

LIBRIS

We know  
books

ALCHEMY  
OF  
SECRETS

STEPHANIE  
GARBER



**Folklore 517**

It started with a whisper you heard while in line at a coffee shop, a story you probably should have ignored. But the rumor stuck in your head like a song, it plagued you like an unsolved riddle. Until, at last, it led you here. A parking lot, which had clearly not paid attention to the weather report.

They said it would be all stars, no clouds tonight, but you feel the rain on your toes. The wet hits in eager droplets as you dash across the pavement in sandals. Around you, streetlamps flicker, a staticky chorus to your damp footfalls.

You're not out of breath, but you slow, stopping under a marquee. The words *COMING SOON* sizzle in red block letters, throwing neon shadows on a retro cashier's booth, covered in washed-out posters for attractions that have already come and gone. Veronica Lake's name splashes across the top of one poster in faded yellow letters, while a black-and-white Loretta Young smiles at you from another. Loretta's poster is for *A Night to Remember*, and you hope tonight will be one of those nights.

You don't know for certain if the stories are true, but you half expect to fall through a rabbit hole as you step through the theater door into the lobby.

Your excitement varnishes everything in an extra layer of shine. On your right, there's a bank of gleaming pay phones in neat wood and

glass boxes. You've never seen a line of so many. You're almost tempted to snap a photo, but you don't. And you couldn't have even if you'd tried. By now your phone is no longer working, though you don't know that yet. You're suddenly too distracted by the ancient concession stand to your left, where the dust looks like nostalgia and you barely notice the chips in the gold paint that make up the art deco border of geometric suns and jumping dolphins.

The sign above says:

*10 cents for popcorn*

*15 cents for popcorn with butter*

*25 cents for cigarettes*

You were unaware they used to sell cigarettes in theaters, but for a moment you can smell the smoke and the popcorn. You can almost taste the butter, too. But you don't linger in the lobby. There's only one theater—one attraction—that you wish to find, and you walk directly toward it.

Your chest is tight. Your heart is already racing. And you're still hoping for the rabbit hole that will take you to another world. You're starry-eyed and optimistic, an overexposed picture made of too much light, as you step through the double doors.

It still smells like smoke and popcorn, but there's something else, too. Maybe it's just the scent of old velvet mixed with lingering hints of petrichor, but it makes you think of Technicolor dreams as you stretch your neck to take in the impossibly tall ceiling. It's all ivory and gold, and it's covered in more art deco designs that look as if they could be cousins to the zodiac.

Beneath the elaborate dome, a fraction of the seats are already occupied. Twenty-five? Maybe fifty? You're too nervous to properly count as you take a chair near the back. It rocks, and the worn velvet is soft, but it feels too far from the stage.

You decide to move closer, sneaking more looks at the others as you do. You want to see who else made it inside, if there's anyone you rec-

ognize. But given the scant number of people you know at school, it's unsurprising these faces are all strangers. Some are whispering, some are giggling, a few like you say nothing, but there's a thread that ties you all together: expectation.

This has to be it. The curtains on the stage are deep, lush pink, and when they part you hold your breath.

*Gentlemen, kindly remove your hats,* flickers across the silver screen.

Then another slide replaces it: *Loud whistles and talking are not allowed.*

This, of course, elicits a number of whistles. But then it's all quiet and hush as the image leaves the screen and a tiny star appears in the upper-right-hand corner. It blinks once, twice. Then every light in the theater goes out.

It's darker than the night outside. You hear people pulling out their phones, but none of them are working, including yours. No signal. No light. No digital clock to tell you how much time is passing.

You don't know how long you sit there before you hear the first person leave. They've decided this class is not for them, if it even is a class. A few others follow.

You hate that you're tempted to do the same.

Your toes are no longer wet, but your skin is prickly with cold. You feel as if someone's watching you, though it's too dark for anyone to see.

More time ticks by, and you go over the stories you've heard, the rumors and the whispers about a very particular class that can't be found in any online catalog, taught by a professor who's not on any website. And suddenly you think it's for a good reason. You think maybe you should go. You think—

A light flickers on the stage. Just a tiny thing, but the shine gets you. You close your eyes, then open them. And when you can see again, she's there.

She's sitting on a wooden stool in the center of the stage.

You don't know how long she's been there, but you have the impression she's been waiting for hours, just like the two dozen or so of

you who remain. She's shorter than you'd imagined. The way people talked about her always made her sound tall, statuesque, literally larger than life. But she looks like someone's grandmother. Bobbed silver hair frames a round, barely smiling face, as she says words that make you feel as if all the cold and the damp and the waiting have been worth it.

"You're here because of a story," she says. "Now I'm going to tell you another one."

## CHAPTER ONE



Holland St. James had been counting down the minutes until tonight. She had tried on seven different dresses and five different pairs of shoes, she had curled her hair, she had even put on new eye makeup. And now she was about to ruin it all.

“I thought we were going for ice cream?” Jake asked, perfectly nice. Because Jake might have been the nicest guy Holland had ever dated.

When Jake had first come into the Santa Monica Coffee Lab a couple weeks ago, Holland had thought he was the perfect kind of cute. He looked more Clark Kent than Superman, with the type of dark-rimmed glasses that had always been her personal kryptonite. Then, he’d bumped into her, spilling some of his cold brew, and Holland had seen the textbooks he was holding. Jake was in grad school, studying to teach ESL.

On their first date, she learned he also volunteered at the Los Angeles Animal Rescue and the Echo Park Time Travel Mart, which was actually a nonprofit that helped children with their creative writing. On their second date, she learned Jake had recently become a vegetarian, and he rode a bike instead of driving a car because he wanted to do whatever he could for the environment.

Jake was genuinely a good guy.

Maybe there was a tiny part of Holland that thought he was a little too perfect, like an email without a typo or an airbrushed picture that

needed one wrinkle. But that could have just been Holland looking for red flags that didn't exist.

This was only their third date, but Holland hadn't made it to a fourth date in two years. She really didn't want to screw this up. And she was afraid she might have already done that minutes ago, when she hadn't been able to stop herself from dragging Jake down this grimy alley, after seeing a poster that made her think of one of the Professor's stories.

The poster had been plastered to the side of a cement wall. It was one of those vintage numbers, the kind that looked as if it should have been on one of the wooden postcards they sold on the Santa Monica Pier. Palm trees in sun-washed brown and green framed the charcoal silhouette of a man wearing a fedora and looking down at his watch. There were no logos, no brand names. There were actually no words at all to identify what exactly the poster was selling. There were just two initials on the faceless man's cuff links: W.M.

*The Watch Man.*

It was the first thought that had entered her mind. Then she had taken Jake down this alley. She hadn't been able to stop herself.

Holland had been raised on her father's treasure hunts. As a child, she'd learned to look for clues the way other children learned to play with blocks or each other. Perhaps that was why Holland had never felt as if she quite fit in, until she found the Professor's folklore class. Her stories made Holland feel as if she was on one of her father's hunts again.

She hadn't actually expected to discover anything tonight. Things around LA were always reminding her of the Professor's stories, and Holland always felt compelled to chase them. She was perpetually darting down alleys she swore she'd never seen before, only to find a bar or a coffee shop or a bookstore she'd actually already visited.

But not tonight. Tonight, Holland knew she'd never been down this alley. She would have remembered the sign.

The words hung from a sleek copper hook that shone against a door Holland wanted to believe was vintage but might have just been dirty. One glance at Jake and she could tell he was thinking *dirty*. He was possibly rethinking his choice to go on this date as well. She wanted to change his mind. She also really wanted to go through that door, and she wanted to convince him to come with her.

“Do you like urban myths?” she asked.

“Yeah—I actually love them.” Jake gave her smile that was far more Superman than Clark Kent. Holland felt a spark of hope that she was headed in the right direction again.

And yet . . . she hesitated.

The Professor had a rule about not sharing her stories with people outside of her class. No one broke this rule. The class required too much effort from students for them to then give the stories away for free, and the Professor always warned students there could be serious consequences to doing so. But Holland wasn't a Folklore 517 student anymore, and it was only one story. But . . .

“Before I say anything else,” she said quietly, “I need you to swear on the life of your dog, or your bike, or that houseplant you've been working so hard to keep alive, that you won't tell anyone what I'm about to say.”

Jake grinned wider. “I swear.” He leaned in and kissed her lightly on the lips, as if to seal the promise. “So, is this like a family secret?”

Holland froze.

She reminded herself that Jake came from a large family that was always calling him and sharing even the most mundane details of their day. Talking about family was normal for him. He wasn't fishing for information.

Yet it took her several seconds to smile in a way she hoped looked playful. “It's not a family secret, but it is something I'm not supposed to talk about. When I was doing my undergrad, I took this class called Folklore 517: Local Legends and Urban Myths. The class itself is sort of a local legend. You can't register for it. It's not on any website. You have to find it

by word of mouth. Then if you pass the class, at the end of the semester, it shows up on your transcript.”

Jake looked all in. “So, it’s like a secret society version of a class?”

Holland nodded nervously, or maybe she was feeling excited. It wasn’t as if sharing this little secret was going to hurt anyone. “Each week, the Professor would talk about a different local legend or urban myth, and we’d have to swear never to share them. One of the Professor’s legends is about someone called the Watch Man. Supposedly, there are signs that lead to him around Los Angeles. If you follow the signs and you manage to find him, you can ask him the time, and the Watch Man will tell you when you’ll die.”

Jake’s expression shifted, a tiny worry line forming between his brows.

“It’s not as morbid as it sounds,” Holland hurried to say. “The Professor also said that you can make a deal with him to get more time, to live longer than you would have.”

“And you *really* believe this?” Jake asked. There was something in his voice Holland couldn’t quite place, but suddenly she feared she’d been a little too optimistic about his interest in legends. He was a normal guy who was probably used to going on very normal dates. And most likely he wanted a very normal girl.

*Of course not.*

*It’s just for fun.*

*No—not even a little.*

Any of these would have been excellent answers to his question; these were all things a normal girl would have said.

“Just come inside with me,” Holland hedged.

“Sure,” Jake said. And because he was a nice guy, he reached out and opened the door with the *Curios & Clockwork* sign for her.

Everything on the other side was milk glass and gold. A perfect row of milk-glass lights on golden cords lit a perfect floor of milk-glass penny tile with a number of shimmering golden tiles that spelled out the words *tick tock*.

There were no footprints, no smudges, just the glittering words, which winked like the flutter of a second hand under the glassy lights.

It almost felt like *magic*. Not big, miraculous magic but the simple magic of timeless things. Of two-dollar bills and handwritten letters, typewriters and rotary phones.

Holland might have said as much out loud. But Jake looked as if he wasn't sure what to make of this uncanny room in the back of a strange alley. This wasn't what he'd signed up for when he'd suggested they go for ice cream. He wanted a date who would look good in an Instagram photograph, not one who could end up on Dating Hell Reddit.

Holland had definitely misread this one, but she couldn't go back now. This felt like the closest she'd ever been to finding one of the Professor's myths in real life.

There were two doors across from them, and they were milk glass as well, glossy white, with golden handles and simple rectangular golden plaques in the center. One plaque said *curios*. The other said *clockwork*.

Holland reached for the *clockwork* door, hoping it was for the Watch Man. If she was ruining this date, it needed to be for a good reason.

The doorknob didn't budge.

She tugged again. "I think it's locked."

Jake reached over her shoulder and knocked. Two loud raps of his knuckles.

"May I help you?" The voice came from the other door. The one labeled *curios*.

In the yawning doorway now stood a girl. She had pixie-cut platinum hair and a small nose ring, and she wore a fitted white dress the same shade as the milk glass. At first glance, she looked young, but there was something about the way the girl stood and stared that made Holland think her appearance might be deceiving.

Holland tried to see behind her, to get a glimpse of the *curios* inside, but there was only more white light.

The girl drummed her squared-off nails on the doorframe impatiently.