


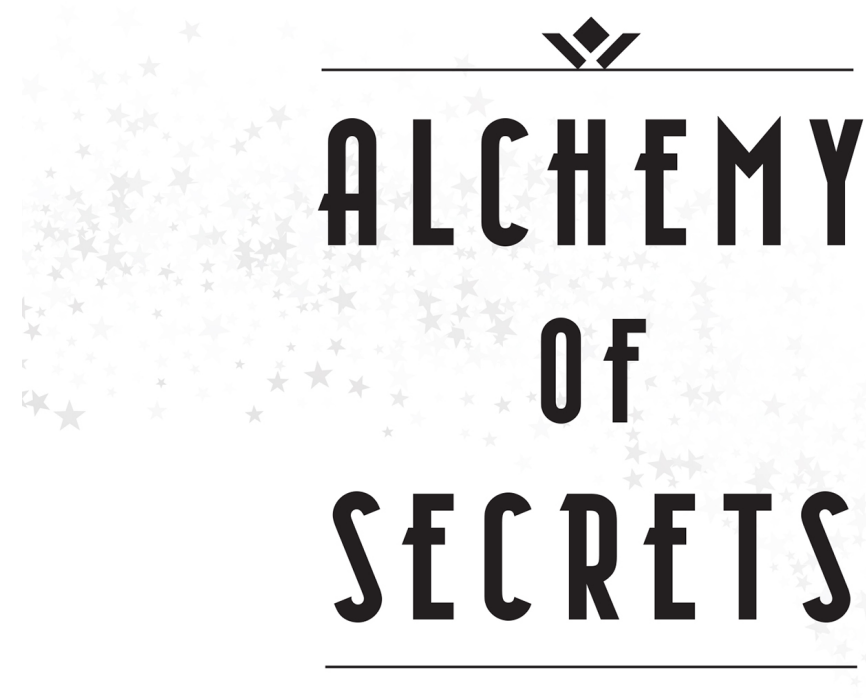


ALCHEMY OF SECRETS

A NOVEL

#1 *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLING AUTHOR

STEPHANIE
GARBER



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This one is for my dad.

You told me not to write this one for you, but I did it anyway.

I love you, Dad!

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 recognize. 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.

Curios & Clockwork

Inquire Within

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.

"We're looking for the Watch Man," Holland said.

"I'm sorry. I can't help you." The girl immediately stepped back to shut the door.

"I just want to ask him the time," Holland blurted.

The girl froze. "Are you sure about that, hon?" She followed her question with a look that said Holland would be wise to walk away right now and take the cute boy with her.

"She's sure," Jake said. "I want to know the time, too."

"Really?" Holland asked.

He wrapped an arm around her shoulder, his skin warm against hers. "If you're doing it, I'm in, too."

She wanted to ask what had changed his mind, but she was suddenly feeling too much nervous excitement.

The girl in white muttered something under her breath. It sounded like the word *fools*. Then she disappeared behind the door.

Time slowed inside the milk-glass hall as Holland waited for the girl to come back. Jake's arm grew hot against her shoulder. This time, she felt like the uncomfortable one, hoping the girl would actually return.

Finally, the *curios* door reopened. The girl emerged, holding out pens and slips of paper that had carbon attached to the back. She pursed her lips. "If you two are certain about this, write down your names, along with the requested information, and the Watch Man will be in touch."

CHAPTER TWO

The next morning arrived slowly, reluctant to perform a job it had grown tired of doing.

Holland woke up to thick silence. There were no chirping birds, no cars rushing down the street, no creaking floorboards as her house stretched awake. For a second, she swore her heart didn't even beat.

Her head spun as she finally sat up in bed. She felt vaguely nauseated all of a sudden. It wasn't a hangover, at least she didn't think so.

She tried to remember what she had done last night. But for a moment she couldn't even recall what day it was. She felt like a piece of paper that was slightly stuck to the page before.

Holland groggily leaned over to check her phone.

It was Thursday.

Yesterday had been Wednesday.

Her third date with Jake.

The details came back in a slow parade of grainy off-white pictures that made her think of old home videos. She remembered the alley ... the milk glass ... Jake's arm around her shoulder ... sheets of carbon paper ... the simple magic of timeless things ... the Watch Man ...

Everything had felt so electric at the time.

But now the night felt strangely dull and far away as she replayed the events.

After leaving the alley, she and Jake had finally picked up peanut butter and bacon ice cream, and then he'd kissed her at her car. They'd kissed for a while. But maybe he felt differently about all the kissing than she did because this was the first morning since she'd met him that she hadn't woken up to a text from him.

It wasn't that late. He could still text **Good morning.**

Her phone chimed, as if on cue.

But it wasn't a message from Jake.

2:00 Meeting with Adam Bishop

Holland dropped her phone back on the bed.

Adam Bishop was a new faculty member who had recently come over from the UC Berkeley Folklore Program. Holland hadn't met him in real life, but she'd heard other grad students chattering about him. Everyone seemed to love him.

The email he'd sent her on Monday was brief, requesting her presence this afternoon. When she'd followed up to ask why, Adam Bishop had cryptically responded that it would be easier to explain in person.

She wondered if maybe he was looking for a teaching assistant, and the Professor had given him Holland's name. Holland might have been behind on finishing her thesis, but she was an excellent assistant. She'd been the Professor's TA for two years—one year during undergrad and one year during grad school—and everyone knew it required a lot of patience, along with a number of skills that weren't usually found on résumés. She actually really missed that job. But she had another job now. A fantastic job.

Every Friday night, Holland showed classic films in the loft of the Santa Monica Coffee Lab, then followed them up with a discussion. It was like teaching without the grading, and everyone got to drink.

She loved it.

She loved the Coffee Lab. She loved the people who showed up each week. But most of all, she loved the old movies.

Holland had loved movies ever since she was four and her father had introduced her and her twin sister to *The Wizard of Oz*. When they'd finished the film, her sister had taken off with a broom and Holland had immediately asked for a pair of ruby slippers.

Her father had said, "I thought you might say that, Hollybells." Then he'd told her the slippers were already waiting for her somewhere in the house; she just had to find them.

That had been her first treasure hunt.

Her father had always connected his hunts to movies. Showing old films at the Coffee Lab made her feel close to him now. She was currently doing a film noir series, and she loved the history behind the films. She loved how the movies had a way of making her believe there was a hidden black-and-white corner of the world, where private eyes lined the streets instead of fast food joints, and at least once a week a femme fatale with a peek-a-boo hairstyle would walk through the door and take someone's life down a dark, twisty path.

If Adam Bishop was looking to hire her as his assistant, she didn't think she'd be interested. But Holland was still curious. She was always curious.

After getting up, she went for a run and tried to imagine what else Adam Bishop could possibly want from her. But as the run turned into a walk and the morning disappeared into noon, her thoughts kept returning to Jake.

He still hadn't texted.

Holland wanted to regret taking him down that alley. She wanted to think it would have all gone differently, and she would have woken up to a good morning text, if they'd just gone straight to ice cream and she hadn't messed it up by chasing an urban myth about death.

But what Holland really wanted was for Jake to like her in spite of—or maybe even because of—the myth. The irony was, the Watch Man wasn't even one of Holland's favorite myths. She didn't really care to know when she would die, she just wanted to know that the myths were true.

It was now nearly time for her meeting. Holland checked her phone one last time.

Nothing.

She knew this didn't mean it was over, but in that moment, it didn't feel as if it was going anywhere. She considered texting Jake, but she'd been the last one to text, last night after she'd gotten home.

If only January was there.

Holland knew what her twin sister would say—something along the lines of *Forget any guy who doesn't want you*. Only January would have used a different *F* word than *forget*.

The sisters might have been identical in appearance, but in most other ways they couldn't have been more different. And yet, January was Holland's best friend. The one person she told everything to.

Holland darted down her staircase to leave for her meeting. Like so many things Holland loved, her house was old, built in the 1940s, full of real wood, white walls, and lots of windows that let in the light. Halfway down the steps, she called her sister.

Normally Holland and January talked every day, but since the beginning of October, January's job had been keeping her busier than usual. For the past three weeks, there had only been the occasional text or photo from Spain.

Right after college, January had gotten a job as a rare book collector. People were willing to pay exorbitant amounts of money to have something no one else did, and it was January's job to track those somethings down. It was truly the perfect job for her. She'd always wanted to travel the world, and like Holland, she'd been raised on their father's treasure hunts. But Holland missed her whenever she was gone.

January's phone rang once before it went to voicemail. "Hello. You've reached January St. James. I'm traveling internationally at the moment—"

The recording was interrupted by January answering the phone. "Hey—" she sounded out of breath but wide awake.

"Is this a bad time?" Holland asked.

“No, but I only have a second.” Traffic rumbled in the background, making it sound closer to midday than midnight.

“What are you doing?” Holland asked.

“Boring work stuff. I just finished meeting with a client who really liked hearing the sound of his own voice.” January always tried to make her job sound far less interesting than it was, probably to keep Holland from feeling jealous. But tonight, January actually sounded a little worn out. “I miss you, kid.”

January never said *I miss you*.

“I miss you, too,” Holland said. “My house has been far too clean, since you haven’t visited. When is your trip over?”

“Not soon enough...” The phone went quiet for a second. Holland briefly thought she might have dropped the call, then January said, “I wish I was there with you...” Her voice was so soft, it didn’t even really sound like her.

“Is everything okay?” Holland asked. “You almost sound sappy.” Usually, Holland was the sappy one.

“I’m just tired,” January said, and she really must have been because she didn’t even scoff at being called *sappy*. “It’s late here and I wish I could talk longer, but I need to dash. I—”

Holland’s doorbell rang, muffling January’s last words.

Then her sister was gone.

Holland glanced out the windows flanking her door. No one ever rang the doorbell, except for the occasional person selling pest control or solar panels. But this gentleman didn’t look like he was selling anything.

There were wisps of silver hair peeking out from his hat and wrinkles on his light-brown cheeks. His shirt was white, and his pants were khaki, held up by a pair of brilliant red-and-white checkered suspenders that made everything else on Holland’s quiet street appear dull.

Holland didn’t have any minutes to waste if she wanted to make her meeting on time. But as she looked through the window, she was struck by a bolt of déjà vu. *I’ve met him before*, she thought. Only she couldn’t place how.

It might have just been that the suspenders reminded her of an old picture of her grandfather, who had died before she was born.

Whatever it was, it was enough to make her open the door.

“Hello, Holland.” The gentleman smiled, an easy grin that made her think of hard candies in shiny wrappers and exaggerated bedtime stories.

“Do I know you?” she asked.

“No, I’m afraid you don’t.” His smile remained, but his brown eyes lost some of their twinkle as he held out a package wrapped in brown paper and string.

“What’s this?” she asked.

“I found it on your doorstep.”

Holland took a second look at the parcel. There was no return address, only a blocky orange *Happy Halloween* stamp in the corner and her full name, Holland St. James, typed across the middle in smudgy, old-fashioned letters.

It must have been from the Professor. She loved sending packages and, of course, she never put her name on the return address because she liked them to be mysterious.

Holland’s palms tingled as she held the brown paper box in her hands. She was curious about what the Professor had mailed her this time. They were usually esoteric books or manuscripts related to the devil, which the Professor thought might be helpful for Holland’s thesis.

Unfortunately, Holland really didn’t have time to open anything right now. She set the package down in her hallway.

“Thank you for grabbing this,” she told the man. “But I’m afraid I have to —”

“I know you don’t have much time, but I’ll only take a minute,” he promised, and then he held out a pale cream business card with foiled emerald-green printing.

MANUEL VARGAS

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