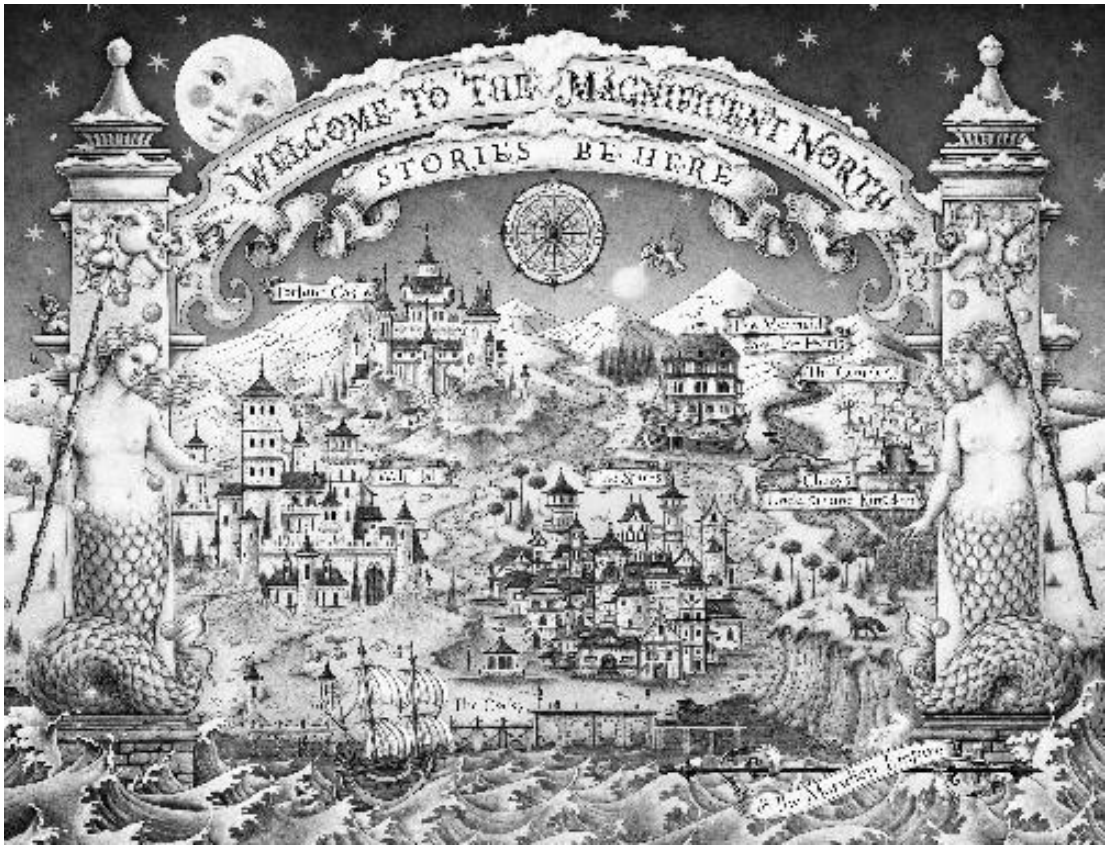
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*For anyone who has ever made a bad decision because of a
broken heart*



Warnings and Signs

The bell hanging outside the curiosity shop knew the human was trouble from the way he moved through the door. Bells have excellent hearing, but this little chime didn't need any particular skill to catch the crude jangle of the gaudy pocket-watch chain at this young man's hip, or the rough scrape of his boots as he attempted a swagger but only succeeded in scuffing the floor of Maximilian's Curiosities, Whimsies & Other Oddities.

This young man was going to ruin the girl that worked inside the shop.

The bell had tried to warn her. A full two seconds before the boy opened the door, the bell rang its clapper. Unlike most humans, this shopgirl had grown up around oddities—and the bell had long suspected she was a curiosity as well, though it couldn't figure out exactly what sort.

The girl knew that many objects were more than they appeared and that bells possessed a sixth sense that humans lacked. Unfortunately, this girl, who believed in hope and fairytales and love at first sight, often misinterpreted the bell's chimes. Today the bell was fairly certain that she had heard its cautionary ring. But, from the way her voice affected an excited edge as she spoke to the young man, it seemed as if the girl had taken the bell's early toll as a serendipitous sign instead of as a warning.

PART I

The Tale of Evangeline Fox

The Whisper Gazette

WHERE WILL THE BROKENHEARTED PRAY NOW?

By Kutlass Knightlinger

The door to the Prince of Hearts' church has disappeared. Painted the deep bloodred of broken hearts, the iconic entry simply vanished from one of the Temple District's most visited churches sometime during the night, leaving behind an impenetrable marble wall. It's now impossible for anyone to enter the church—

Evangeline shoved the two-week-old newsprint into the pocket of her flowered skirt. The door at the end of this decrepit alley was barely taller than she was, and hidden behind a rusted metal grate instead of covered in beautiful bloodred paint, but she would have bet her father's curiosity shop that this was the missing door.

Nothing in the Temple District was this unattractive. Every entry here was carved panels, decorative architraves, glass awnings, and gilded keyholes. Her father had been a man of faith, but he used to say that the churches here were like vampires—they weren't meant for worship, they were designed to entice and entrap. But this door was different. This door was just a rough block of wood with a missing handle and chipped white paint.

This door did not want to be found.

Yet it couldn't hide what it truly was from Evangeline.

The jagged shape of it was unmistakable. One side was a sloping curve, the other a serrated slash, forming one half of a broken heart—a symbol of the Fated Prince of Hearts.

Finally.

If hope were a pair of wings, Evangeline's were stretching out behind her, eager to take flight again. After two weeks of searching the city of Valenda, she'd found it.

When the gossip sheet in her pocket had first announced that the door from the Prince of Hearts' church had gone missing, few imagined it was magic. It was the scandal sheet's first article, and people said it was part of a hoax to sell subscriptions. Doors didn't simply disappear.

But Evangeline believed that they could. The story hadn't felt like a gimmick to her; it had felt like a sign, telling her where to search if she was going to save her heart and the boy that it belonged to.

She might not have seen much evidence of magic outside of the oddities in her father's curiosity shop, but she had faith it existed. Her father, Maximilian, had always spoken of magic as if it were real. And her mother had been from the Magnificent North, where there was no difference between fairytales and history. *All stories are made of both truths and lies*, she used to say. *What matters is the way that we believe in them.*

And Evangeline had a gift when it came to believing in things that others considered myths—like the immortal Fates.

She opened the metal grate. The door itself didn't have a handle, forcing her to wedge her fingers into the tiny space between its jagged edge and the dirty stone wall.

The door pinched her fingers, drawing a drop of blood, and she swore she heard its splintered voice say, *Do you know what you're about to step into? Nothing but heartbreak will come from this.*

But Evangeline's heart was already broken. And she understood the risks she was taking. She knew the rules for visiting Fated churches:

Always promise less than you can give, for Fates always take more.

Do not make bargains with more than one Fate.

And, above all, never fall in love with a Fate.

There were sixteen immortal Fates, and they were jealous and possessive beings. Before they'd vanished centuries ago, it was said they ruled over part of the world with magic that was as malevolent as it was

marvelous. They never broke a bargain, although they often hurt the people they helped. Yet most people—even if they believed the Fates were merely myths—became desperate enough to pray to them at some point.

Evangeline had always been curious about their churches, but she'd known enough about the mercurial nature of Fates and Fated bargains to avoid seeking their places of worship. Until two weeks ago, when she'd become one of those desperate people the stories always cautioned about.

“Please,” she whispered to the heart-shaped door, filling her voice with the wild and battered hope that had led her here. “I know you’re a clever little thing. But you allowed me to find you. Let me in.”

She gave the wood a final tug.

This time, the door opened.

Evangeline’s heart raced as she took her first step. During her search for the missing door, she’d read that the Prince of Hearts’ church held a different aroma for everyone who visited. It was supposed to smell like a person’s greatest heartbreak.

But as Evangeline entered the cool cathedral, the air did not remind her of Luc—there were no hints of suede or vetiver. The dim mouth of the church was slightly sweet and metallic: apples and blood.

Gooseflesh covered her arms. This was not reminiscent of the boy she loved. The account she’d read must have been wrong. But she didn’t turn around. She knew Fates weren’t saints or saviors, although she hoped that the Prince of Hearts was more feeling than the others.

Her steps took her deeper inside the cathedral. Everything was shockingly white. White carpets, white candles, white prayer pews of white oak, white aspen, and flaky white birch.

Evangeline passed row after row of mismatched white benches. They might have been handsome once, but now many had missing legs, while others had mutilated cushions or benches that had been broken in half.

Broken.

Broken.

Broken.

No wonder the door hadn’t wanted to let her enter. Perhaps this church wasn’t sinister, it was sad—

A rough rip shattered the church’s silence.

Evangeline spun around and choked back a gasp.

Several rows behind her, in a shadowed corner, a young man appeared to be in mourning or performing some act of penance. Wild locks of golden hair hung across his face as his head bowed and his fingers tore at the sleeves of his burgundy topcoat.

Her heart felt a pang as she watched him. She was tempted to ask if he needed help. But he'd probably chosen the corner to go unnoticed.

And she didn't have much time left.

There were no clocks inside the church, but Evangeline swore she heard the tick of a second hand, working at erasing the precious minutes she had until Luc's wedding.

She hurried down the nave to the apse, where the fractured rows of benches ceased and a gleaming marble dais rose before her. The platform was pristine, lit by a wall of beeswax candles and surrounded by four fluted columns, guarding a larger-than-life statue of the Fated Prince of Hearts.

The back of her neck prickled.

Evangeline knew what he was supposed to look like. Decks of Destiny, which used Fated images to tell fortunes, had recently become a popular item in her father's curiosity shop. The Prince of Hearts' card represented unrequited love, and it always depicted the Fate as tragically handsome, with vivid blue eyes crying tears that matched the blood forever staining the corner of his sulky mouth.

There were no bloody tears on this glowing statue. But its face did possess a ruthless kind of beauty, the sort Evangeline would have expected from a demigod that had the ability to kill with his kiss. The prince's marble lips twisted into a perfect smirk that should have looked cold and hard and sharp, but there was a hint of softness to his slightly fuller lower lip—it pouted out like a deadly invitation.

According to the myths, the Prince of Hearts was not capable of love because his heart had stopped beating long ago. Only one person could make it work again: his one true love. They said his kiss was fatal to all but her—his only weakness—and as he'd sought her, he'd left a trail of corpses.

Evangeline couldn't imagine a more tragic existence. If one Fate were to have sympathy for her situation, it would be the Prince of Hearts.

Her gaze found his elegant marble fingers clasping a dagger the size of her forearm. The blade pointed down toward a stone offering basin

balanced on a burner, just above a low circle of dancing white flames. The words *Blood for a Prayer* were carved into its side.

Evangeline took a deep breath.

This was what she'd come here for.

She pressed her finger to the tip of the blade. Sharp marble pierced her skin, and drop after drop of blood fell, sizzling and hissing, filling the air with more metal and sweet.

A part of her hoped this tithe might conjure up some sort of magical display. That the statue would come to life, or the Prince of Hearts' voice would fill the church. But nothing moved save for the flames on the wall of candles. She couldn't even hear the anguished young man in the back of the church. It was just her and the statue.

"Dear—Prince," she started haltingly. She'd never prayed to a Fate, and she didn't want to get it wrong. "I'm here because my parents are dead."

Evangeline cringed. That was not how she was supposed to start.

"What I meant to say was, my parents have both passed away. I lost my mother a couple of years ago. Then I lost my father last season. Now I'm about to lose the boy that I love.

"Luc Navarro—" Her throat closed as she said the name and pictured his crooked smile. Maybe if he'd been plainer, or poorer, or crueler, none of this would have happened. "We've been seeing each other in secret. I was supposed to be in mourning for my father. Then, a little over two weeks ago, on the day that Luc and I were going to tell our families we were in love, my stepsister, Marisol, announced that she and Luc were getting married."

Evangeline paused to close her eyes. This part still made her head spin. Quick engagements weren't uncommon. Marisol was pretty, and although she was reserved, she was also kind—so much kinder than Evangeline's stepmother, Agnes. But Evangeline had never even seen Luc in the same room as Marisol.

"I know how this sounds, but Luc loves me. I believe he's been cursed. He hasn't spoken to me since the engagement was announced—he won't even see me. I don't know how she did it, but I'm certain this is all my stepmother's doing." Evangeline didn't actually have any proof that Agnes was a witch and she'd cast a curse on Luc. But Evangeline was certain her

stepmother had learned of Evangeline's relationship with Luc and she'd wanted Luc, and the title he'd someday inherit, for her daughter instead.

"Agnes has resented me ever since my father died. I've tried talking to Marisol about Luc. Unlike my stepmother, I don't think Marisol would ever intentionally hurt me. But every time I try to open my mouth, the words won't come out, as if they're also cursed or I'm cursed. So I'm here, begging for your help. The wedding is today, and I need you to stop it."

Evangeline opened her eyes.

The lifeless statue hadn't changed. She knew statues didn't generally move. Yet she couldn't help but think that it should have done *something*—shifted or spoken or moved its marble eyes. "Please, I know you understand heartbreak. Stop Luc from marrying Marisol. Save my heart from breaking again."

"Now, that was a pathetic speech." Two slow claps followed the indolent voice, which sounded just a few feet away.

Evangeline spun around, all the blood draining from her face. She didn't expect to see him—the young man who'd been tearing his clothes in the back of the church. Although it was difficult to believe this was the same person. She had thought that boy was in agony, but he must have ripped away his pain along with the sleeves of his jacket, which now hung in tatters over a striped black-and-white shirt that was only halfway tucked into his breeches.

He sat on the dais steps, lazily leaning against one of the pillars with his long, lean legs stretched out before him. His hair was golden and messy, his too-bright blue eyes were bloodshot, and his mouth twitched at the corner as if he didn't enjoy much, but he found pleasure in the brief bit of pain he'd just inflicted upon her. He looked bored and rich and cruel.

"Would you like me to stand up and turn around so that you can take in the rest of me?" he taunted.

The color instantly returned to Evangeline's cheeks. "We're in a church."

"What does that have to do with anything?" In one elegant move, the young man reached into the inner pocket of his ripped burgundy coat, pulled out a pure white apple, and took one bite. Dark red juice dripped from the fruit to his long, pale fingers and then onto the pristine marble steps.

“Don’t do that!” Evangeline hadn’t meant to yell. Although she wasn’t shy with strangers, she generally avoided quarrelling with them. But she couldn’t seem to help it with this crass young man. “You’re being disrespectful.”

“And you’re praying to an immortal who kills every girl he kisses. You really think he deserves any reverence?” The awful young man punctuated his words with another wide bite of his apple.

She tried to ignore him. She really did. But it was like some terrible magic had taken hold of her. Rather than marching off, Evangeline imagined the stranger taking her lips instead of his snack and kissing her with his fruit-sweet mouth until she died in his arms.

No. It couldn’t be ...

“You’re staring again,” he purred.

Evangeline immediately looked away, turning back to the marble carving. Minutes ago, its lips alone had made her heart race, but now it just seemed like an ordinary statue, lifeless compared to this vicious young man.

“Personally, I think I’m far more handsome.” Suddenly, the young man stood right beside her.

Butterflies fluttered to life inside Evangeline’s stomach. Scared ones. All frantic wings and too-fast beats, warning her to get out of there, to run, to flee. But she couldn’t look away.

This close, he was undeniably attractive, and taller than she’d realized. He gave her a real smile, revealing a pair of dimples that briefly made him look more angel than devil. But she imagined even angels would need to beware of him. She could picture him flashing those deceptive dimples as he tricked an angel into losing its wings just so he could play with the feathers.

“It’s you,” she whispered. “You’re the Prince of Hearts.”