

1 THE WATCH

She's almost to McKinney's Pharmacy when she sees him walking down the sidewalk, his backpack slung over one shoulder, his long legs loping along. She would know that form anywhere, tall, dark hair, head down, lost in thought. Yup, that's her bestie, Tom, and considering the bulge in the backpack, Sarah is willing to bet that he stuffed his school jacket and tie in there.

She quickly pulls to the curb in her birthday Mustang (for her sweet 16th, five months before). She beeps. He turns, and then saunters over, no big rush. He opens the door, tosses his bag in the back and then folds himself into the seat. The fit is tight. Whoever sat here last adjusted the seat short, and Tom's hand automatically reaches for the seat levers. He moves the seat back, audibly relaxing as the position gives him room.

"Hey... Thanks for the ride," he says, stretching out his legs.

"No problem. But do you mind if we make a stop before I drop you off?" Sarah asks brightly. Her energy is contagious and spills over onto Tom, as he pulls himself up in the seat, his head almost brushing the Mustang's ceiling.

"My old neighbor's daughter called me last night and asked me to stop by to pick up a small box she found with my name on it. Apparently, her mother left it to me when she died."

"Sure. What do you think it is?" Tom asks, feeling a little stuffy, rolling the window down a little, letting in some fresh air.

"I have no idea, but we're going to find out," Sarah replies, making an illegal U-turn in the road.

Sarah's one-time neighbor, Mrs. Carter, used to live up the road from Sarah. When Sarah was eight years old, she would get on her bike and ride through her neighborhood, looking for someone to play with. One day she spotted someone out tending the gardens of a huge house, and being an outgoing eight-year-old, she rode down the long driveway. Sarah was hoping that some kids would be up there. Instead, she found Mrs. Carter.

Mrs. Carter, taking pity on the inquisitive eight-year-old, invited her to the back gardens for tea, and the two of them became fast friends. Throughout that summer and for many summers following, Sarah would sit with Mrs. Carter and have 'tea,' while the elderly woman told Sarah wonderful stories of a faraway place. Sometimes, if Tom were visiting, the two of them would go together, Sarah sitting

forward, eagerly inside the action and drama of the story, while Tom sat back quietly listening, his face masking his thoughts and emotions.

Sarah now turns into the long drive, her car easily taking the turn, and then moving smoothly up the asphalt. Several cars are parked out in front of the house, and Sarah pulls alongside them.

“Do you want to come in with me?” she asks, unbuckling her seat belt and opening the door.

“Naw, I’ll wait.”

“I’ll only be a minute,” she says, getting out and making for the front door.

As with all grand houses, this one has a grand front door. Sarah raises and releases the lion brass knocker and hears it reverberate throughout the house. She quickly smooths her white blouse and forest green plaid skirt.

The door is answered by a middle-aged woman, dressed conservatively in a navy suit and heels, her dark-brown hair, streaked with gray, swept up in a French twist. Immediately Sarah sees the resemblance to Mrs. Carter.

“Hi. I’m Sarah Richardson,” she says, her face brightening. “Someone called and left me a message.”

“Yes, I’m Deanna,” the woman answers warmly. “My mother always spoke kindly of you and your afternoon teas during the summers.”

Sarah smiles and then remembering why she’s there, lets the smile fade, and a more solemn façade appears. “I’m sorry about your mother’s passing,” she offers.

“Thank you. It was somewhat expected. My mother was 76. The good thing is that she died peacefully in her sleep. She didn’t suffer the way, so many people do,” Deanna replies, a faraway look in her eyes.

“Anyway, my brother and I are trying to get the house ready for market, and I ran across a small box and letter. Your name is on it, and I guess my mother wanted you to have it. Come in for a moment, and I’ll get it for you.”

“OK. Thank you,” Sarah says, as she steps into the foyer. She stands there, looking around. Boxes are packed and stacked in the corner, waiting to be taken away. Sarah hears Deanna’s footsteps echoing on the hardwood floors as she walks to the library and then returns.

“Here it is. I hope it’s something you like,” Deanna says, handing the small white box to Sarah. She pauses and then continues, “There’s a note for you as well.”

Sarah looks at the box, which is tied with a black satin ribbon. An envelope with her name on it has been slipped under the ribbon. “Thank you.”

Deanna reaches around Sarah, and places her hand on the door, intimating that the visit is over. Sarah steps aside, while the door opens. She thanks the woman again, and then leaves.

Sarah is happy to be out of there since the house is depressing and cold. She needs warmth, and she turns her face to the sun, the small box and letter in her hand.

Sarah walks down the three steps and back to her car.

She opens the car door and climbs in.

“That didn’t take long. I thought you’d be in there at least fifteen, twenty minutes,” Tom says, closing his chemistry book and returning it to his backpack.

“Me too,” she says distractedly.

Sarah sits looking at the box. She pulls out the envelope and opens it up, handing the box to Tom.

Tom watches her for a couple of seconds and then opens the box. Nestled in a bed of cotton padding he finds a small watch on a chain. Tom picks up the chain carefully, letting the watch pendant hang above the box, and holds it out to Sarah, she glances at it and turns back to her note.

She then starts to read the note, written in a neat, but shaky hand.

Tom seeing her immediate disinterest in the dangling watch decides to take a closer look. It’s gold with small diamonds around the outside of a round shape. In the middle is a watch face. It looks old. Looking closely, the watch has stopped.

Tom wonders if it still works. Glancing at the dashboard time, 4:46, he pulls the stem out on the watch and resets the watch to the current time. Once he has the hands as they should be, he begins to wind the watch.

“Listen to this,” Sarah says excitedly as she starts to read the letter aloud.

My dearest Sarah,

Some of my fondest memories are of our afternoon teas and the sharing of my stories. In all my life, you’re the only one I told them to, as others would have taken me for a senile old woman.

My grandmother gave me this pendant when I was just a girl, about your age. She also told me of a faraway place filled with magic and dragons, a place that I visited many times during my life.

With that said, I am leaving you my stories. To dream the stories, set the watch to the time you wake each morning. While winding it, repeat the following;

Dream another source
While setting another course
Excitingly real
Wake in one, reawake in another,

Refreshed as if time slept on

Remember that what happens is real, so wear the stone pendant always, as it will keep you safe.

Happy Dreams,

Elizabeth Smith Carter

Tom listens, trying to make sense of the note, while still holding the watch.

“Let me see it,” he says, as he reaches for the note.

Sarah instead holds the note out in front of him, and he reads it aloud, still winding the watch. He pauses while reading the stanza, puzzled at its meaning. He re-reads it a second time, aloud and under his breath.

Dream another source
While setting another course
Excitingly real
Wake in one, reawake in another,
Refreshed as if time slept on

He blows out his held breath and his frustration. “I haven’t a clue. It doesn’t make any sense.”

He looks down at the watch. The second hand isn’t moving.

“Doesn’t matter anyway—the watch is broken. The second hand isn’t moving, and I know that it’s wound,” Tom says, looking closely at the watch.

“It still is pretty. Let me see it,” Sarah tells him as she takes the pendant from Tom and slips it over her head. It settles right above her cleavage, instantly warming her skin. She picks it up, turning this way and that way, the sparkles from the diamonds catching her eyes, and then she puts it down.

“Let’s get out of here.” She puts the car in reverse, and they turn around and start down the drive.

Later that night, Sarah is lying in her bed, her iPod blasting in her ears. She fingers the pendant while she re-reads the note. Just like Tom, Sarah can’t make sense of the poem. She pulls the pendant up so she can look at it. *He’s right... It’s broken. At least it’s pretty.* The watch face sparkles as she again turns it one way and then another. ... *Definitely gold and diamonds.*

She turns off her light, earbuds still attached, and closes her eyes.

2 FIREWOOD

“Wake up, you lazy girl! The fire has gone out!”

Sara’s eyes jerk open, and she tries to sit up and get away from the woman kicking at her.

What the hell?

Sara automatically slides her body away from the woman, performing a backward crab walk, trying to miss her attacker’s feet, while her eyes dart around the darkened room.

The woman comes at her again with her foot. Sara dodges it, but just barely.

Where the hell am I, Sara wonders?

In slow motion, as if time is standing still, Sara’s eyes adjust to the dimly lit room, and she scans the space. The room is long and somewhat wide with a couple of tables, one with benches, and the other without. The one without is covered with flour and rising bread in the center and bowls at the end. Pots are stacked beneath it. The table with the benches is clear.

Sara’s eyes are focusing better, and she can see bunches of flowers hanging from the ceiling, dried and old looking. Sara is crouched in the corner, on the floor. The floor is stone, and the cracks are filled in with dirt. Sara looks across the room at her and sees a stairway through an open door. The stairwell is dark. Cupboards and shelves line that wall. The fireplace takes one whole wall, or actually, the hearth does.

The fireplace opening is almost as tall as she is, and is twice as wide. It is big. That must be what the woman is going on about. There isn’t any fire in the fireplace. At the far end of the room is an outside wall. Sara knows this because a door and a window there allow some light to come in through the cracks. That’s her escape.

The old woman’s foot connects with her shin. Sara didn’t see it coming, she was so busy taking in her surroundings.

Shit! That hurts!

Involuntarily, she shrinks back into the corner, trying to make herself as small as possible, and then realizes at the last moment that this is probably not her best strategic move.

“Get the fire going now... And get me more wood,” the old woman barks.

Sara knows that she really doesn’t have an alternative right now. She has to do something or risk another kick, and her shins can’t take any more kicking, so she tentatively starts to leave her corner.

She knows for certain that this is a dream. Any minute now, she’ll wake up. Her hands are gritty, and she looks around for something to wipe them on. Like every good kid, not finding anything at hand, she

glances down at her own clothes. At this point, she realizes she's wearing something hideous. It looks like a sack. *Gross!* A brown sack dress, rough like burlap, and gathered just above her waist and tied with a string at her neck. The sack goes to her ankles.

Her head turns, and she looks at how the sack fits behind her and then looks back to the front of her again. As she takes in the fashion mistake, disgust, and then fear, rise on her face. *Please, God! Don't let any of my friends be in this dream!*

But things get worse as she looks down and realizes that, apparently, she has been sleeping directly on the cobbles, with a dirty blanket wadded up near the wall. *That would explain the soot all over my arms.* She tries to brush off the dirt, but only succeeds in rubbing it in. After a few moments, she gives up. *Apparently, in this dream, I'm supposed to be dirty. Go figure.*

Sara again notices the fireplace next to her. Nanny at home would have said that if it had been any bigger, it would have bitten her, but Nanny isn't here. The fireplace is humongous, easily the most significant thing in the room. And yup. No fire. Where the fire should have been being a lot of ash, and maybe a glimmer of hot coals beneath the ash. A big black pot is hanging there on a bent-metal rod, but the pot has been pushed to the side. Sara stretches a little and sees that the pot is empty.

The heavysset woman who yelled at her earlier has returned to the big table and is concentrating on breaking eggs into a large wooden bowl. She glances back at Sara, her dark, beady eyes staring out of a heavy, round and lined face, watching Sara's progress.

"Sara!" she yells louder now, as she's across the kitchen, "Get your ass going, girl. I need that fire to get the breakfast out on time."

She knows me. She called me by name.

Sara turns to look at the woman, trying to register her command. Panic rises in her as she realizes that she has never started a fire from scratch. At home, if she wants a fire, she just pushes the button on the wall, and presto, a fire happens in the fireplace.

She looks to the side of the fireplace, opposite where she has been sleeping and sees wood stacked there, but not enough, given the shadow on the wall showing where it has been stacked over time. Sara's hand tentatively reaches down and takes a piece from the small pile. She places it in the fireplace, which is still warm. The weight of the log moves the ash aside, showing red coals, barely there, from the previous fire.

I guess that's good.

Within a second or two, small curls of smoke start to rise from the new log.

Sara begins to get excited, as she realizes that she might have something here. This isn't so tough. She reaches for another log and repeats the action, mesmerized by the small fire that is starting to ignite.

Sara doesn't see the old woman or the next kick coming.

Bamn!

“What in the name of all things good are you doing, girl!”

Sara falls toward the fire, her hand going out to stop herself from pitching into the fire, only for her to actually touch the hot coals lying in wait under the ash. She pulls back while trying to get herself away from the coals. She has help, the old woman grabbing her roughly by the shoulder, grasping her hair and pulling her back, and then pushing her against the wall. Sara holds her burned hand with her other hand, the sharp pain throbbing across her palm, as her palm turns red. Tears form in her eyes while Sara watches the old woman to see what she'll do next.

“You'd think that you never saw a fire before today! Get out! Go get me more wood. I'll get the fire going since I can't wait any longer,” she says, yelling at Sara, and then continuing under her breath. “That good for nothing girl. Lazy she is... And me having to get the morning meal out.”

The old woman rumbles on in her complaining, and Sara turns and heads for the far end of the kitchen, still grasping her hand with the other.

The dawn light has started to come through the window on the far side of the room. Beside the window is a door, not the kind that Sara is used to. This door splits in half, allowing one to open either half on its own. The top half is open now. Sara heads toward the door, making her way to freedom. She has never been happier to see sunlight as she is to see it this morning.

Almost to the door, Sara notices another girl inside the kitchen. This girl has been quiet the whole time so that Sara didn't notice her before. As Sara starts to go by, this other girl rises from the stone floor.

“Morning, Sara,” the girl says sleepily. In the dim light, she looks familiar. Her hair is the same as Sara's, only it's a darker blonde as if she rarely sees the sunlight. She's a little shorter than Sara but is dressed similarly, in a brown, stained shift.

“You shouldn't get Cook going like that first thing in the morning. We'll all have to pay the whole day now,” the girl says, talking in a familiar tone.

“I have to go get wood,” Sara mumbles at her, continuing toward the door, still trying to make her escape.

“Well, of course, you do. It's what we do every morning,” the girl replies in a bright and chipper voice as she falls in line, following Sara out the door.

The morning sunlight is bright now; sunrise has come.

Sara starts to turn left, but the girl reaches out and pulls Sara's arm, bringing her right instead.

“Where are you going? We have to get the wood... Unless you want more of what you already got this morning.”

Sara doesn't want more of anything right now. Her hand is hurting, the red on her palm already starting

to blister. She just wants to go home, to wake up in her own bed, but since this is a dream, what choice does she have?

Sara turns to her and follows passively, waiting for the girl to show her the way.

They're in a courtyard of some type, the open space the size of half a football field. The ground is covered in cobblestones fit tightly together and packed with dirt, the unevenness makes walking somewhat tricky. Several buildings are scattered across the courtyard, which also has a fenced-in area for horses. A wall, casting a shadow, runs behind everything. Based on what Sara can see, they're in a castle or some similar type of estate. She saw something like this once before on a family vacation to Ireland.

"Morning, Jess!" a boy calls from one of the buildings.

"Morning, Abe," Jess returns as she waves back, a smile breaking across her face.

Jess! Her name is Jess. Well, that's one mystery solved.

"Hey, Jess?" Abe calls out to her. "Have you put your name in for the Lottery yet?"

Jess stops and then walks over to where Abe is standing, so as not to yell her business across the courtyard. Sara follows.

"No, and I not going to, I don't have time for that nonsense," she replies.

"Why not?" he asks, looking at her with a quizzical face.

"Because the Quest isn't my life's path. That's why" Jess responds belligerently.

"I put my name in yesterday," he says enthusiastically, not letting Jess's response squelch his own.

"Are you even old enough?" Jess asks flatly.

"Yesterday was my naming day. I'm just old enough," Abe states, staring back at her, holding out his stone, which is hanging from his neck.

"Well, good luck then, if that's what you want. I hope you get to go," Jess says with a forced smile.

Sara can tell that she really doesn't want him to go, but Abe is so into it that he doesn't recognize Jess's hesitancy.

During a pregnant pause, nothing is said, and then Jess says, "Well, we need to get going. We have to get the firewood before Cook comes after us. See you later, Abe... and, Abe... Happy Naming Day. I'm sorry I missed it."

"Yeah, thanks... We'll talk later, Jess. Bye, Sara," Abe mumbles, seeming confused.

Abe turns and walks back into the building. Jess turns and strides away so that Sara has to run to keep

up with her. Jess is obviously upset about something.

“Hey, Jess. Wait up,” Sara calls after her.

Jess slows, waiting for Sara to catch up.

“What are you mad about?” Sara asks, touching her shoulder.

“The stupid Lottery,” Jess replies, pulling away from Sara.

“What’s the Lottery?” Sara asks. She wanted to ask back when Abe was talking about it but didn’t want to seem totally stupid.

“You know what the Lottery is,” Jess says, rolling her eyes at Sara. “Everyone knows what the Lottery is. Everyone wants to be selected for the Lottery. And then win the Quest Games and go on the Quest. Everyone wants to get an egg and become a Dragoon Guard,” Jess rants in one long stream.

“Slow down, Jess. Tell me what’s wrong,” Sara says. She knows that if she can get Jess talking about this, then she can figure out the details.

“You remember that my brother put his name in the Lottery two years ago and was won the right to join the Quest. Right?” Jess looks at Sara for confirmation, and Sara nods back, even though she hasn’t a clue as to what she agrees to.

“He went on the Quest with the Wizard. They crossed No Man’s Land and the Fae Forest and climbed the Dragon Range. He went before the dragons and was found deserving. Then he was chosen by an egg.” Jess has a faraway look in her eyes as if watching the events unfold.

“But on his way back through No Man’s Land, he was attacked and killed. End of story,” she says.

Tears are leaking from her eyes. Sara puts her arms around Jess’s shoulders, trying to give her comfort, but Jess twists and pulls away, the anger still fresh within her, even after two years.

“He would still be here today if it weren’t for that stupid Lottery,” she says, sniffing. She wipes her hand across her eyes.

“Come on. We have to get the wood,” Jess says, turning and striding away...

Sara thinks she hears her mumble ‘stupid boys,’ as she walks away. Again, Sara follows.

Sara’s curiosity is piqued. She wants to know more about the Lottery, but she knows that she can’t ask Jess. She has to figure out how to get back out later to ask Abe. He’ll tell her, she believes, but right now Jess is right. They have to get the wood before Cook has kittens.

Throughout the day, Sara makes many trips from the kitchen to the castle keep’s woodpile, bringing a never-ending supply of wood for the kitchen’s fires. If not for the large fires in the fireplace, then for the enclosed fire pits, so that the bread can be baked. By day’s end, her legs are tight from running, and her

arms are full of tiny splinters, as well as incapable of carrying anything more substantial than a spoon to her mouth, and even that she's unsure of.

Jess is a godsend, always there encouraging her, pushing her when she thinks that she can't take another step, telling her stories to help pass the time. Most of the stories are of the people in the castle and where they come from or how they've come to be at the castle, or who they're related to. It's funny, Sara realizes, that whether she's here or at home, life is relatively the same, the gossip is the same—and in this, Sara finds comfort.

On one of their last trips to the woodpile for the evening, they run into Banen. Sara has heard all about this bad boy from Jess. Jess spots him first and grabs Sara's arm pulling her behind her as they duck back in between two outbuildings, apparently in the hope that he hasn't seen them. Jess's plan is to keep to the shadows until he passes, thus avoiding him. But although their luck has held all day, it chooses now to dissipate, as Banen spots them and make his way toward them, trapping the girls in the small alleyway.

"Sara, Jess," he says slowly, looking each of them over as if they were livestock.

Jess is a fighter, and she grabs Sara's arm. "Never you mind, Banen. Cook is expecting us with a load of wood any minute now. You let us pass." And she tries to walk by him, but Banen simply moves to block her. When she tries to go around him, he steps that way.

"Last I hear, you kitchen girls are giving out free treats, so to speak."

"Well, I guess you heard wrong then. Now move out of our way, and let us be," Jess says forcefully.

"Like I say, it'll cost you," he tells her, standing there as though he owns the world—that is until a dark shadow appears behind him. The girls see this, though Banen doesn't. An arm comes around his neck, while a hand grabs his arm and pulls it up behind his back—so high that Banen starts walking on his tiptoes.

The stranger's voice, low and deep, whispers in Banen's ear—a whisper that Sara can hear clearly. "I suggest you apologize to the ladies."

Banen sputters a quick apology to the girls. The girls' eyes are wide. They don't want to miss a moment of this.

The stranger then whispers a second time in Banen's ear, though again loud enough for Sara to hear. He says that if Banen is ever caught near these two girls or any girls within the next few years, that he won't have arms to work with. The stranger lifts higher on Banen's arms to make his point, and Banen cries out from the pain in his shoulders. The man turns Banen and then pushes him toward the castle gates and tells him to get home. The boy stumbles at first, but then rights himself and breaks into a run.

Sara and Jess are still in the alleyway between the two buildings, and so they don't see the final exit. As Banen leaves, they emerge from the alley and stand in the yard. In the fading light of the day, they see

and recognize their rescuer as none other than Markus, one of the trusted Palace Guards who helped Sara with a load of firewood earlier.

“Thank you,” Sara says, walking up to him.

He tries to play it off as a joke. “How else am I going to get my breakfast in the morning if the firewood isn’t hauled?”

Sara and Jess look at each other. With all the excitement, they still need to finish up.

They both call their thanks over their shoulders as they quickly head for the woodpile and their last duty of the day.