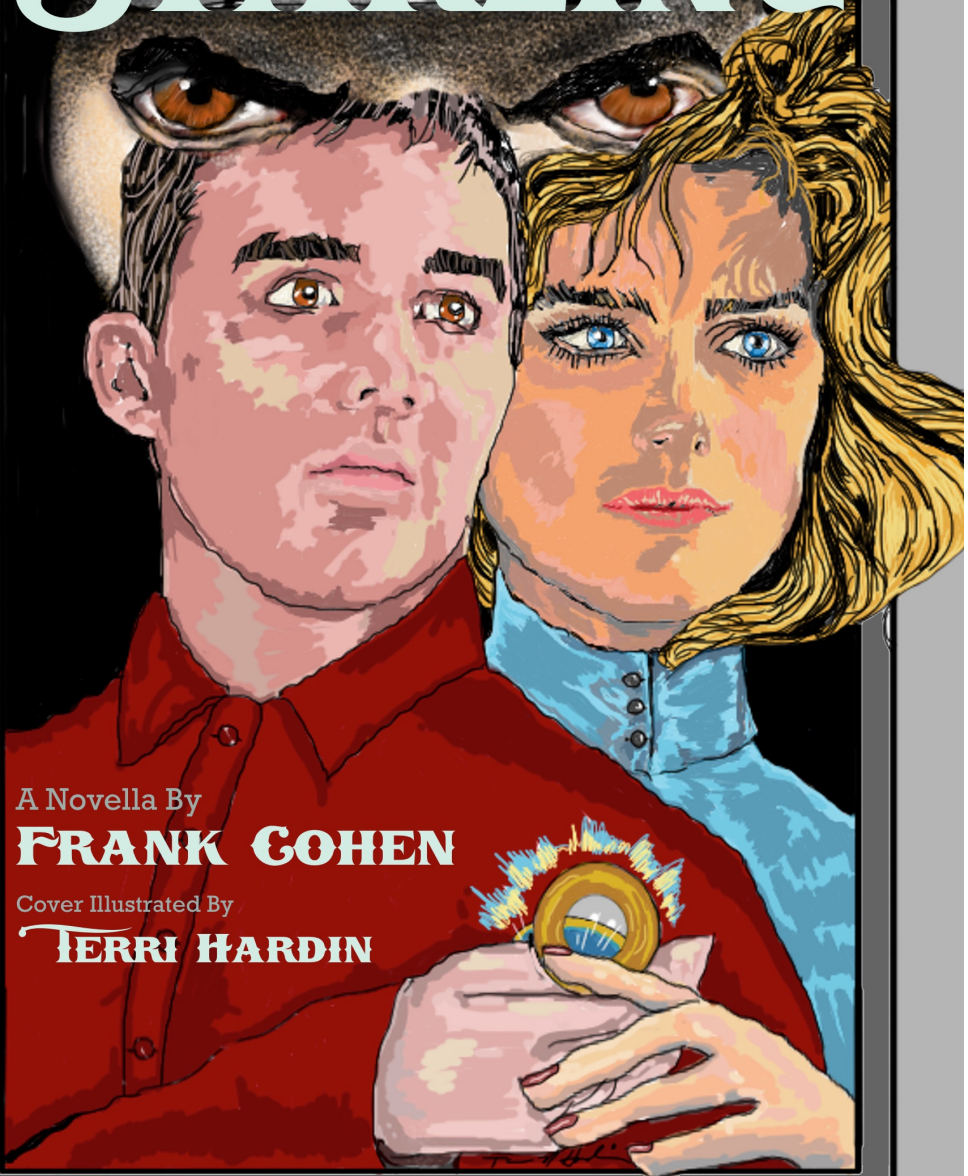


STARLING WATCHES

STARLING



A Novella By

FRANK COHEN

Cover Illustrated By

TERRI HARDIN

www.STARLINGwatch.com

STARLING

A Novella By Frank Cohen



STARLING, A Novella Book

Part of the STARLINGwatch.com Experience

By Frank Cohen

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This is the March 2016 revision. It fixes typos and formatting issues. It fixes a time-travel issue with the phone call in Chapter 3. It fixes the cover illustration credit to Terri Hardin.

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STARLING watches are instantly collectible pocket watches unlike anything you've ever seen before. STARLING is the design and invention of Frank Cohen and Disney Imagineer Terri Hardin. Open each watch and the millions of light color combinations that emerge have the power to improve your life, bring you relaxation, and make you more mindful of the things that unlock fulfillment and happiness. The STARLING novella is wonderfully illustrated in bas relief sculptures in a cast resin box by famed Disney Imagineer Terri Hardin. STARLING is collectible and limited edition.

Details at: STARLINGwatch.com



Chapter Two

In the period of one month, Jeff witnessed an accident, saved an old woman's life before she died, and found a time travel device. He'd become completely puppy-dog infatuated with a woman his own age — only he and she were sixty years in the past. Remembering his hospital's emergency room mentor's advice — don't ask questions, be useful, and keep moving — he was getting very good at rolling with whatever came up.

Alli was the center of his attention. He was impressed with many of her talents, and her charm felt like soft electricity. He'd learned that she made the stylish clothes she wore from old luggage that was never claimed at the train station. He didn't know the train system gave up unclaimed luggage like that but, *whatever*, he thought she was impressive. She was quick with a pair of scissors and needle and thread. The skirt that looked a little too long transformed into something a movie star from decades ago would wear.

Alli said that her clothes were out of date, but Jeff was even more so out of place in this time. It was the 1950s and he didn't know Marilyn Monroe, Lauren Bacall, or Grace Kelly from Julianne Moore. He didn't know Chet Baker, Dave Brubeck, or Bill Evans from Kanye West. He could have just wandered this 1950's world seeking these famous living movie and jazz stars but, instead, his mind was focused on following her and enjoying this world. So, when she needed to run errands, he was happy to traipse after her.

She had an energy that kept her moving forward — mostly from being hungry and poor. He tramped after her as she did her errands that day.

Alli walked toward the post office in Sinop's small train station. Few people were up this early, so she didn't have to worry about drawing unwanted attention when she reached out to a mail cart piled with letters and packages. "Oops," she said as she not so innocently knocked down the closest pile. Then she grabbed a box and letter that had fallen on the floor, and stepped away with them.

She read the address on both, paused, decided which one to go to first, and walked to the address on the letter. She placed the package under a bush to keep safe.

After she knocked on the door, an older man answered.

“I was walking near the train station and found this letter on the ground. I believe it belongs to you,” she said.

The man smiled broadly and invited her in.

Through the window, Jeff watched as she sat down at the man’s table and he fed her breakfast.

Soon, she reappeared, and the man set a few coins in her hand before bidding her good day, and closing the door.

She returned to the bush, and retrieved the box from the bush.

“Really?” Jeff asked.

She didn’t answer. Her eyes rolled. She exhaled. She read the address on the box, and started down the sidewalk.

They arrived at the second address. Jeff stayed on the street. She knocked on the door of a small house. A teenage boy answered.

“I was walking near the train station and found this package on the ground. I believe it belongs to you,” she said.

“Thank you,” the boy said. He took the box, and began to close the door, Alli’s hand stopped him.

“It’s customary to give a reward.”

The boy disappeared inside a moment, and returned with a potted plant.

“Don’t you have money?”

He pushed the pot into her hands, and closed the door.

“Fine,” Alli said to the air, and returned to Jeff waiting from the street.

They walked a few more streets in silence before she finally said, “Please don’t judge me. I get enough of that from my father.”

“He’s right.”

She didn’t say anything—or even look at him.

The morning was almost over and Jeff wondered what she would do next. She looked around. After a while, she asked, “When we first met, you knew my name. How?”

“There are going to be some things you’ll just have to trust me on,” Jeff said.

“But I have no idea where you are from?”

“I wouldn’t ask where. Maybe when.”

“This happened already for you, hasn’t it?”

Not that Jeff could recall. But she seemed to understand that time had been messed with pretty well.

“We meet and you stay. We’ve already had this conversation, haven’t we?” she asked.

“This is the first time I’ve had this conversation with you,” he said. “You see, I meet you a long time from now, when you first gave me the blue pocket watch. You said I hold the Memories now. I opened the watch, saw a blue glow, and here I am.”

She gave a thoughtful nod, and didn’t say anything else.

This was the first time he’d really thought about the situation they were in. They were both game for an adventure, which was wonderful, but the whole thing was so far off the normal track for either one of them, neither was sure how far they could trust each other.

“Wait a minute.” Jeff stopped walking. “You said your parents were dead.”

“Yes, they are.”

“You said you ‘get’ judged by your father. How can that be?”

Alli reached into her skirt pocket, then opened her hand to reveal a blue pocket watch.

“Because of this, both are true. It’s a watch my father gave me. He calls it a Memories watch. It allows me to be with him.”

“How great would it be to talk to my mother again,” Jeff said empathetically. “I lost her last year.”

“It is truly marvelous, but I have no idea how it works—or why it works. It just does.”

Jeff stared at the Memories watch as Alli turned it over and over in her hand. It was the same watch she gave him—and the same watch in his hand right now in his hotel room.

“I have so many questions about the watch,” he said.

“Watches,” she corrected.

“Right. The man wearing the bowler now has one too. Do they both emit the same blue light?”

“I’m not sure, I only have this one watch. That goon stole the other before I could open it.” She looked around. “Let’s go where we are not so conspicuous.”

Jeff followed as she led the way, all the while his head reeling with questions he couldn’t wait to have answered. “Who made them?”

Alli walked on.

“What do they do? Are they harmful?”

She kept walking. The houses in this part of Sinop grew sparse.

“Where do they get their power? How many are there?”

She rounded the corner, heading toward a park at the next intersection.

“Would I hurt myself by opening the inside of the watch? Can I change the past?”

She led him into the park, but then didn’t slow down.

“Where can I go with them?”

They went down a small path, and entered a clearing. It was out of view of anyone else just out for a stroll.

“Is this some alien device we are not supposed to have? Why blue?”

Alli sat down on a park bench and gestured for Jeff to join her.

He stopped talking, sat down, and waited.

“Ready?” she asked. Her slight hands reached into her skirt pocket and produced the blue Memories watch. She pressed the crown, and the watch opened.

They both peered in and waited. The watch did not disappoint. A blueish glow emerged, and they were both drawn in. To Jeff, it felt like a warm hug.

Jeff saw that they were now standing in front of a small house. The acrid smell of smoke and gun powder was in the air. A family of six people were trying their best to make a house livable again — sweeping, cleaning, and repairing.

The blueish glow began to narrow and fade till Jeff realized he was looking into the deep blue eyes of an older gentleman standing before them. He had to be Alli’s father. His blue eyes and good looks were great inheritance gifts to her.

The two were happy to see each other. They couldn’t stand still, yet they didn’t hug, or even touch each other. Jeff couldn’t help but smile from empathy of what Allisandra was feeling. It occurred to Jeff that his time as an Emergency Room intern helped him with the time travel. For a doctor, an Emergency Room is a place of intense emotions and constantly changing circumstances. Jumping around time to see people you love was just as emotionally intense.

One of Jeff’s mentors advised him to begin each shift refreshed and ready for anything. *Just go with it* was the mission. A broken arm; mend it. A heart attack; get it beating again. Two patients who had stabbed each other in a drunken brawl; stabilize both ... and make sure they don’t try to kill each other again right there in the Emergency Room!

Being effective in the chaos was miserable but a necessity. Knowing how to handle himself now was a big help. He surmised this time-jumping thing wasn’t so bad.

“Lada! I’m back,” Alli called to one of the women. Alli turned to Jeff. “These are my cousins. Well, actually they are my father’s cousins.”

Lada stood in front of a pile of cut wood meant to heat the house and warm the family. The winters got pretty cold in the region. Large black char marks covered the side wall of the house. It must have been from a fire. Lada was taking the pile apart and moving the unburned wood away from the house.

She tossed a piece of wood into the new pile and walked to Alli, Jeff, and Alli's father. Alli looked from the black char marks to the surrounding countryside.

"Any sign of him?" Alli asked Lada. Speaking in English seemed to be a sign that they could trust the stranger. And Jeff appreciated it.

Alli's father looked at the ground and his shoes.

"No, he is an iktidarsız am!" Lada yelled as if she expected someone could hear her from the nearby glade of trees. Alli's eyebrows raised upwards and her cheeks became slightly more red in the shock of the curse she just heard Lada yell.

"Oh Cousin, that's so impolite," Alli said.

Lada and Alli broke into laughter. The father scowled. Jeff took in this moment. He saw these two women as compatriots who had supported each other in some recent battle. These women had obviously emerged with a victory. He listened intently.

"Who would try setting our house on fire like that!" Alli said.

"He is alone, I just know it," Lada said, "And someone alone has no boundaries of common sense or ethics. They do what pleases themselves."

"Are we talking about the man in the bowler hat?" Jeff asked. The women in unison nodded their heads.

Alli turned to Lada and said coldly, "You want to understand him; I want to kill him."

"Look at our lives well, dear heart," Lada said, "A year ago would either of us have guessed we could even defend ourselves?"

"I hate the idea of waiting for him to come to us again. We should take the war to him."

Alli's father interrupted, "Come inside and let's have tea."

Alli nodded to Lada as she and Jeff followed her father toward the house.

"Father, I would like to present Jeff Standish, a medical student from the United States," Alli said formally. "Jeff, this is my father Artur Menshikov."

Jeff instinctually held out his hand, but Artur waved his hand above his head.

“Now I am blessed with two ghosts, including my daughter,” Artur said, “Either I am lucky or completely insane.” He opened the door and made way for Alli to go first. “Let’s go in.”

The house was small for so many souls. A single bedroom, kitchen, bathroom, and dining room are all the space it has. Jeff deduced this house and these people had to be much of the source of her tenacity and drive.

“So, how are you?” Her father asked.

“I am fine, Papa.”

He stopped moving and looked her in the eyes. “Alli, I don't want you stealing, even if it's for food.”

Jeff nodded in agreement and it registered with Artur.

“How do you know what I do?” she asked.

“I know you,” said her father.

She gave a sheepish grin before becoming more serious. “We have come to talk to you about the pocket watches.”

Her father’s shoulders immediately tightened and his eyebrows came together. “Please, sit down.” Artur moved to the kitchen where a kettle of water had already been started and was steaming away. He moved the water kettle off the heat and poured himself a cup of tea.

Alli and Jeff sat at the dining room table a few feet from the kitchen.

Jeff leaned in, so that only Alli would hear him. “He had a pretty strong reaction to the watch. Is there something I should know?”

Alli leaned in too. “He believes the watches were made by the devil himself. You will see. He won’t even say their names for fear of bringing that evil to his house. He’s trying to protect me and my family from the evil powers in those watches.” She pointed to a photo on the wall behind them and the table. “This is my Grandfather in the Crimean War. I am pretty sure he gave my father the blue Memories watch.” She checked to make sure Artur was still out of earshot before she went on. “One day I came home from school

and Papa had the watch open in his hands. Whatever the watch had let him see, he was terrified.

“After the war, my father was a border guard in Berlin. Another man guarded the other side. Even after moving away to Turkey my father carried the experience of turning people away at the border with him. It’s like his heart was too big and he just wanted to protect them. While I grew up, the memories he carried from the war and his time watching so much sadness while guarding the border stayed over all of us. It became a barrier between him and the rest of the world. I decided I might help him, if I took him back to Berlin to show him the beautiful place it had become.

When we arrived, we went to a house that rented rooms to visitors. The man that answered the door should have been a stranger to us, but he was familiar to my father. It was the guard that patrolled the opposite side of the border. He welcomed us as friends. After that things were better for my father.”

Her father entered the room. They pulled back as he sat down. He looked at them.

“I don’t want you having anything to do with those watches,” he said firmly. “Holding them makes any of us a target. Just look what that madman tried to do to our house. And, they will bring you back to a time when men slaughtered each other.”

Jeff didn’t necessarily want to go there, but he was interested to know what her father had to say.

“My own father came of age during the Victorian time among the ideal of modern inventions, and the terrible fact of war. At Sevastopol, he fought with new industrial technologies, modern rifles, steamships and railways, telegraphs, war reporters and photographers. It was the first total war — civilians and soldiers murdered in the millions. Do you really want to witness that?”

“No, Papa, we are not students of war,” Alli said. “We want to talk with you, to learn about these watches and see how we can use them for good.”

They told her father about their run-in with the man in the bowler, and they told him about finding two more watches.

Her father listened intently.

Lada opened the front door and poked her head in. “I am finished doing what I can. The rest of the logs are too big for me alone. I need your help to finish, Artur.”

Artur stared at them a little longer, and then without a word, he got up and followed Lada outside.

Jeff wanted to say something comforting to Alli but he didn’t know what. All he could do was look around the room and try to find a way to fill the silence.

His eyes came to rest on a photo of a man he presumed to be her grandfather. The man was leaning against the wall of a bombed out house. His hands were crossed at his chest. He wore the distinctive Russian spiked helmet with a double-headed eagle of polished copper. Two bands of white leather ended at his hips to hold swords. He looked miserable.

Next to that photo was another one. In that picture, her grandfather leaned against the tree with several soldiers smoking and smiling with one another, and there was another soldier sitting on the ground next to the tree.

“Who is that with your grandfather?” Jeff asked as he pointed to the picture.

“My God, it looks like *him*,” Alli said. “He’s just missing a bowler hat to be complete.”

They held the photo in their hands, passing it between each other. Jeff didn’t want anything to do with the photo and yet here he was with proof that this man had been targeting not only Alli but her family stretching back to her Grandfather’s time.

“I have an idea,” Alli said. She went to her father’s bedroom. Jeff followed her as she found the blue Memories pocket watch on the top of his nightstand.

It took Jeff a minute to piece all these Memories watches together in his mind. This watch had been around for a long time. Alli’s father gave it to Alli—but not yet at the time of this visit. It was the same watch she carried with her in 1955. And it was the same watch she eventually gave him the day of the car accident. But since his time traveling was happening in a chain backward, the watch could be in all three places at the same time. Jeff still didn’t know who gave it to Artur, but he remembered the words of his

mentor in the Emergency Room: *Just go with it.* At that particular moment, he didn't think he could do anything else.

The blue Memories watch was open on the nightstand. Jeff found that a bit odd with Artur telling Alli how bad the watches were, and it made him wonder if maybe Artur was doing even more time traveling than they were. The watch cast a light in the direction of the wall opposite the bed. They walked into the glow; it surrounded them; and brought them right to her grandfather's time.

"How far back could we actually go?" Jeff asked partially sarcastically, realizing he was pretty deeply in time with no sure way to get back.

They now stood on a tree-lined two-lane dirt road, among a unit of soldiers.

The soldiers wore Russian spiked helmets. Each soldier carried a heavy pack, a canteen presumably with food, two swords at their hips, and a long old-fashioned rifle.

One soldier stood out to them, it was his deep blue eyes. Alli's grandfather noticed them almost immediately—they were easy to spot standing in a military unit in civilian clothes. Alli's grandfather rushed over to them and said, "Pourquoi es-vous ici? Il ya danger ici!"

"French?" Jeff asked Alli, "Did he say we are in danger here?"

Alli nodded.

The soldiers walking ahead of them started yelling and scattering in all directions.

Moments later a bomb exploded. It was disorienting and violent. All three of them were knocked off their feet. Alli's grandfather lay stunned and in shock. After another soldier helped him back to his feet, they followed him for a few hundred yards, until they were at a small makeshift barracks.

Her grandfather sat down, reached into his jacket pocket, and produced a copper pocket watch. This watch had a relief illustration of clovers around the front. The watch had a silky aqua dial and white second, hour, and minute hands. A pink-blue glow emanated from the watch. Jeff heard the man now speaking English, even though his lips were forming words of a different language entirely. Most likely, he was still speaking the very old form of French from before.

“Modern Russian?” Alli asked Jeff.

“I’m hearing English with a New England accent,” Jeff answered.

They both nodded and turned to her grandfather to listen to his story.

Her grandfather told Alli and Jeff a story about a man he had met named Hinky. They met as he was being deployed to the Crimean War two years ago. Hinky was wearing a long winter coat at the time, with pocket watch chains coming out of six pockets in the chest. He said Hinky stood out like he was a circus performer, especially since he was walking alone in the Crimean woods. Her grandfather went on to say he followed Hinky when he realized the man was in some sort of emotional distress. Intrigued with Hinky’s jerky body movements and wild directions of his arms and hands, her grandfather followed Hinky into the woods.

Eventually Hinky came to a large and fast flowing river. He pulled seven pocket watches out of his pockets and threw all but one into the river. The last one he returned to his pocket. The water swallowed up the watches and they were gone. Hinky moved on, and her grandfather started to return to his unit.

But then he saw a glow from the water. One of the watches had opened. He reached down and felt for them.

Alli’s grandfather stopped his story. His eyes were full of tears. He motioned with his arms that they were to leave. He led them out of the barracks and over to a tent. He pointed to the right of the tent where they saw fifty or more wounded soldiers lying on the ground. The smell of death and decay was overpowering. The man pointed downward and Jeff and Alli saw Hinky lying on the ground. Half of Hinky’s head was covered in blood and scars.

Jeff thought he was dead, but then he opened his eyes wide and began to speak.

“Shadows and a black mist shroud this place. There are no good people here, this is cursed land. I should have stayed in my house in Tonknavitzya, my home village. But instead the blackness followed me across the sea, searching for me, seeking and killing along its path. It is a time for evil spirits to foam at their mouths and pray on the living, feeding on our souls in the darkness. There is no going back, I have been claimed. And so will you. They turn the best people into rabid spirits ready to claim you for their own.

We are all condemned to haunt these woods forever.” Hinky took a deep breath and passed out cold.

“Um, I would say this is our time to leave,” Jeff said to Alli.

She nodded and they retreated toward the western edge of the camp.

Hinky’s ramblings played in a loop in Jeff’s head. “I wonder, what did he see to make him go so far over the edge?”

Alli said, “On this piece of rock more than a million soldiers and civilians died, relatively few from their injuries, most from disease and malnutrition. Imagine the carnage. It’s pretty easy for me to find a bit of sympathy and empathy for him. I know that sounds dumb, but it’s how I feel.”

They walked long enough and briskly enough for Jeff to feel his heart beating faster. They weren’t really walking, they were fleeing the scene.

Suddenly, they were in the blue glow again. It receded and they were standing in her father's bedroom again, with her father holding the Memories pocket watch he had recently closed with his hand and fingers.

“Tell me you are alright,” her father said.

They smiled at each other.

Artur scowled at them, turned and left the room, still saying nothing more about the watches. Alli followed him and Jeff too in turn.

“Papa, this time it is different. That evil man is out there, lurking about, and actually hurting people around me to get these watches. Even if I don’t have a watch, I believe he will come after me too.” Alli said.

Artur looked out his window and across the Black Sea. “You will find what you are looking for in the hotel in Sinop. Look for a time capsule.”

“I love you Papa,” Alli said, blowing him a kiss.

Alli folded the blue pocket watch closed. The blue glow from the Memories watch dissipated, and Jeff and Alli were back sitting in the park on the park bench, where they had started. World War II was now eight years in the past, and the Crimean War was a hundred years ago.

They stood up and rushed to the hotel. There were more watches to find.

“Why are we doing this? Why are they so important to us?” Jeff asked along the way.

“We live in a time when it looks like atoms, wars, and industry is all we need to live happy and fulfilled lives,” Alli said. “Now here are these watches that tell us the extent of our human hearts is not fully known. These watches give a glimpse of how this world is truly wonderful and mysterious. That’s enough reason for me.” She ran out of breath.

“I’m good with that. I just don’t want to be randomly looking around for them while Hinky is out there.”

They arrived back at the Sinop Hotel. The hotel lobby was quiet and calm—even if they were on edge.

“If you were a time capsule, where would you be?” Jeff asked out loud. They found the bellboy standing near the baggage room door in the lobby. The bellboy recognized them immediately and his eyebrows lifted up and a large smile pushed on his cheeks.

“I am sorry, Monsieur, I am not aware of a time capsule,” said the bellboy, “But there is a sign, it tells of the opening of the hotel a long time ago.” He pointed to the base of the fountain.

“Thank you,” Alli said.

Jeff followed her. Feelings of anxiety rose as they walked to the fountain. A list formed in his mind of the places Hinky could be lurking. He was afraid Hinky would jump out of any of them. “If Hinky is good at only one thing, it would be showing up consistently at the worst time.”

In front of the fountain was a plaque made of bronze, with raised letters. Alli translated: *We set this day, March 24, 1865, a box to celebrate the opening of the Parovož Hotel. May its glow light up the world.*

“Do you suppose there is a time capsule box buried somewhere beneath the fountain?” Jeff said, “I don’t see anything.” Even if it was buried, how would they ever explain their needs to open it to the hotel management?

“We can’t let anyone get these watches,” she said. “I saw my father die once, now I have him back, and I’m not giving him up again.”

“It’s kind of an addiction, the glow of these watches,” Jeff said. “Not the glow, but the effect. Allisandra, even without the watch in your hand, you

will always have your father. He lives in your memories, and that's all the blue glow is giving you."

"But you're here, and you're real to me," she said.

"You can't lose me, you already have me."

Jeff noticed that whenever he was getting close to extolling his feelings to Alli, she pulled back emotionally, but he felt she was getting more comfortable when he pushed her, and he felt like he just needed to press her just a little more.



The fountain made a pleasant rushing sound. The hotel placed a tasseled carpet in front of the fountain to keep the occasional water droplets away from the now antique carpet. The rug was silly-looking, but it wasn't something permanent. Jeff decided if it were his hotel, that rug would be one of the first things to go.

“You should know that last year I starting dating someone, but he wasn’t my type, and well, it got really uncomfortable and I did what I could to avoid him,” Alli said.

“If he wasn’t your type, then what is your type?”

Alli’s eyes darted away from Jeff. For Alli, that kind of joke was enough of a push.

“Oh you know. American. Obnoxious . . . and sopping wet.” She reached down, grabbed the tassels of the rug, and gave it one big tug.

Just the motion of her hands made Jeff lose his balance and, wildly waving his arms, he tumbled back into the fountain—but there was no splash. There was no swimming. His recoil had been over the very idea of falling into the water. Yet, when the time came he realized he didn’t need to swim at all, nor was he getting wet.

Alli laughed at his predicament.

Since he didn’t have to worry about getting wet—apparently ghosts don’t get wet—he stayed where he was. Being in the fountain gave him a unique view of the rest of the hotel.

Behind the plaque was a metal box. It looked old. Metal rivets with bands of oxidized metal strips held the box together. The lid was attached to the base of the box with a long hinge. Someone had already been here and broke open the round key lock that hung from the partially opened latch.

From his viewpoint, Jeff gave Alli instructions to reach into the box. Alli reached with her hand, and connected with what felt like a box with a latch. She opened the box, reached in and retrieved another pocket watch. Jeff stood up and walked over the water to stand next to her.

Quickly, she put the watch into her skirt pocket. She looked around and directed Jeff to the luggage room and closed the door behind them. All the jackets and bags inside gave the air within the room a muffled feel. They sat on two large steamer trunks and observed their newfound treasure.

This watch had a dark copper case. The cover was made of rows of hearts, ribbons, and waves in concentric circles. There were gaps between the hearts to let you view into the green faceplate even when the cover was closed. The concentric circles were cryptic instructions on how to access the watch’s ability.

She opened the pocket watch cautiously, but nothing happened. “I wonder if it’s broken?” she said shaking it.

“There is something peaceful about this watch,” Jeff said. “When I want peace, I find someplace quiet to form a vision of where I want to be in the future.”

She looked harder at it. Still nothing.

Jeff exhaled a long and slightly verbal breath. The watch began to glow.

“There! I see four glowing spots in the watch. Keep breathing like that!” she said excitedly.

“My yoga teacher showed me a breathing technique, something called Ujjayi.”

“You-jop-ee?” Alli said.

“More like ooo, then jaaa, then eee.” He closed his eyes, sat up straight, and began to make a snake-like sound with his breathing. A hiss.

The watch responded. Inside the watch were four stone chips. The chips glowed with different colors, and the colors changed to form patterns. Even with his eyes closed, Jeff could see four distinct shapes emerging in his mind.

He looked left and saw himself standing with Alli in front of a house. They were holding hands in a loving way. When he looked down he saw himself sitting in the luggage room with her. When he looked to the right he saw himself alone in a nursing room with sensors connected to his chest. He looked like a hypertension victim — pale and sickly. When he looked up he saw his parents looking back at him. This was the last time he had seen them alive and together. He had told them he was not sure about medical school. His mother looked stern; his father said they just wanted him to make a decision that would lead to his happiness.

The watch glow receded and he opened his eyes.

“That was amazing,” Jeff said, “It shows you what-if. I saw a little bit of my future, and the possibilities yet to come.”

“Can I try?”

“Of course. Just close your eyes.”

She sat for a minute or two and nothing happened. “What am I doing wrong?”

“I think you are too tense. I tried the breathing technique and it calmed me down. Why don’t you try it.”

“Teach me, please.”

“Just inhale and exhale deeply through your mouth. Feel the air you take in going over the back of your tongue, down your throat, and into your lungs. When you breathe out, slightly contract the back of your tongue, as you do when you whisper. Softly whisper the sound, ‘ahhh,’ as you exhale. Imagine your breath fogging up a window.”

She tried it and the watch began to glow. Jeff told her to slightly constrict her throat when she breathed in.

“You will notice your breath making an ocean sound, softly moving in and out, like ocean waves. When that happens breath through your nose instead and keep your mouth closed. It’s a quiet sound for you alone, someone standing nearby won’t hear it. The sound of your breath soothes your mind.”

Jeff observed her reaching the ocean sound, and watched the glow intensify. A few minutes later she opened her eyes and closed the watch.

“That was good,” she said.

“What did you see?”

She looked at him with a kind and loving smile. “What-if.” She straightened up and said, “Let’s go.”

They emerged from the luggage room into the lobby.

“You found another watch!” Hinky blurted out. He was standing at the top of the lobby stairs. “This is not going in the right direction!” He raced down the stairs, passed the fountain, and stood directly in front of them.

Alli held the green What-If watch in her hands tightly, the chain dangling down as she moved away.

Hinky lunged left toward Alli, but Jeff stepped in his way. Hinky stopped, not realizing he could just as easily have walked through Jeff and grabbed the watch.

Hinky stood on the same tasseled carpet at the fountain. She reached down, gave it another big tug, and Hinky fell backward into the fountain.

This time the water splashed. Hinky's clothes began soaking up water, and he was legitimately trying to stay afloat. His arms flailed around as he tried to get across the water and out of the fountain.

"You are getting very good at that," Jeff said.

Alli gave a little curtsy. "Thank you, it's all about practice."

They hurried out the door, ran down the street, out of sight, and hid in an alley next to the train station. After a few minutes with no Hinky, they knew their escape had worked.

Alli leaned in to give Jeff a kiss—but her lips pushed straight through his smiling cheek. She tried to hold his hand and again reached right through him. "Now I see it," she said with tears welling in her eyes. "You are a ghost."

STARLING WATCHES

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